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# SARE

**Southern African Review of Education**

*Special Issue*

**Critical Issues in Education in Southern Africa and Beyond**

Editor: Charl Wolhuter

**A Review of Comparative Education,  
History of Education and Educational  
Development**



# SACHES

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**THE SOUTHERN  
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AND HISTORY OF  
EDUCATION SOCIETY**

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and educational development**

**Volume 29, Issue 2, December 2024**

## *Special Issue*

**Critical Issues in Education in Southern Africa and Beyond**

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## Editorial notes

Charl Wolhuter

This is the second 2024 issue of the *Southern African Review of Education*. The issue offers seven articles focusing on a variety of issues critical in education in Southern Africa and beyond.

The university is widely acknowledged as the pinnacle of education systems and, in the first article, “Assembling the Transformational African University for the Public Good Amid Neoliberal Constraints,” Aslam Fataar focuses on that sector. His article contrasts the need for the transformation of universities in Africa with the constraints, and even counter-forces, exerted by the global neoliberal economic revolution.

While globally, education is facing many challenges, it is especially in the Global South contexts where these challenges are acute. One factor that can make a critical difference in education is leadership. Melese Shula and Jan Heystek, in the second article, “Collaborative Leadership Practices of Principals in Rural Schools: Implications for Improving Educational Quality,” report on a study of how principals’ collaborative leadership practices in challenging contexts can improve the quality of education in those contexts.

One of the main challenges besetting education globally is that of inequality. Two of the major, universal forms of inequality in education are gender inequality and urban-rural inequality, and the next two articles deal with these inequalities. Mlamuli Hlatshwayo writes about the challenges faced by “Women Postdocs in a Neoliberal Higher Education in South Africa.” And, in their article, Labby Ramrathan and Serisha Candice Moodley consider the possibilities for “Digital Integration in Rural Schools: Perspective of Teachers Teaching in Such Schools.”

The final three articles bring focus to the three main groups of actors in education: students/learners, teachers, and families. Chantelle August-Mowers and Rouaan Maarman report on their study about “Using Change Laboratory Workshop to Enhance Capabilities for Multilingual Learners in the Western Cape.” Samantha Hoffman and Rouaan Maarman critically examine the “Freedoms of Teachers Using CAPS: A Capability Analysis of a Western Cape School.” And then, to close, Otilia Chiramba and Phefumula Nyoni, in their article, “Navigating Systemic Barriers: The Role of Family Background in the Experiences of Historically Marginalised Students in South African Higher Education” report on their study of resilience and agency among the transitioning of historically disadvantaged students to a South African university.

Next year, the *Southern African Review of Education* will celebrate its 30th year. The Southern African Comparative and History of Education, founded 33 years ago, has been in existence since 1991. In the first issue of 2025, I intend to have a special section taking stock of education in the

Southern African region.

**Interim editor**

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# Assembling the transformational African university for the public good amid neoliberal constraints

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## Abstract

Neoliberalism is pervasive in African (and global) higher education. This paper argues that the transformation of African universities must be situated within, and respond to the constraints imposed by neoliberalism, proverbially, “inside the belly of the beast.” It calls for a shift from market-driven agendas toward a vision emphasising the university’s role as a catalyst for societal change and advancing the public good. The paper introduces the concept *transformational assemblage* to analyse how universities can promote societal development through critical engagement spaces. Two illustrative examples are explored to demonstrate this potential. The first examines a university-led visual restitution and redress programme, using a sociology of translation framework to reveal how collaborative negotiations between university and community actors activate transformational assemblages. The second example discusses a postgraduate student-led sustainability initiative in an informal settlement by exploring the networked processes and dynamics that emerge in co-created community spaces. Both examples underscore the importance of equitable collaboration and the use of diverse forms of knowledge and expertise from university and community stakeholders. The paper provides insights into how African universities can be assembled to advance the public good, leveraging their transformational potential despite the constraints of neoliberalism.

**Keywords:** African university, neoliberalism, transformational assemblages, sociology of translation, public good

Fataar, A. (2024). Assembling the transformational African university for the public good amid neoliberal constraints. *Southern African Review of Education*, 29(2), 7–19.

## **Introduction**

The university's image as an ivory tower relatively isolated from the dynamics of society has been eroded over time, signalling a marked shift in how higher education institutions are perceived within the societal context (Burawoy, 2011). This view indicates a rethinking of the university's purposes and functions, urging a reconsideration of its place in an ever-changing world. The rise of globalisation, the influence of the market, and the relationship between society, the state, and the university have impacted the modern university's identity. Thus, the university has to balance its role in focusing on knowledge and academic inquiry with the demands of a transforming landscape that emphasises innovation, efficiency, and digital transformation.

To envision the African university's future, examining the discourses that shape its operations and identity today is essential. A dominant narrative has emerged that situates the university within market-driven imperatives—prioritising profit, competition, and performativity—at the expense of its potential to contribute meaningfully to social progress. The dominant neoliberal vision of the university emphasises commodification, with knowledge viewed mainly as a tradable product, often disconnected from the needs and well-being of society. This hegemonic approach has made it difficult to nurture a university that prioritises the public good or plays a transformative role in addressing pressing societal challenges. In response, this paper explores alternative ways to integrate the transformative potential of the African university within the constraints of a neoliberal framework.

In this paper, I develop the view that universities have to embrace a transformative approach, which would involve shifting away from market-driven orientations toward a vision that stresses the university's role as a catalyst for societal change. This transformation requires the university to be understood not as a fixed institution but as a dynamic network—a university–societal nexus—where the intersections of academic knowledge and community engagement serve as the primary vehicle for societal development. The university has to engage with communities' challenges by using its knowledge and intellectual resources to build critical citizenship and promote societal progress.

At the heart of this argument lies a key question raised by Marginson (2024, p. 19): “Which values, deemed essential for a healthy society, should higher education instil?” In response, this paper explores how universities can be reimagined as transformative institutions that actively contribute to the common good. The task is to activate transformative practices within the university's operations that extend beyond conventional academic structures and engage with communities in ways that engender critical thinking, social responsibility, and community engagement. This approach requires decentring the traditional boundaries of the university and embedding its knowledge production processes within the broader society.

Delanda's (2016) assemblage theory provides a conceptual framework for understanding the processes through which these transformative practices can emerge. Drawing on the work of Deleuze and Guattari (1987), Delanda's perspective on assemblages offers a departure from

hierarchical, static models of organisation, advocating for a more fluid and dynamic understanding of complex systems. An assemblage is not a fixed or predetermined structure but a network of interconnected elements that interact and evolve in response to changing conditions. In the context of universities, this approach suggests that transformation occurs not through top-down mandates but through the complex, organic interactions between human and non-human actors, institutional practices, and the larger societal systems in which they operate.

Through the lens of assemblage theory, the university becomes a dynamic entity that interacts with its environment and shapes its identity through its engagement with various societal actors. This understanding emphasises the interconnectedness of university practices, where academic knowledge, community involvement, and institutional structures converge to create new possibilities for societal transformation. The university's identity is thus not fixed but instead, emerges through ongoing interactions that reflect its evolving role in society. Delanda's (2016) work invites us to reconsider traditional notions of institutional order and embrace the complexity and fluidity of the systems at play within and outside the university.

This process of transformation is particularly crucial in the context of African universities, which are at the intersection of competing visions: the neoliberal model that sees higher education as a private good and the alternative vision that regards universities as promoting the public good, serving the collective benefit of society. The neoliberal model increasingly dominates higher education systems, emphasising market-driven values such as efficiency and performativity. Bacevic (2018, p. 79) vividly described this model as one where universities are "savaged by the combined forces of capital and technology," leading to the fragmentation of knowledge and its commodification. In contrast, the vision of the African university as a public good seeks to place justice, inclusivity, and societal benefit at the core of its mission. This vision reimagines the university as a space for addressing inequalities, promoting democracy, and contributing to the development of the African continent.

The university's transformation into an institution that promotes the public good requires a multifaceted process of claiming its role as a force for societal development. This transformation occurs at the intersections where academic knowledge and community engagement meet, shaping the university's practices and how it engages with various local, national, and global publics. The process is dynamic, shaped by the complex interplay of knowledge production, societal engagement, and institutional practices. Within these intersections, the university's potential to contribute meaningfully to societal change can be realised.

This paper explores how this transformation can be actualised in the context of African universities. By focusing on two examples of how universities can assemble their transformational identity, I discuss the practical manifestations of this process. These examples highlight how universities can navigate the tension between competing frameworks and explore how they can actively contribute to the public good, drawing on the collective knowledge and resources of the institution and its community. Through this exploration, I seek to illuminate the pathways through

which African universities can reassert their role as transformative institutions, contributing to creating more just, inclusive, and sustainable societies.

### **Exploring an emergent transformational assemblage in university–society restitutional co-creation**

This section delves into the assembly of university–society nexus transformational activities by applying a sociological method of translation; this will elucidate how transformational assemblages are activated and substantively developed. Using the visual redress initiative at Stellenbosch University as an example, I illustrate the composition of such an assemblage. Drawing from actor-network theory (ANT), the focus on “translation” illustrates the network building that is integral to assemblage activities (Müller & Schurr, 2016). This network-building process involves integrating heterogeneous elements, both human and non-human, activated and translated into productive operations (Smith et al., 2010). Processes of translation are central to ANT’s explanation of how complex processes come together and function. Translation refers to the processes through which actors—individuals, organisations, technologies—come to align their interests and actions to form a network. The sociology of translation thus provides a framework for understanding how complex social phenomena emerge, stabilise, and change through the dynamic interactions of diverse actors and activities.

This section seeks to understand how a transformational assemblage is constituted through these translation-type activities. An assemblage evolves as practices and activities emerge from negotiated interactions among actors with specific interests. These assemblages are networked activities described as the “product of heterogeneous engineering in which bits and pieces from the social, technical, conceptual, and textual are fitted together” (Smith et al., 2010, p. 505). The process involves transforming and aligning interests, enrolling actors into networks, and redefining roles and goals. The translation process brings together and enables the functioning of these networked assemblages, encompassing interactive dimensions, including: *problematization*, which involves the identification of a problem or challenge; *interessement*, which involves drawing in the participation of actors; and *the recruitment, enrolment and mobilisation of allies and networks* in the identified practices or activity (Smith et al., 2010, pp. 505–515). Some of these aspects are discussed in this section.

The transformational university in Africa should be anchored in a vision of an alternative public good, with a central commitment to community service. This reimagining must challenge the dominant neoliberal framework that has shaped university identities since at least the 1970s. An alternative vision would emphasise a localised interpretation of the United Nations’ Sustainable Development Goals, focusing on the university’s local community. Such an approach prioritises local development and addresses the needs of excluded communities within the university’s geographic region. African universities can fulfil their public good mission by systematically applying their knowledge infrastructure to address community development challenges. The visual redress activity discussed here exemplifies how targeted transformational initiatives within

South African universities, dealing with the impact of hegemonic performative neoliberal policies, have sought to redefine their public good mission to imbue it with an Africa-centred local responsiveness.

Holding up former White South African universities, such as Stellenbosch University, as examples of transformational assemblages based on an alternative Africa-centred public good imaginary may seem far-fetched. However, these universities are acutely African in their historical formation. Like other African universities, they had functioned in the service of colonial segregationist and apartheid ideologies. As Mamdani (1993) pointed out, their political, cultural, and educational foundations were Eurocentric. These universities were complicit in colonial violence and erasure associated with land dispossession, linguistic alienation, and the marginalisation of Indigenous, enslaved, and Black communities. Their academic identity was rooted in the taxonomies of colonialism and apartheid's racial categorisations, and they primarily served White communities at the expense of Black communities, who suffered from the universities' racial geographies. Many universities were complicit in state-driven efforts to forcibly clear Black communities from land to make way for spatial development based on Eurocentric architectural styles (see Fataar, 2021, 2023). The imperative to transform these universities in line with a democratic commitment to non-racism, inclusion, and equity, along with shedding the vestiges of racism in their institutional culture, has received significant attention (Fataar & Costandius, 2021).

Stellenbosch University's engagement with local communities for restitution, viewed through a sociology of translation lens, has involved attempts at transforming its visual culture and symbolic representations. The primary actors in this transformative activity have been academics and academic support staff from various university departments and other university workspaces. They focus on reshaping the visual culture of their work environments, which include architecture, statues, and iconography. Where these activities extend into the community, the challenge has been recruiting and enrolling key community actors to participate in visual restitution and redress efforts. Given that the community had been victims of apartheid violations and had been forcibly removed from land that the university had taken over, attempts to involve them were often met with scepticism and sometimes cynicism. This process of restitution has included discarding visual cultural depictions as represented in statues, buildings, and names associated with a racist past. The university's restitution initiatives have struggled to provide a basis for restorative healing through productive memorialisation processes. A methodology of restitution, termed "visual redress," has emerged in recent processes at Stellenbosch University (see Fataar & Costandius, 2021). I have participated in these processes as a committee member of the university's visual redress committee. Our committee serves as an interlocutor in ongoing restitution efforts involving communities forcibly removed for university expansion during apartheid.

Our emergent approach to restitution is based on community participation and dialogue, research-led restitution centred on violated communities' stories, and collective decision-making

perspectives and decisions on appropriate forms of memorialisation. The university's scholarly infrastructure is central to these processes, which involve listening, dialogue, research, and storytelling to build respect and trust for sensitive and fractious discussions. University participants have learned to engage with humility and care, enabling community voices to articulate their views and guide the direction of the discussions. Emphasising dialogue on community dehumanisation and violations caused by the university, these discussions include topics such as forced removals and the long history of exclusion from university spaces.

The translational process of *interesement* [obtaining participation] involves identifying community members who directly experienced the university's violations, typically elderly individuals or their descendants, to address the missingness created by their ongoing absence from the university's consciousness. This is the phase where assemblage activity persuades key actors to come on board by addressing the reasons for their resistance and establishing trust in pursuit of commonly identified objectives (Smith et al., 2010). Paramount has been the commitment to telling the full and complex story of university-associated violations. For instance, we have sought to tell the story of the decommissioning of a cemetery by the apartheid state, where bodies were removed with the intention to construct a university faculty building. The construction never occurred, leaving the cemetery grounds lying derelict and inaccessible. Descendants of people buried there expressed their grief and feelings of fracture and violation at the violation of the cemetery and their inability to mourn their loved ones at the site.

Our redress work developed and adopted a type of truth-telling commitment that exposed the extent of the community's erasure and violation. Importantly, it conferred legitimacy for the redress and restitution work. Despite the lack of official records, a research-informed restitution process has been weaving together a coherent account of the history of the cemetery. We have been gathering sources such as newspaper articles, organisational documents, and academic theses to construct a comprehensive understanding that provides a socio-historical contextualisation of the affected area and community. Amplifying the voices of those impacted by the erasure of the cemetery provides a deeper understanding of the injustices perpetrated against this community.

The translational work of assemblage functioning during our visual redress work has involved mobilising allies, resources, and networks to support the activity of the societal nexus assemblage. Archivists, officials in governmental heritage bodies, local schools and libraries, media exposure, and access to redress funding have been critical to mobilising translational work. We are committed to exploring the multifaceted lives overshadowed by apartheid's dehumanising policies including struggles, losses, resilience, cultural heritage, and community contributions. Honouring these individuals' lives affirm their enduring humanity and dignity.

Our assemblage activity has led the university to acknowledge its role as a perpetrator and to take responsibility for atonement, recompense, and processes of re/humanisation. Through historical research by university academics and community participants through a community participation approach, our collective restitution practices have enabled a fuller, verifiable story to emerge. This research has contextualised the complicity of the apartheid state and municipal government, as

well as of disciplines such as anatomy and physical anthropology, and the university management's racially segregated spatial planning, with devastating consequences for expelled communities.

Our participative processes have been focusing on the stories of violated communities. Community-based researchers have been collecting and compiling oral histories from those who lived in areas affected by forced removals and integrating these narratives into the restitution process. One key outcome of the project thus far has been the publication of a book of stories of descendants of people buried at the Hardekraaltjie cemetery (Oelofsen & Fortuin, 2024). The collection of these stories has enriched and deepened the archival research, providing multiple accounts of forced removals for community and university participants to understand the violations better. The community's stories and participation have informed how sites are memorialised and used for meaningful conversations, making restitution part of productive community activities in which the university participates. Adopting a community-led approach is integral to re-humanising violated communities, allowing them to uncover as well as develop narratives geared toward citizenship formation and democracy making.

This section has illustrated how a transformational assemblage has emerged at one university's societal nexus. Building legitimacy for its restitution efforts has relied on inclusive processes that enrolled various university and community actors in community-informed redress activities. Community researchers and university academic researchers have collaborated as co-equal partners to tell a fuller story of community erasure, the experiences of bereavement and loss, and how lives have been re-established. The emerging networks of collaboration have been crucial to the functioning of this transformational assemblage, bridging university and community-based processes aimed at restitution and democracy making. Connecting the alternatively imagined university and the community's restitution processes to concrete development operations is crucial for citizenship and democracy making, an aspect of assemblage activity discussed in the next section.

### **Assembling critical sustainable development spaces in an informal settlement**

This section focuses on how critical spaces are established as an example of a transformational assemblage within the operations of the university's societal nexus. It draws on Mourad's (2020, 2022) examination of democracy's role in higher education, particularly the concept of *critical spaces* that stimulate democratic, civic, and societal development processes. These generative spaces leverage the university's scholarship, research, teaching, and community engagement to tackle local and global challenges, countering neoliberal trends and impacts on higher education and society (Mourad, 2022, p. 1).

The section explores the makeup of these critical democracy-making developmental spaces, exemplified by the developmental sustainability initiatives at Stellenbosch University, which interact dynamically with the local community. It discusses the setup of these critical

university–societal nexus activities and how they apply integrated, responsive scholarship to local problems. It highlights how innovative epistemic processes, developed with community participation, yield productive solutions to seemingly intractable problems. And it exemplifies the functioning of a university’s transformational assemblage, rooted in the intellectual tradition that views higher education as a transformative social institution. On this view, higher education institutions “act as shelters for politically controversial projects in relation to social movements in the public sphere . . . [and] are arenas of contestation for conflicting positions about moral principles in social life” (Mourad, 2022, p. 2).

A critical space is envisioned within universities, where groups of inquirers gather, based on shared concerns about specific social change issues. They utilise knowledge from various disciplines to promote critical dialogue and debate, applying principles of deliberative democracy and communicative action to reach consensus while engaging targeted publics (Mourad, 2020, p. 444). The goal is to increase public awareness and understanding, influence public opinion, and mobilise action. Each epistemic grouping defines its “public” and the nature of public interest based on its developmental foci and goals, thus enabling universities to act as shelters for social change projects that serve the public good.

In these critical spaces, values are central to dialogue and participant inquiry. The challenge for this type of assemblage activity is that traditional methods for validating knowledge in established domains may not always apply. Instead, validation comes through the difficult work of being open to differing values among university and community actors, aiming for mutual understanding and consensus in developing proposals for social change. Critical spaces can extend the impact of scholarly research, teaching, and public service. They function as spaces of critical reasoning where value-oriented positions are developed. These spaces serve as venues and incubators for discussion and debate among self-organising groups of academics and students across disciplines, with active community interaction, ultimately bringing proposals for social change to the public sphere. Moral alternatives are explored and discussed transparently and participatively in an evolving interactive network that seeks to address societal problems productively (Marginson, 2011). In this way, critical space activity extends academic freedom by pushing research beyond traditional inquiry domains. Scholars in these critical spaces can be seen as engaged in knowledge activism, which involves developing communicative capacities that grow a critical and collaborative public discourse. They explore and apply their research and specialised knowledge within deliberative processes to drive social change at societal levels (Mourad, 2022).

Stellenbosch University (SU) hosts several research projects on climate studies and sustainable transitions. SU’s School for Climate Studies embodies an integrated, institution-wide approach that emphasises research and development on water recycling, food security, disaster risk reduction, clean fuels, and alternative energy. One notable graduate research project activity is discussed here as an example of a transformative assemblage at the nexus of university and society. This project involves the Sustainability Institute, located at the Lynedoch Eco Village, 10 kilometres from Stellenbosch, and renowned as a “socially mixed ecologically designed

community” (Swilling, 2020, p. 10). This community serves as an “actually existing experimental community” (Swilling, 2020, p. 11) and co-facilitates an academic programme that includes research, as well as undergraduate and postgraduate studies. The academic programme is based on a collaboration between the Sustainability Institute, SU’s School of Public Leadership, and its Centre for Complex Systems in Transition.

A group of SU students from the postgraduate programme based at the Sustainability Institute directed their research towards Enkanini, an informal settlement near Stellenbosch (Swilling, 2016). Their initial focus was to explore the practical implications of in situ upgrading of the settlement, as outlined in government programmes. Embracing a transdisciplinary approach, they immersed themselves in the community, living alongside residents. This direct engagement enabled them to experience daily life in Enkanini, first-hand and build acceptance and trust in their work. Collaborating with the Informal Settlement Network and officials from Stellenbosch Municipality, their research evolved to address immediate community needs in anticipation of formal infrastructure development.

Following a period of problem identification, the project co-identified three infrastructure interventions—waste, sanitation, and energy—with Enkanini residents, piloting these solutions in the settlement. They identified interested residents who became co-researchers through deep immersion, informal discussions, participant observation, and public art campaigns. These engagements facilitated the development of shared perspectives, identifying critical service delivery problems and brainstorming creative responses (Swilling et al., 2016).

Transitioning from conventional research aimed at understanding government-prescribed development, the researchers adopted a transformational approach to understanding community functioning and implementing contextually informed technological adaptations. This allowed them to pursue community-driven improvements to enhance quality of life and catalysing social and systemic innovations. Swilling (2016, p. 37) noted that “asking what can be done by members of the community in partnership with the student researchers to improve aims to generate transformative knowledge [resulted] in social innovations.” The project combined applying knowledge to local sustainability challenges with active community participation in designing innovations. This approach, for example, culminated in the development of the iShack—a 14.2 m<sup>2</sup> sustainable dwelling featuring innovations such as fire-retardant insulation, passive heating and cooling systems, solar panels, and rainwater harvesting. The iShack demonstrated substantial advancements in thermal comfort, fire safety, and lighting (Swilling, 2016).

Beyond addressing housing challenges, the students’ research sparked social mobilisation in Enkanini, empowering residents with newfound skills and knowledge. This initiative led to broader social innovations and grassroots efforts towards incremental upgrades and sustainability. Driven by their problem-solving research, their overarching aim was to establish a sustainable social enterprise that enables informal settlements to organise around tangible material improvements. This model envisioned residents paying for guaranteed services, fostering

cooperative action, and establishing social and institutional frameworks that advocate for further enhancements, including securing land rights. Developing alternative infrastructure solutions through direct engagement with specific groups of shack dwellers yielded profound social impacts. Ultimately, the political decision-makers in local government acknowledged the viability of Enkanini, sparking a broader conversation involving political and community stakeholders about the area's development (Swilling, 2016).

What is fundamental to this university–society nexus activity in the “deterritoralised” zone of an informal housing site is the integration of academic and everyday knowledge through community participation processes involving mutual learning. Reflexive knowledge co-production allows actors to share and reconstruct their underlying theories of change and develop shared mental frameworks necessary for initiating lasting change (Swilling et al., 2016). Transdisciplinary work across the university's borders, in community sites, enables collaboration across different knowledge discourses, making community engagement founded on knowledge problematics possible. A useful approach for advancing the public good in local communities involves framing the university's work around identifying problems. Transforming problems into knowledge problematics (Zipin 2017) requires applying the university's disciplinary knowledge in conjunction with the perspectives of local community actors. This collaboration, involving scientists, community knowledge experts, and laypeople, facilitates a knowledge-informed consensus to guide community-based activities (Fataar, 2023). Such an approach was demonstrated by the students' sustainability research and development work in Enkanini, illustrating how the university's knowledge can enhance societal life.

Swilling et al. (2016) explained that understanding infrastructure challenges in informal settlements requires addressing issues from multiple perspectives. To achieve this, the researchers employed diverse methods, including immersion, participant observation, household surveys and interviews, focus groups, and mapping to understand Enkanini's micro-dynamics. These methods provided insights into the householders' perspectives and helped forge relationships, leading some residents to become co-researchers and co-facilitators. Through intensive participatory interactions, these relationships coalesced into an emergent group of co-researchers.

Following a transdisciplinary research methodology, the focus shifted from physical construction (services, houses, electricity) to exploring how active community networks could develop the knowledge capacity to generate solutions on their own terms. Meaningful engagements among partners led to co-produced problem identification and perspectives that inspired ongoing explorations of workable innovations. This approach enabled the emergence of a collaborative environment where shared knowledge and mutual learning were paramount. Transdisciplinary research in this transformational nexus assemblage played a decisive role in the project's generative processes, demonstrating the power of collaborative, community-based development and innovative solutions.

Critical spaces at the university–society nexus are created by deploying the university's research and knowledge infrastructure to address intractable community development problems. The

African university's transformational vision emerges through the reterritorialising processes of assembling epistemic activity and actors in local community sites. As this student-led example illustrates, constructing critical development spaces that depend on community knowledge and participation is crucial to the university's transformational work.

## Conclusion

This paper argued that meaningful transformation hinges on Africa's higher education's commitment to promoting the public good by advancing societal change. Central to this argument is the assertion that the continent's universities can serve as transformative agents through their epistemic engagement with societal and community spheres, facilitated by interconnected assemblage processes that bridge institutional and societal boundaries to address pressing developmental challenges.

The paper demonstrated this transformative capacity through two illustrative examples. The first example uses a sociology of translation lens to discuss a visual restitution and redress project that involves the university's collaboration with the community. By engaging diverse participants in translational processes of interestment, these efforts legitimised restitution through inclusivity, addressing historical erasures, and rebuilding community narratives. The second example discussed a postgraduate research initiative in an informal settlement, emphasising the creation of critical spaces where transdisciplinary networks mobilised the university's epistemic resources to address enduring development challenges collaboratively. These examples illustrate how universities can reterritorialise their transformative mission by locating development processes in community participation and knowledge.

This paper's insights contribute to broader discussions about the African university's role in promoting inclusive and participatory societal development. By engaging in transformative assemblage activities across disciplinary silos, universities can reimagine their institutional functioning, challenging neoliberal constraints to produce co-owned community solutions to real-world problems. Collaborative processes between academic and community actors can convert societal challenges into knowledge problematics that could spur innovative and sustainable outcomes. Future research might explore how diverse institutional configurations and epistemic traditions shape the effectiveness of university–community assemblage transformation work.

This paper highlights the urgent need for African universities to reconceptualise their transformative mission as formative role players in societal change. By using their epistemic infrastructures to prioritise community participation, cooperation, and sustainability, universities can position themselves as catalysts for just development outcomes. This vision of transformation affirms the university's relevance as an agent of societal progress and a beacon of hope for Africa's developmental future.

