



Rethinking freedom: Challenges facing rural education in Northern KwaZulu Natal, South Africa

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Abstract

After three decades into democracy in South Africa, some children must still traverse considerable distances to attend schools with limited crucial teaching and learning resources. These schools lack proper facilities and expose learners to harsh weather conditions, such as severe cold during winter; these schools lack security, adequate sanitation, playing facilities, and proper infrastructure. Despite the South African Constitution's pledge to ensure equality and quality education for all children, this has yet to be realised for some learners in under-resourced schools in northern KwaZulu Natal, South Africa. This paper, employing The Conflict Theory, explores how the government's failure to enhance the standards of rural schools has perpetuated inequality and deprived rural learners of quality education and developmental learning experiences. The study utilised a systematic literature review, sampling secondary data published ten years ago. Data from the past decade provide valuable context and a recent historical perspective within the broader 30-year timeframe of South Africa's democratic transition, illustrating trends and changes leading up to the present. Data were generated from reputable academic databases and sources to answer the research question. Deductive thematic analysis was used to analyse the reviewed sources. The argument posits that neglecting remote rural schools in South Africa exacerbates inequality, poverty and unemployment. Furthermore, it contends that this neglect places learners from well-resourced schools at an advantage in the competition for employment opportunities and spots in tertiary institutions.

Keywords: *rural education, inequality, apartheid, transformation, democracy*

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1. Introduction

The 30th anniversary of South Africa democracy in 2024 prompted a critical period of reflection and introspection, encouraging citizens to look back on the progress and challenges of the past three decades. South Africa is a young democracy that is still trying to nurse the wounds of the past. Supposed true education is a tool for transformation. In that case, there is a need to look back at the journey travelled by the South African government in trying to make education accessible for all, quality education and resources for all South African children as stipulated in the Freedom Charter, the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa (Act 108 of 1996), South African Schools Act (Act 84 of 1996), Article 26 of the Universal Human Rights Declaration, International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights as adopted on 16 December 1966, and many other pieces of legislation. Important questions have been asked in education, politics, commerce, justice, and, most importantly, issues of inequality as far as the highlighted issues are concerned.

Thirty years after the remarkable 1994 general elections that ushered South Africa into the new democratic dispensation, the triple challenges of poverty, inequality and unemployment continue to devastate and negatively affect many South Africans, mainly black South Africans in townships and remote rural areas of the country. The lack of access to resources and funding to develop schools in South Africa remains the fundamental challenge characterising an unfair and unequal education system in present-day democracy. Education is perceived to be the key to success; basic education should lay a strong foundation for South Africa's future generations. However, in the mind of a rural and township child, this seems to be a dream deferred. Access to quality education and valuable resources to enhance teaching and learning in rural South African schools is a severe problem. It deprives children of this country of equal and quality primary education but also contributes to inequality that is evident in the present-day democracy as the result of the former apartheid regime in South Africa. Does this suggest the dismal failure of the South African government to address some apartheid legacies? After thirty years of democratic rule in South Africa, many rural children and rural school-based teachers do not enjoy the same benefits a child and a teacher in the city and developed towns enjoy, from infrastructure to availability of essential resources like textbooks, a desk and a chair.

Since the end of apartheid in South Africa, rural development and education have remained peripheral to the broader progress aimed at enhancing the lives of all South Africans

(Nkambule et al., 2011). State efforts to address the challenges in rural areas, particularly within the education system, have failed to bridge the significant gap between rural and urban middle-class children. This disparity is particularly concerning given that a substantial portion of South Africa's population resides in rural areas (Mkhize & Davids, 2023). Despite being a focal point since the dawn of democracy, rural education continues to suffer, with serious concerns about the quality of education rural learners receive and the conditions under which rural teachers operate (Myende & Maifala, 2020). The failure to improve rural education systems has far-reaching consequences for the affected individuals and the nation's broader economic growth and social mobility.

The Department of Basic Education (DBE) has deprived South African children in rural areas of equal access to resources and facilities as their counterparts in cities and bigger towns. Inequality in the system is evident and unacceptable. This paper examines the DBE efforts to improve rural schools and its shortcomings in providing equal resources to all children in the Republic of South Africa. It is guided by the research question: How has the DBE in South Africa addressed issues of inequality in rural schools over the past 30 years of democracy, and what strategies can be implemented to ensure equitable access to quality education for all learners? To explore this, the paper aims to achieve the following objectives: first, to examine the progress made by the South African government and the DBE in addressing inequalities in rural schools since the advent of democracy in 1994; second, to analyse the key challenges facing rural schools in accessing quality education and essential resources, including infrastructure, learning materials, and teacher support; third, to evaluate the role of existing policies, such as the South African Schools Act and the Constitution, in promoting equal access to education in rural areas; and lastly, to propose actionable strategies and policy recommendations for improving access to quality education and reducing inequalities in rural South African schools.

