

**Current challenges in implementing the secondary school-level curriculum in
South Africa**

by

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submitted in accordance with the requirements for
the degree of

MASTER OF EDUCATION

in the subject

CURRICULUM STUDIES

at the

UNIVERSITY OF SOUTH AFRICA

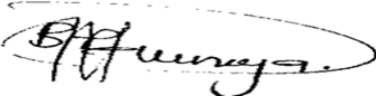
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January 2026

DECLARATION

I, **Busisiwe Nyalunga**, hereby declare that this dissertation, entitled Current Challenges in Implementing the School-Level Curriculum in South Africa, is the result of my own independent work. All sources consulted or quoted have been duly acknowledged and referenced in accordance with academic standards.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

- First and foremost, I give thanks to Almighty God, whose grace and wisdom have sustained me throughout this journey. As it is written: ***“I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me”*** (Philippians 4:13). Without His guidance, this dissertation would not have been possible.
- I wish to express my deepest gratitude to my supervisor, Professor Tebogo Mogashoa, for his invaluable guidance, encouragement, and constructive feedback. His mentorship has been instrumental in shaping the quality of this work.
- I am sincerely thankful to my academic friend, Mr Justice Makhado, for his unwavering support, insightful discussions, and motivation during challenging times.
- To my beloved parents, Mom and Dad, I owe endless appreciation for their sacrifices, love, and prayers. My heartfelt thanks also go to my sister, Nonhlanhla, and my aunt, Khetsani, for their constant encouragement and belief in me.
- I am profoundly grateful to my best friend, Velephi, whose companionship and support have been a source of strength throughout this academic journey.
- Special thanks are extended to my workplace friends, Bongeka, Nomfundo, and Mbali, for their encouragement and understanding during the demanding stages of this research.
- Finally, I acknowledge with deep appreciation all the participants who willingly took part in the data collection process. Their contributions were vital to the completion of this dissertation.

DEDICATION

I dedicate this study to all individuals who have ever felt a loss of academic hope. May this work serve as a reminder that perseverance makes the impossible possible. Never give up; success is within your reach.

ABSTRACT

This study investigated the challenges affecting the implementation of the school-level curriculum in South African schools, particularly the gap between curriculum policy expectations and classroom practice. Despite the existence of national curriculum frameworks intended to guide teaching and learning, teachers often encounter difficulties in translating these policy directives into effective classroom instruction. This study aimed to examine the factors that hinder effective curriculum implementation at the school level and how these challenges influence teaching practices and learner outcomes. By analysing teachers' experiences and perspectives, the study sought to generate insights that may inform improvements in curriculum implementation and support more effective teaching and learning practices in schools.

The study adopted an interpretivist paradigm and employed a qualitative phenomenological design to explore participants' lived experiences of curriculum implementation in a public secondary school in South Africa. Purposeful sampling was used to select ten participants who were directly involved in curriculum implementation. The sample comprised 10 participants, five high school teachers (PL1–PL5), two learners aged between 18 and 20 years, and one curriculum subject advisor. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and document analysis, and were analysed using thematic analysis to identify recurring patterns and meanings within the data. The researcher chose a serene and inviting environment for conducting the interviews, ensuring that it was both free and comfortable from distractions.

The findings were organised into main themes: structural and resource-related constraints, institutional and professional support challenges, and learner-related socio-economic barriers. These themes revealed that limited teaching and learning resources, inadequate infrastructure, and teachers being required to teach subjects outside their areas of expertise significantly constrained effective curriculum delivery. Furthermore, participants highlighted insufficient managerial and district-level support, limited teacher involvement in curriculum development processes, and the challenges associated with English as the language of learning and teaching. The findings also demonstrated how broader socio-economic conditions influence learners' participation

and academic achievement, thereby shaping the effectiveness of curriculum implementation at the school level. The study was guided by the theories of assimilation and accommodation (Piaget's cognitive development theory) put forth by the renowned French psychologist Jean Piaget.