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# Collaborative leadership practices of principals in rural schools: Implications for improving educational quality

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## Abstract

This paper explores the influence of principals' collaborative leadership on quality education in South African rural schools. The aim of this study was to explore how principals' collaborative leadership practices contribute to quality education in rural schools and the strategies that are most effective in this context. The authors conducted in-depth interviews with six principals of six rural schools in three South African provinces to gain insight into the phenomenon under investigation. This qualitative method allowed us to conduct an in-depth exploration of principals' interactions with educators, learners, and other stakeholders. As part of the theoretical-conceptual framework, we investigated the primary leadership that promotes collaboration in academic research. The findings revealed several essential collaborative behaviours of rural school principals that improved the teaching-learning process in their schools, consequently improving the quality of outcomes in their schools. These behaviours included developing strong relationships with different stakeholders, encouraging teamwork, and involving educators in decision-making processes. Furthermore, the principals addressed unique challenges in their schools by devising and executing ways to improve learner outcomes and foster a good school culture. These methods are consistent with earlier studies that highlighted the value of collaborative leadership and distributed decision making in educational contexts. Drawing on the findings that emerged from this study, we made two specific recommendations: first, tailored professional development programmes—focused on relationship building and team dynamics—should be presented to help principals improve their collaborative leadership skills and second, future research could compare urban and rural school contexts to explore how collaborative leadership promotes school development so as to suggest more targeted and effective leadership practices for long-term success.

**Keywords:** collaborative leadership, quality education, human capital, rural context

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## Introduction and background

Education is the cornerstone of social growth and human capital; it empowers individuals and directs the course of communities and nations (Howells, 2018). The leadership style used in educational institutions therefore has a significant impact on educational quality and outcomes (Mincu, 2022). South Africa—a country with a rich but complicated past characterised by historical struggles and ongoing socioeconomic inequities—faces a unique set of conditions that has a great influence on its educational institutions. Despite significant attempts to address these disparities, schools in rural, low socioeconomic contexts continue to face various challenges including poverty, poor infrastructure, socio-political issues, and ineffective leadership styles (Spaull, 2013).

This study was conducted in South African rural schools that frequently face several obstacles that have an impact on their efficacy and educational quality (Spaull & Taylor, 2015). These schools are usually located in remote areas, making access to resources and infrastructure challenging. Many of these schools are located in low socioeconomic contexts with inadequate infrastructure, such as insufficient classrooms and a lack of power and clean water, leading to poor sanitation. Furthermore, these schools typically face a scarcity of competent instructors and such instructors are sometimes hesitant to work in remote areas owing to restricted professional development possibilities and bad living conditions.

Furthermore, these schools typically have a high student-to-teacher ratio, resulting in overcrowded classrooms and limited individual attention for learners. In addition, restricted access to educational resources and technology impedes the learning process, consequently challenging the style of leadership practised in these schools. Many rural children face socioeconomic obstacles, including poverty and hunger, which have an impact on their academic performance and school attendance.

Despite the above-mentioned challenges, rural schools often serve as critical community hubs, and are supported by strong local traditions and values (Chikoko et al., 2015). Educators in these schools are often deeply committed to their students' well-being and development, which fosters a resilient and community-oriented learning environment. Addressing the unique needs of rural schools is essential for improving educational outcomes and fostering social equity in South Africa.

The rural context just provides the background of the schools where the research was conducted. It is not the purpose of this paper to argue how and why the value of context may or may not influence the collaborative practices of leaders. In this context, understanding the role of school leadership is becoming increasingly important. The scope of this research was limited to collaborative leadership. School leadership, especially the leadership style practised by the principal, is essential for addressing challenges and promoting a conducive learning environment for learners (Mincu, 2022). Principals, as key decision makers, are responsible for navigating the

complex landscape of challenges their schools face while striving to build an enabling environment for effective teaching and learning (Weiner et al., 2021).

The application of collaborative leadership is explained in the context where there is a school management team (SMT), which normally consists of the principal, deputy principal(s), and departmental heads. Senior teachers may also form part of the SMT. Collaborative leadership is examined with the SMT as point of departure to determine how one can help schools improve their quality of education. However, we noted a significant gap in understanding which leadership style is most effective to enhance quality education in South African schools in low socioeconomic contexts (McCallum, 2021). This paper aims to fill this knowledge gap by discussing the collaborative leadership style principals adopt in such contexts and how it links to the provision of quality education. Collaborative leadership involves shared decision making, actively engaging with stakeholders, and building a collective vision (Kujala et al., 2022). Although existing research recognises the importance of leadership in an educational context, the specific application of collaborative leadership in the South African context is still unexplored (McCallum, 2021).

The study attempted to answer the following question: “How do principals in the South African rural context practise collaborative leadership?”

## **Collaboration**

Collaboration is inherently linked to the establishment of trust and the cultivation of partnerships. Trust serves as the bedrock upon which collaborative efforts are built. Trust fosters open communication, promotes the sharing of ideas, and creates a supportive environment for collaborative decision making (Bryk & Schneider, 2002). In the case of educational leadership, trust among team members is paramount for building cohesive relationships and encouraging a shared commitment to common goals. Leaders who prioritise the development of trust in collaborative teams create an atmosphere that values transparency and encourages the free exchange of different perspectives, ultimately enhancing the effectiveness of collaborative endeavours (Coleman, 2012).

Partnerships play a pivotal role in collaboration, whether in teams or in groups. Short-term groups may be able to address problems in a partnership better than teams because groups know it is for a short time that they must partner and collaborate, then they can go their own way. Teams involve a long-term partnership—collaboration must be much stronger and deep-seated for the partnership to be sustainable. Partnerships extend the collaborative ethos to external stakeholders including parents, community members, and other educational institutions. According to Fullan (2007), effective partnerships strengthen the impact of collaborative efforts by mobilising a broader network of resources and expertise. In the realm of educational leadership, partnerships with external entities could yield fresh perspectives, added resources, and community support, all of which contribute to the success of collaborative initiatives. Therefore, the symbiotic relationship between collaboration, trust, and partnerships is fundamental to shaping a robust foundation for effective educational leadership.

Research has consistently underscored the interdependence of collaboration, trust, and partnerships in educational settings. The establishment of trust is not only an outcome of successful collaboration but also a prerequisite for it (Katzenbach & Smith, 1993). When trust is present, individuals are more likely to engage in collaborative activities, share information openly, and contribute to collective decision-making processes (Coleman, 2012). Effective partnerships further reinforce trust by broadening the collaborative network, facilitating the exchange of knowledge and resources, and promoting a shared vision for educational success (Bryk et al., 2015). The dynamic relationship between collaboration, trust, and partnerships forms a synergistic triad that is essential for fostering a culture of collaborative leadership in education.

Aligned with and part of collaboration is the relationship between partners, which should be based on trust for the relationship to be sustainable over a prolonged period. Collaboration to achieve specific goals also implies decision making and individual and group thinking. These concepts are discussed in more detail later in this paper. Decision making also implies that there may be power at play as well as possible micropolitical activities that may influence collaboration as well as relationships and trust and hence the partnership. These complex interrelations linked to collaboration are discussed in the rest of the paper.

Collaborative leadership redefines responsibility and accountability by delegating these within a team. Shared responsibility fosters a collective commitment to achieving common goals and outcomes (Gronn, 2009). Collaboration in a school team, for example, an SMT, assumes accountability and responsibility.

## **Collaborative leadership**

Literature shows that collaborative leadership improves school performance including student success, educator morale, and the overall school climate (Hafeez & Akhtar, 2022). First, collaborative leaders are more likely to engage with stakeholders, share decision-making power, inculcate positive relationships, and foster a sense of ownership among teachers and community members, yielding positive changes in the school environment (Wang et al., 2022). Second, the role of stakeholder engagement in collaborative leadership cannot be emphasised enough. This implies the active involvement of the SMT, the school governing body, educators, parents, learners, and the wider community, among others. This commitment not only supports the creation of a common vision but also fosters a sense of unity and collective responsibility to improve schools. Third, the literature shows that contextual factors—such as socioeconomic conditions, cultural dynamics, and historical heritage—significantly influence how collaborative leadership is applied and acted upon in South African schools (van der Vyver et al., 2021). Principals must adapt their leadership to account for these unique contextual factors. Finally, collaborative leadership can play a vital role in addressing issues of equality and inclusion in South African schools (Leithwood, 2021). By engaging various stakeholders, leaders can better understand and respond to the needs of disadvantaged learners, thereby fostering a more inclusive learning

environment.

Collaborative leadership intersects with shared and distributive leadership models, emphasising the decentralisation of authority and the equitable distribution of leadership responsibilities among team members (Spillane et al., 2004). This must be read with the findings of Hallinger and Heck (2010a, 2010b); not only collaborative leadership but also the organisational context and the ability to improve are key components of potential sustainable academic achievement. Collaborative leadership reflects a distributed and shared approach to leadership. It involves multiple individuals or teams working together, each contributing their expertise to achieve common goals. This concept aligns with ideas from complexity leadership theory, which emphasises the importance of adaptive processes, shared leadership, and distributed decision making (Uhl-Bien et al., 2007).

Collaborative leadership must be well explained and understood by all collaborators and role players. There can be a collaboration process with many collaborators, but there may be only one leader for this collaboration process—a collaborative leader of the rest of the SMT and the rest of the staff members in the school. The SMT may also be a collaborative leadership team that takes the lead as collaborators. They become the leaders of the rest of the staff and the school. In this case, the roles and responsibilities, accountability and power relations, and trust and respect must be clearly understood and discussed before the process of collaborative leadership as a team is put into action.

Complexity leadership theory posits that effective leadership involves not only traditional hierarchical structures but also distributed leadership and adaptive processes. Collaborative leadership aligns with this perspective by emphasising the importance of shared decision making, collective problem solving, and distributed responsibilities (Uhl-Bien et al., 2007). Uhl-Bien et al. (2007) argued that collaborative leadership is well suited to navigate the complexities of modern organisational environments. It recognises that no single leader holds all the necessary knowledge and skills to address multifaceted challenges. Instead, leadership becomes a collective endeavour where diverse perspectives contribute to innovative solutions and adaptive responses.

An important aspect of collaborative leadership in a school organisation is that all members of the collaborative leadership team are not at the same level of experience, qualification, and dedication (motivation). This must be considered in the distribution of work among the team members and in working with the rest of the teachers and any other role player. Situational leadership theory suggests that leaders can adapt their styles based on the situation and the readiness of their followers (Hersey & Blanchard, 1969). Collaborative leadership aligns with this adaptive approach, responding to the unique demands of different situations within the organisational context. In a dynamic, complex, and ever-changing environment, collaborative leaders determine and assess the context and adjust their approach to best fit the needs of the team and the goals at hand.

If collaborative leadership is accepted as the approach for an organisation, it must be clarified whether an individual would be the leader of a collaborative group or whether a collaborative team

assumes the leadership role. This may imply that one of the leaders would need to consider situational leadership theory and share leadership and responsibilities with the rest of the collaborative leadership team. In this case, it may be the principal as the leader of the collaborative leadership team who must ensure that the situational requirements of experience and commitment of the collaborative team are at least considered.

According to O’Leary et al. (2010), collaborative leadership involves a paradigm shift from traditional notions of individualised leadership where one figure has exclusive responsibility for outcomes and achievements to leadership that is shared with group or team members, encouraging shared responsibility and accountability. The essence of collaborative leadership lies in fostering a collective, cooperative environment where diverse perspectives can contribute to decision making and problem solving. As education systems worldwide grapple with multifaceted challenges, understanding and implementing collaborative leadership becomes pivotal to fostering innovation, adaptability, and sustained improvement.

Contextual leadership acknowledges the importance of considering the unique circumstances and challenges within a specific education environment. It involves tailoring leadership practices to the cultural, rural, and historical context of the South African education system. This understanding is crucial for effectively implementing collaborative leadership because one size does not fit all in diverse education settings (Bush, 2011).

### **Collaborative leadership in the organisational context**

The relationship between individual and collaborative leadership is not dichotomous but exists on a continuum, and each approach influences the other in various organisational contexts. Carson et al. (2007) explored the idea of shared leadership and suggested that leadership responsibilities could be shared or distributed among team members, which blurs the lines between individual and collaborative leadership. This shared leadership dynamic allows organisations to benefit from the strengths of both approaches. Shared leadership blurs the boundaries of leadership roles, emphasising a collective influence that is not confined to an individual (Bolden et al., 2011). According to Uhl-Bien et al. (2007), in collaborative leadership, the emphasis is on teamwork, cooperation, and joint decision making, suggesting a distributed approach to leadership responsibilities. These blurred and overlapping approaches and theories are visible in the explanation of shared leadership. The latter relies on collaboration. At the core, collaborative leadership and shared/distributive leadership share a common thread—a departure from traditional top-down leadership models. In the school context, the SMT could follow a collaborative approach within the team and leadership is shared. This can also be labelled as collaborative leadership. It may be technical or there may be a slight difference between shared leadership and collaborative leadership. Both involve more than one person as a leader in complex organisations rather than allowing one leader to attempt leadership in a complex situation.

Individual leadership has certain advantages for the organisational landscape. Clarity in decision

making, swift responses in emergencies, and accountability are notable strengths associated with this approach. Bass and Riggio (2006) argued that individual leaders may have a profound impact on organisational culture, and inspire followers through their vision and charisma. In situations where a single visionary leader can provide a clear direction, individual leadership becomes an asset. On the other hand, collaborative leadership offers different advantages. The pooling of diverse perspectives and expertise fosters innovation and adaptability (Uhl-Bien et al., 2007). The collective intelligence of a team can lead to more informed and well-rounded decisions. Collaboration also enhances engagement and commitment among team members because they share a sense of ownership in the decision-making process (Bryk & Schneider, 2002).

## **Research design**

We used a qualitative case study methodology to investigate principals' collaborative leadership styles and their link to better educational quality in rural school environments (Rule & John, 2011). We purposefully selected six schools in three provinces of South Africa and conducted individual semi-structured interviews with the principal of each school. The principals were chosen based on their seniority and leadership experience in their respective schools. This ensured that participants had adequate experience and understanding of leadership methods and their influence on quality educational.

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, allowing for the exploration of many facets of the principals' leadership style. Each of the six principals—labelled P1, P2, P3, P4, P5, and P6—participated in the individual semi-structured interviews. The interviews lasted around an hour, allowing us to have detailed conversations and obtain thorough knowledge of their leadership styles. The interview questions focused on the principals' techniques to encourage teacher cooperation, their approaches to decision making, and the perceived impact of these practices on student achievement and school progress. The semi-structured interviews enabled the researchers to delve deeper into the replies to gain insight into the collaborative leadership processes in these rural schools.

The data were analysed using a thematic approach and numerous essential processes to ensure a thorough study of the qualitative data. First, each interview was transcribed verbatim to accurately present the participants' opinions. The transcripts were then subjected to a rigorous coding procedure during which significant phrases and concepts were identified and categorised.

The coding approach revealed numerous recurring themes about collaborative leadership and educational quality. These themes were refined through iterative evaluation and comparison across the identified themes. This ensured that the analysis was consistent and thorough. The following main themes emerged: encouraging cooperation, developing trustworthy connections, collaborative accountability, team empowerment, and sharing a similar goal.

The thematic analysis emphasised how collaborative leadership strategies helped to increase educational quality in rural schools. The findings emphasised the diverse character of leadership

and its critical role in creating an inclusive and supportive school culture that is conducive to academic performance. The explication of each theme followed the pattern of developing descriptions, using the words of the participants, and “describing how the narrative outcome will be compared with theories and the general literature” (Creswell, 2014, p. 194).

The next section focuses on the data obtained from principals of rural schools in low socioeconomic contexts. The interviews focused on their collaborative leadership techniques and the contribution of this leadership style to quality education, based on their experiences.

## **Findings**

In this section, we discuss the data that emerged from the semi-structured interviews with the participants regarding their understanding and experiences of collaborative leadership practices and quality education in their schools. Our discussion is categorised into the following themes: teamwork, trusting relationships, collaborative accountability, team empowerment, and sharing a common vision. These themes reflect the participants’ understanding and practising of collaborative leadership principles to improve quality education in challenging contexts.

Collaborative leadership does not happen by itself. It is an attitude, value, and part of a personal dedication to sharing and collaborating with all role players. There needs to be a change in perspective from a hierarchical and authoritarian position to a shared, flat leadership structure. Collaborative leadership is more aligned with a shared and democratic approach where the participants are equally responsible for the outcomes and the process to achieve the outcomes.

### **Teamwork**

The participants’ experiences of collaborative leadership were that teamwork was a vital aspect of this leadership style. Importantly, participants emphasised that good teamwork usually enhanced quality education through a shared responsibility for the teaching–learning process. To achieve this all-encompassing aim, P2 stated that effective teamwork was the main creator of the collaborative environment and the enabler of academic progress. This view confirms Lasater’s (2016) standpoint that effective teamwork leads to the improvement of quality in learning and to the building of a learning community where the stakeholders engage to shape the vision and mission of the school. This view was strengthened by P3, who said the following:

Collaborative leadership is all about supporting each other to improve the functionality of any given organisational vision and, in our case, our schools’ vision. Collaborative leadership is getting together to put our thoughts together and devise the path that directs us to success. However, this happens when we plan together as a team.

P4 further shared that academic responsibilities and regular meetings were executed within a team. This participant also highlighted that teamwork came with its challenges:

Sometimes staff members have different backgrounds, political affiliations and agendas.

However, P5 noted that, in a genuine community, these differences could be overcome by focusing on building a learning community where their getting together was to build their abilities and skills in order to grow and improve the teaching–learning process in the school.

The views of these school leaders were in line with Wang et al.'s (2022, p. 48) definition of collaborative leadership: a “synergy of individuals or stakeholders” who have common interests, share a common vision and shared purposes, and work towards improving the organisational teaching–learning culture to provide improved school performance. The principal, teachers, learners, staff, and parents together with SMTs therefore work together (preferably as a team) to improve the quality of learning in the school.

Roberts (2018) supports the above-mentioned ideas. According to Roberts, groupwork is a critical element of a strong learning community and it can only be effective if focused on learners' learning and by involving teachers as active participants in this process.

### **Trusting relationships**

Participants believed that the foundation for collaboration was trust, respect, and relationships. Collaboration must also be built on an equal understanding that the parties would share the same values and achieve the same results. Collaboration cannot be a one-sided process where one party gets the benefit, while the other party is responsible for taking action and doing the work.

It was clear that most participants viewed collaborative leadership as a critical aspect of human relationships. They indicated that collaboration between school leaders and staff as well as among staff revealed the quality of human relationships in a school. Furthermore, participants emphasised that trusting relationships, built through collaborative leadership, were the cornerstone of improving quality education in challenging contexts. This view was articulated by P3 when she said:

Our success in this particular context depends on our ability to inculcate a collaborative atmosphere with one another, as that works for the good of humanity.

P2 highlighted a trusting relationship among stakeholders as a source of quality education:

Despite the contextual challenges that affect our areas, I firmly noted that 100% pass of our school is the result of the trusting relationships built through the collaborative leadership style. We believe our success in creating a cooperative spirit has been established through the good relations between staff and learners alike and resulted in quality outputs.

P4 concentrated on the link between collaboration and leadership:

Today's changing context of the school landscape and school environment requires a collaborative leadership type that promotes mutual respect and support. Therefore, we cooperate with our principal, our parents, and the rest of the staff.

It is clear that P4, as a leader, believed that principals' ability to employ collaborative leadership had a positive influence on schools, which improved the quality of the teaching and learning environment.

### **Collaborative accountability**

This section discusses participants' views on collaborative accountability for school performance as they practised collaborative leadership. According to participants, all parents, teachers, and SMTs played a pivotal role in the academic performance of their schools. P2 shared the following example:

Through our regular school meetings with the stakeholders, we create a decision-making platform, which serves as a reminder that when the school succeeds, it is the entire team that succeeds and, in the end, all are accountable as well.

P1 stated that leadership was in the hands of all stakeholders—teachers, parents, community, and SMTs alike. The positive relationships that were built, communication, and their common vision drove them to “pull [up their] socks” and work towards the common goal. These leaders also highlighted the challenges they faced as they motivated their school communities to understand the importance of collaborative accountability for school performance.

In her response, P4 stated that personal interests, selfish attitudes, poor communication skills, and conflicts were some of the factors that made it difficult to implement collaborative accountability in schools. However, she testified:

If my school [is] one of the top schools in the province, it is because every individual feels obliged to give the best of [themselves] for the success of the academic performance.

### **Team empowerment**

This finding focuses on participants' views on empowerment as an aspect of collaborative leadership. Participants believed that everyone in their school context had the responsibility to do whatever they could to enhance the personal, professional, and spiritual growth of all staff.

P5 provided the following example:

We have our monthly get-together with the major emphasis on the importance of each student, parent, and staff member helping each other to build a healthy person and healthy school community.

P2 shared:

I am confident to say we are empowered through coaching and regular encounters we have among ourselves and with our parents as we listen to their concerns.

P6 noted:

I believe in capacitating our educators to the point that they . . . feel they share in the leadership of the school. They should be proud of being part of the leading team. We all learn to lead. To do so, I motivate the staff to develop themselves to be leaders.

P3 said:

The aim of the whole exercise is to ensure that the needs of the management staff are fulfilled and

that they are enabled to cope with the challenging situation of our schools and are capacitated to be better leaders.

The aspect of empowerment is strongly associated with the previous theme (i.e. trusting relationships). Nash and Hwang (2012) noted that by creating an atmosphere of trusting human relationships, staff members feel empowered and respected and become more willing to give of themselves to develop the school.

### **Sharing a common vision**

Participants reported a link between leadership and learner academic performance. This could be ascribed to these schools inculcating a strong collaborative leadership style and positive relationships in their context. Consequently, over the previous five years, these schools were able to provide quality education. P2 noted that they had established a focus on the vision and mission of the school. As a result, decision making was in line with what the school wanted to achieve academically.

P5 noted:

I develop a purpose and vision by actively working with teachers, parents, and learners to establish common values and goals. I attempt to express a clear and compelling vision that represents our school's distinct goals and objectives. This vision informs my decisions and contributes to a united, purpose-driven school culture.

P6 shared:

I collaborate closely with our school community—teachers, students and parents—to develop our purpose and vision. This is how I inculcate collaborative leadership practices, which has greatly improved quality education.

P3 said:

We [have] open dialogues with the staff, students, and parents. I focus on understanding the unique strengths and needs of our community, then craft a vision that reflects our commitment to excellence and inclusivity.

According to Hughes and Pickeral (2013), effective leadership, as one aspect of a positive school climate, comprises leadership characteristics and the decision-making style of the school's administration, such as establishing and communicating a clear vision, supporting and appreciating teacher development, involving teachers in key decisions, and becoming friendly and approachable.

### **Conclusion**

The participating principals ascribed their schools' success to collaborative leadership style efforts with their stakeholders (teachers, parents, and SMTs). What emerged as a unique aspect of the principals' collaborative leadership and quality education was the perception that these leaders built positive relationships, inculcating a common vision and collaborative accountability for

improving quality education in a challenging context.

Regardless of the context in which these leaders practised their collaborative leadership, it was clear that they were committed to developing their staff. This is in line with what (Leithwood & Mascall, 2008) and (Supovitz et al., 2009) suggested—empowering educators enables better quality education in the school environment. Furthermore, the principals' collaborative leadership was built on positive relationships and trust. These leaders believed their open communication promoted a supportive environment for collaborative decision making (Bryk & Schneider, 2002).

Finally, participants said that not all educational leaders had learners' academic performance at heart. From the findings, the following themes emerged as important for improving quality education: sharing a common vision, understanding collaborative accountability, and creating positive relationships with co-workers and parents. The participants agreed that shared responsibility fostered a collective commitment to achieving common goals. Furthermore, regardless of the challenging contexts under which these leaders operated, quality academic performance was maintained in these schools through a distributed and shared approach.

This study focused solely on schools in rural contexts as a case study. Future studies could compare rural and urban schools (comparative research) with the focus on collaborative leadership.

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# Women postdocs in a neoliberal higher education in South Africa

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## Abstract

The neoliberal turn(s) in higher education has socially constructed the public university into a private corporate entity, with students being the fee-paying clients entitled to the curriculum goods of academia. This neoliberal turn has also socially constructed the precarious postdoctoral research fellows (postdocs) who are useful for helping the neoliberal university achieve its ratings, rankings, and grants/subsidies, amongst others. Largely under-researched and under-theorised, are the complex experiences of women postdocs in South African higher education, and how they grapple with precarity in their lives. In this paper, I explore and theorise the gendered lives of postdocs in three South African universities. I purposively recruited and interviewed 23 current and former postdocs across different faculties and departments. The major theme that emerged from the data revolves around the gendered, patriarchal, and sexist nature of the postdoc system that women postdocs have to navigate and negotiate in their lives. I argue that in order for the postdoc system to be inclusive, democratic, and socially just in higher education, these gendered challenges need to be tackled and dismantled. I end the paper with some concluding thoughts on the targeted interventions that are urgently needed to ensure that women postdocs are supported, mentored, and retained in South African higher education.

**Keywords:** postdoctoral research fellows, gender, motherhood penalty, neoliberalism, higher education

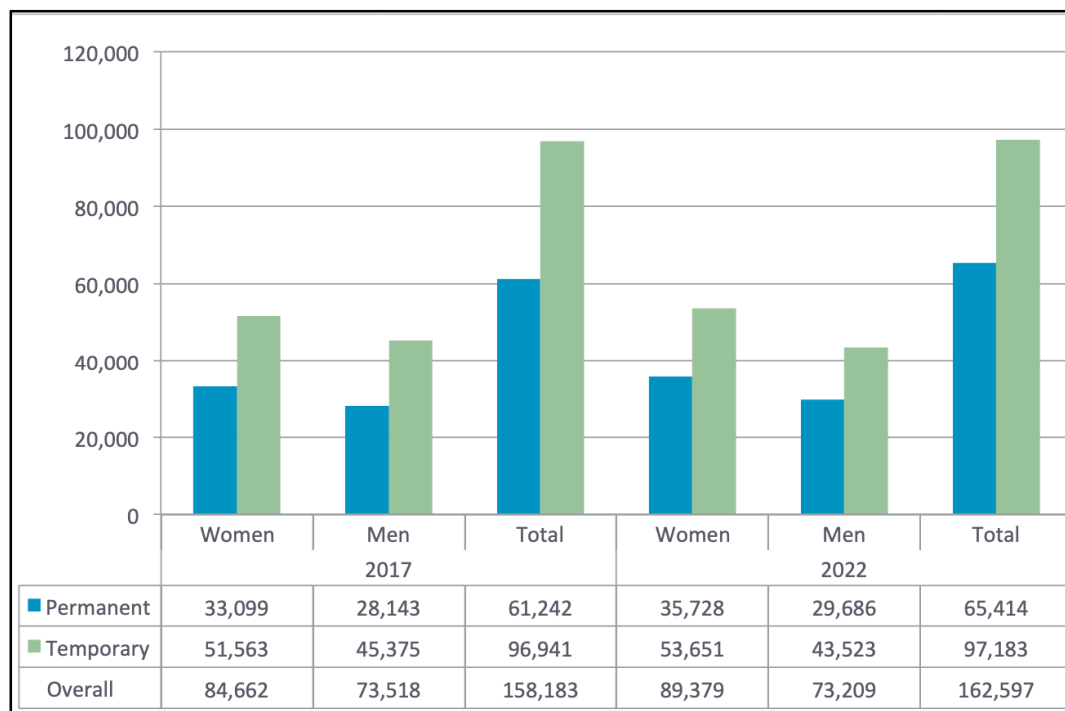
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## Introduction

Since at least the early 1990s, staffing has been an integral tool for achieving demographic transformation in South African higher education. It should be noted that in terms of the demographic profile of the staffing in the sector, there have been some gains that have been achieved over the years (Council on Higher Education [CHE], 2023). According to the latest publicly available data from the CHE (2024, p. 62), 60 per cent of all staff members in South African higher education were on part-time or short-term contracts in 2022, with the bulk of that casual labour force being women. In gender terms, 51,563 women staff members were on contract posts compared to only 45,375 men in 2017. This gender gap slightly increased in 2022, with 53,651 women still on contract employment compared to 43,523 men on part-time contracts. Table 1 traces this gender gap.