2. Literature Review

2.1 The Origin of the Crisis – What Apartheid Did!

When addressing issues of inequality and social injustice in the education sector, it must be acknowledged that the disparities and challenges schools face are directly linked to the unfair and unjust resource allocation during apartheid from 1948 to 1994 and possibly even further back to the colonial period and the apartheid period started in 1948 under National

Party (NP) rule as a by-product of many prejudicial and racial policies imposed earlier on African people, Coloureds, and Indians by European settlers. Factors such as colonial conquest, land dispossession and redistribution, economic impoverishment, and the exclusion of Africans from citizenship and meaningful political participation in South Africa during the colonial era set the stage for apartheid. The core objective of the apartheid project was to establish a system that advantaged people of European descent politically, economically, educationally, and socially (Seroto, 2020).

The formation of the Union of South Africa in 1910 responded to what Afrikaans and English-speaking communities saw as a “black threat”. In addition, the rise of Afrikaner nationalism was informed by the fear of Afrikaners that their language and culture would disappear. Therefore, the education system protected the Afrikaner language and culture. It was used to preserve these cultural aspects from what they termed *swart-gevaar* (black danger) and the English dominance in schools. To achieve this, legislation was passed to promote Afrikaans and the Afrikaner culture. Laws passed included the Bantu Authorities Act of 1951, the Bantu Education Act of 1953 and later the Christian National Education Act of 1962 (Seroto, 2020; Booyse et al., 2017).

Education for white learners and teachers had far better opportunities compared to their black counterparts in terms of resources, teacher training, and teacher-learner ratio in the classroom. On the other hand, the government refused to recognise black people as meaningful citizens of South Africa. The apartheid regime was deeply committed to segregating South Africans by race. This commitment was epitomised by implementing the Group Areas Act of 1950, which prohibited different racial groups from living in the same residential areas. This legislation was a deliberate strategy to entrench white supremacy and maintain white dominance (SAHO, 2024). In addition, through the Bantu Authorities Act of 1951 legislation, African people were pushed into reserves known as Bantustans. These Bantustans were in remote areas and established along ethnic lines. In total, ten Bantustans were established in South Africa: Transkei, Bophuthatswana, Ciskei, Venda, Gazankulu, KaNgwane, KwaNdebele, KwaZulu, Lebowa and QwaQwa. These Bantustans were designated for specific ethnic groups. For instance, Ciskei and Transkei were reserved exclusively for the Xhosa people, Bophuthatswana for the Tswana people, KwaZulu for the Zulu-speaking people, Lebowa for the Pedi and Northern Ndebele, Venda for the Venda people, Gazankulu for the Shangaan and Tsonga people, and QwaQwa for the Basotho people (SAHO, 2024). This move

by the Nationalist government was a strategy to conquer African people easily (Seroto, 2020; Chisholm, Friedman & Queenta, 2018; Mhlauli, Salani & Mokotedi, 2015; Thobejane, 2013).

While white children enjoyed studying in well-resourced schools with adequately trained teachers, African children were given an inferior education under the Bantu Education Act, which was designed to maintain a subordinate and marginal status of black people in South Africa (Thobejane, 2013). This system had an adverse impact on the black population of South Africa (Seroto, 2020; Glaser, 2015; Ndimande, 2013; Thobejane, 2013), and the legacy of these past injustices is still evident to this date. In some remote and marginalised rural areas, it is glaringly apparent. Over the past thirty years, the democratic government has been trying to right the wrongs of the past, but to what extent has it succeeded in bringing about the desired transformation and ensuring that South African children, both in urban and rural spaces, enjoy the same benefits?

During this era, black schools were poorly financed. For instance, the Bantu Education Act of 1953 segregated funding for African education from general state spending, tying it to taxes paid by black people, which significantly reduced the amount spent on black education compared to white education. In 1955, the Exchequer and Audit Amendment Act No. 7 established a separate Bantu education account for managing school funds in black schools. The government allocated a fixed annual amount of R13 million from the General Revenue account to this separate account for the next 17 years (Seroto, 2020). Despite increasing enrolment, the per capita expenditure on black education dropped. Government funding for black education remained stagnant during apartheid (McKeever, 2017; Seroto, 2020). Consequentially, the black schools in towns and rural areas lacked resources to ensure teaching and learning quality. This historical imbalance and unfairness are still evident and painfully glaring in many rural schools of the country that are dilapidated and lacking crucial resources for operation.