Overall, the study concludes that addressing the identified challenges is essential for strengthening curriculum delivery and enhancing learner outcomes in South African schools. The findings contribute to the field by highlighting the practical implications of curriculum implementation gaps, including the critical need for collaborative curriculum development, targeted professional support for teachers, and adequate resourcing at the school level. By drawing attention to these factors, the study provides actionable insights for policymakers, school leaders, and curriculum planners on how to improve instructional practices, foster more inclusive and effective learning environments, and ensure that the curriculum achieves its intended educational goals.

KEYWORDS: Curriculum implementation, educational challenges, school-level curriculum, teacher development, curriculum management

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS AND ACRONYMS

OBE	Outcome-Based Learning
DBE	Department of Basic Education
RNCS	Revised National Curriculum Statement
SADTU	South African Democratic Teachers Union
CAPS	Curriculum Assessment Policy Statement
CT	Curriculum Theory
OECD	Economic Co-operation and Development
PISA	Programme for International Student Assessment
PIRLS	Progress in International Reading Literacy Study
TIMSS	Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study
NCATE	National Council Accreditation of Teacher Education
WIL	Work Integrated Learning
TPACK	Technological Pedagogical Content Knowledge
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organisation
CPD	Continuous Professional Development
LoLT	Language of Teaching and Learning
BICS	Basic Interpersonal Communicative Skills
CALP	Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency
PLC	Professional Learning Community
ATP	Annual Teaching Plan
SIP	School Improvement Plan
SMT	School Management Team

SGB	School Governing Body
NSNP	National School Nutrition Programme
LiEP	Language in Education Policy

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CHAPTER 1

OVERVIEW OF THE STUDY

1.1 INTRODUCTION

This chapter provides an overview of the study, which examines the current challenges associated with the implementation of the school-level curriculum in South Africa, with specific reference to high schools in the Johannesburg Central District. The study focuses on the experiences of key stakeholders involved in curriculum implementation and explores how curriculum delivery responds to the diverse needs of learners within the school context. The study is situated within ongoing debates on the alignment between curriculum planning, development, and implementation. While curriculum policies are designed to promote effective teaching and learning, challenges often arise during the implementation phase. This study, therefore, seeks to explore these challenges and to examine the extent to which the curriculum supports effective teaching and learning in practice.

This chapter begins by presenting the background to the study, outlining the broader context within which the research problem is located. This is followed by a discussion of the research problem and the rationale for the study. The significance of the study is then highlighted, demonstrating its relevance to curriculum implementation and educational practice. Thereafter, the chapter presents the research questions and objectives that guide the study. The chapter concludes with a clarification of key concepts and an outline of the structure of the study.

1.2 BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

The successful implementation of the school-level curriculum in South Africa presents a complex and ongoing challenge, which has persisted despite numerous reforms initiated since the end of Apartheid in 1994. Various curriculum frameworks, including Outcome-Based Education (OBE), the Revised National Curriculum Statement (RNCS), and the Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS), were developed with the intention of fostering inclusivity, standardization, and the enhancement of quality teaching across diverse educational settings (Mendy & Madioppe, 2020; Masondo, 2019). However, substantial evidence indicates that the

practical application of these frameworks has been marked by significant inconsistencies and varied levels of success among schools throughout the country.

Research indicates that a multitude of factors contribute to these challenges, including but not limited to inadequate teaching and learning resources, a lack of targeted teacher training, significant infrastructure deficits, and pervasive socio-economic barriers that learners face. These elements have been recognized as substantial impediments to the effective delivery of the curriculum, as outlined in various studies (Chisholm, 2019; Department of Basic Education [DBE], 2020).