**Table 1**

Headcount overall staffing members by gender and employment status (CHE, 2024, p. 64)



Although the staffing numbers give some insights into a changing/ transforming/ reforming sector, the qualitative and existential experiences of women academics in the sector remain deeply concerning. Two seminal books illustrate this painful point. In *Being at Home: Race, Institutional Culture and Transformation at South African Higher Education Institutions*, Tabensky and Matthews (2015) complicated our conceptual understanding of *home*, *space*, and *belonging* in a historically White university, and the challenges of grappling with an untransformed and White institutional culture. In her chapter in that book, “Employing Safe Bets: Reflections on Attracting, Developing and Retaining the Next Generation of Academics,” Amanda Hlengwa (2015) argued

that universities in general, and historically White universities in particular, have resorted to employing middle-class women academics who are “safe bets” and who conform to the hegemonic institutional culture(s), norms, and behaviours in the institution. This is a calculated effort at subverting and undermining the transformation agenda. It allows universities to achieve several things. Firstly, they can claim to have complied with the employment equity targets through employing Black African candidates. Secondly, higher education institutions can monitor, police, and control the pace and direction of transformation in the institution without feeling uncomfortable or self-reflexive.

The second book, closely related to the first, is *Black Academic Voices: The South African Experience* (Khunou et al., 2019). This book complicates what I term the “demographic conceptions of transformation,” with Black women academics in research-intensive universities narrating their painful encounters with institutional racism, harassment, discrimination, and structural oppression. It is Motlalepule Nathane’s (2019) aptly titled chapter, “Sitting on One Bum: The Struggle of Survival and Belonging for a Black African Woman in the Academy,” that reflects on her existential instability, mental anguish, and feeling of dislocation in the public university. This author wrote on the intersectional role of race, class, and gender in producing new forms of marginality for Black African women academics, highlighting the function of deeply embedded corporeal power in university leadership and governance. This has resulted in Malaika wa Azania (2020) arguing that historically White universities have become “slaughterhouses” where Black bodies (and women) go to die.

In this paper, I locate the plight of the postdoctoral research fellows (postdocs) within the South African higher education context. I suggest that, despite the emergent plethora of post #FeesMustFall and #RhodesMustfall literature shining a spotlight on the struggle for transformation and decolonisation of the university in South Africa (see Hlatshwayo, 2021; Nyamnjoh, 2017; Valela, 2015), there remains a paucity of research on the complex and nuanced narratives and voices of women postdocs and how they navigate their lives (Hlatshwayo, 2024a, 2024b; Kerr, 2022). I argue that postdocs remain scholars in the margins of higher education, who are often invisible, unseen, misrecognised, and misframed in the public university. This paper particularly responds to an earlier conversation that I started in another publication (see Hlatshwayo, 2024b) where the issues of gender, patriarchy, and sexism emerged in the postdoc experience in South Africa. Although briefly discussed in passing, I did not delve deeper into these contested issues. Thus, in this paper, I attempt to explore, explicate, and theorise the gendered and patriarchal challenges that postdocs are navigating in their lives.

## **Postdocs in higher education**

The literature on postdocs is bleak, revealing what is seen as the “over-supply” of postdocs competing for limited academic posts in higher education (Afonja et al., 2021; Ivancheva, 2015; Jones, 2023), the inefficiency and de-professionalised manner in which the postdoc system

persistently fails to create a coherent pathway to permanent employment (Kerr, 2022), and the effect gender has on undermining the career prospects of women postdocs, resulting in the “motherhood penalty” (Ysseldyk et al., 2019) for women (Eaton et al., 2020; Jones, 2023; Jones et al., 2018), amongst others. Equally troubling is what is called academic “in-breeding,” where recruitment of postdocs only occurs within male-dominated inner circles of academia (Checchi & Cecero, 2022). There has also been a huge focus on the rise of neoliberalism in higher education, and the introduction of precarity and employment insecurity amongst the postdoc community (Jones, 2023). In “Pandemic Darkens Postdocs’ Work and Career Hopes,” Woolston (2020, p. 310–311) noted that at least 68% of the postdocs in North and Central America, 68% in Australasia, 61% in Asia, and 59% in Africa all expressed that the COVID-19 pandemic had negatively affected their career prospects, with some postdocs seeing the pandemic as an opportunity for governments to cut the science and higher education funding from their national budgets. Norton (2022) revealed that in Australia alone, job losses ranged from 12,000 in October 2020 to about 35,000 by end of May 2021, with the bulk of those job losses being part-time and contract academic staff members.

More recently, and in response to the above postdoc challenges, literature has revealed how postdocs respond to some of the complex challenges they are facing. These include using social capital networks and connections to access and navigate their academic careers (see Epstein & Elhalaby, 2023), the importance of mentoring relationships between doctoral candidates and postdocs (Blaney et al., 2020), the need for alignment of postdoc careers with job market changes and demands (Alund et al., 2020), and the importance of communities of practice and conference attendance in supporting the growth and development of postdocs (Haus, 2021), amongst others.

The rise of neoliberalism in higher education has led to the increase of postdocs in the academy (see Hlatshwayo, 2024a). As the dominant socioeconomic system in the world, neoliberalism fundamentally believes in rugged forms of individualism, free market fundamentalism, deregulations, and the power of the private sector to resolve all societal ill and problems (Fukuyama 2022, p. 19). What separates neoliberalism from other forms of market-based ideologies is the denigration of the role of the state in what is seen as the private affairs of the individual. The state, at least in the neoliberal imagination, is a threat that needs to be contained, monitored, and not allowed to grow. I support Jones’ (2023) idea that firmly rooted in neoliberal thinking, is the pernicious idea that higher education institutions have operated like private businesses in their efforts at being “productive,” “efficient,” and “self-sustainable.” This has presented itself through managerialism, crippling (and punitive) forms of performance management, the publish-or-perish discourses, and profitability, among others. Higher education institutions have transformed and transitioned into private corporate entities that are “selling” curricula to entitled “clients” who have a right to the curriculum goods. This has presented several crises for higher education.

Firstly, higher education has ceased to be seen as a public good, necessary for society, state, and the global community, to now being a private investment in one’s future (see, for example, Ndaba,

2024).

Secondly, the growing cut in state subsidies and higher education funding has forced institutions to compete in the global marketplace—jostling for top-performing academics, student grants, funding, and subsidies, among others. Building on this idea, Gallas (2018) wrote about the invention of precarity in the German higher education system, and the academic labour activists resisting it. In the German higher education system, like in South Africa, there is little support for postdocs, or what Gallas (2018) termed “the middle-level faculty,” who often have to take on excessive research and teaching loads under precarious and insecure employment conditions. In the Canadian context, Bauer (2018) offered an interesting case study of how professionals who are on the non-tenure track faculty have led to the development of “precarious professionals” who feel that their work is devalued and unimportant. In the Italian context, neoliberal policy formulations have led to the introduction of precarity in the higher education system, with crippling levels of restrictions on the university system meant to reduce public expenditure (Armano & Murgia, 2013). The effects of this has resulted in highly skilled postdocs on short-term contracts, with no job security and often supported and funded by an external private sector grant.

The neoliberal turn in higher education has resulted in the control, measuring, policing, and quantifying of academic labour, culminating in what Hall (2018) regarded as the proletarianisation of academic labour through its commodification, loss of control of labour, outsourcing, casualisation, and part-time or fixed contracts. The postdoc system emerges from this logic, and it is meant to be a pathway into a research career for scholars interested in knowledge production (Hlatshwayo, 2024a). In the South African context, like in other contexts, a postdoc fellowship is awarded to individuals within the first five years of obtaining a doctoral qualification. The contract term ranges from 12 to 24 months, with the postdoc expected to publish at least two research units per academic year. The postdoc responsibilities tend to vary with each appointment. Some postdocs only do research, others do both research and teaching, and yet others do research, teaching, and some form of postgraduate supervision under the guidance of their host/mentor/supervisor. Tied to the research on postdocs is the idea of employment precarity and casualisation, and its implications on one’s well-being, performance, and productivity. I now turn to this idea more closely.

There has been widespread research focusing on precarity, the casualisation of labour, and employee exploitation, with women postdocs bearing the brunt of this (see, for example, Lazar & Sanchez, 2019; Mason & Megoran, 2021; Strauss, 2017). Precarity has also featured prominently in critical studies of labour as well as employment relations (Mason & Megoran, 2021). Scholars in the Marxist traditions have similarly been interested in exploring and theorising the dehumanisation of the workforce and the implications this has on identity formation, well-being, solidarity, and mobilisation. The concept of “precarity,” that is, *précarité*, first emerged from French sociology and economics in the 1970s in an attempt to make sense of the social conditions linked to poverty, employment, and casualisation beyond the then Fordist versions of full-time

permanent contracts (Lazar & Sanchez, 2019). Lazar and Sanchez (2019) suggested that it is only from the early 2000s onwards that the ideas of precarity and the casualisation of labour have been understood in relation to insecure employment and employee uncertainty. This concept became a “political proposition” during the May Day protests of 2001–2006, to describe the then conditions of labour after the rolling back of the welfare state and its social protections.

Arguably, one of the hallmarks of precarity and the casualisation of labour and the need for its extraction and exploitation has been the corporate, colonising idea that workers should be primarily seen as a “resource,” with the introduction of human resources management taking part in that broader ideological framing and classification of human beings into cheap and accessible labour reserves (or human capital). For Foucault (2008, p. 15), precarity or being precarious speaks to the broader neoliberal project of governmentality, rooted in compelling and persuading the individual, without much force or coercion, to become the “entrepreneur of himself,” through adopting conduct appropriate for the “dynamic of competition.” In a Foucauldian sense, given that individuals are active in the very production of power, precarity should be understood as part of the conditions of possibility that are rationalised (“accepted”) and that force individuals to adjust to this type of social reality, as is, with little resistance.

Bourdieu (1998, p. 85), in his interview in Grenoble, argued that the casualisation of employment is reflective of the domination of a new kind, premised on the “the creation of a generalized state of insecurity aimed at forcing workers into submission, into acceptance of exploitation.” Although this type of exploitation is similar to previous labour exploitations and dehumanisation, Bourdieu (1998) suggested that casualisation and precarity represent what we can conceptualise as the *flexploitation* in society. This flexploitation, is supported by the neoliberal discourse that seeks to suggest that to maximise economic growth, stimulate the credit-based economy, and incentivise the free market, labour must be “liberalised,” that is, it has to be cheap, accessible, unregulated, and expendable. I am strongly persuaded by the political philosopher Giroux’s (2010) argument that commodification and corporatisation of higher education have had devastating effects on the public good of the university. Instead of the public university being a space for critical engagement, intellectual thought, and civic dialogues (and their contestations), the university has increasingly become a public marketplace characterised by cutthroat competition for funding, grants, and sponsorships. In this paper, I contribute to the growing body of research that looks at the other side of precarity in higher education, that is, women postdocs’ gendered challenges in South African universities. I now turn to the methods used in this paper.

## Research methods

In this paper, I adopted a critical paradigm to attempt to explore and make sense of the gendered challenges of women postdocs in South African higher education. I was attracted to the critical paradigm due to its focus on issues of power, gender, inequality, marginality, and the need to recentre the voices of those living and existing on the margins of society (see Corradetti, 2012). This paper is underpinned by Horkheimer’s argument that “when an active individual of sound

common sense perceives the sordid state of the world, desire to change it becomes the guiding principle by which he organises given facts and shapes them into a theory” (as cited in Brincat 2012, p. 220). The undermining logic of the critical tradition is not only theorising and exploring a phenomenon, but also attempting to fashion emancipation and change. Brincat (2012) argued that what ultimately shapes the development of the critical paradigm is an ethical commitment to the human condition and to ending suffering in all its forms. Thus, the critical paradigm aligns with my focus on the complex and marginalised experiences of postdocs in a higher education institution.

I purposively recruited and interviewed 23 current and former postdocs in three South African universities—two research intensive universities in the Gauteng province and one historically Black university in the Eastern Cape province. I deliberately chose these three universities because 1) the two research intensive universities have a large number of postdocs and have claimed to offer a targeted supportive and development space for postdocs, and 2) the historically Black university has a small growing postdoc community who have become integral to the improvement of research, ratings, and ranking of the institution. The focus on these three universities constitutes the first phase of the project. It is planned that the second phase will focus on eight additional universities, with the final phase focusing on the remaining 15 public universities in South Africa.

This paper forms part of a larger national project on the experiences of older early career academics in South Africa. Through this project, I obtained the necessary ethical clearance and gatekeeper permissions from all three participating universities. Furthermore, I obtained the necessary consent from the research participants who took part in the study (both in writing and in audio recordings). The interviews ranged between 35 minutes and 1 hour and 20 minutes. In line with the ethical commitments and responsibilities of this paper, all the names that are used are pseudonyms, with all attention and care being given to hiding and protecting the real identities of all the research participants.

Data were analysed through a thematic analysis where I allowed themes to emerge before imposing a heavy theoretical lens in line with Peel’s (2020) suggested six stages of data analysis. These are (a) collecting, (b) engaging with the data, (c) coding, (d) generating the code categories, (e) conceptualising the themes, and (f) contextualising and representing the findings. I now turn to the findings and discussions.

## **Findings and discussions**

One of the major themes that emerged from the data was around the idea of the postdocs system as a gendered/ sexist/patriarchal institution, with little support for women postdocs. A large number of the women research participants reflected on the complex challenges of attempting to strike a balance between being a worker, mother, and wife, and the apparent sacrifices required in the process. Using words such as “juggling,” “extra effort,” and “conflicting,” the research participants narrated their experiences of striking this burden as exemplified below.

I'm a wife, juggling those two it's never easy, in my case I've got a nanny who's understanding probably because she's a woman herself but then it's never easy because now as a mother, as a wife you work extra hard. I believe as a woman, especially if you're married and you've got children, you put extra effort and worse—you know how it is as woman in male-dominated probably, set-up, you always have to put extra effort to prove yourself as a woman—that you're worthy. (Susan)

The biggest challenge that I face is the conflicting demands of both roles and beyond being a mother, you are also a wife, the children, the attention—and they need the attention. You also need the time to concentrate and do something. . . I have two children, they are aged 17 and 16. As a postdoc, I have been granted permission to work from home because I have a sick child, one of them is not well. (Maria)

In the above quotations, Susan and Maria reflected on the challenges of attempting to balance work, motherhood and being a wife. For Susan, motherhood and wifely and family responsibilities are not enough, she also has to existentially contend with the deeply embedded patriarchal assumptions that, as a woman postdoc, she is not good enough. She has to constantly prove her worth and value to academia. Maria revealed that one of her children is currently not well, and therefore she has to find a way of building a career as a postdoc while nurturing and being there for her kids. In their groundbreaking paper, “Falling off the Academic Bandwagon,” Martinez et al. (2007) argued that one of the major reasons women postdocs like Susan and Maria leave a postdoc programme and abandon an academic career is largely because of the invisible and unseen care work that women academics have to perform, and the sacrifices they need to make to survive at work. This is seen in how there is limited maternal support globally for women postdocs who struggle to negotiate and navigate these complex responsibilities. Another research participant, Lusanda, called this phenomenon an “interference” dividing the researcher/motherhood/wife identities and responsibilities, and described penalties that come with this burden in her life. For Lusanda, the postdoc programme and its workshops have punitive logics and orientations due to non-attendance or last minute cancellations not being tolerated.

I think it's an interference in some ways. I'll speak with regards to being a postdoc and being a mother, where we look at the postdoc requiring that I finish three publications in one year and looking at that I need to attend conferences and workshops. And then now with the motherhood role, you would find that with the limitation that comes with being a postdoc I can't afford some luxury or even probably the extent of getting a nanny and now that I have to attend workshops and then I do not have anyone to leave the child with so I'll have to cancel on some workshops. But now when you cancel on workshops, the rule with the workshop centre is that when you cancel two more then they don't consider you for other workshops because you are not serious. Or if you cancel last minute, then you would not be considered—you know, which is a bit unfair, I thought was a bit unfair because with kids you never really plan, you know. Sometimes maybe you do manage to find someone who can take care of the child when you are not there. But then they just fall sick three days before you are registered for the workshop, and you can't really leave your child when they are not so well and you feel bad for giving that as an excuse. (Lusanda)

Jones (2023) wrote about how career breaks largely affected women postdocs and contributed to their precarity in the academy. Maternity leave, taking care of families, and lack of support during

those career breaks all have a negative effect on women academics' entry and success in academia. Another research participant, Samantha, commenting on this career break, noted:

At 34, I started my PhD—then I got pregnant. I had a family, all these things that I have to think about all the time.

It should be highlighted that higher education is deeply rooted in patriarchal logic, often resulting in unequal power relations, sexism, sexual harassment, and discrimination in the sector (see Donaldson, 2015; Jones, 2023; Khunou et al., 2019). Magoqwana et al. (2019) wrote about what they termed the “Black nannies” in higher education, that is, the invisible, unseen, unrecognised, unvalued, and unappreciated care work that women academics often perform with little to no recognition for their labour. This invisible and unseen care work appears gendered, sexist, and patriarchal, having relatively less effect on male academics (and postdocs). It is Correll et al.'s (2007), “Getting a Job: Is There a Motherhood Penalty?” that reminded us of the insidious and gendered nature of labour, and how organisations tend to discriminate against mothers under the sexist assumption that, because they have children, they are likely to be less committed and less dedicated to the organisation. Reflecting on how she grapples with the motherhood penalty in her life, Tafadzwa credited her husband and her ability to establish some boundaries with her supervisor by demarcating weekends to be exclusively her family days:

It gets overwhelming at times but I'll say I am grateful because I have a supportive husband. . . . In my case, I sat down with my host and told her my Saturdays and my Sundays are mine. No matter what might what might be happening. What do we do might not be matter of life and death, we are not surgeons, gynaecologist we are just researchers. What impact is that you might think of can always wait to on a Monday? So I've made that clear. Also, even if she does think of something, she sends an email you know. She knows I won't respond on Sunday because, for me, I've told her weekends for me, my child with my husband. (Tafadzwa)

In her magnum opus, “Too Late to Come Back? The Paradox of Being a 50-Year-Old ‘Early Career’ Black Female Academic,” the late educationist Audrey Msimanga (2013) wrote about the complex challenges of being an older early career scholar who returned to higher education in her 50s with limited supporting, funding, and mentoring to guide her path in higher education. Largely returning to higher education in their 40s and 50s, this group of scholars tends to largely be women who have previously worked in basic education or the private sector, and are returning to academia often to pursue a master's or doctoral qualification with the hope of being employed as a lecturer (see Hlatshwayo, 2024a). Thus, they are older in the sense that they are in their late 40s/early 50s however, they are early career in the sense that they are still novice or junior academics, with the majority being research assistants, tutors, postdocs, contract lecturers, and junior lecturers. A number of the research participants who took part took in this study could be classified as “older” early career scholars who confronted some great challenges in negotiating their entry and success at university. Commenting on what she termed her “late bloomer” journey, Priyah noted:

It took me very long to move from lecturing to senior lecturer, because of publications, and various other factors like community engagement work, because you needed to be, you know, polished.

Let's use the word polished all around. And publications were slow, because I was being an emerging researcher and I was already 50 by then you know, 51, 52. So it took me a bit longer to get articles published. So, so that was the stumbling block and sort-of delayed my progress as an academic from lecturer to senior lecturer. . . . But now I've reached a point where I can just publish, because I've mastered it, I know where the gaps are. And I know how to publish, and I know how to seek out journals. I've learned all of that.

Overall, the women postdoc research participants who took part in the study reflected on the complex challenges of balancing work/motherhood/wife responsibilities, and the apparent lack of support from their respective institutions. For Priyah (and others), struggling with research and publications delayed her progress in reaching promotion in her department. Furthermore, there was a sense from the research participants, that higher education institutions could be more intentional and deliberative about the targeted interventions required to support women postdocs and the gendered challenges that they are confronting.

### **Moving forward . . .**

In this paper, I call for two types of intervention that are needed in order to respond to the structural challenges that confront women postdocs' lives in South African higher education. At a theoretical and philosophical level, we cannot tackle the gendered challenges of women postdocs without grappling with the emergence of the neoliberal university in the global South, and the casualisation and exploitation of academic labour.

First, I argue that we need new sites of struggle and resistance against the growing encroachment of the neoliberal university in South Africa, and its corporate logics. This neoliberal university sees precarity as a useful labour tool to maximise profit margins, productivity, performance, and academic (and commercial) value at the expense of academics, students, and support staff. Part of grappling with the neoliberal university, is reclaiming the central questions: "What is the purpose of higher education?" "Is it possible to reimagine the public university, and the public good, beyond the commercial marketplace?" In a paper titled, "The University in Techno-Rational Times: Critical University Studies, South Africa," Nuttal (2023) proposed what she called the "distributive university," an institution that is committed to blurring the boundaries between the university and society, and one that seeks to pursue epistemic, economic, social, and political justice. Nuttal's distributive university, Mbembe (2016)'s pluriversity, and Tabensky's (2015) countercultural university are all worthy and necessary projects dedicated to reclaiming the public university.

Second, the gendered challenges that women postdocs are facing need to be interrogated. This second set of interventions needs to operate at national policy level, at institutional/university level, and on individual/personal levels. I argue that intervening at these different dialectical levels would assist women postdocs, and enable them to succeed at university. At a national policy level and 30 years into democracy, South Africa still does not have a national policy or legislative framework focusing on postdocs and their experiences. As argued in another research paper (see

Hlatshwayo, 2024a), this has caused a number of challenges for us. Firstly, we are unsure how many actual postdocs we have in South Africa, how many are South African, the number of women postdocs in the country, their nationalities, and the popular areas of research and disciplinary backgrounds, amongst others. Secondly, we cannot trace, map, monitor, and track the retention abilities of the postdoc system in South Africa, that is, how many postdocs end up obtaining permanent academic employment and how many postdocs we lose in the sector, and why. Thus, an integrated national policy and legislative framework is urgently required in South Africa.

At the institutional/university level, there is need for university postdoc offices and associations to show some engagement with the gendered nature of the postdoc system. This includes mentoring, support, guidance, dialogue, and proposals targeted at women postdocs on how to balance work, motherhood, and marriage responsibilities without being left behind or leaving higher education, as literature seems to suggest that some of them will (see Green & Jackson-Jefferson, 2021).

At the personal/individual level, women postdocs have the agency to form rich social capital networks and connections with one another that constitute communities of practice. These networks and connections, rooted in social justice and critical friendships, could act as a form of support to provide critical feedback, submit papers for special issues, host special issues, collaborate with other postdocs, and provide other forms of research support beyond the narrow and limited relationship they already have with their host/supervisor. Mbatha et al. (2020) suggested that early career academics ought to be creative in using critical friendships as a metaphorical life jacket, using one another to navigate and negotiate life, work, publishing, teaching, supervision, and community engagement activities, among others.

These different forms of interventions, operating at different discursive levels of the higher education system, play a significant role in helping women postdocs negotiate their entry, access, and success in the university in South Africa.

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# Digital integration in rural schools: Perspective of teachers teaching in such schools

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## Abstract

The integration of digital technology in school education is well established across the globe, yet there are still concerns about the digital divide between rural and urban schools. In this paper we explore, from rural school teachers' perspective, the possibility of making digital technology integration into teaching and learning processes in rural communities a way of life. Through an ethnographic study of a primary school located in a rural context, teachers were found to be very positive about the integration of digital technology in teaching and learning processes despite the challenges of rurality. Learners' exposure to digital technologies in their home environments, the migration patterns of parents and significant others between urban and rural contexts, and teachers' digital competences contributed to this positive perspective of making digital technology a way of life in rural communities.

**Keywords:** digital technology in rural schools, digital competence, rurality and digital technology, enculturating digital technology in rural communities

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## Introduction

Digital technology in basic education has become, and continues to, be a euphoria in educational settings. It has set in motion the development of new policies, curriculum reforms, and teaching and learning innovations to embrace this emergence as an inescapable reality that will continue to evolve into a way of life in education. Yet, based on a plethora of reports and scholarship in the domain, there are serious concerns and scepticisms about the ability of school education systems to implement such grand scale changes, noting the severe challenges currently being faced, especially those of language, literacies, and socioeconomic divide that continue to bedevil school education in South Africa, let alone in rural schools.

The introduction of digital technology into the school education systems is not a new phenomenon. Such introductions have been in place in South African schools since the early 1980s. Of concern now, is the ubiquitous nature of digital platforms; the 21st century is a time when learners need to prepare for the challenges, and be equipped with new skills, required by the technological and information age. This paper was born out of that sentiment: a focus on the revolution of rural schools to deliberately integrate digital technology into the teaching and learning processes across all schools in South Africa—not just those that have the infrastructure and economic means to do so. In the paper, we focused our gaze on exploring the ubiquitous possibility of integrating digital technology for teaching and learning in a rural school from the teachers' perspective in order to contribute to ongoing discourses and debates about rolling out digital technology across schools in South Africa, including in rural schooling. The paper points to the teachers' perspective on digital integration becoming a way of life in rural communities, and suggests ways that this could become a reality in such communities. Rural communities are often excluded from developments and innovations due to, amongst others, their geographic isolation from urban communities, low population density, lack of adequate infrastructure, and poor socioeconomic living conditions that render them largely considered as impoverished communities (Kettler et al., 2016). Thus, the availability of technology in rural schools is limited by geographic reach.

## Digital technology in a rapidly changing world

After the emergence of the internet in 1989, the 21st century witnessed ground-breaking innovations in technology that have revolutionised the world (Yamin, 2019). With rapidly increasing data storage capacities including cloud computing and storage, big data and big data analytics have paved the way for ubiquitous access to unlimited information. In the same wavelength of innovation, digital device technology has swiftly expanded to meet the demands of instant access to information and real time analysis (Yamin, 2019). Social networks have also emerged as a marker for an information society (Sekerin, et al., 2019), in which the internet has become a way of modern communication within and beyond societies. These authors argued that by virtue of the internet, people have reduced distance not only within countries but also across countries, allowing people to communicate at any time and across any geographical space. Joshi et

al. (2022) added that the internet is not a mere technology but rather, a cultural artefact that brings cultures together and aggregates people in more accessible forms, giving rise to new forms of expression beyond just text. Joshi et al. (2022) further argued that the internet has strongly influenced schooling systems by connecting and empowering students and teachers through unbounded possibilities of knowledge sharing, and creating new ways of teaching and learning. The Internet of Things has, according to Haleem et al. (2022), proven to be one of the most cost-effective ways of educating young learners. Access to the internet has expanded significantly in recent times, and the digital devices to access the internet or digital platforms have substantially increased both in form and in the process of access.