2.2 Challenges of Rural Education

Education is a fundamental human right guaranteed by the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa (Act 108 of 1996). This right is further supported by the South African Schools Act and policies aimed at equity in education. However, the reality in rural South Africa tells a different story. Poverty, unemployment, and systemic inequities significantly impact the

roles of teachers and the quality of education available to learners in these areas (du Plessis & Mestry, 2019).

South Africa's education system is deeply rooted in its historical legacy of inequality. During the 19th century, Cape Mission schools admitted both black and white learners, but education for African people was voluntary and severely underfunded compared to the compulsory education provided for whites (Morris & Hyslop, 1991). The apartheid-era policy of separate development further entrenched disparities in education, shaping access, facilities, and outcomes along racial lines (Singh, 2022). Despite post-apartheid policy reforms aimed at promoting equity and democracy in education, the question remains: to what extent has the government succeeded in delivering quality education for all?

The decentralisation of education governance under the South African Schools Act has placed significant responsibilities on School Governing Bodies (SGBs), which often lack the skills and resources necessary for effective management (du Plessis & Mestry, 2019). In rural schools, where parents are frequently unemployed and have limited formal education, SGBs face challenges such as poor financial management and inadequate governance capacity. Consequently, schools struggle to provide essential resources like water, furniture, and functional infrastructure.

Teachers in rural areas contend with numerous obstacles, including inadequate professional development, poor infrastructure, and learners' socioeconomic difficulties. Many learners must travel long distances to school, assist with household or farming duties, and lack motivation due to the hardships of rural life (du Plessis & Mestry, 2019; Hlalele, 2014). Moreover, low parental literacy hinders adequate support for children's education, further exacerbating the burden on teachers. Rural schools are plagued by poor road infrastructure, limited access to technology, and a lack of essential services such as water and sanitation (Hlalele, 2014). These challenges, compounded by provincial financial constraints, leave rural schools at a severe disadvantage compared to their urban counterparts.

Unique social and cultural challenges also undermine rural education. Issues such as witchcraft, superstition, initiation ceremonies, and gender disparities disrupt teaching and learning processes (Chakanika et al., 2012). Singh (2022) argues that these conditions perpetuate social injustice, denying rural learners the quality education necessary to break the cycle of poverty.

The challenges faced by rural education in South Africa reflect a broader violation of human rights and social justice. Addressing these systemic inequities requires targeted interventions to improve infrastructure, empower SGBs, support teachers, and bridge the resource gap between rural and urban schools. Ensuring equitable access to quality education is a constitutional and moral imperative for advancing social justice in South Africa.

2.3 Theoretical Framework: The Conflict Theory

This study employs Conflict Theory as a theoretical framework to analyse the state of rural schools in northern KwaZulu Natal within the broader context of freedom and democracy. Conflict Theory, rooted in the works of Karl Marx, Max Weber, and other sociologists, provides a critical lens to understand the complex dynamics of power, inequality, and social change in society. According to Coser et al. (2006), Conflict Theory aims to scientifically explain the main aspects of societal conflicts, including their origins, variations, and consequences. The primary focus of Conflict Theory is the unequal distribution of limited resources and power. While the specific resources considered can differ among theorists, conflict theorists generally utilise Weber's three systems of stratification: class, status, and power. Through this lens, one could investigate the unequal and unfair distribution of resources in the education system in South Africa, despite the Constitution's guarantee that everyone should be equal. The Conflict Theory has a long history in sociology. It is attributed to Karl Marx and Max Weber as people whose ideas gave birth to this perspective. Conflict Theory developed as a response to structural functionalism in the context of sociocultural change. Conflict theorists argue that conflict is an essential and inevitable part of human life, necessary for altering the socio-cultural conditions of society. They view conflict as a natural phenomenon and believe it becomes crucial at certain stages to bring about change (Prayogi, 2023). The Conflict Theory emphasises that people are inherently contentious when competing for resources and power, believing that this struggle is a fundamental aspect of societal dynamics and drives change (Paige & Frederik, 2015). It posits that social interaction naturally leads to conflict, making it an inevitable aspect of relationships within families, institutions, organisations, and society. However, conflict can be advantageous, mainly when it drives beneficial changes and helps resolve issues (Prayogi, 2023; Paige & Frederik, 2015; Mishra, 2013).

Conflict is an inherent part of human nature, and as a result, it is present in all areas of society. Education functions as a societal subsystem, and conflict is prevalent in educational institutions. A significant sociological theory that influences education is Conflict Theory. This theory posits that conflict stems from societal inequality (Mishra, 2013). Various factors drive this inequality and have a significant historical context, especially in South Africa, given its painful history and segregated educational systems. Under the former South African regime, resources were distributed unequally to maintain white hegemony and the dominance of the minority over the black majority. Conflict Theory views education within this context as a tool to preserve the power of those who hold societal dominance (Mishra, 2013). The education system, through its allocation and distribution of resources, perpetuates the status quo by ensuring that the lower classes become obedient workers. The proponents of this theory in education argue that the school curriculum favours the elites, whom Karl Marx calls the “haves” at the expense of the “haves-not” – people with low incomes, thus indoctrinating the “haves-not” to accept a position in society as lower-class members.