Moreover, teachers frequently encounter a range of difficulties in their professional practice. Many are tasked with teaching subjects that fall outside their areas of expertise, leading to a sense of inadequacy and reduced confidence in their teaching abilities. Additionally, there is often limited involvement of teachers in the curriculum development processes, which can lead to a disconnect between policy and practice. Insufficient managerial support and a lack of robust district-level guidance further exacerbate the challenges faced by educators in the classroom (West, 2019; Masondo, 2019).

These issues not only have implications for teachers' instructional practices but also significantly affect learner participation, engagement, and ultimately, academic achievement. As a result, disparities in educational outcomes have become increasingly pronounced across different schools, particularly when comparing urban schools to their rural counterparts. While national policies have been designed to steer curriculum implementation in a uniform direction, a critical gap remains in understanding how these challenges materialize at the school level and how they interact to undermine effective teaching and learning.

Considering these complexities, this study aims to identify and thoroughly explore the specific challenges that hinder the implementation of the school-level curriculum in South African secondary schools. By investigating the lived experiences of teachers, learners, and curriculum advisors, the research seeks to uncover nuanced insights that can inform viable strategies for enhancing curriculum delivery, providing substantial teacher support, and ultimately improving learner outcomes across the educational spectrum. Through such an examination, the goal is to contribute to

developing a more effective and equitable educational system that meets the diverse needs of all South African learners in secondary schools.

1.3 Significance of the study

The researcher posits that investigating the current issues in curriculum implementation at the school level can generate valuable insights into curriculum reform and development in the following ways:

- 1.3.1 The curriculum outlines the common objectives that teachers aim to impart to their learners each year, while learners set their own learning goals. These goals often overlap, allowing teachers to tailor their teaching approach to meet the academic needs of their learners and ensure their success.
- 1.3.2 The research findings will shift the school curriculum wheel to be reinvented to serve as a great map, outlining where the teacher and the learner need to go and how to get there.
- 1.3.3 Extensive research and analysis will be conducted to guarantee that learners receive the highest quality education possible. A collaborative agreement on curriculum development will enable educators to carefully and systematically determine what students need to learn.

PROBLEM STATEMENT AND MAIN RESEARCH QUESTION

PROBLEM STATEMENT

The primary challenge facing schools is the lack of consistent and committed implementation of the newly introduced method-based curriculum. Overseers have not operated to identify or understand the practices, issues, concerns, and barriers to curriculum implementation. The present gap in practice is that teachers are not entirely involved in the planning processes, which then results in teachers not being able to implement the curriculum truthfully (Zikalala and Ntshangase, 2025). According to Penuel and Fishman (2019), this gap is a result to a lack of aids for professional development and classroom observations to sort out the problem. In general, implementing curricula consistently provisions learners' growth of knowledge and academic attentiveness for the next grade levels (Polikoff and Porter, 2019). With the

system's "a learner should repeat the grade once" it is difficult to determine which objectives are taught before learners go into the next grade

There is a necessity for understanding the reasons that either support or prevent teachers' authentic implementation of a new curriculum. Subsequently, the socio-economic backgrounds of learners also play a vast role in learners' learning and in equipping the taught curriculum. It has been found that there is a deadlock between socioeconomic status and intellectual performance. Research indicates that children from lower socioeconomic status backgrounds often demonstrate lower academic achievement and cognitive performance compared with their higher-SES peers, due in part to disparities in access to educational resources and supportive learning environments (e.g., Harris, 2023; Guo, 2025; van Zwieteren et al., 2021). Despite the government's commendable attempts to equalise the education system, socioeconomic classes continue to have a significant impact on learners' education (Milan and McCarthy, 2021).

Most learners from low-income households, most of whom have unskilled parents, struggle academically as compared to learners from well-off families with well-equipped parents. This can be linked to a variety of circumstances affecting learners at school, at home, and in society. Lack of professional support and development, lack of enthusiasm for teaching, ineffective timeframes, school-level pass requirements, lack of guidance on the implementation of curricula changes, complexity to manage both a new and an old curriculum at once, a lack of teacher involvement in curriculum planning, and learners' socioeconomic backgrounds have all made successful curriculum implementation in schools difficult. Against this backdrop, the following main research question was formulated.