As businesses compete for market competitiveness, creative and novel solutions to digital access are expanding rapidly such that digital technology has become a way of life—rendering the paper-and-pencil process of learning and teaching, accessing information, and seeking solutions a thing of the past. Haleem et al. (2022) were of the view that with smartphones and other wireless technology devices becoming popular among the general public, digital technology's transference into school education systems was just a matter of time; however, they warned that in the initial phases of use in schools, it could be viewed as a distraction. The challenge then, is to explore how this distraction can be transformed into an affordance in the teaching and learning process. To some extent, the COVID-19 pandemic opened up possibilities and provided opportunities for teachers and schools to use digital devices more substantially in the teaching and learning processes. Digital communications via social media with learners and parents formed a substantial link during school lockdowns to enable teaching and learning to continue (Mustapha et al., 2021) and consequently, teachers have come to realise that the distraction noted can be turned into meaningful learning activities.

In the modern world, children are exposed to a range of digital devices. These include smartphones, laptops, and tablets, most of which are used in their homes largely for entertainment and communication purposes by the children (Qureshi et al., 2021). Building on this exposure to, and usage of, such digital technologies would be a natural trajectory into the school education system. This natural trajectory is, however, not a smooth or definitive process but is dependent upon a number of variables including the readiness of the school system, the capacities of teachers to migrate their teaching practices into digital platforms, the accessibility of digital technologies in classrooms, and the purpose of using such technologies. Qureshi et al. (2021), in their desktop study, found that digital technology adaptation in schools in developed countries was more systematic and efficient but in less developed countries, many implementation and regulation issues occurred, limiting their efficiency and wide-scale use in schools.

A country's development status also influences the use of digital technology by teachers with variables such as attitude, experience, and ongoing training as confounding factors (Scherer et al., 2019). Digital technology has become an integral part of life globally, and substantial inroads into schools have been made (Singh, 2021), however, these same inroads have resulted in widening gaps and increasing inequalities (Timotheou et al., 2023). Schools that are well resourced have

made digital technology an integral part of their teaching and learning processes while those that are resource deprived have not. This widening gap is unlikely to change without political will and adequate resourcing—both in school education as well as in impoverished communities. In a non-systematic literature review to show the complex and continual process of integration of digital technology into classrooms, Timotheou et al. (2023) showed that digitisation of teaching and learning requires a deep and co-ordinated change in culture, workforce, and technology at the site of a school and in the community from where it draws its learners. Hence, digitising school education is a long, drawn-out process that requires enculturation, collaboration, and the buy-in of all stakeholders associated with school education to bring about the transformation of teaching and learning processes into an enriching learning experience for teachers and learners. The study by Timotheou et al. (2023) revealed that, while there is a positive relationship between the use of digital technologies and learning, they were used to supplement rather than substitute for learning instructions—suggesting that the use of digitised teaching and learning is a mediated process that requires capacities in both the teacher and the learner. Other benefits of digital technology usage that the authors found in their study were increased attention, motivation to learn, and communication by learners.

### **Digital technology in rural contexts**

Having noted the exponential growth in digital technology innovations and usage across the globe through the extant literature, some of which have been presented above, it is evident that context sensitivities, especially those of rural contexts, have largely been understudied. Consistent with digital technological innovations and the Internet of Things that allow for working with big data sets, Zhang et al. (2023), through a two-scale large literature review study, found that rural spaces and places have largely been understudied, with focus mainly being on issues of connectivity and inclusion. Noting that the conceptions of rural and rurality are contextually driven and do not mean the same thing in different geographic places, the distinctive features of rurality bring complexity to understanding digital technology in rural contexts. Nonetheless, Zhang et al. (2023), through their review using a global dataset, revealed that the theme of digital technology in teaching and learning in rural contexts was the least researched area (comprising 5.2%), with public access and usage comprising only 16.4% of the top 10 themes researched and published in journals. Thus, research on usage of digital technology in rural areas is focused more on issues of access to information by the residents of rural communities, and less on how digital technologies could influence teaching and learning. This paper, therefore contributes to the call for more empirical research in the area of digital integration into teaching and learning processes, rather than on the infrastructural and economic issues that facilitate such integration.

While noting that rural communities are struggling to keep up with developments, especially with digital technology innovations, the discourse on digital access and usage has shifted from the haves and have-nots to the degree of usage and different usage patterns (Correa & Pavez, 2016;

Salemink et al., 2017; Young, 2019)—suggesting that digital technology is firmly located in rural contexts but that more needs to be established on how, to what extent, and why they are used. Issues of connectivity, access to digital devices, and access to sites are the limiting factors that have been noted.

### **Digital technology in educational contexts**

Digital technology over the last two decades has changed the way learners learn, and it has further changed many spheres of modern-day living. In the 21st century, there has been a declining shift from the chalk-and-talk method and a sharp increase in the use of hardware, software, and white boards that are interactive or platforms that enable online learning (Dwivedi et al., 2020). The most commonly used technologies in the classroom are smartphones, tablets, PowerPoint, spread sheets, interactive whiteboards, word processors, data projection, e-book, animation, and podcasts (Singh, 2021). According to research reports (Singh, 2021; Walan, 2020), while these technologies are available for teaching and learning purposes, their use is constrained by pedagogical issues of teachers not fully understanding the match between content to be taught and the most appropriate technology to use. Teachers based in rural schools receive minimal professional development training on how to use technological devices, and limited finances are provided by government for these teachers to acquire external knowledge on how to use technological devices or to join with urban schools when the latter are provided with training on the usage of such devices in their classrooms (Budianto & Dewi, 2023). Some efforts have, however, been made to adapt pedagogical theories to incorporate digital technologies. For example, extending Schulman's notion of pedagogical content knowledge, Koehler et al. (2013) proposed the Technological Pedagogical Content Knowledge construct, which has now integrated pedagogical insights within technologically enhanced teaching and learning processes. Hence, substantial research on pedagogies using digital technologies have emerged, and are gaining traction in teacher education programmes to develop new teachers for this reality.

Digital technology can also provide learners in school-based contexts with fast and efficient access to information, which vastly improves their educational learning experiences in the classroom (Solano et al., 2016). Most schools with access to both the infrastructure to support digital teaching and learning as well as the financial resources to acquire digital tools to facilitate teaching and learning have incorporated digital technology into their teaching and learning processes. Thus, there is now a clear alignment in the use of digital technologies in schools and in the lifestyles of the youth, making digital technologies a way of life. Although some may argue that learners in rural communities are greatly disadvantaged by their low levels of access to these platforms of communication and knowledge retrieval, Balfour et al. (2008) have argued that rural communities are quite dynamic and adaptable to innovations. They further argued that new conceptions of rurality include being generative—with variable interactions that connect them (the rural communities) to innovations, including technological innovations. Hence, conceptions of rurality are evolving at a rapid pace—far from the deprived status that once characterised their plight.

### **Technology advantages in a learning context**

Digital technology has become an important and progressive component of learning as it shapes, facilitates, and enables learners to apply their acquired knowledge in generative situations (Alenezi, 2019; Palagolla & Wickramarachchi, 2019). Digital technology utilised in the classroom context can fundamentally enable teachers to be more creative when presenting lessons and when assessing learners (Lotherington, 2021; Maphosa et al., 2021). Parvin and Salam (2015), in their study on the use of digital technology in classrooms in Bangladesh, found that when learners were exposed to visual digital images, they became excited and showed greater interest in the learning and classroom activities but, in the absence of these technology integrations in their classrooms, they were less enthusiastic to learn. And, the vocabulary associated with digital pictures enabled higher levels of learning amongst these learners. Through observation of various rural schools, it has become evident that when digital technology is integrated into the lessons, there is also a reduction of learning issues (Nkula & Krauss, 2014; Salinas, & Sanchez, 2009). The advantages of integrating digital technology in the teaching and learning process also include acquisition of knowledge of various types of digital technologies available and what learnings can be facilitated through these technologies.

Eze et al. (2013) further found that learners learn independently when given opportunities to work with digital technologies. According to Chisango et al. (2020), digital technology teaching and learning processes are not restricted or confined to a particular place (location) of usage and time. Rather, its flexibility can allow for multi-site usage and in both synchronous and asynchronous learning processes. This is a huge advantage, especially for teaching and learning in rural contexts confronted by unstable or limited internet connectivity, supply of electricity, and accessibility time. Learners can benefit from these flexibilities of time and location according to their particular challenges and opportunities for learning. Learners could, therefore, learn in the classroom, at home, or anywhere that they can access and use the digital technologies available to them.

Alenezi (2019) argued that if digital technology were increasingly integrated into the teaching and learning processes with less use of the traditional chalk-and-talk lessons, it could enable teaching and learning to attain a higher standard and conform to the new global trend currently unfolding. Learners could also learn via virtual tools and acquire knowledge when their teacher is unable to assist each learner individually (Chithra 2019; Harvil, 2018). Navaridas-Nalda et al. (2020) were of the opinion that, with the rapid production and availability of educational digital resources, the usage of digital technology is being globally facilitated, and swiftly changing education across the globe. The global access to digital resources for teaching and learning further allows for teachers to prepare adequately before teaching.

### **Limitations of technology in a learning context**

Teaching in modern 21st century entails complex dynamics, which demand that teachers draw upon varying in-depth information, effective strategies, classroom pedagogies, and resources to

enable effective teaching and learning. Hence, it becomes imperative for teachers to acquire an in-depth knowledge of, and expertise in, the use of digital technologies in order to use them effectively in their teaching practice (Hermans et al., 2008). This means that teachers need ongoing professional development, which Peralta and Costa (2007) argued, would keep them (teachers) updated with appropriate knowledge, skills, and technological advancements. However, in a meta-study conducted by Fernández-Batanero et al. (2022), most qualitative studies between 2008 and 2018 revealed that teacher development in digital technology training was lacking. This finding thus compromises the intent that teachers be knowledgeable and skilled to integrate digital technologies in their teaching practice. They argued that digital technology in the last two decades has played a significant role in improving the lives of people, however, in education it is still in the developmental phase. These authors explained that digital technology training is a challenge both in pre-service teacher education as well as in in-service teacher development. Through their meta-study, they revealed that the concept of *digital teacher competence* (meaning the skills, attitudes, and knowledge required for teachers to support student learning in today's digital world) has emerged strongly in society—and that society is concerned at the level of teachers' digital competence. Joshi et al. (2022) alluded to this concern, which they believed would lead to greater regression if teachers were not adequately trained in order to acquire and maintain their digital competence levels. Being a teacher in a rural school context is not excluded; even though their teaching takes place in rural contexts, the exposure to and use of digital technologies are usually contemporary.

Rana et al. (2022) and others (e.g. Kidd & Murray, 2022) argued that teachers in rural schools, despite being technologically savvy, cannot just be provided with computers and internet access to use in the classrooms. They also need training to become digitally competent, nuanced to the realities of rurality. To become digitally competent, teachers also require certain conditions, as argued by Lindfors et al. (2021). These authors proposed several conditions necessary for teachers to become digitally competent and to remain so. These include, amongst others, a teacher education policy with a strong focus on digital technology as part of teacher competence, continuous professional development easily accessible to teachers, and organisational leadership that places high value on digitising teaching and learning. While these conditions could be seen as inherent, achieving them would be challenge. These challenges include the ability of departments of education to provide for continuous professional development to teachers on an ongoing basis (Zagouras et al., 2022), the extreme cost of maintaining technological relevance, and rapidly advancing technology innovations that could limit the use of technology in a classroom context (Rahiem, 2020). There are various attributing factors that deter the implementation and integration of technology within a rural classroom context. One major factor is that teachers feel a lack of support from their managers and administration. Teachers are often disillusioned because many of them are not familiar with the technological devices and are more accustomed to the traditional talk-and-chalk method of teaching and learning. Teachers also fear that they may soon not have jobs because technology might replace them (Mendoza et al., 2022).

## Research design

This paper emerges from a larger study on integrating digital technologies in teaching and learning processes in rural schools. The data for the paper were derived from an ethnographic study of a rural school located in KwaZulu-Natal. The intent of this ethnographic study was to explore the possibilities of introducing and sustaining the use of digital technologies in teaching and learning processes—noting the lived experiences of teachers who teach in such schools, and knowing intimately the school, its learners, and the community the learners come from. Ethnographic studies are about relationships between people and several aspects of their life, and include the embedded culture within which they spend most of their time, the culture and history that informs the way of life within a community, and the socio-political influences that have come to define what it means to live in a particular community (Cohen et al., 2017). The main purpose of the ethnographic study was, therefore, to understand the relationship between people and the social and culture context they occupy, and which defines the way of life for these individuals within that context. Within an interpretivist epistemology, ethnographic studies are more concerned with understanding human action rather than with the forces that shape these actions or explaining peoples' behaviour.

A purposively selected rural primary school was selected for this ethnographic study. The school was rural and drew its learner population largely from impoverished communities settled around the school. The communities were not homogenous (meaning that the people who had settled in the respective communities were from various regions within and outside of South Africa) and their indigenous languages were different: some had an isiZulu home language, some had isiXhosa, some had other South African indigenous home languages, and some had foreign languages. Parts of the communities had formal structures as homes and some had informal structures—varying socioeconomic groupings.

Data production was largely facilitated through conversational interviews with participants associated with the selected school. Teachers were purposively selected on the basis of having been teaching in the selected rural school for a minimum period of three years, were qualified teachers, and had used digital technologies in their teaching practices. Their experience as teachers ranged from five to 30 years. The conversational interviews took place over period of time (up to a year) to deeply understand the lived realities of the participants in term of the research focus. The conversational interviews were conducted over several occasions and were iterative in nature. Observations within the school and classrooms were also used as data generating tools. The conversational interviews took place with six purposively selected teachers in the school. These conversational interviews also enabled us to the participant's personal experiences of their daily lives, which may have had implications for the use of digital technologies in their teaching and learning processes. The data were analysed inductively.

## Findings and discussion

Rural communities are often excluded from developments and innovations due to, inter alia, their geographic isolation from urban communities, low population density, lack of adequate infrastructure, and poor socioeconomic living conditions that render them largely considered as impoverished communities (Kettler et al., 2016). At a family and social level, Shikalepo (2020) suggested that parents of learners have low expectations of schooling because they expect that their children will follow the same trajectory they did, and make a living from cleaning or working in the family business. However, there are positive aspects that could be harnessed into possibilities for growth and enhancement. For example, Corbett (2021) suggested that schooling could be a relational enterprise that connected rather than separated people. People connect socially and supportively when they face similar situations and, in the case of digital inclusion, the possibility of social, business, and education connections exist, as alluded to by Tanya (all names are pseudonyms), a teacher participant:

I find it challenging as there is very often a language barrier. I do ask children who know some English from my class to translate what I need to say but sometimes it gets very difficult. This is especially difficult as I am trying to teach them English, which is a language which is foreign to some learners. I do understand that because they do not speak English at home they may feel bored especially when they do not understand what I am saying but I have now learnt to let them do some easy work first and not push them to do more difficult work if they are finding it too challenging. On a part-time basis, I do online teaching and I use a language translating app to teach Chinese children English. I then recently got a company to donate 50 iPads to the school which I keep in a locked cupboard in my staffroom which the learners can use but due to their being no internet connection they cannot access this language translator app, but I use it in class to let them play word games to improve their spelling and reading.

I am at this school for 24 years now and find it going from bad to worse because now we have many kids in one class. Many teachers, especially the novice teachers, also struggle with discipline because there are many kids in one classroom. Facilities are also lacking here at the school because we do not have aircons or fans in all the classrooms. Many classrooms do not have power points and electricity to even put a swing fan. The roofs are tin roofs, which are very often damaged so when it rains, we have to put buckets all over to stop the rain from falling on the kids. It is sad to see kids suffer like this. I was lucky to have managed to get an aircon installed into my classroom as I managed to get a company to donate an aircon, but we hardly use this due to load-shedding but when there is no load-shedding, the aircon makes the class very comfy.

The defining digital divide between urban and rural schools is quite stark (Timotheou et al., 2023; Zhang et al., 2023). However, increasingly, learners in rural schools are accessing digital platforms for their personal, social, and learning activities (Salemink et al., 2017; Young, 2019). This incremental use of digital technologies by learners in rural schools means that they will become enculturated into using such devices as a way of life and consequently, could migrate this

usage into schools and teaching and learning processes. Thus, with time and continued use of digital technologies for their personal, social, and educational needs, a sense of normality would emerge. The perspectives of two teachers alluded to this potential reality.

Lungile noted that parents invariably have smartphones and should allow their children to use them:

If parents can allow their children to use their smartphones for at least one hour a day it will allow for their children to feel more comfortable with digital devices instead of them having barely any ability to use devices.

Lungile also felt that teachers should be trained to use basic technological devices because they are usually open to learning when they do not know things:

A common device is a tablet, which we can get training on how to use as well as some online platforms for learning. It would also be nice to work with some state schools, which are in urban areas who are more exposed to digital devices to see how they use blended learning in the class to see how we can use some technology and some of the traditional methods of teaching. Teachers are willing to learn if they are given good training, which can be done at school as sometimes it is hard for us teachers to travel far away for workshops. Also, teachers who are knowledgeable in digital devices can host some workshops at the school to upskill teachers who are not familiar with how to use technological devices. These teachers can also use their knowledge to train learners on how to use basic technology like a smartphone or tablet.

Tanya suggested further that:

The use of digital technology in schools draws learners to school. They want to come and use the technology because they get excited to use and learn new things. They take it as new learning experiences.

Tanya elaborated, saying:

Learners can become independent researchers. The YouTube videos excite them and they even learn how to pronounce words whilst watching and listening to these videos.

However, she expressed concern that, with the rapid rate of innovations in digital technologies, neither the schools nor the learners and parents could keep up with the upgrades and innovations. Thus, learners in rural schools would always be behind in terms of upgrades and innovations. Tanya's viewpoint was that learners need to use technology because it would assist them to learn better:

I feel technology will be helpful because then children in the class will know how to use technology like tablets and computers. In today's world, one needs to know how to use technology. I know the feeling of not knowing how to use technology because the first time I went to campus was the first time I put on a computer. Using technology will make it easier to be able to communicate with the children wherever they are. During the COVID-19 pandemic, I used WhatsApp to communicate with some of my students whose parents had cell phones. I could definitely see this had helped as I could tell them when the workbooks were available. Some students also contacted me to ask me

what they must do when doing certain written tasks. This had assisted them because when we had opened school then they knew how to do the assessment tasks, which they did well in, but the children that did not have that communication with me were not able to do the tasks easily.

She added:

I always prepare my lessons using technology and this helps me because when I get to the classroom, I am prepared. Sometimes there are some very smart learners in class who ask some intense questions, and this allows me to have enough knowledge to be able to answer their questions. Due to the large number of students in the class, it is very important that I am clued up and equipped to know my subject content. I have internet connectivity at my home, so I always prepare the night before my lessons. When I am prepared, this eradicates the behavioural problems in my classroom and the learners are meaningfully occupied with their work and less issues happen in class. They enjoy thinking about what I tell them, and they love the fact that I am usually able to answer their sometimes not so normal questions related to what we are learning.

Rurality and rural schooling, including teachers' feelings of helplessness, multiple roles played by teachers, difficulty in managing large classes, and impoverished home conditions that do not support learning are established perspectives and were confirmed by these teachers. Historically in rural schools, those conditions of teaching and learning have prevailed and become a normalised expectation. Schools continue to be without adequate infrastructure and resources to support or sustain quality teaching and learning.

Ramrathan et al. (2021) captured the essence of rurality, saying that the narratives of rurality often tend to focus on what these communities lack, rather than the possibilities that exist within them. This image permeates all references to rurality and rural schools. Innovations in rural contexts are usually filtered through the image and it is therefore a limiting factor to being able to change the way things have always been done. If we continue to consider learners and community as being impoverished, and infrastructure as being dilapidated, then limited progress will occur. However, if we look at the possibilities and try to capitalise on the small things that occur (for example, learners being exposed to mobile devices at home, which they are able to utilise or where parents in their migration patterns from urban to rural areas, bring in modern technology) this historical deprivation narrative may change and a new way of life may be enculturated.

Modern technology usage in rural communities has been established (Correa & Pavez, 2016; Zhang et al., 2023). The internet has become a way of life, largely in urban and well-developed contexts, but as Joshi et al. (2022) suggested, the internet is not just a mere technology; rather, it can bring cultures together and aggregate people across various contexts. The key to supporting this is sustaining the enculturation process to make digital technology a way of life for rural learners. School education within rural communities has the agency to be part of this enculturation process and should seize every opportunity to integrate digital technology into the lives of teachers and learners.

With respect to integrating digital teaching and learning in schools, the teachers argued that it was possible that school, home, and community resources could be exploited to support the use of

digital technologies in schooling. As has been noted, discourses on digital access and usage have shifted from haves and have-nots to degrees of usage and usage patterns (Correa & Pavez, 2016; Saleminck et al., 2017; Young, 2019), and teachers in rural schools believe that integrating digital technology into the teaching and learning process is a matter of time. The teachers reported on some success with the use of digital platforms like WhatsApp, and these successes could be harnessed for meaningful learning processes. WhatsApp and Facebook were used for communicating with learners and parents during COVID-19 and there were levels of success in these forms of communication. Such communications could be enhanced beyond teacher–learner communications to connect learners with fellow learners through dialogical discussions and engagements (Waghid, 2023), thereby engendering asynchronous peer-learning processes. These kinds of digital usage patterns could then become a springboard for more direct and personal interactions with digital technologies to access information far beyond the purview of the classroom, thus increasing the degree of the usage of available digital technology.

With respect to the home environments, a shift in narratives of futility and lack of adequate infrastructure and resources is being established through migration patterns of people between urban and rural communities. Parents of rural school learners are known to move to urban contexts due to work opportunities. Thus, they are immersed in modern technology, most notably with hand held mobile devices. These devices, most of which are smartphones, have affordances beyond communication. Online searches for commodities and other services (e.g. online delivery services) slowly become a way of life that is taken back to their rural homes and communities. Children and others are then exposed to the possibilities of simple devices like a hand-held mobile smartphones and experiment with such technologies, initially through games and playfulness. As they gain confidence in its use, they explore other possibilities that these devices offer. The learning process by learners, therefore, could be initiated at home and exploited in the school environment at a pace and level commensurate with the learners' exposure and experiences in the use of such devices. A new culture would be initiated from within the home through activities that are meaningful for the learner, the family, and their parents.

A further pattern of migration can be noted in people (businesspersons, professionals, near-retirement middle-class individuals) wanting to reconnect with their rural communities (rural gentrification, according to Li et al., 2019). These individuals take technologies from the more urbanised areas to which they migrated, and return with them to their rural communities, creating business interest and exposing rural communities to new digital technologies. The ensuing interactions between urban and rural communities grow through these migration patterns and the latter become more advanced in their way of life. Li et al. (2019) argued that such migration patterns offer rural livelihood diversification, create market-oriented institutions, and strong social capital that enhances rural advancement. New ways of communicating and doing things emerge through these development processes and also would infiltrate and influence schooling in rural communities. Teachers and learners are knowledgeable about digital technologies and that by making them part of a way of life, they can be migrated into school education and, in time, become

a means of teaching and learning.

Teachers have varying competences in the use of digital technologies. For the past two decades, teachers exiting teacher education programmes in South Africa have had computer literacy development, with some institutions insisting that all undergraduate students take computer literacy courses. The most recent teacher education policy, Revised Policy on the Minimum Requirements for Teacher Education Qualifications (Department of Higher Education, 2015), required all teachers to be computer literate. However, being computer literate does not mean that teachers have the competence to integrate digital technologies into their teaching and learning practice. Skantz-Aberg et al. (2022), through their desktop study found that there are few insights into what it means to be competent in the use of digital technology in teaching and learning processes. They found that little of the literature reviewed suggested what digital competence would entail, which include (1) technological competence, (2) content knowledge, (3) attitudes to technology use, (4) pedagogical competence, (5) cultural awareness, (6) critical approach, and (7) professional engagement—with the technological and pedagogical competences as the most prominently advocated. Hence, to be digitally competent in integrating digital technologies in the teaching and learning process requires the substantial profession development of teachers.

However, the process of becoming pedagogically competent needs to start somewhere. Being computer literate is that starting place. Teachers, as revealed by themselves, are computer literate—more especially the younger teachers. They are more conversant with the advanced use of digital technologies, and have used these in their classes for teaching and learning purposes. For example, tablets were donated to the school and were used for teaching and learning purposes, suggesting that both teachers and learners had positive attitudes towards using such technologies, despite the basic level of their usage. Technologies for communicating with learners and parents were used during COVID-19 and post COVID-19, suggesting that there was still interest by teachers and learners in the use of such communication technologies. Other elements of their competence in the integration of digital technologies in their teaching and learning processes will emerge as they interact with others, even breaching the urban–rural divide. Learners are also becoming more competent in the use of digital technologies through exposure and sometimes, as a requirement for particular purposes.

When digital technologies are provided for teaching and learning purposes, learners use such technologies. This has happened in the ethnographic school. The Department of Basic Education has identified schools across South Africa for upgrading to support the use of computers in teaching and learning purposes. Computer laboratories have become a feature in most schools. The challenge of sustaining the use of these computer laboratories was due to a number of factors including load-shedding and lack of electricity supply, a lack of funding to maintain and upgrade the computers, theft and damage, and the lack of professional development for teachers to enable them to integrate such technologies in their teaching and learning processes. The ethnographic study school had a computer laboratory, but it was being used as an ordinary classroom for learners because of large learner enrolments beyond the school's capacity. However, when the

facilities were available, the technologies were used by learners and could be re-instituted through meaningful interventions.

As indicated earlier, learners are also becoming increasingly competent in the use of digital technologies for their personal use. Digital footprints within rural communities, more especially in the agriculture sector (Pabitha, et al., 2023), are expanding and learners are accessing them through various ways including socialising and online applications, especially for further studies or work opportunities. Internet cafés and online deliveries are well established within rural communities and the communities and learners are increasingly using digital technologies to access these services. Their competence in the use of these technologies will naturally increase and, in a matter of time, these learners will explore educational issues through such devices.

Teachers and learners are technology ready because they believe that the use of digital technology is a modern-day thing. Teachers and learners are exposed to technology on a daily basis; however, not merely for entertainment but as a crucial element of teaching and learning for the 21st century. As explained above, the potential for teachers and learners to expand their competences in the use of digital technologies in teaching and learning processes has been established. The concept of 21st-century skills has been a point of hype across various sectors, including the education sector and the world of work, the two most relevant sectors for both teachers and learners. Twenty-first-century skills have been etched into the discourse on curriculum and curriculum policy reform agendas, thus, teachers are aware of these competences being part of the modern-day world. Learners are equally aware that, in order to access post-school activities (e.g. further studies), applications must be done through online application processes using digital platforms. Hence, digital technologies mediate the outcomes of teachers and learners. This reality of a modern-day living is well established in rural communities and suggests that both teachers and learners are technology-ready for the modern-day lifestyle.

## Conclusion

This paper revealed that teachers, while raising critical reservations, have a positive perspective on the use of digital technologies in their teaching and learning processes in rural schools. The critical reservations relate largely to infrastructural and financial resources to sustain the use of such technologies in teaching and learning. However, noting that there is a global drive to embrace the presence of digital technology, the perspective of these teachers is positive for a future in which digital technologies become a norm in rural schools. The digital divide between urban and rural communities is slowly breaching, which augurs well for the use of digital technologies in rural communities. The natural progression would then be into the domain of teaching and learning. Teachers argued that the possibilities could be harnessed to infuse education as digital technologies become a way of life in rural communities. Digital technologies have substantial affordances, which can be exploited to meet individual, communal, and educational needs within rural communities.