3. Methodology

This study employs a systematic review method (Phillip & Barker, 2021; Guillaume, 2019; Hanley & Winter, 2013), guided by Conflict Theory, to explore challenges in rural-based schools in northern KwaZulu Natal, South Africa. The selection process follows PRISMA guidelines to ensure transparency and reproducibility. Data screening involved a rigorous three-stage approach to identify the most relevant and high-quality sources. Initially, 115 studies were identified from Google Scholar, PubMed, and JSTOR databases. The title and abstract screening were conducted to assess their alignment with the study’s objectives. Articles that met preliminary criteria proceeded to full-text review, where they were further evaluated based on inclusion and exclusion criteria. The timeframe of 2013 to 2024 was selected to focus on issues affecting rural education. In the end, a total of 27 studies were included.

A systematic search strategy was used (Page et al., 2021; Yannascoli et al., 2013), applying keywords and phrases related to the research topic across electronic databases and archives. Search terms included “rural schools in South Africa,” “rural education,” “rural education in post-apartheid South Africa,” and “challenges in rural schools.” The focus was on themes within education, social sciences, welfare, and rural contexts. Inclusion criteria were

English-language documents relevant to rural education challenges. Sources written in other languages, those unrelated to the core issues, and outdated material were excluded, as shown in figure 1 and table 1.