MAIN RESEARCH QUESTION

What are the challenges in implementing secondary school-level curriculum in South Africa?

1.4.1 SUB-QUESTIONS

- What are the recent issues experienced by teachers and learners in schools that affect curriculum delivery?
- What impact does a teacher's lack of participation in curriculum development have on the success of curriculum implementation?

- How do off-curriculum issues (socioeconomic backgrounds) influence the performance of learners in schools?

1.5 AIM AND OBJECTIVES

1.5.1 AIM OF THE STUDY

To study the current challenges in implementing the school-level curriculum in South Africa.

1.5.2 OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

To accomplish the aim of the study, the following are the outlined objectives:

- To identify the curriculum challenges teachers and learners encounter in schools.
- To investigate the influence of a lack of teacher engagement in curriculum development on school curriculum delivery.
- To analyse how off-curriculum issues (socioeconomic backgrounds) influence the performance of learners in schools.

1.6 LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

Reduced access to information, which includes the sources' year frame within which the researcher must stick on is one of this study's shortcomings. This study is biased because the researcher has ignored the study's other unresolved issues in favour of selecting the facts and figures that support the main thesis. The outcomes or research outputs, however, are impacted by specific limits on this research or available methods.

1.7 CLARIFICATION OF CONCEPTS

Curriculum: refers to the specific teachings and materials covered in a particular course or subject. It encompasses a comprehensive interactive instruction and learning system that includes specific objectives, tactics, metrics, and materials. The goal of a curriculum is to facilitate the successful transfer and development of knowledge, abilities, and attitudes among students (Ornstein and Hunkins, 2018; Marsh, 2019).

Curriculum implementation: Refers to implementing curriculum plans and policies to bring about changes in learners' knowledge, skills, and attitudes. Teachers use curriculum-specific materials to offer instruction and assessment. (Fullan, 2016; Lawton, 2018).

Curriculum theory: The academic field of curriculum theory is focused on analysing and developing curricula for education. There are numerous ways to interpret CT, ranging from the dynamics of a single student's learning process in a classroom to the course of a person's lifetime learning (Schiro, 2013; Pinar, 2019).

Curriculum policy: A policy is a principle or rule used by governments and organizations to allocate resources, which may be legislated, a process, an administrative decision, an incentive, or an optional practice (Kelly, 2016; McLaughlin and Talbert, 2019).

Curriculum reform: The act of modifying the curriculum to enhance the effectiveness and value of teaching and learning is referred to as curriculum reform (Eshach, 2018; Blignaut, 2020).

Resources: Resources are materials that can be freely accessed, reused, modified, and shared to support education (UNESCO, 2019; Mayer, 2022).

Socio-economic background: It has been defined as the social position that an individual or family holds about the prevailing average standards of cultural and material possessions, income, and participation in group activities within the community (Coleman, 2019).

Challenge: Defined as a difficult, new, or complex situation, task, or problem that evaluates skills or resources and can be seen as an opportunity (Ryan and Deci, 2017).

1.8 ASSUMPTION, DEMARCATION, AND DELIMITATION

Assumptions

This study assumes that participants, including teachers, learners, and a curriculum advisor, would provide honest, reflective, and accurate accounts of their experiences regarding the implementation of the school-level curriculum. It is further assumed that these participants possess sufficient knowledge and exposure to the curriculum to offer meaningful insights into the challenges and barriers affecting effective curriculum delivery.

Demarcation

The study focused specifically on secondary schools located within the Johannesburg Central District. Although the broader context is South Africa, the research is demarcated to this district to ensure that the findings are manageable, contextually relevant, and reflect the realities of the participating schools. By narrowing the scope, the study provides a

detailed examination of the challenges faced in this district without overgeneralizing to all schools in the country.