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# Using Change Laboratory Workshop to enhance capabilities for multilingual learners in the Western Cape

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## Abstract

This study explored the application of Change Laboratory Workshop (CLW) to enhance the capabilities of multilingual learners in Western Cape schools. CLW is a collaborative problem-solving method that encourages participants to critically examine current practices, identify areas for improvement, and develop innovative solutions. The strength of the CLW approach lies in its emphasis on collective action—fostering a sense of ownership and shared responsibility among participants. Globally, multilingual learners require targeted interventions to ensure their academic success, and implementing CLW provides teachers with a collaborative space to reflect on their teaching practices critically, challenge existing norms, and co-construct innovative pedagogical strategies that promote inclusivity and cultural responsiveness. The CLW is a dynamic platform for learners to actively engage with their linguistic abilities and empower them to take ownership of their language learning journeys. Through the collaborative nature of the CLW, meaningful interactions occur among individuals from diverse linguistic backgrounds, leading to enhanced cross-cultural understanding and improved communication skills. However, because the process is complex, evaluating the effectiveness of a CLW is crucial. This qualitative study utilised two CLWs, guided by double stimulation. Data collection tools included questionnaires, individual interviews, focus group interviews, lesson observations, and document analysis. The findings indicate that the CLWs created a space for learners to sensitise teachers to their frustrations, which led to positive changes in educational practices. Overall, this study emphasises the potential of the CLW to enhance the capabilities of multilingual learners in Western Cape schools, and highlights the importance of ongoing evaluation in implementing this collaborative problem-solving approach.

**Keywords:** change laboratory workshops (CLWs), multilingual learners, collaborative problem-solving, teaching methods, assessment practices, inclusivity, cultural responsiveness

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## **Introduction and background**

This article focuses on the methodological approach, Change Laboratory Workshop (CLW), and how it can enable multilingual learners and their teachers to develop their capabilities in a learning environment. The CLW approach, which has gained attention in recent years, is a collaborative problem-solving method that aims to bring about transformative change in educational settings (Bal et al., 2014). It was developed by Finnish psychologist, Yrjö Engeström, to address complex problems in organisations and communities (Engeström et al., 1999). It draws on principles from activity theory, emphasising the importance of social interaction and collective action in learning and development. The key objective of Change Laboratory is to create a space for participants to critically examine their current practices, identify areas for improvement, and develop innovative solutions.

Multilingualism has become a common phenomenon, globally. Therefore, educational institutions are faced with the challenge of providing effective learning environments for multilingual learners. These learners often face specific needs and challenges that require targeted interventions to ensure their academic success. One such approach is the implementation of the CLW to identify and address these needs through collaborative problem solving. This paper specifically focuses on the CLW approach to raise awareness of discourses that condition meaning making in Afrikaans Home Language (AHL) multilingual Grade 10 classrooms. Many scholars have asserted that the Change Laboratory involves bringing together different stakeholders including teachers, learners, administrators, parents, and community members to engage in a structured dialogue to identify problems and generate creative solutions (Bal et al., 2014; Botha, 2017; Engeström et al., 1999).

It is based on challenging learning environments for multilingual learners that this paper argues for the potential of CLW methodology to enhance learners' capabilities by using a multilingual approach in teaching, learning, and assessment in Grade 10 AHL classes. In the paper, we discuss the challenges faced by multilingual learners, the role of CLW in creating inclusive and culturally responsive instructional approaches to support and empower multilingual learners, cultural historical activity theory (CHAT) that underpins the concept of expansive learning, the CLW methodology, and an analysis of a CLW.

## **Challenges faced by multilingual learners**

Multilingualism is inescapable, but the readiness of the education system to accommodate multilingual learners in classroom settings and assessment practices remains an unresolved puzzle. Even though there is global and national advocacy for multilingualism, there seems to be ongoing marginalisation of multilingual learners who are subjected to English Home Language or AHL teaching, learning, and assessment practices in South Africa. Maintaining a positive self-identity amidst discrimination or marginalisation based on linguistic or cultural differences (Conteh & Meier, 2014) is a fundamental challenge, and multilingual learners may feel isolated or undervalued if not provided with an inclusive learning environment that celebrates diversity.

Although multilingual learners might possess conversational fluency in multiple languages, the development of academic language proficiency (Aizawa et al., 2020) remains a challenge. Mastering complex academic vocabulary and writing skills thus requires additional support.

Ollerhead (2019) noted that multilingual learners come from diverse linguistic backgrounds, each with unique language proficiency levels, cultural experiences, and educational histories. This paper therefore, specifically focuses on learners in the Western Cape who come from Afrikaans-speaking, isiXhosa-speaking, and English-speaking backgrounds, among others. Consequently, these learners may encounter difficulties in various aspects of their education (Conteh & Meier, 2014), specifically, meaning making.

The lack of meaning making, and other language barriers, can impede learners' ability to comprehend academic content or effectively communicate with teachers and peers. Additionally, cultural differences can affect their social integration within the school community. The intricate nature of language acquisition for multilingual learners necessitates innovative approaches that can address their diverse linguistic backgrounds. According to Garrett (2009), the CLW offers an immersive and interactive environment where learners can explore different aspects of language such as grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation, and cultural nuances. Through collaborative activities and discussions in these workshops, multilingual learners can tap into their existing linguistic repertoire while also expanding their linguistic horizons.

### **CLW's role in creating inclusive and culturally responsive instructional approaches to support and empower multilingual learners**

In today's increasingly diverse educational landscape, it is crucial to create inclusive and culturally responsive instructional approaches that support and empower multilingual learners (Barron et al., 2021). These learners bring a wealth of linguistic and cultural knowledge to the classroom, which, if harnessed effectively, can enhance their educational experiences and foster their academic success. However, achieving such an inclusive environment requires a deliberate effort to recognise and address the unique needs and strengths of these learners.

Change Laboratory is an interventionist method developed and used within the framework of Activity Theory to initiate change (Sannino, 2008). Particularly, CLWs are often employed in change efforts in workplaces and organisations such as schools and classrooms (Engeström et al., 2014). The latter scholars further elucidated that the strength of CLWs lies in their compact but compressive character of gathering data in such interventions. These workshops provide a collaborative space for teachers to critically examine their teaching practices, challenge existing norms, and co-construct innovative pedagogical strategies that promote inclusivity and cultural responsiveness (Polleck et al., 2022).

By engaging in this transformative process, teachers can gain valuable insights into how they can

better support multilingual learners in their classrooms (Elfers & Stritikus, 2014). CLW generally focuses on teachers as participants and not on students, which is a limitation (Engeström et al., 2014). Even though teachers were at the centre of this study to ensure the sustainability of the ongoing intervention strategy, the study also used learners as participants to challenge the teacher-centred approach as well as to “build on children’s potential as change-makers in local communities and global challenges” (Engeström et al., 2014, p. 125).

The benefits of CLWs are numerous. Kandjengo and Shikalepo (2019) posited that they encourage teachers to reflect on their assumptions about language learning, and to dismantle any preconceived biases towards multilingual learners. Through critical dialogue with colleagues from diverse backgrounds, teachers can gain a deeper understanding of the unique challenges faced by these learners and recognise their inherent strengths. Augustsson (2021) posited that CLWs could facilitate the exchange of best practices among teachers by providing a platform for sharing successful instructional strategies tailored specifically for multilingual learners. This collaborative approach allows teachers to learn from one another’s experiences, and build on existing knowledge, to develop more effective teaching methods. Virkkunen and Newnham (2013) observed that the CLW creates opportunities for teachers to engage directly with multilingual learners themselves. By involving learners in the workshop as active participants in shaping their education, teachers can gain valuable insights into student perspectives while also fostering a sense of agency among these learners.

## **Theoretical framework**

This paper employs and develops theoretical insights into Cultural Historical Activity Theory (CHAT)’s expansive learning through CLW methodology. The paper is underpinned by CHAT, which creates opportunities for teachers to reflect on their practice and use it as a guide for formative intervention (Mbelani, 2019). Engeström (2011) asserted that formative intervention aims to improve and stimulate the development of activity, and is usually framed in terms of CHAT. Daniels et al. (2007, p. 522) elucidated that the aim of CHAT is “to analyse the development of consciousness within practical social activity settings.” This paper applies CHAT’s key principles (i.e. object-orientedness, mediation, historicity, expansive learning, and contradictions) to raise awareness of discourses that condition meaning making in AHL multilingual Grade 10 classrooms.

There are four different generations of CHAT but, in this paper, only three generations are discussed. The first generation includes a subject (such as teachers, learners, and interventionists), an object that focuses on the problem space and motive (such as Xhosa learners writing AHL subject assessments), and the tools used to reach the objective (such as mediation, scaffolding, and multilingualism to support teaching, learning and assessment for multilingual learners in AHL Grade 10 classrooms). The second generation considers a wide range of perspectives such as rules, the community, and division of labour (Engeström, 1987). These elements consider the fact that

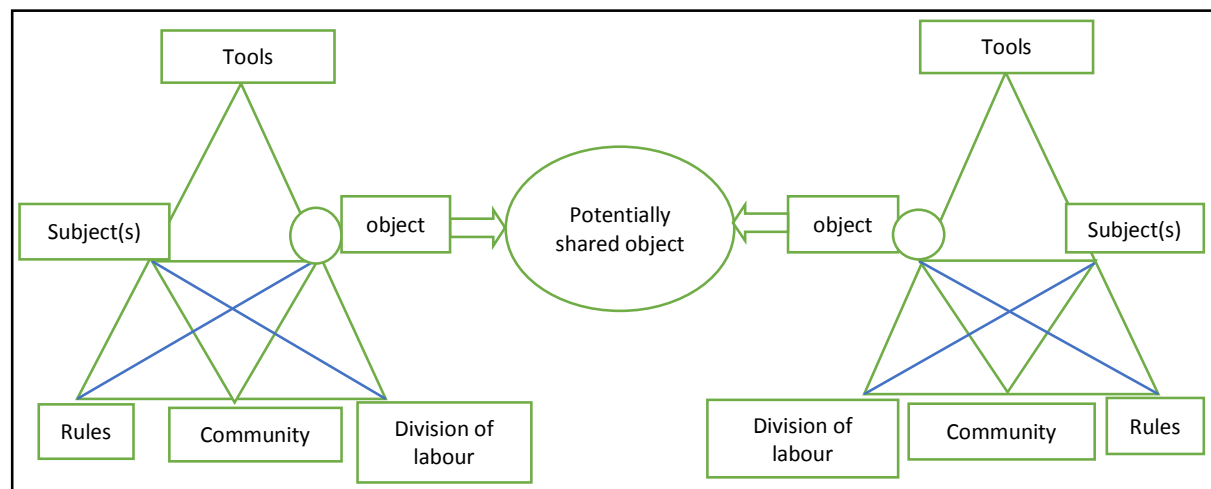
individuals are nested into social systems. The third generation provides “the intersection of two activity systems working towards individual and collective goals” (Barrett-Tatum, 2015, p. 4), and was employed in this study. This paper examined teachers’ existing engagement with multilingual learners and analysed contradictions that emerged from in or between the six elements of the first three generations of CHAT (subject, object, tools, community, division of labour, and rules).

Two foundational methodological principles, namely, the principles of double stimulation and ascending from the abstract to the concrete, which, when combined, form transformative agency (Engeström et al., 2014) were applied in this study to harness the targeted intervention. Double stimulation can be perceived “as a cognitive technique that can enhance problem-solving and concept formation” (Engeström et al., 2014, p. 120). Sannino (2011, p. 584) saw the principle of double stimulation as “the mechanism with which human beings can intentionally break out of a conflicting situation and change their circumstances or solve difficult problems.” Engeström et al. (2014, p. 124) asserted, that ascending from the abstract to the concrete entails “how individual volitional actions of breaking away from the old grow into a new concrete collective activity with the help of the direction and vision crystallised in the germ-cell abstraction.” It is important to note that these principles should be in line, and connected with the targeted intervention, and not be treated as abstract (Engeström et al., 2014).

At the CLW, participants represented different activity systems and worked together towards a shared object, which was to use isiXhosa as a resource in AHL classrooms for teaching, learning, and assessment. Working towards a shared goal implies that the participants would enter a territory unknown to them. In this case, learners used their isiXhosa home language as a problem-solving technique (the mechanism) to break out of conflicting situations (that is, lack of making meaning of concepts and instructions demanded in the AHL classroom) to solve their problems. The individual and collective goals offered a third space where multilingualism was used as a strategy for meaning making during teaching, learning, and assessment. In the third space, “dialogue, multiple perspectives and networks of interacting activity systems” (Engeström, 2001, p. 136) were explored and facilitated through multilingualism. This third space allowed opportunity to look into the division of labour and reinforcement of unsaid rules in terms of the role of the teacher, the AHL learners, and the researcher. The rationale of the study was to ensure that both activity systems advanced the meaning making of all Grade 10 learners. Surfacing contradictions were identified through CLWs and were used as springboards for change. Figure 1 illustrates the intersection of the two activity systems.

**Figure 1**

The two interacting activity systems (Engeström, 2001, p. 136)



As illustrated in Figure 1, the two activity systems in this study were the out-of-classroom system comprising isiXhosa language, and the in-class activity system that comprised AHL teaching, learning, and assessment. Mediating tools supported both the concepts of mediation and scaffolding in Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory. These tools focused on teaching, learning, and assessment strategies to enhance and evaluate learners' meaning making. They were used during classroom activities with and without multilingualism as a strategy to compare learner performance and outcomes.

## Methodology

This study was based on a qualitative approach with four main phases, which were informed by CHAT's expansive learning cycle. Figure 2 shows the seven steps of the expansive learning cycle, which were condensed into four main phases.

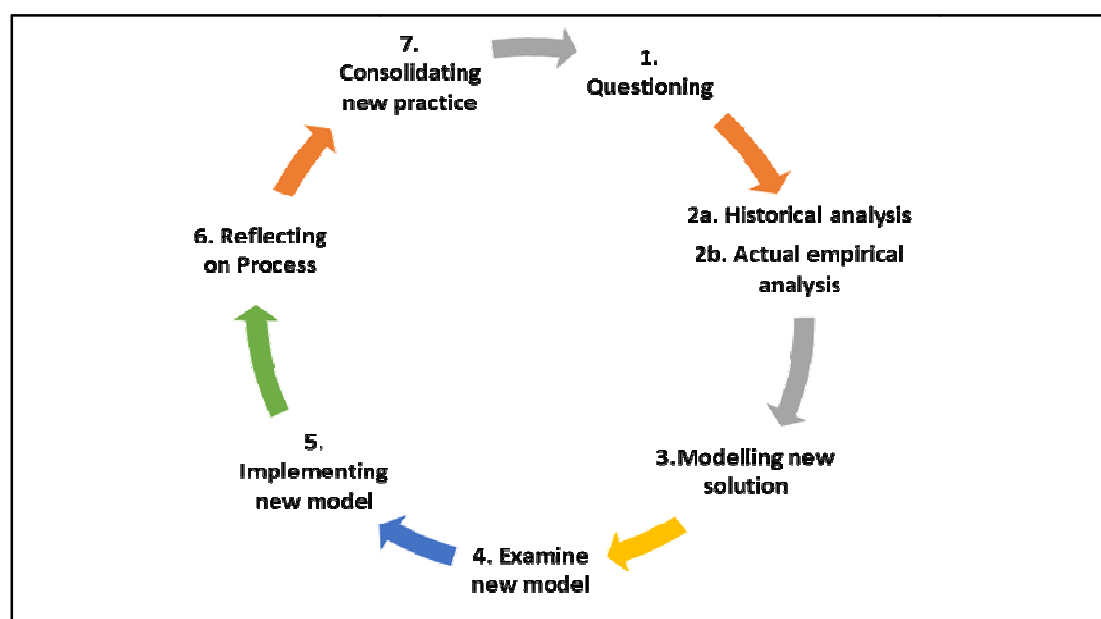
The paper documents the two CLWs that occurred in Phase 2 and Phase 4, which aimed to raise awareness of the discourses that conditioned meaning making in the Grade 10 AHL classes. Specifically, the CLWs were aimed at bringing teachers and learners into one space to elicit discussion amongst them—to link discussions to learners' experiences, connect the known with the unknown, sensitise teachers to the common challenges that arose during group discussions to address them, and to give feedback in the whole group discussion. The study acknowledges that, through double stimulation, a dialogue happens between teachers, learners, and parents, which brings out the multi-voicedness among participants (Morselli, 2021). Although the focus here is on CLWs happening in Phases 2 and 4, it is important to understand Phases 1 and 3.

Phase 1 combined Steps 1 and 2 of the expansive learning cycle (Figure 2). During Phase 1, the interventionist researcher used questionnaires, conducted interviews (one-on-one and focus

group), observed lessons and assessment practices, and collected documents from teachers, parents, and AHL learners in order to represent the many voices of using isiXhosa during AHL lessons. Phase 1 intended to surface contradictions, which were viewed by Engeström (as cited in Engeström et al., 1999, p. 381) as the “motive force of change and development within and between activity systems.”

**Figure 2**

CHAT expansive learning cycle (Engeström, as cited in Engeström et al., 1999, p. 382)



Based on the situational analysis in Phase 1, Phase 2 incorporated Steps 3 and 4 of the expansive learning cycle in designing and examining a new multilingualism model for teaching, learning, and assessment. Data from Phase 1 were used as mirror data to encourage double stimulation and the emergence of multi-voices. Then, we posed questions to the participants to encourage reflective practice or reflexivity to guide discussions after the data were presented (Sannino, 2008). Through reflexivity, participants can navigate between past, present, and future activity systems to find practical solutions to the problematic situation.

Phase 3 represents Step 5 of the expansive learning cycle. In this phase, the new model was implemented, and the learners wrote a post-activity (activities using the change model) with the new model of multilingualism. This intervention model was measured using post-activities aimed at assessing learners' written formative assessment to find traces of multilingualism influences, to assess variations in learner results upon implementation of the proposed multilingualism model for assessment, and to act as scaffolding for isiXhosa home language learners in all AHL classes.

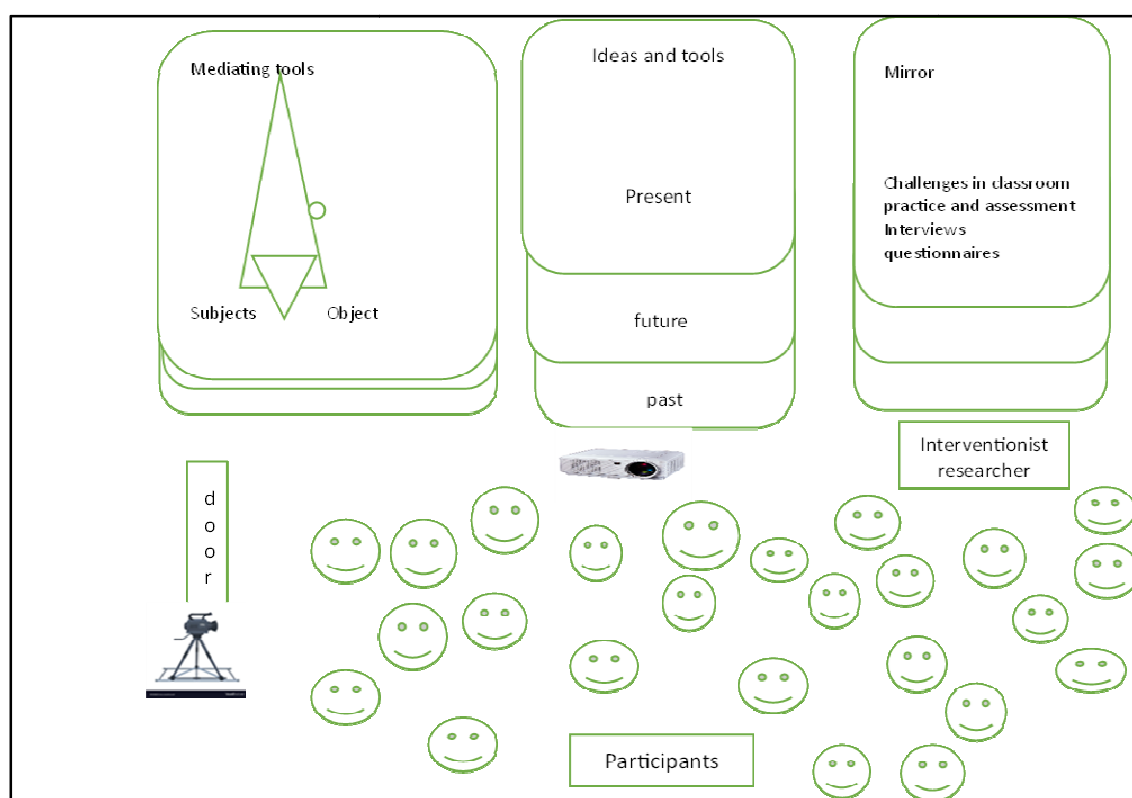
Phase 4 represents the evaluation, reflection, and consolidation (Steps 6 and 7 of the expansive

learning cycle) of the new model that was implemented. This study evaluated and consolidated the formative intervention strategy by initiating the second CLW.

Data were collected from an object-orientated CLW that consisted of three 2-hour sessions, over three days. The interventionist researcher-initiated cycles of discussion, with the help of artefacts, stimulated conversations among teachers and learners. The dialogical conversations in CLWs offer the space where what is thought within participants (intrapersonal) is verbalised from different perspectives (interpersonal). The object of the activity was reconceptualised into multilingualism and multilingual strategies. Engaging in CLW, different sets of stimuli were presented through data particles and analytical frameworks to stimulate participants' reflection on current practices towards a future, intended activity system. This led to the emergence of transformative agency where participants took charge of their change (Mbelani, 2018). Figure 3 demonstrates the layout of the room and seating arrangement of the CLW.

**Figure 3**

CLW seating arrangements under COVID-19 regulations (Reproduced: Mbelani, 2018)



The participants in the CLW, which had 28 attendees, included the researcher and a research assistant. In the CLW, teachers were grouped, and learners were divided into five groups, with four groups having five learners and one group having four learners. Participants were coded according to teacher and learners and based on gender (female teachers = TF, learner boys = LB, learner girls

= LG, and research assistant = RA).

The session was video recorded, and the voice recording was used as a backup. Participants were informed beforehand that data from the lessons and interviews would be used to mirror the first stimuli as well as to open discussions that allowed for multi-voicedness and reconceptualisation of the object of the activity. Various mirror materials used during the sessions highlighted the unequal access to educational success, which manifested as a grade gap between multilingual learners and AHL speakers enrolled in AHL classrooms. The researcher and participants relied on a set of representational devices to mirror surfaced contradictions to jointly analyse disturbances in classroom teaching, learning, and assessment and to develop new practices. The main tools used were PowerPoint transcription, data projection, and paper to write on. This allowed participants to make notes of key points stemming from the discussions. In addition, the mirrored data were used to bring critical events and innovative solutions from the classroom into the discussion. This dialogical process through shared experiences was reproduced by playing data that were videotaped during lesson observations and interviews.

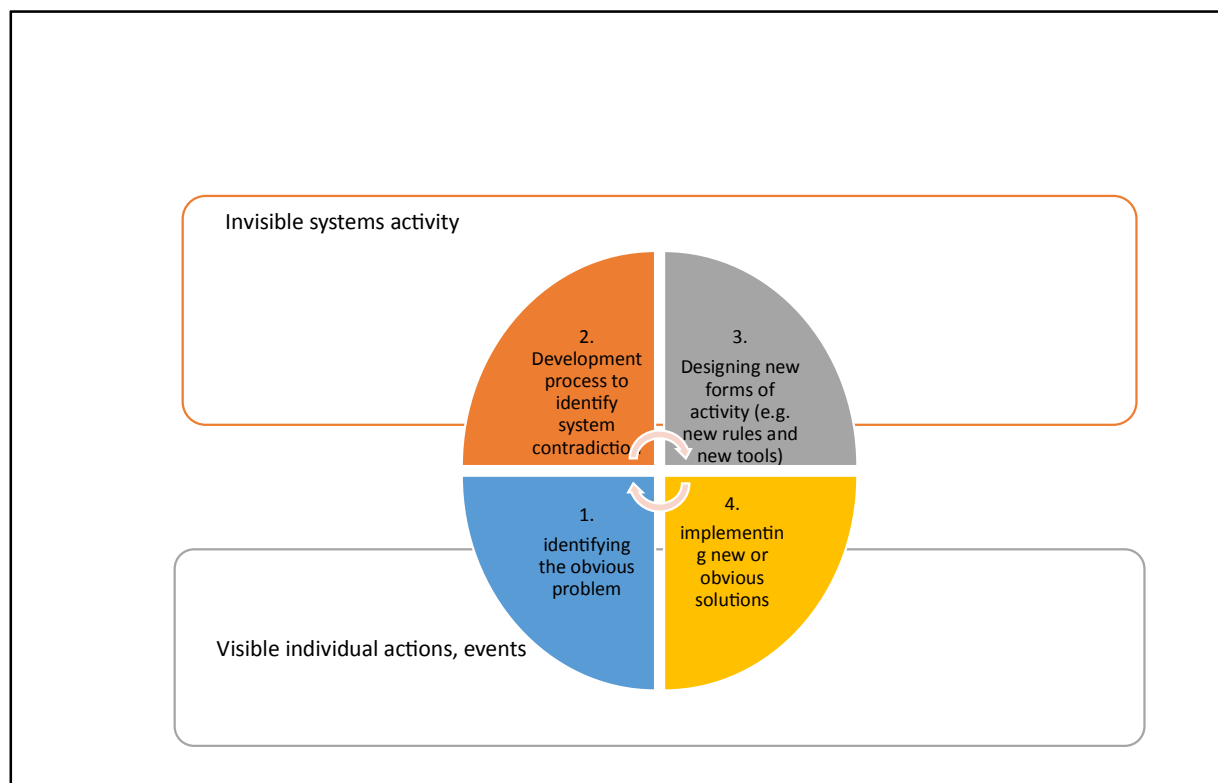
During the sessions, participants were encouraged to analyse the contextual, cultural, and historical underlying factors that hindered the meaning making of drama literature during the lesson, as well as the academic performance of learners when engaging in activities or tasks. The CLW aimed to help participants develop self-awareness through reflective practices (Sannino, 2008), encouraging them to verbalise their perspectives on the ongoing interactions and the object of the activity (Vygotsky, 1978). Given the complex nature of CHAT's contradictions and expansive learning, the following questions were used to guide discussions and reflexivity, and to simply CHAT's contradictions: What was done not so well? What did you find interesting in the lesson? What was challenging? What factors hinder the meaning making of drama literature during the lesson and performance of activities or tasks?

The first three questions were used to engage workshop discussions, and focused participants' attention on the current actions of individuals relating to the meaning making of drama literature in Grade 10 Afrikaans classes. The fourth question encouraged thinking about unidentified past actions or causes of occurrences that had happened, connecting them to the identified actions, and establishing why they had happened. In our attempt to simplify the complexity of CHAT's contradictions and expansive learning, and to promote reflexivity, the three sessions not strictly follow the chronological order of the seven steps of the expansive learning cycle. However, all sessions occurred iteratively. The primary rationale for the questions was to identify contradictions, model, evaluate, and implement solutions.

Figure 4 illustrates the process of reflecting on individual actions triggered by the present actions, exploring the past, and seeking solutions for the future.