Figure 1

PRISMA flow diagram

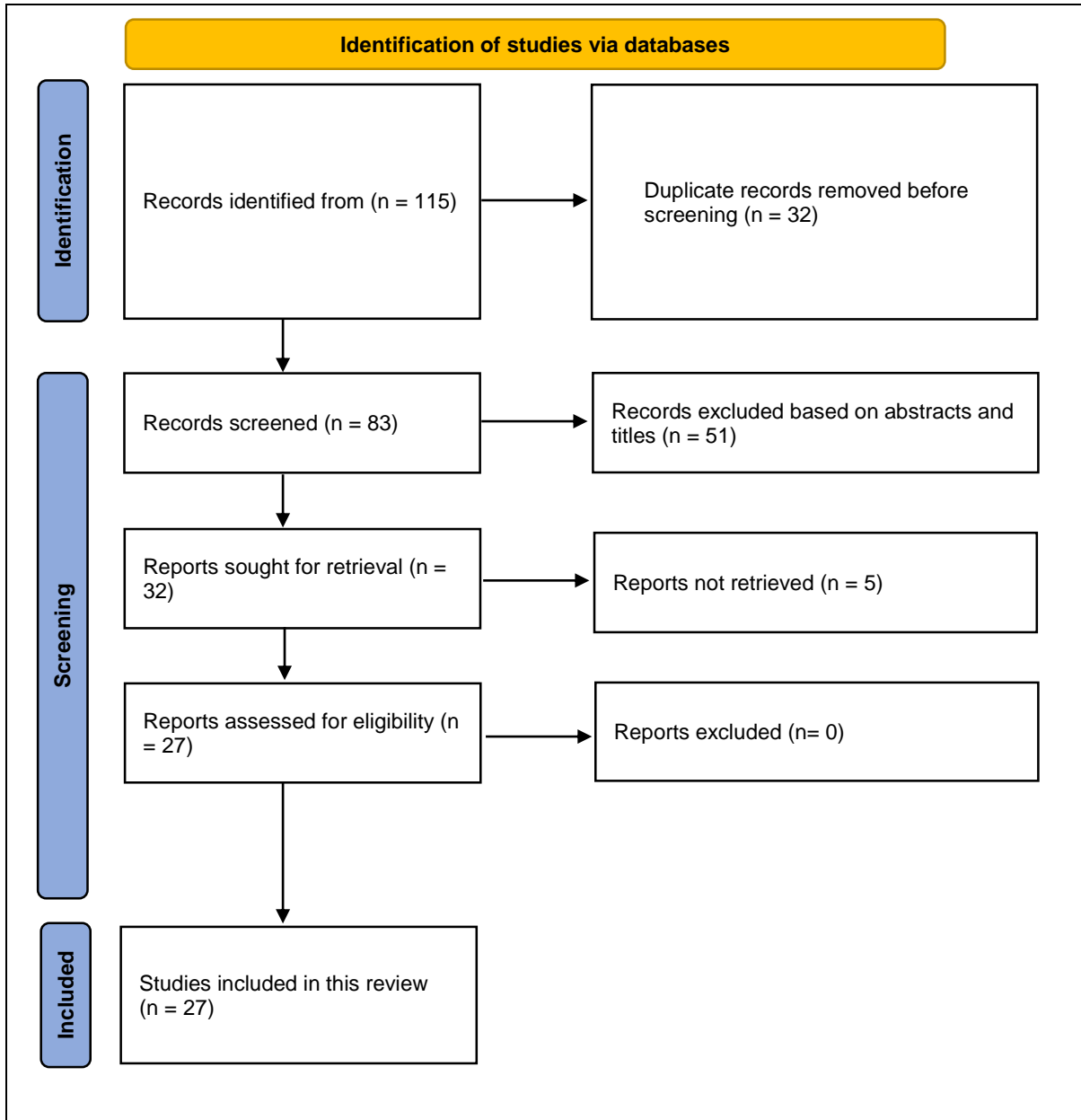


Table 1

Inclusion and exclusion criteria

Inclusion	Exclusion
Articles written in English	Articles written in other languages
Published in reputable journals between 2013 and 2024	Before 2013 and after 2024
Search protocol, "Rural Schools in South Africa", "Rural Education", "Rural Education in post-apartheid South Africa", and "Challenges in Rural Schools"	Sources that did not address critical issues related to rural education and its challenges

Table 2

Reviewed sources

Types of sources reviewed	Total
Books	03
Journal articles	24
Total	27

The author acknowledges that while this study provides valuable insights, it has limitations. The review relied on publicly available sources, which excluded unpublished studies or restricted-access data, potentially limiting the comprehensiveness of the analysis. Additionally, the scope of the review excluded studies published outside the specified time frame, which may have led to the omission of long-term trends. The quality and reliability of the review are further influenced by the rigour of the analysed studies, some of which may contain bias or methodological limitations.

4. Findings and Discussion

South Africa remains one of the most unequal countries globally (Mfeka-Nkabinde Moletsane & Voce, 2023), with significant disparities in democratic rights across urban, semi-urban and remote areas. Essential commodities are often inaccessible to many citizens, and this inequality is particularly evident in the education system. The country continuously struggles with the legacy of past injustices, leading to an uneven distribution of resources and teacher allocation. Rural schools are significantly disadvantaged, highlighting the urgent need for intervention to ensure that children and teachers in these areas can enjoy the same privileges

as their middle-class counterparts in better-resourced schools despite being governed by the same laws and policies.

South Africa's Bantustan policy, enacted through the Bantu Authorities Act of 1951, resulted in the establishment of four "independent" and six "self-governing" territories by 1980 (Chisholm, 2018). These territories were intended for Black people to exercise their political rights, though this "independence" and "self-governance" were illusory, as Pretoria retained direct control over the Bantustans. The Bantu education system in these territories was also managed and funded by the national government in Pretoria, providing significantly fewer resources than schools in urban areas (Chisholm, 2018). This segmented oppression meant that Africans in rural areas were the most disadvantaged in terms of resource allocation and distribution.

Even today, schools in the former Bantustans remain neglected, lacking essential resources such as classroom furniture, and learners often walk long distances to reach them. Poor infrastructure exacerbates this issue, with some schools becoming inaccessible during rainy seasons due to the deplorable condition of roads. Despite the transition from apartheid to a democratic government, these schools continue to suffer from neglect. This ongoing failure to meet constitutional obligations raises serious questions about the government's commitment to these rural communities. Additionally, teacher colleges in the Bantustans were underfunded, compromising the quality of training for African pre-service teachers compared to those designated for whites, Indians, and coloureds. This historical context links directly to the objectives of the study, which explore the extent to which past educational policies continue to shape the experiences of learners and teachers in rural schools today. The continuation of inadequate funding for schools in these areas is a clear manifestation of how the legacy of apartheid persists in educational inequality.

The objectives of this study, which focus on examining how historical policies, infrastructural shortcomings, poverty and a lack of parental involvement have contributed to the ongoing educational inequality in rural South Africa, are embedded in the lived experiences of rural learners and teachers.

4.1 Infrastructure and Resources in Rural Schools

Rural schools' lack of resources and facilities is a key challenge that limits learners' academic success in these areas, exacerbating the already significant gap between rural and

urban education. In South Africa, a child's academic performance is significantly influenced by the quality of school facilities, teacher training and motivation, and class sizes. Some rural schools do not offer critical subjects like mathematics, opting instead for mathematical literacy, which significantly diminishes the chances of passing the matric examination at a level sufficient for university admission (Hunter, 2016). This perpetuates the very inequality the state seeks to eliminate. Learners from urban, well-resourced schools and those from rural, under-resourced schools compete for the same university spots. However, rural learners face additional hurdles, such as adapting to English-only university instruction. This transition is particularly challenging for rural learners who have relied on code-switching, unlike their urban counterparts who often study English as a home language. Consequently, universities must establish support programs to help underprivileged learners adjust to this new environment. Hunter (2016) also notes that urban middle-class schools provide learners with "prestigious accents, connections to businesses, and social networks," offering significant advantages over rural learners who remain marginalised by their remote locations and limited resources.