Delimitations

The study deliberately excluded primary schools, private schools, and learners younger than 18 years, as the research specifically targeted secondary school-level curriculum implementation. The participant group comprised seven high school teachers (Post Level 1–5), two learners aged between 18 and 20 years, and one curriculum advisor from the Johannesburg Central District. These delimitations ensured that the study remained focused on the population most directly involved in curriculum implementation at the school level.

1.9 CHAPTER DIVISION

CHAPTER ONE: OVERVIEW OF THE STUDY

The first chapter of this study stipulated the introduction, which gives an insight into what this study is about. The background of the study was also reviewed in this chapter, which gives the history and overview of the main research question. This chapter also concentrated on defining and contextualizing the research problem and stating the objectives, aim, and significance of this study. Additionally, it introduced the main research question, accompanied by the secondary sub-questions and the problem statement. It further outlined the possible limitations of the study and clarified important concepts. Moreover, the division of chapters was also covered in this chapter, and lastly, there is a drawn conclusion that indicates everything that has been discussed in this chapter.

CHAPTER TWO: EDUCATIONAL THEORIES AND EXISTING KNOWLEDGE

The hypothesis that guides this research was examined in Chapter 2. The researcher also looked at published papers relevant to this topic. Studies from both national and international sources were examined. The theoretical framework, Jean Piaget's theory of assimilation and accommodation, was examined and discussed in the first section. The second section reviewed the body of knowledge regarding how teachers apply or integrate theory into practice. The third section outlined the context of policy in relation to curriculum creation and implementation.

CHAPTER THREE: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY AND DESIGN

The researcher described the research methodology that was used to conduct this study in Chapter 3. The research approaches, research methods, collection of data processes, data recording, sampling, data analysis, and lastly the ethical practices used were examined.

CHAPTER FOUR: DATA DISCUSSION, ANALYSIS, AND INTERPRETATION OF FINDINGS

In chapter 4, the researcher presented the study's findings. The collected data were analysed to answer the research question and sub-questions.

CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION, LIMITATIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The findings of this study, its limits, the recommendations that resulted from it, its implications for teacher education, teacher education policy, and school practice, as well as areas for future research, were covered in Chapter 5.

CONCLUSION

In this chapter, the researcher provided a comprehensive introduction, offering insights into the study's subject. The researcher included a thorough review of the study's background, providing the history and overview of the main research question. Furthermore, this chapter precisely defined and contextualised the research problem, clearly stating the objectives, aim, and significance of the study. Additionally, this chapter also introduced the main research question, as well as secondary sub-questions and the problem statement. The chapter also outlined the potential limitations of the study and elucidated important concepts. Moreover, it explicitly covered the division of chapters and concluded by succinctly summarizing the key points discussed in the chapter.

CHAPTER 2

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 INTRODUCTION

This chapter aims to examine the foundational theories of the study and assess pertinent literature that provides a comprehensive insight into the study. To achieve this objective, the researcher provided a comprehensive analysis of the existing knowledge and relevant literature that addresses the current challenges faced in the implementation of school-level curriculum in South Africa. By examining these issues, the researcher's aim was to highlight the complexities involved in the process and identify potential strategies for improving curriculum implementation in the context of South African schools.

2.2 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

According to Cliffe's (2019) study on creative education, a theoretical framework refers to an explanation of a particular set of observed phenomena using a system of constructs and laws that connect these constructs. The author emphasised that theoretical frameworks are a crucial aspect of research because they provide the necessary theoretical foundation that enables researchers to establish the research problem, ask appropriate research questions, select an appropriate study population, guide their selection of research design, and facilitate the data interpretation and findings.