**Figure 4**

Reflexivity process (Reproduced: Hill et al., 2007)



## Findings and discussion

The major area of expansive learning was to provide a space for learners to sensitise teachers to the frustrations they experienced and, at the same time, temper teachers in this regard. As shown in Extract 1, learners highlighted teachers' exclusive practices and their unresponsive nature to culture. Teachers' ways of thinking, being, and behaviour were shaken by the CLW as illustrated in Extract 2.

### Extract 1: Learners verbalising their frustrations

LB2: Afrikaans words take longer to come to mind. I can express myself and my feelings better in my language and to hear people speak my language makes me happy.

LG5: Hulle sê dat jy mag nie vir iemand vra vir help nie (They say that you cannot ask someone for help).

LG13: Ons mag nie in ander klasse isiXhosa praat nie (We are not allowed to speak isiXhosa in other classes).

LB1: Ons het niks freedom nie (We do not have any freedom).

LB4: There is no freedom of language use in our assessment tasks.

### **Extract 2: Teachers deepening their understanding of learners' frustrations**

TF1: I think this is a learning curve for all of us. Time will allow us to improve on the strategies we tried in the intervention lesson. We still have a long way to go but if using learners' languages can help them, I think we must just keep going.

TF2: I can focus more on the learners and their languages. I am sceptical like I said, but I will overcome my fear. Learners must just work together and don't do their own thing.

As seen in Extract 2, TF1 acknowledged that we still have a long way to go in terms of embracing multilingualism. This resonates with McKinney and Tyler (2019) who asserted multilingual classrooms are shaped by language ideologies as well as the language used as a resource of learning. TF2's utterance "I can focus more" shows deep reflexivity as she reflected on mirrored data. The data enabled communication and challenged participants to question assumptions and existing practices (Tari & Rossana, 2019). This led to new insights and perspectives that may not have been considered before as can be seen in Extract 2.

Extract 3 reflects the perspectives of teachers regarding multilingual learners at school. These perspectives were given before the CLW.

### **Extract 3: Different perspectives regarding the accommodation of multilingual learners**

TF2: There are schools for isiXhosa home language learners.

TF3: There are schools in the area the Xhosa learners can go to.

LB8: Baie van die onderwysers vat ons aan wanneer ons in 'n ander taal praat dan word dit vir ons gesê dat dit 'n Afrikaans skool is (Many teachers challenge us when we speak in another language and tell us that it is an Afrikaans school).

The perspective of TF3 shows the dominant lack of acknowledgement of multilingualism, and reflects the exclusive practices of teachers, which instil an inferiority complex and the sense that they are not welcome in multilingual learners. The learners being excluded in a new South Africa post 1994, despite the values of the Constitution, reminds them of the apartheid era where Black people were marginalised for years because of their skin colour. Janks (2010, p. 126) asserted that access without diversity "fails to recognise that difference fundamentally affects pathways to access and involves issues of history, identity and value."

Through the CLW, it was found that there was a secondary contradiction between the subjects' adopted belief to give more attention to explaining the work, rules (expected time frames set out by CAPS), tools (use of dictionaries), and division of labour (learners' ability to use the dictionaries effectively). Even though the lack in consolidating the work, time, and tools was a structural hindrance, one of the teachers voiced her agency to transform the situation as can be seen in her comment above (Extract 2, TF2). This is in line with the study conducted by Engeström and Sannino (2021, p. 13) who found:

In third-generation studies, lateral interactions across the boundaries between participating activity systems become central. This sideways dimension of expansive learning involves the construction of new social relations using debate, negotiation and shared experimentation. While still chiefly an implicit notion, agency was seen to emerge through the recognition of differences and complementarities of expertise and positions.

The contradictions identified created the space for transformation as shown in Extracts 4 and 5.

#### **Extract 4: Expansive learning through a different perspective in CLW**

The conversations in the CLWs sensitised teachers to rethink their current practices in the classroom. The prior discussions and the questions indicated that participants wanted to progress from where they were to a future intended activity. This proves the dependability and validity of this study as well as the usefulness of the CLW in environments where diversity is prominent. Both teachers acknowledged that they must work on their shortcomings. Their commitment, as evidenced in the extracts below, shows their agency and willingness to act.

TF2: I am sorry if I offended anyone in my class. I can't remember me belittling anyone in my class, I love my children. If that is the case, I am sorry. In terms of how I treat Xhosa learners, it is not negative. I have my reasons why I don't allow learners to speak in isiXhosa in my class because they don't stop. They laugh and I don't know why. I feel that learners use their language to be disrespectful.

TF1: I agree. We as teachers don't want to make our learners feel bad. A lot of things happen at school and sometimes it is tough.

Reflexivity (Extract 4 above) created the possibility for participants "to look at [themselves] through the eyes of other worlds" (p. 145) and "to learn something new about their own and others' practices" (Akkerman & Bakker, 2011, p. 144). As a result of their deep reflexivity, participants reconfigured the multi-layered nature of meaning-making challenges experienced by isiXhosa learners in AHL classes through face-to-face discussions and engagements in the CLWs. Changing their approaches, yielded positive results as can be seen in Extract 5.

#### **Extract 5: Positive change through expansive learning**

The teachers indicated that learners liked working in groups, were comfortable amongst their peers, and learned new things.

TF1: Learners were comfortable speaking with their peers. They liked working in groups. I think some of them could hide amongst their peers, but they tried.

TF2: Yes, and they learned new words and even though it was difficult to understand they learned something new.

The CLW further developed learners' capabilities such as critical thinking, problem solving, and social interaction (Asigigan & Samur, 2021). It provided learners with the tools and strategies to navigate their multilingual reality, enabling them to overcome language barriers and fully engage with their education and community. And it also created a space for learners. Collaborative

learning such as group work aligns with the CLW approach because it is a collaborative problem-solving method that aims to bring about transformative change in an educational setting by creating a space for participants to critically examine their current practices, identify areas for improvement, and develop innovative solutions.

### **Evaluating the effectiveness of CLW as a pedagogical approach to enhance the capabilities of multilingual learners**

Multilingual learners and individuals who acquire and communicate in multiple languages present unique challenges and opportunities in the realm of language acquisition (Loucky, 2005). The effectiveness of CLW as a pedagogical approach to enhance the capabilities of these learners in language acquisition and communication skills is a topic that warrants careful evaluation. Discussions among teachers and learners during the CLWs allowed them to think and reflect on events (in this case, the actual lesson), current practices, and individual actions in teaching—and on occurrences of meaning making during teaching, learning, and assessment tasks. A common space for teachers and learners in CLWs was paramount because it allowed them to explore past actions and to envision future practices to improve the situation. These workshops served as a dynamic platform for multilingual learners to engage actively with their linguistic abilities and foster a deep understanding of various languages.

CLWs promote a sense of agency among multilingual learners by encouraging them to take ownership of their language-learning journey (National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2017). By actively participating in these workshops, they become active agents rather than passive recipients of knowledge. This increased agency empowers multilingual learners to experiment with different languages and to develop strategies that work best for them, individually. CLWs facilitate meaningful interactions among multilingual learners from diverse linguistic backgrounds (Warschauer & Meskill, as cited in Rosenthal, 2014). This diversity not only enriches the learning experience but also provides opportunities for cross-cultural understanding and appreciation. By collaborating with peers who have varying degrees of proficiency in different languages, multilingual learners can enhance their communication skills through authentic conversations that reflect real-world contexts.

Evaluating the effectiveness of CLW as a pedagogical approach for enhancing the capabilities of multilingual learners in language acquisition and communication skills is crucial. These workshops provided an immersive environment where multilingual learners could actively engage with different languages while fostering a sense of agency over their learning journey (Austin, 2023). Additionally, the collaborative nature of the workshops encouraged meaningful interactions among individuals from diverse linguistic backgrounds, leading to cross-cultural understanding and improved communication skills.

## Conclusion

This paper explored the potential of expansive learning through CLW. In the CLWs, there was space for participants from different activity systems to meet to share good practices, critique poor practices, surface contradictions/unfreedoms, explore potential areas of growth, consolidate, reflect, and evaluate the whole process of the study. The workshops focused on teaching, learning, and assessment in AHL classes, specifically in the context of drama literature. CLW created the space for multi-voicedness, one of the elements of the third generation as illustrated by Engeström (as cited in Engeström et al., 1999). This CLW platform initiated conversations where learners could share their experiences and negotiate alternatives with their teachers in their quest for meaning making in AHL classrooms. Notably, the teachers' positivity regarding the learners' abilities gained momentum during the CLWs and the practical implementation of the reconceptualised activity.

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# Freedoms of teachers using CAPS: A capability analysis of a Western Cape school

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## Abstract

This study investigated the extent to which teachers can exercise their professional judgement and adapt the Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS) to meet the needs of their learners at a school in the Western Cape, South Africa. The CAPS framework is designed to equip learners with the knowledge, skills, values, and attitudes for holistic development. However, it is crucial to recognise that teachers are active agents who possess agency and autonomy in the teaching process. When empowered to use their professional judgement, teachers are more likely to create engaging and dynamic classroom environments that capture learners' attention and facilitate effective learning. The study employed a capability analysis framework to examine the freedoms of teachers in implementing CAPS, and underscored the experiences of teachers inside the classroom. A qualitative research approach was used, utilising interviews, document analysis, and observations to gather data. The study revealed constraints caused by several factors inside and outside the classroom that influence the implementation of CAPS. Factors such as the uniformity enforced in lesson planning and preparation, time constraints, excessive workloads, lack of resources, overcrowded classrooms, CAPS being too bulky, and the diverse nature of learners in classrooms—and in the school context, poverty, high crime rates, substance abuse, and lack of parental involvement are accentuated as significant impediments. They restrict teachers' professional autonomy to effectively implement CAPS, which in turn compromises their ability to fully exercise their freedoms to adapt the curriculum to cater for individual learner needs.

**Keywords:** CAPS framework, capability analysis, professional judgement, South African education system, teacher autonomy, teacher freedoms

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## Introduction and background

Education systems around the world are influenced by various curriculum frameworks that guide teaching and learning processes. In South Africa, the national curriculum is guided by the Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS), which provides prescribed topics, content, and assessment criteria for each grade and subject (Letshwene & du Plessis, 2021). Even though CAPS aims to provide all teachers with the same outline of what should be taught and when it should be taught, the time allocation, and how it should be assessed, it should be noted that there is little consideration for the immense differences in school contexts across South Africa (Hoffman, 2017) in this one-shoe-fits-all approach.

Research on CAPS has focused on the many challenges for teachers with implementation of the framework (Chisholm, 2003; Pudi, 2006; Smit, 2001; Taole, 2013). In 2010, research by the Catholic Institute of Education (CIE) outlined the following key issues with respect to the implementation of CAPS for teachers.

- The key objective of CAPS is to provide specific guidance so that teachers know what the degree of difficulty is, and how best to prepare for exams. However, this is not provided in the CAPS documents.
- The guidance across subjects differs, and the cognitive challenge dimension is only observed in some subject documents.
- The organising principles of the curriculum are not clear.
- The curriculum documents are all different, and there has been no attempt to standardise them. Some of the documents lack page numbering, resulting in it being difficult to follow their contents.

Although the issues mentioned above highlighted by the CIE (2010) offer a document analysis perspective on CAPS, teachers' experiences and school contexts offer authentic participation and intersectionality of policy and the knowledge learned in the classroom when using the framework. Understanding the realities and constraints that teachers face is therefore important, and would help to inform policy decisions and could lead to improvements in the implementation of CAPS (Manik, 2022).

Accordingly, this research is timely and relevant, shedding light on teachers' experiences and the pressing constraints impacting their capabilities when using CAPS. This aligns with Sen's (1992) central argument in the Capability Approach that there are possibilities for variations in outcome. Even when equal resources are provided (in this case, the CAPS framework), the significance of barriers and constraints have been ignored (Hoffman & Maarman, 2024). In this study, these variations include factors inside and outside the classroom that influence teachers' implementation of CAPS.

According to Lennert da Silva and Mølsted (2020), an important aspect of effective teaching is the freedom and agency given to teachers in the classroom. The level of freedom afforded to teachers

can significantly impact their ability to adapt the curriculum to meet the needs of their learners, encourage critical thinking, and foster a creative and engaging learning environment (Shuls & Flores, 2020). By conducting a capability analysis, this study explored the extent to which teachers can exercise their professional judgement and adapt the curriculum according to their learners' needs, together with the challenges they face when doing so (Erduran & Msimanga, 2014).

## **Theoretical framework**

The Capability Approach, developed by economist Amartya Sen (1992), was used as the theoretical lens for this study to discuss teacher freedoms, with CAPS as the focus of the research. Freedoms relate to people's ability to be able to make choices that allow them to help themselves and others (Hoffman & Maarman, 2024). According to the Capability Approach, individuals should have certain basic capabilities that enable them to function fully as human beings. These capabilities include being healthy, having access to education and employment opportunities, and having social and political freedoms (Alexander, 2016).

Sen's (1999) view was that freedoms can directly enhance people's capabilities. Sen highlighted five types of freedom: political freedom, economic facilities, social opportunities, transparency guarantees, and protective security. This study focused on social opportunities, which refers to the arrangement society makes for education and health care, and which influence the individual's substantive freedom to live better. The freedom of teachers to use the CAPS framework was thus the focus of this study. Hoffman (2017) claimed that in the educational context, Sen intended freedom as the things that help teachers to teach the way they want to teach to achieve their educational goals and objectives; thus, teachers' freedom in using CAPS to enable their learners to reach their maximum potential within their context—as highlighted in the findings below.

Conversely, unfreedoms in the context of the Capability Approach are those circumstances that hinder abilities and efforts to achieve, and can vary from person to person as well as between spaces (Sen, 1999). In this study, unfreedoms are those conditions that hinder teachers from using CAPS as prescribed. Existing unfreedoms limit a person's or institution's capacity or ability to achieve. Consequently, certain choices are made by and an individual/institution not because they are limited by available resources or capabilities, but due to the specific circumstances in which they find themselves (Sen, 1992).

Certain unfreedoms were highlighted as being caused by various factors inside and outside the classroom. These included the uniformity enforced in lesson planning and preparation, time constraints, excessive workloads, lack of resources, overcrowded classrooms, the diverse nature of learners in classrooms and the school context, poverty, high crime rates, substance abuse, and lack of parental involvement. Consequently, these factors accentuate significant impediments (unfreedoms) that restrict teachers' professional autonomy in effectively implementing CAPS and their ability to fully exercise their freedoms to adapt the curriculum to cater for individual learner needs.

## **CAPS implementation in the context of teacher freedoms**

The CAPS was introduced in South African schools in 2012 (Ajani, 2021). It replaced the previous National Curriculum Statement, and aimed to provide a comprehensive and coherent curriculum for all learners. One of the main objectives of the CAPS framework was to promote inclusivity and equity in education. It aimed to provide equal opportunities for all learners, regardless of their background or abilities. CAPS recognised the diverse needs of learners and provided for support for those with special educational needs or disabilities.

Another objective of the CAPS framework was to develop critical thinking skills among learners. It emphasised the importance of problem solving, creativity, collaboration, communication, and information literacy (Matsepe & Maluleke, 2019). CAPS encouraged teachers to use various teaching strategies that promote active learning and engage learners in meaningful activities. Moreover, the framework emphasised assessment as an integral part of teaching and learning (Winberg et al., 2020). It encouraged teachers to use a variety of assessment methods such as tests, projects, assignments, and presentations to assess learners' knowledge and skills. CAPS further provided guidelines for assessment practices that are fair, valid, and dependable (Winberg et al., 2020).

### **Defining teacher freedoms**

Teacher freedom refers to teachers' ability to make decisions and take actions that influence their professional practice (Molla & Nolan, 2020). It involves a sense of ownership over one's teaching methods, pedagogical approaches, and classroom environment. Teacher autonomy thus refers to teachers' freedom to exercise their professional judgement in making decisions about what and how they teach (Derakhshan et al., 2020).

### **Importance of teacher agency in curriculum implementation**

Empowering teachers with agency is crucial for effective curriculum implementation. When teachers have a voice in decision-making processes regarding curriculum design, they become more invested in its successful execution (Wilches, 2007). By involving them in such discussions, policymakers can tap into their expertise and experience, ensuring that curricula reflect the real-world challenges faced by learners.

Furthermore, teachers' agency allows educators to adapt the curriculum based on their learners' unique needs. Every classroom comprises diverse learners with varying abilities, interests, and learning styles (Wilches, 2007). Teachers who possess agency can modify instructional strategies or introduce supplementary materials that cater specifically to these individual differences (Molla & Nolan, 2020). This personalised approach enhances learner engagement and fosters a deeper understanding of the subject matter.

Moreover, when teachers have agency over curriculum implementation, they become motivated and committed professionals. They feel valued as experts in their field rather than being treated as

mere implementers of predetermined plans (Wilches, 2007). This sense of ownership leads to increased job satisfaction among educators, which benefits both them and their learners.

### **The impact of curriculum freedoms on student learning outcomes**

#### ***Teacher autonomy enhances student engagement***

Teacher autonomy is a crucial factor in enhancing learner engagement because it allows educators the freedom to adapt and tailor their teaching methods to meet the diverse needs of their learners. Studies have highlighted the positive impact of teacher autonomy on learning outcomes. For instance, a study conducted by Cain (2014) found that when teachers were given the freedom to make decisions about their curriculum and instructional strategies, learners demonstrated higher levels of engagement in the learning process. This implies that when teachers are empowered to use their professional judgement and expertise, they are more likely to create a stimulating and dynamic classroom environment that captivates learners' attention.

In addition, teacher autonomy promotes student motivation by fostering an atmosphere of ownership and empowerment. When teachers have the flexibility to design lessons based on their learners' interests and abilities, it instils a sense of relevance in the content being taught. As a result, learners become more motivated to actively participate in class discussions, complete assignments with enthusiasm, and take responsibility for their learning journey. A study conducted by Suchyadi and Suharyati (2021) further supported this notion by demonstrating that increased teacher autonomy positively correlates with higher levels of intrinsic motivation among learners.

It is thus evident that teacher autonomy positively influences student engagement, motivation, and achievement. By empowering teachers to make decisions regarding curriculum and instructional strategies, learners are more likely to become actively engaged in their learning process (Restian, 2020). Moreover, teacher autonomy fosters a sense of ownership and relevance among learners, promoting motivation and leading to improved academic outcomes. Additionally, teacher autonomy allows for creative teaching practices that enhance critical thinking skills and overall cognitive development (Cain, 2014). Educational policymakers should therefore recognise the significance of granting teachers the freedom to adapt their curricula to optimise learning outcomes.

#### ***Adaptation positively affects student motivation***

Adaptation, a key aspect of curriculum freedoms granted to teachers, has been shown to have a profound impact on student motivation. Numerous studies have demonstrated that when teachers are given the autonomy to adapt their curriculum based on learners' needs and interests, learner engagement and motivation surge (Metsäpelto et al., 2020). This finding is not surprising, considering that adaptation allows educators to tailor their instruction to meet the diverse learning styles and preferences of their learners. By incorporating relevant examples, real-world applications, and interactive activities into their lessons, teachers can create an environment that captivates learners' attention and fosters a genuine desire to learn.

Moreover, when learners see that their teacher values their input and considers their strengths and weaknesses, they are more prone to taking ownership of their education (Xu & Fan, 2022). This empowerment enhances learner motivation because they become active participants in the learning process instead of passive recipients of knowledge. Adaptation also cultivates intrinsic motivation by tapping into learners' interests. When lessons are designed around topics they find intriguing or relevant to their lives, learners are more likely to be motivated to explore the subject matter further.

Furthermore, adaptation promotes a growth mindset among learners. When teachers provide opportunities for learners to engage in authentic problem-solving tasks or project-based learning experiences, where mistakes are viewed as valuable learning opportunities rather than failures, learners develop resilience and perseverance in the face of challenges (Xu & Fan, 2022). This growth mindset fuels their motivation by instilling in them the belief that effort leads to improvement. Learners who receive personalised instruction are more likely to experience success academically because it addresses any gaps in understanding or skill development. As a result, they gain confidence in themselves as learners and become more motivated to continue striving for excellence.

### **Impact of curriculum freedoms on learner achievement**

The impact of curriculum freedoms on learner achievement has been a topic of great interest in the field of education. Numerous studies have delved into this subject, examining the relationship between the latitude given to teachers in designing their own curriculum and its effect on learning outcomes. Teacher autonomy and adaptation can thus positively influence learner engagement, motivation, and achievement.

Restian (2020) shed light on the significant role that teacher autonomy plays in fostering student engagement. By allowing educators to tailor their curriculum to meet the specific needs and interests of their learners, a sense of ownership is instilled within teachers, which transcends into their classrooms. This heightened sense of ownership leads to increased enthusiasm for teaching, resulting in more dynamic lessons that captivate learners' attention. Consequently, learners become actively engaged in the learning process as they perceive relevance and personal connection to the material being taught.

Additionally, studies have shown a positive correlation between teacher autonomy in curriculum design and improved academic achievement among learners (Metsäpelto et al., 2020). When teachers have the flexibility to select resources and activities that align with their pedagogical style or teaching philosophy, they can better address content mastery goals while catering to diverse learning preferences within their classrooms. This tailored approach allows for an in-depth understanding among learners, as well as improved retention rates.

It is noteworthy that curriculum freedoms given to teachers have a profound impact on student learning outcomes. The autonomy and adaptability afforded to educators in designing their

curriculum not only foster learner engagement but also enhance motivation and academic achievement. By acknowledging the importance of teacher agency in curriculum design, educational institutions can create an environment that maximises student potential and cultivates a love for lifelong learning.

## **Methodology**

For this study, the researcher adopted a qualitative research approach because it was the most suitable to respond to the research aims. The approach was exploratory because it explored the freedoms of teachers using CAPS (Ataro, 2020). The qualitative aspect of the study assisted the researcher in capturing and recording the views that teachers held about their freedoms to teach in a classroom using CAPS in the context of their school.

### **Research setting, sample, and population**

The selected school is a primary school situated in a socioeconomically disadvantaged area in the Western Cape province of South Africa. Sample refers to the population and variables that have been selected in the process of answering the research question. It is a smaller selection of subjects that represents the larger population and from which the researcher collects information (Oliveira & Ferreira, 2011). The researcher selected teachers in Foundation Phase, Intermediate Phase, and Senior Phase at the school. The selection included four teachers in the Foundation Phase and four teachers in the Intermediate and Senior Phases, based on their years of teaching experience. According to Sen (1992), personal diversities acknowledge that all human beings are diverse and differ not only in external characteristics but also in personal characteristics, which would also determine their capabilities. Hence, participants were carefully selected and categorised based on the following criteria: gender, years of experience, grade, and rank.

### **Data collection and research instruments**

This study made use of classroom observations, focus group interviews, document analysis, and field notes as tools to gather data. These methods enabled the researcher to triangulate data. Methods of data collection are based on appropriateness for the task, thus a combination of appropriate data collection devices (Creswell, 2009) was used to answer the research question.

### **Ethical considerations**

According to Babbie and Mouton (2001), researchers who plan to do social scientific research need to be aware of the general agreements among researchers about what is proper and improper in the conduct of a scientific enquiry. Thus, this study was guided by the following ethical principles: privacy, anonymity, confidentiality (Neuman, 2014), truthfulness, voluntary participation, and protecting all respondents' dignity, rights, and well-being.

Ethical clearance was obtained from the university because the study emanated from a master's research study. Permission was obtained from the Western Cape Education Department and the school's school governing body, principal, and teachers. All participants were fully informed

about the research study, and they were allowed to withdraw at any time without consequence.

## Findings

The data collected through focus group interviews and observations provided valuable insights into teachers' experiences using CAPS. And, the findings of the study highlighted several factors inside and outside the classroom that influence the freedoms of teachers with the implementation of CAPS.

The freedoms of teachers when using CAPS emerged as noteworthy in this study. Freedoms in terms of the Capability Approach are the opportunities or choices a person has that influence their ability to achieve certain objectives (Hoffman, 2017). Conversely, unfreedoms are those circumstances that hinder such abilities and efforts to achieve, and can vary from person to person, as well as between spaces (Munje & Maarman, 2018). Sen's (1992) Capability Approach emphasises the role of freedoms and unfreedoms in the achievement of functioning, which aligns with the circumstances, and experiences of teachers in school settings under CAPS. Sen's approach was employed in this study due to its applicability across various human activities and contexts.

In the interviews conducted, it was revealed that there were concerns among teachers about uniformity in lesson planning. Teachers in both phases highlighted the fact that teachers in each grade and phase are required to have the same format of lesson planning for every subject because they are not viewed as individuals but rather, as a team. The question of uniformity raised concerns as to what extent teachers are allowed to have some individuality and act independently in terms of their preparation and actual teaching in their classrooms. Further, CAPS promotes the use of the same curriculum document despite the diversity of the population. Our findings noted the unfreedoms of teachers about curriculum implementation. And it also needs to be highlighted that the data collected through interviews and observations show that, despite "forced uniform lesson planning," most teachers in the school do not implement what they have planned because the experiences they face in the classrooms are different. CAPS therefore does not fully take into account the different situations that teachers face in schools. This, therefore, calls for a framework that is more adaptable and able to respect and integrate the values and norms of our diverse communities.

The participants expressed concerns about various factors inside and outside the classroom, which influence the implementation of CAPS. The ability to convert existing resources into achievable goals is determined by capabilities possessed by the person concerned and is influenced by both internal and external factors (Sen, 1985). The participants' views were grouped and presented in two main categories, namely, factors inside the school (divided into classroom factors, and school factors) and factors outside the school.

### Factors inside the school

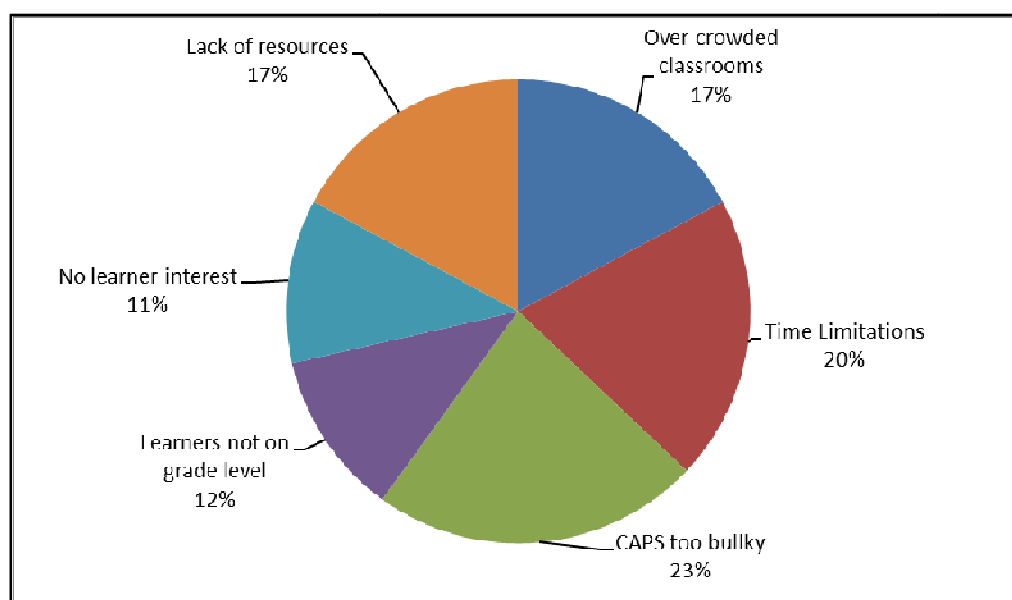
Factors inside the school included classroom factors relating to activities inside the classroom as well as school factors relating to the operational activities of the school, and are presented in Figure 1 and Figure 2.