A study by Ndimande (2013) found that parental choices regarding their children's education are complex. Many parents believe their children have the right, not just the privilege, to attend any school they choose, not only those they can afford. This belief calls for dismantling the still-segregated education system that contributes to ongoing inequality in South Africa. Parents with the means often go to great lengths, including making financial sacrifices, to transport their children to better-resourced urban schools. However, these schools often uphold predominantly white ideologies and cultures, sometimes characterised by Christian doctrines that undermine African spirituality, rituals, traditions, and culture. Despite the prevalent racism reported in these desegregated schools, parents choose them in the hope of securing better futures for their children. As Ndimande (2013) asserts, parents' choices are driven by the resources and opportunities these schools offer, even in the face of racism and other issues.

Beyond parents' choices, another critical dimension exists within the rural context. Despite the numerous challenges, some rural schools consistently produce excellent results, attracting learners eager to improve their chances of success in their grade 12 exams and secure spots in higher education institutions. In pursuit of this opportunity, parents often allow their adolescent children to leave home and stay in rented lodgings near these high-performing

schools. While this proximity can benefit learners by providing easier access to school and support from peers and teachers, it imposes a significant financial burden on poor and unemployed rural families, who must pay monthly rent for these lodgings (Mfeka-Nkabinde et al., 2023). Moreover, this arrangement exposes young learners to various risks. Without parental supervision, they are vulnerable to exploitation by older men and women who may prey on them. These older individuals sometimes become informal support structures, but this dynamic can lead to negative consequences, such as teenage pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections among young girls (Mfeka-Nkabinde et al., 2023).

4.2 Poverty and Its Impact on Rural Education

Poverty in rural areas not only affects the ability of parents to support their children's education but also creates an environment where the quality of education is compromised. This exacerbates the educational disparities that already exist between rural and urban learners. Poverty in rural areas causes significant instability, impacting both learners and teachers. It is the primary factor undermining the future of underprivileged children. Key education stakeholders, including parents, teachers, and education officials at both circuit and district levels, often struggle to support poor children effectively (Msila, 2014). Parents, typically unemployed, unskilled, and black, cannot financially contribute to their children's education. Teachers face challenges in performing optimally due to a lack of essential resources in rural schools, and parents cannot bridge this gap. Consequently, poor children are forced to attend under-resourced or poorly managed schools. Msila (2014) concludes that many schools in South Africa face significant challenges due to a scarcity of resources.

A study by Mkhasibe et al. (2021) suggests that SGBs in rural areas often consist of unemployed parents who are not remunerated for their service. This lack of compensation makes them susceptible to corruption and mismanagement of resources, as they may collude with those who promise financial or other benefits. SGBs are responsible for ensuring effective and efficient teaching and learning, but their need for self-remuneration can lead to corruption. Principals are frequently targeted in these situations, leading to hostility and power struggles within schools. Principals who strive to maintain good governance and effective teaching are often victimised by individuals seeking to control school finances. Such principals may be removed from their positions or may resign out of fear for their safety (Mkhasibe et al., 2021).

Power-hungry teachers may also collude with SGB members who lack governance knowledge, creating further instability and jeopardising learners' futures.

Poverty also contributes to high dropout rates in rural schools. Although this issue is not exclusive to rural areas, studies show a higher dropout rate in these settings (Spaull, 2015). Factors such as teenage pregnancy, the need to find employment, lack of funding, and lack of motivation contribute to high dropout rates. Additionally, gang violence and bullying exacerbate this issue. Quality education, defined as the acquisition of knowledge, skills, and values deemed valuable by society, is crucial for breaking the cycle of poverty. Rohini and Pentang (2023) and Spaull (2015) argue that poor-quality education acts as a poverty trap, perpetuating an intergenerational cycle where children inherit the social standing of their parents regardless of their abilities. This underscores the importance of addressing educational disparities to ensure all learners have the opportunity to escape poverty.

4.3 Parental Involvement

In rural South Africa, many parents face significant challenges, including illiteracy and poverty, which hinder their ability to support their children's education effectively. The lack of parental involvement in school activities, such as homework support or participation in extracurricular activities, further contributes to the educational disadvantages of rural learners. Rural schools' lack of parental engagement reflects broader socio-economic challenges perpetuating inequality.