#### *Classroom factors*

Several classroom factors were identified that influence the implementation of CAPS. These factors included overcrowded classrooms, teaching time limitations, the bulky nature of CAPS, learners not on grade level, lack of interest by learners, and lack of resources.

**Figure 1**

Classroom factors



#### *Overcrowded classrooms*

Participants pointed to overcrowded classrooms as one of the main constraints for teachers to achieve educational objectives. Big classes make it difficult for teachers to teach, and for learners to learn. This not only impacts discipline but also the seating arrangements learners in a limited space.

#### *Time limitations*

Participants highlighted time as a factor that hinders the successful implementation of CAPS. It was noted that the time allocations in CAPS are not sufficient to meet the demands of the prescribed workload.

#### *CAPS is too bulky*

Teaching time limitations due to the curriculum pace requirements of CAPS, and the volume of

content were identified as constraints. Participants pointed out that CAPS prescribes too much work (bulky) with very little time to teach and consolidate the work.

#### *A lack of interest by learners*

Learner attitudes and lack of interest in their schoolwork is an unfreedom for teachers that hinders their capability to achieve educational objectives. Participants also mentioned that some learners showed interest in their schoolwork, but others were not coping because they fell behind and could not keep up with the pace.

#### *Learners not on grade level*

The findings highlighted that some learners repeat a grade, and others are progressed with support. This also contributes to the ill-discipline of learners because they are not on grade level, and the work becomes extremely difficult for them.

#### *Lack of resources*

Many learners in classes do not have the basic stationery and books to support learning and teaching. Participants expressed their frustrations with learners who came to school without a pen or pencil to write the work or do activities. This contributes to the discipline issues the teachers are facing daily. Therefore, using the Capability Approach, one could argue that the desire to teach is restricted by certain dynamics rooted in a system that results in teacher unfreedoms—thus the need to pay particular attention to what people are effectively able to do and to be, and not focus only on the number of resources available (Sen, 1985).

### **School factors**

The challenges teachers are facing were not limited only to the classroom; the school operation also impacted what was happening in the classroom. These factors included too many meetings, unnecessary interruptions, feeding schemes, retention of teachers, subject responsibility, and demonstration lessons.

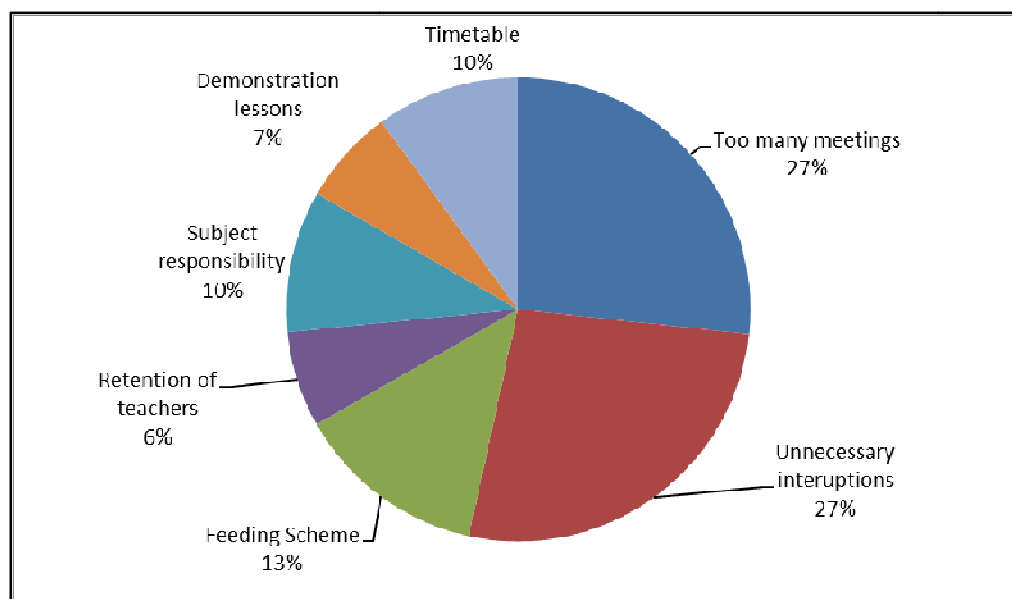
#### *Unnecessary interruptions*

All the teachers highlighted interruptions in teaching and learning time, and referred few factors such as the intercom being used frequently for announcements that are not urgent.

#### *Too many meetings*

Participants expressed concerns regarding the frequent unnecessary staff, grade, and phase meetings that keep teachers at school until late. As a result, teachers are too tired to go home and do class preparation work because they have family responsibilities as well. Apart from teaching, teachers are required to do extra and co-curricular activities. This adds to the workload of teachers because they must attend games and practices on certain days, with no extra remuneration.

**Figure 2**  
School factors influencing CAPS



### ***The feeding scheme***

A large group of the learners at this research site were dependent on a meal from the feeding scheme. Although the feeding scheme was a good intervention, it was an unfreedom to teachers in achieving their educational objectives and functioning.

Teachers noted that the feeding scheme at school disrupted contact time because the learners who depended on those meals had to leave class to go and eat. The unpredictable time schedule of the feeding scheme was an unfreedom for teachers because it impacted teaching directly, and also resulted in learners missing out on work being done in their absence.

### ***Retention of teachers***

Participants expressed concerns regarding the school's inability to retain teachers, with the school having a high number of teachers coming and leaving school. It should be noted as being a burden for those teachers who remain and face challenges such as discipline and burnout.

### ***Subject responsibility***

Participants expressed concerns about the subject responsibility of teachers at school. Some teachers were expected to teach a subject for which they were not qualified. As a result, teachers had to study the work before they could teach the learners. This also added to the stress and workload of teachers.

### ***Timetable***

The participants expressed their frustrations with the timetable routine, which contributed to

ill-discipline and influenced the teaching and learning process. At this research site, the teachers are the ones who rotate and move from one class to another. The lesson periods are 30 minutes long. The timetable was changed often due to activities taking place at the school such as assemblies, mass sport events, extra- and co-curricular activities, and unscheduled guest speakers. This resulted in ill-discipline in the classrooms, making classroom management and effective teaching difficult for most teachers.

### ***Demonstration lessons***

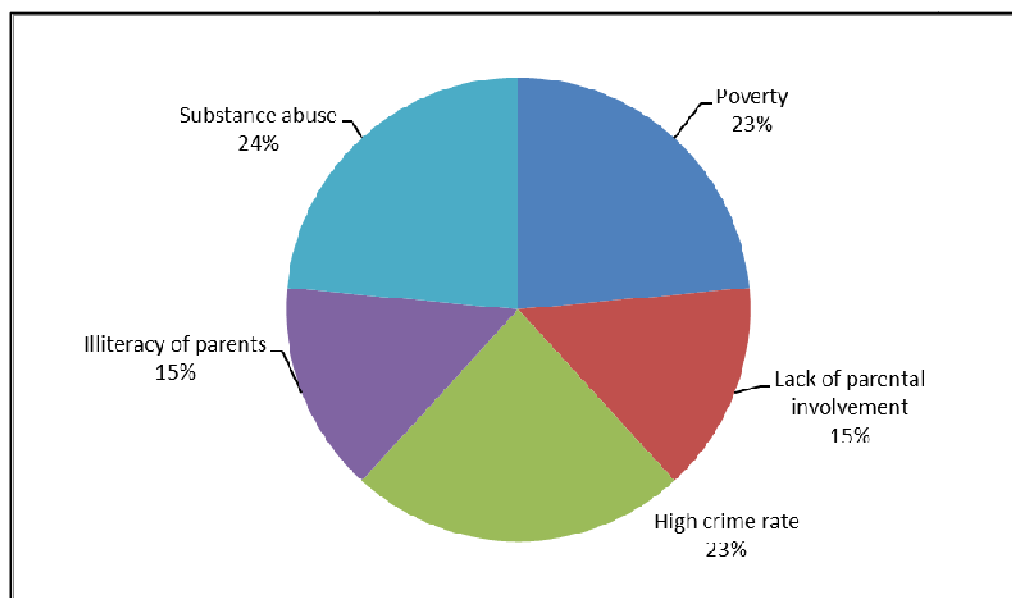
Participants expressed their view that weekly demonstration lessons were an added task.

### **Factors outside school**

Figure 3 provides insight into the external factors influencing the implementation of CAPS.

**Figure 3**

External factors that influence implementation of CAPS



The data highlight that poverty in the community where the school is situated is one of the biggest challenges that impacts the teaching and learning process. Poverty results in learners not having the basic resources to facilitate their learning.

The role of the parent was also highlighted as another of the biggest constraints. Lack of parental involvement, particularly by parents who cannot assist learners because of their own illiteracy, was identified as a constraint.

Exposure to violence and substance abuse was also another constraint that impacted directly on learning and teaching.

## **Discussion**

Based on the findings presented, it is evident that there are contrasting opinions regarding the use of uniformity in lesson planning among teachers in South Africa. On the one hand, teachers expressed concerns about the lack of individuality and independence in their lesson planning and teaching practices. They felt that being required to follow a standardised lesson format for each subject restricts their ability to cater to the unique needs and interests of their learners. On the other hand, CAPS promotes the use of a uniform curriculum document throughout the diverse population of South Africa. This raises questions about how effectively the framework can address the specific needs of different regions and student populations.

To strike a balance between the need for individuality among teachers and the necessity of a uniform curriculum, there should be a flexible framework in place that allows teachers to personalise their lesson plans while still ensuring key learning objectives are met. This would empower teachers to adapt their teaching approaches to suit the unique needs and abilities of their learners, while still adhering to the overarching curriculum guidelines.

The study established that participants could not execute their lessons in the ways that they wanted to in terms of planning. Discipline and many other factors like interruptions and learners who were not on grade level, for example, impact teaching in class. However, the teachers tried to keep the learners interested in the lessons to the best of their ability. It can be concluded that teachers were unable to execute the lessons and achieve the educational objectives as they would have liked, hence these are unfreedoms of teachers when teaching in class.

The constraints highlighted by these teachers include limited time, a heavy workload, lack of consolidation of work, discipline issues, and unnecessary interruptions. These challenges hinder the effective delivery of lessons and hinder the ability of teachers to focus on their primary role, which is teaching. Inasmuch that the teachers must adhere to the *in loco parentis* principle, it does not diminish the parents' role of helping learners at home. This culminates in the problem of indiscipline in the sense that while the teacher is busy trying to keep up with the time stipulated in CAPS, some of the learners are left behind.

The study also unveiled that the freedoms of teachers are largely limited during the assessment process. Teachers in the Foundation Phase emphasised time as a constraint because even when content had not been covered, they had to do assessments. The workload was too much for the learners and they were consequently disadvantaged by writing an assessment. Additionally, the form of assessment played a role because a question paper can cater for a variety of needs in terms of different types of questions. However, a learner who struggles with reading and writing will always be disadvantaged and be limited in achieving their full potential. Likewise, the teacher will also be disadvantaged and not achieve maximum results if their learners are unable to achieve academically.

From the focus group discussions, the study found that classes were overcrowded, which hampered the teaching of thinking skills because the teacher could not facilitate group work or pair

work activities with the learners due to the amount of time that would take. Consequently, the lack of space and affordance to exercise group work and pair work as a collaborative teaching and learning strategy imposed unfreedoms on teachers and learners, and could lead to deficit learning achievements when an assessment requires a collective classroom activity.

To address these challenges, there is a need for support and solutions at specific levels (Santos-Trigo, 2023). At a policy level, it may be necessary to review the curriculum and consider reducing the content burden, allowing for more in-depth exploration and consolidation of topics. Furthermore, providing teachers with additional resources and professional development opportunities could enhance their ability to manage time effectively and address discipline issues. At the school level, it is crucial to create a conducive learning environment by implementing effective behaviour management strategies and reducing unnecessary interruptions. This requires collaboration between school administrators, teachers, and support staff to establish a disciplined and focused classroom atmosphere.

It is essential to recognise the importance of teaching as the primary role of educators, and to address the constraints that hinder their ability to fulfil this role effectively (Miranda Júnior et al., 2019). By providing adequate support, resources, and a conducive learning environment, teachers could overcome these challenges and deliver quality education to their learners in alignment with the vision of UNESCO (2014) that quality education should promote equitable access to learning opportunities, fostering critical thinking and innovation. The United Nations' Sustainable Development Goal 4 has further emphasised the need for inclusive and equitable quality education and lifelong learning for all (United Nations, 2015).

## Conclusion

In the field of education, curriculum implementation plays a crucial role in shaping learners' learning experiences. However, it is essential to recognise that teachers are not mere implementers of the curriculum; they are active agents who possess agency and autonomy. Various challenges faced by teachers in the Western Cape regarding their freedoms and constraints in implementing the CAPS framework were revealed.

This study demonstrates that teachers should have the capability for professional autonomy. They should be able to make decisions about what and how they teach, based on their expertise and knowledge of their learners' needs (Crocker & Robeyns, 2009). To this end, there is a need for an environment that values teachers' professional judgement and allows them space for creativity in their teaching methods.

While the curriculum aims to prepare learners for various aspects of life, teachers' professional judgement and autonomy are often limited by factors such as uniformity in lesson planning, time constraints, lack of resources, and student diversity. It is crucial to address these challenges and to empower teachers to personalise the curriculum and create engaging learning experiences for

learners in order to enhance the quality of education and better serve the needs of learners.

By acknowledging the importance of teaching as the primary role of educators, and addressing the constraints that impede their ability to fulfil this role effectively, significant improvements could be made in the education system. Teachers should have the capability to participate in decision-making processes that affect their work (Robeyns, 2005). Teachers must have a voice in matters such as curriculum development, school policies, and resource allocation. Their expertise and insights are invaluable in shaping educational practices that best serve the needs of their learners.

By foregrounding Sen's (1992) Capabilities Approach, this article aims to shed light on the impact of external policies and structures on the agency and freedom of teachers. It highlights the need to consider teachers as active agents rather than passive implementers, and emphasises the significance of enabling them to fully utilise their capabilities in their professional practice (Robeyns, 2005).

When applying this approach to teachers' freedoms at a Western Cape school using CAPS as the focus of the research, several key aspects came into focus, including that teachers should have the capability to provide quality education to their learners. This means access to resources such as textbooks, teaching materials, and technology that enhance their ability to provide effective lessons. Further, it means having sufficient time for lesson planning and professional development activities.

Teachers should also have the capability for fair remuneration and working conditions. Teaching is often considered a noble profession but is not always adequately compensated or supported (Alexander, 2016). Teachers should be paid fairly for their work so that they can meet their own basic needs without financial stress. Moreover, they should have reasonable working hours and manageable class sizes that allow them to give individual attention to each student. The researchers hope to shed some light on the above-mentioned unfreedoms imposed on teachers using CAPS.

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# Navigating systemic barriers: The role of family background in the experiences of historically marginalised students in South African higher education

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## Abstract

This paper explores the role of family background in shaping the experiences of historically marginalised students in South African higher education. The role of family involvement in supporting student success remains underexplored in the South African context. Drawing on the intersection of socioeconomic status, parental education, and cultural capital, the study examines how these factors shape student resilience and success. Despite post-apartheid reforms aimed at democratising education, systemic barriers rooted in the legacy of apartheid continue to perpetuate inequalities that mainly affect students from disadvantaged backgrounds. This paper highlights how cultural capital influences educational outcomes, and how resilience (which arises from a stronger familial background) among students from marginalised communities often helps them navigate challenges encountered within the university system. The research used data from a mixed-methods project conducted by the Ali Mazrui Centre for Higher Education Studies in collaboration with the Council on Higher Education and only focused on interviews with 10 students. The study addresses the complex relationship between family background, resilience, and institutional support, providing insights for policy development and interventions aimed at promoting meaningful success in higher education. Findings show that most participants come from households where financial strain is a significant concern, often relying on a single breadwinner and social grants. Family support, particularly from mothers and grandmothers, plays a crucial role in fostering educational aspirations despite limited resources. Individual resilience is important, but institutional interventions are essential for meaningful success for marginalised students.

**Keywords:** family background, higher education, historically disadvantaged students, systemic barriers, resilience, forms of capital

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## Introduction

In South Africa, the interplay between socioeconomic status, parental education, and cultural capital creates compounding effects on students' experiences. For example, a student from a low socioeconomic status background whose parents lack formal education is less likely to possess what is viewed as the cultural capital needed to thrive in a university environment (Richards, 2022). These intersecting factors bordering the challenges experienced within families exacerbate inequalities in student success, thus reinforcing systemic barriers. The relationship between family background and higher education outcomes is deeply intertwined with the country's historical, social, and economic inequalities (Altbach et al., 2019). The racial legacy of apartheid coupled with poverty has left profound and persistent disparities in South Africa's society, with family background continuing to play a significant role in determining resilience and success in higher education (Letseka et al., 2010). Despite post-apartheid reforms aimed at democratising education, systemic barriers rooted in socioeconomic inequalities remain entrenched.

Students from disadvantaged family backgrounds often face multiple challenges, including inadequate financial support, limited parental educational attainment, and poor academic preparation due to inequalities in primary and secondary schooling (Letseka & Breier, 2008; Spaull, 2013). While these factors have continued to restrict access to higher education, they have also largely contributed to high dropout rates among marginalised groups (Marginson, 2016). Furthermore, cultural capital as defined by Bourdieu (1986, in Bourdieu, 2011) as the non-economic resources that influence educational success, such as language proficiency, familiarity with academic norms, and social networks, plays a critical role in reproducing inequality in educational outcomes.

However, many students from disadvantaged backgrounds exhibit remarkable resilience in navigating the challenges of higher education (Chiramba, 2021). Resilience is often shaped by individual agency, peer networks, and institutional support systems. Research has highlighted the importance of institutional policies, such as financial aid programmes, mentorship opportunities, and academic support services, in helping students overcome barriers and achieve success (Bozalek et al., 2011; Heleta, 2016). Nonetheless, inconsistencies in implementing these policies across institutions often limit their effectiveness.

The interplay between family background and higher education outcomes also raises questions about the role of family involvement and support (Wang & Huang, 2021). Families, even those with limited resources, can play a pivotal role in motivating students, fostering resilience, and providing emotional support. However, the extent of family involvement varies widely, and its influence on educational outcomes in the South African context remains underexplored.

This complex dynamic underscores the need for more research to understand how family background, resilience, and institutional support intersect to shape higher education outcomes in South Africa.

The key questions are:

1. How do certain dimensions of family background (e.g. socioeconomic status, parental education, cultural capital) influence resilience and success among students from disadvantaged family backgrounds in South African higher education?
2. What coping strategies do students from disadvantaged family backgrounds employ to navigate higher education?
3. How can institutional practices shape the resilience and academic success of students from disadvantaged family backgrounds?

Addressing these questions is crucial to developing policies and interventions that promote students' resilience and academic success in higher education—ultimately, contributing to breaking cycles of poverty and inequality in South Africa.

## **Methodology**

This study used empirical data derived from an extensive mixed-methods research project carried out by the Ali Mazrui Centre for Higher Education Studies in partnership with the Council on Higher Education. The broader research examined six universities in South Africa with a focus on students' epistemic access and success, particularly in the humanities and sciences faculties. Data for each case study were gathered from multiple sources, including (1) institutional policy documents and reports, (2) statistical data from 2016 to 2020, encompassing metrics such as student enrolment, gender, race, graduation rates, and success rates, (3) interviews with final-year undergraduate students from disadvantaged backgrounds within the selected faculties, and (4) interviews with academic staff, support personnel, and administrative staff.

This paper used mainly the qualitative data drawn from one of the six universities, in which 10 student participants from the humanities faculty were involved. These students were selected from the 40 interviewed at the institution because they had specifically emphasised a stronger role of family and parental support in shaping their academic success in higher education. The data were analysed thematically using the MAXQDA software.

## **Theoretical framing: From Pierre Bourdieu's cultural capital to Yosso's community cultural wealth, up to Cross and Atinde's compensatory capital**

Pierre Bourdieu's (1986) concept of cultural capital is particularly relevant in the South African context, where many universities still operate within Eurocentric frameworks. Cultural capital refers to the non-economic resources—such as language, attitudes, and cultural knowledge—that individuals inherit, and which influence their ability to navigate educational institutions (Bourdieu, 1986 in Bourdieu, 2011).

Students from families that align more closely with the dominant cultural norms of universities

(e.g. those fluent in English or familiar with academic discourse) have an advantage in accessing and succeeding in higher education (Oropeza et al., 2010). Conversely, students from marginalised backgrounds may struggle with cultural alienation, which affects their sense of belonging and academic confidence (Heleta, 2016). This misalignment often results in higher dropout rates and lower academic achievement among historically disadvantaged groups.

Taking the matter beyond Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital, Yosso's (2005) community cultural wealth (CCW) theory provides a compelling framework for understanding the experiences of disadvantaged students transitioning from high school to university. It challenges traditional notions of capital—such as economic, social, and cultural capital—by recognising the diverse forms of knowledge, skills, and assets that these students possess and use to navigate and resist systemic challenges.

The CCW theory identifies six forms of capital that illuminate the strategies and strengths these students bring to higher education:

- Aspirational capital refers to the ability to maintain hope and ambition for a better future, even in the face of adversity. Aspirational capital explains why many disadvantaged students defy negative expectations regarding their academic performance, and succeed against the odds.
- 4. Familial capital is rooted in strong bonds within families and communities. Familial capital encompasses non-material support such as encouragement, shared values, and expectations. This type of capital fosters a sense of belonging and purpose, empowering students to persist in their educational pursuits.
- 5. Linguistic capital involves the skills and knowledge gained through cultural practices such as storytelling, which enhance abilities like memorisation, attention to detail, and effective communication. Linguistic capital equips students with unique tools for academic and social success.
- 6. Navigational capital represents the determination and resourcefulness needed to adapt to, and navigate, unfamiliar or hostile environments. It reflects the resilience students develop in overcoming systemic barriers within educational institutions.
- 7. Social capital arises from relationships and interactions with family, friends, mentors, and community members. These networks provide emotional and practical support, which plays a crucial role in helping students overcome obstacles and achieving their goals.
- 8. Resistance capital is rooted in a historical and collective resilience developed in response to oppression. It reflects the ability of historically marginalised communities to persist, resist, and thrive despite systemic inequities.

Embedded within Yosso's (2005) framework is the profound element of resilience. Chiramba (2021) highlighted how resilience emerges as a key factor in disadvantaged students' ability to confront and overcome adversity. By leveraging their community's cultural wealth, these students demonstrate an extraordinary capacity to transform challenges into opportunities for growth and

success. In this way, Yosso's CCW theory shifts the narrative from deficit-based perspectives to one that acknowledges and celebrates the rich, multifaceted strengths of disadvantaged students. It underscores the importance of recognising and valuing these assets in creating more equitable and inclusive educational environments.

Of importance in the theoretical framing of this paper, is how an integration of Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital and Yosso's (2005) six forms of cultural capital results in the much stronger conception of compensatory capital, which is linked to the work of Cross and Atinde (2015). Compensatory capital can be understood as a holistic combination of diverse forms of support that students can draw on, and which can be equated to a form of essential capital that helps shape their networking skills and resilience (Cross & Atinde, 2015). This therefore broadly points to a wide range of students' actions, which they draw on to ensuring resilience and academic success—especially when faced with disruptions. Of importance, is the conception of social capital particularly, in relation to some actors possessing capital that enhances their capacity to pursue their goals. What is crucial in the Bordieuan conception of capital, though somewhat problematic in this paper's argument, is its assumption that in pursuit of their day-to-day goals amid struggles, some individuals lack the capital to pursue their goals and thus find themselves on the margins of society. This conception poses the danger of capital being viewed in binary terms, thus missing some elements of reality, especially when it comes to the struggles of marginalised people. This limitation, while complemented by Yosso's six forms of cultural capital is well reflected by Cross and Atinde's notions of compensatory capital.

The paper thus aligns with the arguments of Cross and Atinde (2015) whose work not only complements Yosso's (2005) six forms of cultural capital but also contrasts with Bourdieu's (1986 as cited in Bourdieu, 2011) notion that students from disadvantaged backgrounds occupy a weaker position when navigating systemic barriers within a university setting. According to Bourdieu, this weaker position reflects a lack of capital theses students can draw upon to pursue their epistemological access, unlike their counterparts from more advantaged backgrounds who enter university equipped with the requisite forms of capital. Drawing from Cross and Atinde, the paper transcends the a Bordieuan view by posing the argument that the often-underestimated students from disadvantaged backgrounds, in reality, possess adequate capital that draws from some form of social, cultural, and one can add, *academic habitus*, which enhances their resilience and epistemological success, and might even transcend that found among their advantaged counterparts.

Cross and Atinde (2005) thus emphasised the cognitive processes, which they equated to a form of pedagogy of survival through which individuals persist in settings that could be seemingly disruptive or threatening. By processing, weighing, and integrating different forms of capital these individuals can make decisions that can ultimately enhance their resilience and academic success. According to Cross and Atinde, academic success is attained in an environment in which the three cultural domains (the institutional, student, and academic) combine for students to amass the capital that they require for overcoming epistemic and other challenges encountered within the

university setting. Considering this view, it needs to be noted that at the core of the argument of this paper, is the notion that the combination of a positive attitude with a student's resolve to succeed in their academic obligations, coupled with the support received from parents, family, and the community can significantly enhance their chances of dealing with systemic barriers encountered within the university environment.

This paper relates the conceptions of capital to the resilience theory, which highlights the dynamic and multifaceted nature of adapting to change and adversity, emphasising the interplay between personal attributes, social support networks, and institutional resources (Masten, 2001). It views resilience as a developmental process shaped over time, involving not only the capacity to survive adversity but also the potential to emerge stronger and use challenges as opportunities for growth (Ungar, 2013). Resilience is not an inherent trait, but a set of processes influenced by individual experiences and the broader social, cultural, and institutional contexts such as the structural inequalities and historical legacies evident in South African higher education (Heleta, 2016). This perspective recognises both “bouncing back” to regain stability and “bouncing forward” to achieve growth and transformation, underscoring the critical role of resources such as personal strengths, social networks, and institutional support in navigating and overcoming challenges (Masten et al., 2023).

### **The conceptual terrain**

Conceptualising historically disadvantaged students in South African universities involves recognising the complex interplay of socioeconomic, cultural, and historical factors that shape their educational experiences and outcomes. Historically disadvantaged students in South Africa are often from marginalised groups, including Black African, Coloured, and Indian students, who continue to face the enduring legacies of apartheid, which institutionalised inequality in education (Badat, 2010). While the effects of this history are still evident in the disparities in access to higher education, and in the social, psychological, and academic challenges that these students face, they have largely shaped students' development of resilience and academic success.