Schools require support from communities and families to address the diverse needs of learners. For the holistic development of children, parents must collaborate and cooperate with schools to ensure adequate growth and learning. However, this remains a significant challenge in rural South African schools, where many parents are illiterate, compromising their involvement in their children's education. This creates a substantial gap (Ngozwana et al., 2024).

From a Western perspective, parental involvement includes supporting schoolwork such as projects, assignments, and homework, participating in decision-making about their children's education, and supporting extracurricular activities. Studies reveal a lack of such involvement in rural South African areas. Few parents visit schools to watch their children play soccer, participate in debates, or perform arts. The reasons for this lack of involvement can be traced to the socio-economic status of rural parents and perhaps a lack of awareness about the

significance of parental involvement in education. Increased parental involvement could enhance children's performance and influence their career choices.

Ngozwana et al. (2024) explain that African education is often viewed as a three-legged pot: parents, the school, and the state. The state provides resources for schools, but these resources are usually inadequate. In many rural African schools, the state handles children's education while parents often remain absent, playing little to no meaningful role in their children's educational development. In the South African context, parental involvement is a constitutional requirement essential for maintaining quality public education. However, many parents neglect this obligation for various reasons, prompting the state to reconsider its policy position. The Bela Bill (2017) addresses this by requiring all parents of public-school learners to be fully involved in their children's education. If passed into law, this bill could impose up to twelve months of imprisonment for parents who neglect their children's education.

4.4 Teaching and Learning Resources

The availability of teaching and learning resources is another critical issue that rural schools face. Many schools lack essential resources, such as textbooks, libraries, and science laboratories, essential for quality education. Poor infrastructure, including inadequate sanitation and unreliable transport, further complicates the situation. These issues directly relate to the study's objectives, which seek to assess how a lack of resources and inadequate infrastructure contribute to the continued educational inequality between rural and urban schools.

For many children, the promise of a brighter future after apartheid remains unfulfilled. In numerous areas across the country, transportation is unavailable, and a lack of running water and proper sanitation persists, with many schools still relying on pit latrines. Despite the Constitution guaranteeing the right to quality education, this right remains elusive in many rural areas of South Africa (Carelse, 2018). The severe impact of the past regime on rural areas does not justify the government's failure to address these challenges thirty years after the democratic government began governing. It appears that there is a lack of political will to address issues affecting rural schools in South Africa.

Some might argue that resource availability is not the sole determinant of performance. While this holds some truth—as evidenced by four districts in KwaZulu Natal ranking among the top ten best-performing districts in the 2023 national senior certificate results—the question

remains whether it is fair to expect teachers and learners to operate under such difficult conditions. Thousands of children and teenagers in rural South Africa travel long distances to school. Poor road networks and limited access to transportation make this journey extremely difficult (Uleanya, 2024). Similarly, many schools are dilapidated and lack adequate teaching and learning resources and essential infrastructure like libraries, computer rooms, and science laboratories. In some areas, learners are forced to learn outside, using broken furniture that threatens their safety and fails to create a conducive environment for effective teaching and learning (Majola, 2021). Furthermore, some regions lack network coverage, complicating communication and the integration of ICT in education (The Conversation, 2016).

The lack of connectivity, data, and devices for online learning was a significant challenge highlighted by scholars during the lockdown-induced school closures in 2020 (Maree, 2022; Vale & Graven, 2022; Ndulu et al., 2022). These challenges predominantly affected children from poor backgrounds, preventing them from receiving tuition from their teachers, while others had online classes (Dano, 2021). The Covid-19 pandemic underscored the significant inequalities that South Africa still battles today (Nkosi, 2022). During this time, disadvantaged learners lacked devices, data access, or the financial means to purchase them. They had to contend with the fear of the invisible virus and the uncertainty about their future as they missed their education.

4.5 The Culture of Learning in Rural Schools

Rural schools' learning culture is significantly impacted by the socio-economic challenges both learners and teachers face. Muronga (2021) argues that the destruction of a nation's education system often begins with dismantling its learning culture. In rural South Africa, social challenges such as poverty, hunger, and a lack of educational support structures create an environment that is not conducive to effective learning.

South African schools do not exist in a vacuum; they are confronted by social challenges inherent in their communities, such as poverty and hunger (The Conversation, 2016). To create effective schools where teachers work willingly and happily and where children are motivated, it is essential to address the social ills that continue to affect the operation of schools. Muronga (2021) posits that anyone seeking to destroy a nation should target its education system, particularly mathematics and science. He asserts that rebuilding South Africa's learning culture will require the nation's commitment. This culture was

dismantled by the education system imposed on black people under the former regime, designed to perpetuate inequality and advance the interests of the white minority at the expense of the black majority. Muronga (2021) further calls on universities to build and nurture a culture of learning and teaching in South African communities from the earliest ages. By doing so, the country can produce individuals capable of solving societal problems that continue to confront and destabilise the nation. Addressing these foundational issues is crucial for developing a robust education system to uplift society.