### **Success in higher education**

Success in higher education refers not only to completing degree programmes but also to the quality of learning, personal development, and post-graduation outcomes. In the South African context, success is shaped by combining individual and institutional factors. Despite barriers, many students from disadvantaged backgrounds demonstrate resilience by developing strategies to overcome adversity. This resilience includes seeking support networks, balancing part-time work, and using informal learning resources (Yan & Gai, 2022). Institutions are critical for facilitating student success through targeted interventions such as academic tutoring, mentorship programmes, and counselling services. These supports help mitigate the effects of financial strain, emotional distress, and academic challenges that often accompany socioeconomic disadvantage

(Chiramba & Ndofirepi, 2023). Curriculum and teaching practices that reflect the diverse cultural backgrounds and epistemologies of South African students are also crucial for fostering academic success. The decolonisation of higher education has become a key focus in addressing matters of cultural alienation and promoting inclusive pedagogies (Heleta, 2016).

### **Influence of family socioeconomic status and institutional dynamics on students' resilience and success in South African higher education**

Socioeconomic status is a critical determinant of the emergence of students' resilience and their academic success in higher education. Under apartheid, the education system was racially segregated, with White students receiving the highest quality of education and Black students subjected to underfunded and inferior schooling (Heleta, 2016). These historical disadvantages persist in the form of financial instability, limited access to educational resources, and inadequate academic preparation, which continue to affect the academic success of students from marginalised backgrounds. A significant proportion of historically disadvantaged students face financial barriers to adjusting to the university, with compromised resilience affecting their academic success. This situation is largely a result of the costs of tuition, accommodation, and study materials that often lead to high dropout rates, especially considering that students' families fail to mitigate these challenges (Ravhuhali et al., 2022). The lack of financial support is compounded by limited access to resources, which affects students' ability to access various tools and materials essential for their resilience and academic success.

It is the family setting-linked interactive processes emerging from early childhood that, together with high school experiences, shape the students' resilience at the university level, thus setting the tone for their success (Van Voorhis et al., 2013). The role played by families in the development of resilience is deeply entrenched in the broader social and economic state of families, something that can be defined by levels of poverty, income, education status, and the quality of socialisation and related disciplinary mechanisms. Family practices, particularly at the parental level, have shown to have a strong bearing on students' achievement—especially those living in disadvantaged settings. Emphasising the significance of family experiences in the development of students' resilience, lack of parental academic involvement, non-authoritative parenting, lower maternal education, and family background, in general, is central to shaping students' resilience initiatives (Banerjee, 2016).

Research has shown that students from low-income households face significant barriers due to financial constraints, poor schooling backgrounds, and limited access to resources (Spaull, 2013). The cost of higher education, including tuition fees, accommodation, and learning materials, often excludes students from disadvantaged backgrounds unless they receive financial aid or bursaries. The introduction of the National Student Financial Aid Scheme has partially mitigated this concern, although funding inadequacies persist (Letseka & Breier, 2008). Higher socioeconomic status families are better positioned to provide supportive learning environments, private schooling, and extracurricular enrichment, thereby improving their children's chances of entering prestigious universities and succeeding academically (Mishra, 2020). This advantage perpetuates

inequalities as wealthier families consolidate their socioeconomic status across generations.

Furthermore, South African universities have traditionally been structured around Western education models, with Eurocentric curricula, pedagogical approaches, and institutional norms that can alienate students from Indigenous and African cultural backgrounds (Heleta, 2016). This cultural mismatch can affect students' sense of belonging and academic performance. Students often have to navigate both the demands of higher education and the psychological challenges of cultural alienation. Despite these barriers, many historically disadvantaged students exhibit significant resilience and agency. They often employ strategies such as forming peer support groups, engaging in activism, and finding ways to leverage community networks to overcome the challenges they face (Badat, 2010). This resilience reflects their ability to persist in the face of adversity, challenging deficit-based models of understanding their experiences.

This paper argues that relying on students' resilience alone could slow transformation progress therefore, universities should also develop resilience mechanisms to support these students. Although most South African universities have, for instance, implemented interventions such as enrolling students in an extended programme as to support their success, systemic barriers linked to students' family background and limitations in institutional support due to financial constraints facing families and universities remain a key challenge. Thus Heleta (2016) highlighted that more shifts towards an inclusive and transformative education system are crucial for addressing the needs of historically disadvantaged students. This becomes essential, particularly to ensure that the capital that students possess from their family experiences can be translated into resilience that they can draw from to enhance their academic success.

### **The impact of parental education on student success in higher education**

Parental education has a strong correlation with access to higher education and more so, on the resources and other forms of support that can enhance their children's academic success. Parents with higher education levels are more likely to value and encourage academic success, provide educational support, and understand the demands of higher education (Flanagan-Bórquez & Soriano-Soriano, 2024). They also serve as role models motivating their children to pursue tertiary education. First-generation university students whose parents lack higher education often experience challenges including limited academic preparedness and unfamiliarity with institutional norms (Patel, 2020). These students may face additional pressure to succeed because they carry the expectations of their families, which can impact their mental health and academic performance.

It can be argued that the parents' level of education shapes how they respond to their children's educational obligations. Following a study that took place in American elementary schools, Banerjee (2016) highlighted how parental interest in their children's education had significant shielding effects on their academic success, despite any deprivation they might experience. This factor not only contributes to student resilience in elementary school, but becomes key in their capacity to deal with challenges encountered as they navigate the university system, ultimately

influencing their academic success at university too. It can be further noted that the situation prevalent in the American context epitomises that in other contexts, particularly in South African and other African contexts where academic resilience and students' educational success tend to hinge heavily on parents' levels of education and class status.

A factor related to parental educational status is parental involvement, and parents with a higher education status are more involved and supportive of their children's education. In this regard, Weatherton and Schussler (2021) argued that the importance of parental involvement as an essential aspect of family support for building agency and resilience should be highlighted. Parental involvement, which in many instances relates to authoritative parenting, remains one of the unique practices that assist in developing and sustaining students' resilience and self-efficacy, which are central to academic success. Parents who are strict with their children at both social and educational levels tend to mitigate risk factors that might impede their children's success, not just academically but also in terms of their advancement in life. This implies that resilience that promotes academic success ought to be developed holistically rather than with a narrow perspective. As Silva et al. (2021) argued, parents who defer supporting their children at university, and those who relax their parental hold on grounds of their children being autonomous, tend to expose them to social and academic failure risks. Therefore, resilience building cannot be reduced to a touch-and-go practice; it ought to be continuous and incrementally linked to all other socialisation and support practices. In unpacking the role of parental support in the development of university students' resilience, especially those transitioning into university, the views of Carter-Francique et al. (2015) become central. They argued that it is through the multiple forms of capital that students can draw on, that they can deal with the challenges and obligations they face during their university life and in their pursuit of academic success and career advancement. In this regard, students who have received authoritative parenting usually benefit from interactive practices involving people other than their parents in community and university spaces; they draw from parenting experiences at the family level to deal with their educational and other responsibilities.

## **Results**

### **Intersection between family socioeconomic status and parental educational status:**

#### **Implications for resilience and academic success**

The students' stories about their home and community backgrounds depict them as a largely homogeneous group. Most of the students come from households headed by either their mother or grandmother, often within large families that include siblings, nieces, and cousins. Financial challenges are a significant concern. In many cases, the mother is the primary breadwinner and, in some instances, the family relies on the grandmother's social grant for survival. The information from one participant noted below shows a combination of financial constraints for families and some form of authoritative parenting when it comes to decision making related to children's education.

I grew up with my mom, dad, grandmother, and two siblings. My parents have always been supportive of me pursuing my dreams, but my dad initially wasn't keen on me attending this institution. He wanted me to go to a college closer to home, in my province, and was particularly resistant to the idea of me going to a college in another area. It was a tough situation, but ultimately, this was my dream and with the support of my family, I was able to go to this institution. Currently, only my mom is working, and this has been the case for the past four years. Our household relies on her meagre income, along with the social grant for my two siblings. (08\_HS11\_0312)

This quote also speaks to the complexities of familial support, the struggle for independence, and financial challenges within a South African context where social and economic inequalities shape the educational experiences of many students. The participant reflected on the tension between personal aspirations and parental concerns, particularly their father's initial resistance to their decision to attend an institution far from home. This hesitation can be understood as rooted in protective instincts and concerns about the financial burden that might arise from such a choice—a common experience in South African families facing economic hardship. The mention of the mother as the sole breadwinner over the past four years further highlights the financial strain that many households endure, especially in a context where unemployment is high and wage disparities are widespread. The family's reliance on a social grant for the two younger siblings underscores the reliance on state assistance in situations of poverty, which remains a significant problem for many South African students and their families (Heleta, 2016).

The experiences highlighted above also demonstrate the role of resilience, as the student, with the support of their family, was able to overcome the challenges and pursue their dream. It points to the importance of family networks in navigating the socioeconomic difficulties that students from marginalised backgrounds often face in pursuing higher education (Badat, 2010). These support networks can be seen as a form of resilience, where individuals within the family work together to overcome external pressures in the quest for educational success. In some instances, there is evidence of the critical role of social influences, particularly family members, in shaping educational aspirations. This is what another student had to say:

I first started thinking about going to university when I saw my uncle and aunt coming home with university-related items like pens and t-shirts. It made me think, "I want to go to university too." My uncle would also bring home the university prospectus, give it to me, and ask me to look through it and tell him what I thought about it. I'd take it to school and share it with my friends, but most weren't interested, though few were. (08\_HS07\_02)

The uncle's proactive engagement in bringing the prospectus home, encouraging exploration of its contents, and linking it to career aspirations illustrates the importance of mentorship and guidance in fostering early academic ambitions. This reflects how exposure to higher education within one's immediate social environment can inspire and motivate future aspirations. For the participant, the prospectus became a symbolic tool, sparking curiosity and bridging the gap between abstract notions of university life and concrete career pathways. This aligns with social capital theory, which emphasises the value of networks and relationships in transmitting knowledge and

opportunities (Yosso, 2005). Furthermore, there is some sense of compensatory capital because it is clear that students from disadvantaged backgrounds do possess capital, which they bring from their family setting despite the challenges experienced. Moreover, the uncle's involvement demonstrates the concept of cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986, in Gilleard, 2020), where knowledge about navigating educational systems was shared, equipping the participant with tools to make informed decisions.

Township communities, shaped by apartheid-era spatial planning, are often characterised by poverty, limited infrastructure, and inadequate access to resources. These structural inequities directly impact the quality of life and opportunities available to individuals. This is what a participant highlighted:

Growing up in a township was not easy because I came from an underprivileged background. I lived with my grandmother and, for much of my childhood, my mother was unemployed. She only found a job when I was in Grade 2, but her income was modest—just enough to sustain us. My grandmother also used her pension to help support the family. When it came to schooling, particularly things like uniforms and books, I was fortunate. My family prioritised my education and ensured I always had the necessary resources they could afford. I never lacked uniforms, books, or basic stationery, as they made it a point to provide for my academic needs. (08\_HS15\_0520)

Living with a grandmother and an unemployed mother highlights the reliance on extended family structures, a common coping mechanism in low-income South African households (Seekings & Nattrass, 2008). The grandmother's pension, which supplemented the family's income, aligns with findings that social grants often serve as critical safety nets for impoverished families (Valombola, 2022). Similarly, the mother's modest income when she eventually found work underscores the challenges women face in low-paying jobs in South Africa where gender and economic inequalities intersect (Marais, 2022).

Most students reportedly received support mainly from their families though the inadequacy of the financial resources was noticeable. Despite financial challenges, the family's prioritisation of education reflects a broader cultural emphasis on education as a pathway to improved socioeconomic mobility (Patfield et al., 2021). Ensuring access to educational resources such as finances, books, and stationery, even under constrained circumstances, speaks to the sacrifices families make to support their children's academic aspirations.

Things became more difficult when I was in high school, and my mother lost her job. At that point, we relied heavily on her Unemployment Insurance Fund payments and my grandmother's pension to get by. My grandmother's pension became the primary source of support, and it sustained me until I completed high school up until to the beginning of university. (08\_HS15\_0530)

Extended family structures, while providing emotional and financial support, were found to be commonly part of family support for students. This was even though participants reported that such extended support was not able to fully mitigate the pressures of attaining education, including higher education, thus leaving parental support at the core of the support students usually received. Students from disadvantaged backgrounds often require additional institutional support to bridge

socioeconomic gaps:

Food, on the other hand, was a bit of a challenge at times. While we generally had enough to eat, there were moments, especially a day or two before my mother's salary or my grandmother's pension arrived when we experienced shortages. Despite this, we always found ways to manage. (08\_HS15\_0520)

A home like this underscores the challenges that would be faced by the student in pursuing higher education, particularly in navigating financial hardships. While the resilience displayed by such students is admirable, it is neither fair nor sustainable to expect them to always find ways to manage. Higher education institutions have a responsibility to implement proactive measures to support students dealing with economic difficulties. These measures could include subsidised meal plans, access to food banks, and emergency financial assistance programmes (Devereux, 2016).

### **Institutional cultural dynamics and support: Implications for resilience and academic success**

Universities are diverse environments where individuals encounter a multitude of cultures and perspectives, which can feel overwhelming without a strong sense of personal identity. Participant students felt excluded due to the dominant Eurocentric norms, traditions, and practices in universities, which can alienate them culturally and linguistically. They argued that these norms fail to acknowledge or value their identities and lived experiences.

Sometimes it feels like the university isn't made for people like me. The way things are taught and the rules we follow don't always reflect who we are or where we come from. (08\_HS17\_0510)

The participants also felt they are subjected to implicit biases, where lecturers or peers assume they are less capable because of their background.

It's exhausting to prove over and over that I deserve to be here, just like everyone else. (08\_HS19\_0560)

Research has highlighted the importance of cultural and familial values as protective factors that foster resilience in challenging academic and social environments as reported by scholars (Theron, 2016; Ungar, 2013). Understanding one's background and embracing familial values provide a sense of stability and purpose. These values act as a compass, steering students from potential distractions and keeping them committed to their academic goals. This also underscores the significance of early intervention in shaping educational trajectories. The uncle facilitated a critical reflection process by connecting career aspirations to academic choices in Grade 10, enabling the participant to envision a future within higher education. Such interventions are particularly crucial in contexts where access to higher education is constrained by socioeconomic challenges because they help demystify the pathways to academic success (Heleta, 2016). The values instilled during childhood, particularly in the family context, significantly shape one's ability to adapt to the transition to university life. This is what one student had to say:

The values you acquire growing up, especially in your family, play a significant role when you transition to university. At university, you encounter people from diverse cultures and perspectives, which can be overwhelming if you're not grounded in your identity. Understanding where you come from and embracing the values of your family helps you stay rooted and focused. These values serve as a guide, preventing distractions and helping you remain committed to your academic journey. For me, the values I learned in life have been instrumental in maintaining my focus and dedication to my studies. (08\_HS02\_0629)

### **Perceptions on how the institutions could support students from disadvantaged backgrounds**

Participants advocated teaching methods and curricula that reflect diverse perspectives, histories, and knowledge systems:

We want to see our stories, our languages, and our struggles in what we study. (08\_HS03\_0630)

Their suggestions included enhanced counselling, mentorship, and financial assistance programmes tailored to the needs of marginalised students:

If universities could understand our struggles, they'd design programmes that support us as whole people, not just students. (08\_HS15\_0640)

The participants also emphasised the need for decolonisation efforts to create an inclusive institutional culture:

Decolonising isn't just about statues, it's about making the university feel like home for all of us. (08\_HS15\_0520)

Participants highlighted the importance of inclusive teaching methods and curricula that reflect the diverse perspectives, histories, and knowledge systems of South Africa's multifaceted society. This aligns with calls for culturally responsive teaching in academic content and challenging the dominance of Eurocentric frameworks (Kadir, 2019). Beyond curricular reforms, participants advocated enhanced support systems including counselling, mentorship, and financial assistance programmes tailored to the lived realities of marginalised students. These interventions, they argued, must treat students holistically, acknowledging their struggles beyond academia. Additionally, the participants underscored the necessity of decolonisation efforts that transcend symbolic changes, such as the removal of colonial statues, to foster an institutional culture that feels like home for all students, particularly those historically excluded (Nyamnjoh, 2023). This comprehensive approach to decolonisation underscores the need for universities to adopt structural, cultural, and pedagogical changes to advance inclusivity and transformation.

### **Conclusion**

Family background, particularly socioeconomic status, parental education, and cultural capital, resonates with the nature of support provided for children while profoundly influencing their development of emergent diverse forms of capital, resilience, and student academic success in higher education. This means that for students from historically disadvantaged backgrounds to

successfully navigate systemic barriers encountered at university requires a systemic transformation that recognises the holistic intersectionality of diverse forms of capital and related forms of support. Such transformative mechanisms at institutional level ought to acknowledge the manifold, albeit challenging, circumstances of students from disadvantaged backgrounds, while also prioritising entrenching equity in education.

Several key conclusions can be drawn regarding the interplay of socioeconomic challenges, familial support, and resilience in the pursuit of higher education in South Africa. Despite significant financial hardships, families often prioritise education as a pathway to socioeconomic mobility. Mothers, grandmothers, and extended family members work together to play critical roles in providing emotional, financial, and material support to students—even under constrained circumstances. This support serves as a foundation for students to leverage family experience-related capital in order to build resilience to successfully pursue higher education despite the odds. The students' narratives underscore the profound influence of poverty and structural inequalities on their educational journeys. Financial instability, reliance on social grants, and limited resources highlight the broader context of economic inequality in South Africa, which continues to shape access to and success in higher education. Participants demonstrated remarkable resilience in navigating challenges such as financial shortages, parental resistance, and cultural transitions. Their ability to remain focused on their academic goals, often supported by family values and networks, illustrates the agency they exercise in overcoming systemic barriers.

Mentorship and exposure to higher education within social networks such as family play a critical role in shaping aspirations. For instance, an uncle's proactive involvement in introducing the university prospectus reflects the transmission of cultural capital, equipping students with the knowledge to navigate educational systems. Even though familial resilience is a critical enabler, it cannot fully compensate for systemic problems such as inadequate financial support, unemployment, and historical inequalities. The reliance on informal family networks points to gaps in institutional support systems for marginalised students. Higher education institutions must take proactive steps to address the socioeconomic challenges faced by students. Providing subsidised meal plans, access to emergency funds, and targeted support services are essential to bridge the gap between resilience and sustainable educational success.

Overall, the participants highlighted the intersection of personal determination, family support, and structural challenges in pursuing higher education. And, although resilience and agency are commendable, systemic interventions are crucial to ensuring equitable access and success for students from marginalised backgrounds.

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## Guidelines to contributors

### Peer review process

- All manuscripts are blind reviewed by three external reviewers.
- All manuscripts must follow the Author Guidelines for publication in SARE as set out on the website ([Author Guidelines](#)).
- All must be edited and conform to a high quality of composition and rigour, including language, APA style, and grammar.
- A letter from a professional proofreader must be submitted along with the manuscript.
- A separate document containing author details must accompany submitted work to facilitate the blind review. The reviewers only receive the manuscript and not the author page.

### Journal focus

SARE welcomes manuscripts that are highly readable and captivating, providing critical insight and discussion of education in the Southern Africa region from a variety of disciplinary perspectives.

Given that SARE covers the Southern Africa region with a keen focus on comparative education, education policy, and sociology and history of education, there are a few criteria that should be met if authors seek to publish their work in the journal. The following are guidelines we provide to all reviewers of the submitted manuscripts:

- Does the article have a regional or South African context dimension?
- Does the article have a comparative or historical dimension? Although this is not compulsory, it is preferred.
- Does the article have a global comparative dimension in the area of comparative, and history of, education? Again, not compulsory but preferred.
- Is the submission original and its contribution novel for the SARE audience/readership?
- Is the manuscript thorough, focused in its orientation, and of high quality deserving publication?

It should be noted that:

- SARE does not encourage submission of solely descriptive manuscripts or uncritical policy recommendations. The preferred focus is focused critique and academic argument grounded in comparative, historical, sociological, or education policy analysis.
- A greater focus on argument and intellectual discussion is preferred over methodology and interpretation of findings.
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**Questions authors should ask themselves before submitting:**

Is the submission of a quality suitable for submission? Key questions in this regard include:

- Does your paper have distinctive merits? Not necessary, but would privilege selection of the paper.
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  - o Manuscript must be typed on A4 in Microsoft Word format.
  - o Text must be in Arial font, 12 point, with 1.5 line spacing. Margins must be 2.54cm.

- o Figures must be clear black and white originals. Do not use colour or grey shading.
- o Tables and figures must be numbered consecutively with a descriptive heading.
- o Use decimal points (and not decimal commas) in all text and tables.
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Once reviewed, please follow one of the following recommendations:

- Accept: the manuscript is accepted as is.
- Declined: the manuscript is not suitable for the journal, nor is it of a quality in its current form that it can easily be reconceptualised or rewritten.
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- Resubmit for Review: The article cannot be accepted in its current form because major revisions are needed. In this case, the resubmitted article will either be returned (once revised) to the original reviewer, or subjected to a completely new review.

### **Editors**

Acting Editor-in-Chief is Charl C. Wolhuter (NWU), assisted by an editorial collective comprising of:

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Yunus Omar (Centre for International Teacher Education)

Crain Soudien (Human Sciences Research Council)

### **Procedure for manuscripts accepted for publication**

- SARE has no institutional location, and is managed by email. Manuscripts can be submitted for consideration to [sare@saches.co.za](mailto:sare@saches.co.za).
- Article Processing Fees (APC) is R3,500 per published article. Authors will be invoiced on acceptance of the article.

## Author guidelines

Author Guidelines Southern African Review of Education (SARE) is the journal of the Southern African Comparative and History of Education Society (SACHES). It was previously published together with Education with Production (EWP), the journal of the Foundation for Education with Production. SARE will appear at least once a year. Contributors are welcome to submit articles on educational issues with specific reference to educational policy, comparative education, sociology of education, history of education, and education with production. Beginning with Volume 5 in 1999, articles submitted will be anonymously refereed. Articles are accepted on the understanding that they have not been published or submitted for publication elsewhere. Articles or review essays should be between 5,000 and 7,000 words (inclusive of references) and may include maps, figures, and tables. Reports on research, book reviews, and critical comments should be limited to 2,000 words. Contributions should be submitted electronically. All pages should be numbered. Authors should not use programs like EndNotes to generate lists of references automatically because these do not transfer for typesetting purposes. The manuscript should be submitted bearing the title of the paper and an abstract of 200–300 words together with 4–6 keywords on a separate page. Maps, figures, tables, and illustrations should be supplied on separate pages and not included as part of the text. Their approximate position in the text should be indicated. Maps, figures, and illustrations should also be provided as separate electronic files (jpg) with a resolution of at least 300 dpi. The title of the contribution and the names and addresses of authors should be provided on a separate page. The address of the author who will handle correspondence should be clearly indicated. Telephone and email addresses for the authors should be submitted as well. Authors should supply brief biographical material for the “Notes on the author.” In a covering letter, the authors must state that the contribution has not been published, is not being published or considered for publication elsewhere, and will not be submitted for publication unless rejected by the editorial board of SARE or withdrawn by the authors.

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## Calls for papers

### Special Edition: Call for papers SARE Volume 30 Number 1

SARE call for papers on History of Education in Southern Africa

#### *Guest editors*

Charl Wolhuter

#### *Call for papers*

The *Southern Africa Review of Education* seeks original empirically grounded or theoretical manuscripts on the theme, *History of Education in Southern Africa*

#### *A statement of the problem*

Since the founding of the Southern African Comparative and History of Education Society (SACHES) 33 years ago, in 1991, and the founding of its journal the *Southern African Review of Education* almost thirty years ago, momentous changes have taken place in the scholarly field of History of Education. Even the year 2006, when the journal last had a Special Issue which focused on SACHES and on Comparative and International Education (Volume 12, number 2), already seems to be in the distant past.

It is within this scheme of things that a critical stocktaking of the state of the field of History of Education in the Southern African region, by scholars in the field, would be a valuable exercise. Therefore, manuscripts for this Special Issue are invited. The following would be very welcome:

- Manuscripts dealing with developments in the scholarly field of History of Education internationally and the relevance thereof for History of Education as scholarly field in the Southern African region and
- Manuscripts dealing with developments and present state of History of Education in initial teacher education programmes and in post-graduate Education programmes and as a field of research at universities in the Southern African region
- Without excluding anyone contributions from scholars in the Global South, Africa in particular, and those who are underrepresented in the journal would be especially welcome. countries and contexts underrepresented in the journal, especially from North Africa.

For enquiries and submission of manuscripts, please write to Professor C.C. Wolhuter: [Charl.Wolhuter@nwu.ac.za](mailto:Charl.Wolhuter@nwu.ac.za)

#### *Journal description*

The Southern African Review of Education (SARE), incorporating Education with Production (EWP), is a peer-reviewed journal serving as a forum for critical discussions of education in the Southern African region from various disciplinary perspectives, for the dissemination of

contemporary research, and for reflections on education. It has a broad, cross-disciplinary audience of scholars, researchers, and practitioners in the field of education. (<https://www.saches.co.za/sarejournal/>)

Please consult our Guidelines for Contributors for further important information. (<https://www.saches.co.za/guidelinesforcontributors/>)

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### ***Timeline***

|                                            |                  |
|--------------------------------------------|------------------|
| Deadline for full paper submissions        | 28 February 2025 |
| Articles returned from peer-reviewers      | 31 March 2025    |
| Authors to submit final paper with changes | 1 April 2025     |
| Anticipated publication date               | 1 June 2025      |

## **Special Edition: Call for papers SARE Volume 30 Number 2**

SARE call for papers on History of Education in Southern Africa

### ***Guest editors***

Charl Wolhuter

### ***Call for papers***

The *Southern Africa Review of Education* seeks original empirically grounded or theoretical manuscripts on the theme, *Rural Education*

### ***A statement of the problem***

Since the founding of the Southern African Comparative and History of Education Society (SACHES) 33 years ago, in 1991, and the founding of its journal in the Southern African Review of Education almost thirty years ago, equal education opportunities have been front and centre. While the trinity of inequality, that is socio-economic descent (class), gender and race/ethnicity have received much attention, one other dimension of inequality, namely rural-urban inequality has been neglected. While the education system of China is customarily in Comparative Education take as the textbook example of urban-rural inequality in education, urban-rural disparities in education is universal. In the Southern African region too urban-rural inequalities in education, as well as the contextual ecologies of rural areas and the implications thereof for education, have not come to its right in the Comparative Education research agenda. Therefore, manuscripts for this Special Issue are invited. While manuscripts focusing on Southern Africa would be very welcome, so would manuscripts be dealing with theoretical-conceptual issues, as well as manuscripts focusing on rural-urban disparities in other parts of the world, especially Africa and other parts of the Global South.

For enquiries and submission of manuscripts, please write to Professor C.C. Wolhuter: Charl.Wolhuter@nwu.ac.za

### ***Journal description***

The Southern African Review of Education (SARE), incorporating Education with Production (EWP), is a peer-reviewed journal serving as a forum for critical discussions of education in the Southern African region from various disciplinary perspectives, for the dissemination of contemporary research, and for reflections on education. It has a broad, cross-disciplinary audience of scholars, researchers, and practitioners in the field of education. (<https://www.saches.co.za/sarejournal/>)

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***Timeline***

|                                            |                   |
|--------------------------------------------|-------------------|
| Deadline for full paper submissions        | 31 August 2025    |
| Articles returned from peer-reviewers      | 30 September 2025 |
| Authors to submit final paper with changes | 31 October 2025   |
| Anticipated publication date               | December 2025     |

## SACHES Membership Form

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