4.6 Quality Education as a Constitutional Right

The current state of rural schools in South Africa infringes on children's rights to primary education and quality learning. It also jeopardises the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goal to ensure “free, equitable, and quality primary and secondary education for all girls and boys, leading to relevant and effective learning outcomes by 2030” (Fengu, 2023; Equal Education, 2023). Schools should be safe environments where learners can grow, develop, and reach their full potential. However, many rural schools' conditions threaten children's safety and well-being. Degrading toilets, lack of running water, and inadequate sanitation facilities expose learners to significant health risks. Basic hygiene, a fundamental necessity, remains out of reach for many. Sometimes, learners relieve themselves outside to avoid using unsafe pit latrines, fearing the risk of falling in (Nyathikazi, 2021). This situation undermines their dignity, safety, and privacy, infringing their fundamental human rights.

Safety in South African schools is a growing concern, exacerbated by ageing infrastructure, inadequate security, poor water and sanitation facilities, the continued use of pit latrines, and ineffective fencing. These challenges compromise the safety and well-being of rural school learners, teachers, and non-teaching staff (Mokgwathi et al., 2023). In KwaZulu-Natal, over a hundred schools face closure by the provincial Department of Education. While the department cites low enrolment, opposition parties argue that inadequate resource allocation has driven parents to transfer their children to better-resourced schools, further reducing enrolment (Mukotelwa, 2023). These closures force children to travel longer distances to access education and disrupt teachers' placements, as they may need to be redeployed. Additionally, the closures occur amid a broader issue of unemployment among newly graduated teachers, highlighting systemic challenges in the education sector.

5. Recommendations

Building on the findings of this study, it is evident that addressing the systemic challenges in rural education requires a multifaceted and collaborative approach. According to Muronga (2021), lowering pass marks does not equip society to tackle major social issues like poverty, inequality, unemployment, health, crime, security, and environmental conservation. Instead, efforts should focus on maintaining high academic standards while providing targeted support to help learners meet these expectations. This strategy ensures that education contributes meaningfully to broader social development.

Professionals and graduates from rural areas who have experienced the challenges of rural schools firsthand should support these schools and communities (Muronga, 2021). These individuals are uniquely positioned to inspire teachers and learners by sharing their expertise and serving as role models. This approach helps rebuild a culture of achievement and fosters a sense of responsibility among rural professionals to give back to their communities. Engaging in mentorship programs and skill-sharing initiatives can transform rural schools into hubs of inspiration and progress.

Institutions of higher learning also have a critical role in this effort. By deepening their community engagement, universities can support rural development through mentorship programs, capacity-building workshops, and resource-sharing partnerships. Furthermore, addressing adult literacy is crucial for creating a supportive learning environment at home. Illiterate parents often struggle to assist their children with educational tasks, underscoring the need for expanded adult literacy centres in rural areas. Empowering parents with basic literacy skills will boost their confidence and enable them to participate actively in their children's education.

In addition to these efforts, leadership development in schools is essential. South Africa currently lacks an academy specifically for training school principals. However, universities can bridge this gap if supported by state funding. Encouraging principals to attend such programs will enhance their capacity to manage schools effectively, foster innovation, and secure funding through grant proposals. Similarly, School Governing Bodies (SGBs) require structured governance, financial management, and leadership training to strengthen school administration and accountability.

Through these strategies, the state, educational institutions, and local communities can work together to address the challenges of rural education. These interventions not only aim to

improve the quality of education but also contribute to broader social and economic development in rural areas. Lastly, addressing these issues effectively requires a robust foundation of empirical research that explores the unique challenges rural communities face in South Africa. Such research can provide evidence-based insights to guide policymakers and stakeholders in designing targeted and sustainable solutions. A concerted and collaborative effort can transform rural education into a powerful tool for achieving sustainable progress in South Africa.

6. Conclusion

The study's results have provided clear evidence that historical, infrastructural, and socio-economic factors perpetuate educational inequalities in rural South Africa. These results underscore the importance of addressing these barriers comprehensively. To achieve educational equity, policy interventions must focus on resolving resource deficits, improving infrastructure, enhancing parental involvement, and alleviating poverty. Moreover, the findings suggest that creating a learning culture in rural schools requires a multi-faceted approach that includes improving physical resources and addressing the social challenges that hinder effective learning. This research emphasises the urgent need for targeted interventions in rural education by linking these results with the study's objectives. It highlights the ongoing role of historical inequality in shaping educational outcomes. Therefore, this study calls for a concerted national effort to bridge the divide between rural and urban education and ensure that all learners, regardless of their geographic location, can access the resources, support, and opportunities needed to succeed academically.

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