This research was guided by the theories of assimilation and accommodation (Piaget's cognitive development theory) put forth by the renowned French psychologist Jean Piaget. As per Barker's (2019) findings, assimilation is the process of utilizing pre-existing knowledge or schema to navigate new situations or objects. On the other hand, accommodation occurs when the existing schema fails to function, and one must adapt to cope with a new object or scenario. In the present context, teachers who were trained in the past may struggle to keep up with current curriculum developments; they must assimilate the new schema to thrive in the new educational dispensation driven by curriculum transformation and change. The changes introduced in the curriculum bring in new concepts, techniques, and methodologies, which instructors must accept

to implement them effectively. Additionally, with the ever-changing environment, the curriculum must evolve to cater to the diversity of learners.

2.2.1 PIAGET'S THEORY OF COGNITIVE DEVELOPMENT: ASSIMILATION AND ACCOMMODATION

According to Block (2019), the cognitive theory developed by Swiss psychologist Jean Piaget is the foundation for assimilation and accommodation. Piaget's work on Cognitive Development explains the difference between assimilation and accommodation as essential parts of the learning process. Assimilation involves integrating new knowledge into existing cognitive structures, or schemas (Block, 2019). When individuals encounter new information that fits with their basic schema, they can easily incorporate this new data into their existing mental frameworks. This process reinforces and strengthens their current understanding of the world.

According to Fen (2021), accommodation involves modifying and expanding cognitive structures to incorporate new experiences that may not neatly fit into an individual's pre-existing schema. Expanding on Piaget's assimilation theory, it is posited that when learners encounter information that challenges their existing schemas, they must actively adapt and refine their mental frameworks to integrate this new knowledge, thereby fostering cognitive growth and development, they should be able to relate to the content taught, reinterpret it, reflect on it and be able to revise with understanding.

Fen (2021) further emphasised the importance for teachers and aspiring psychologists to understand the intricate interplay between assimilation and accommodation within the context of Piaget's Cognitive Development theory. By comprehending the complex interaction between these two mechanisms, valuable insights into the dynamic nature of learning, curriculum delivery, and the ever-evolving cognitive landscapes that shape human thought and behaviour can be gained.

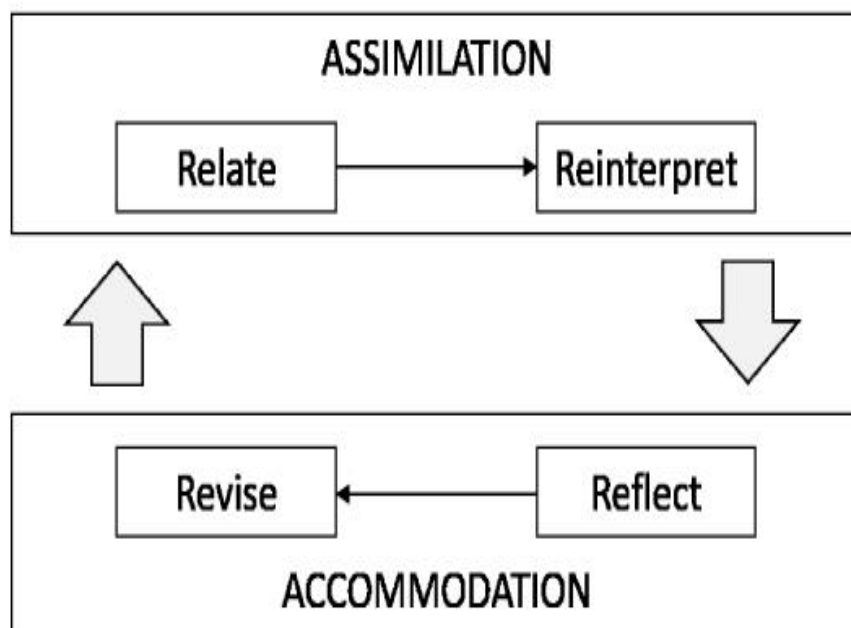


FIGURE 2.1: Assimilation and Accommodation (Halcomb,2023)

2.2.1.1 ASSIMILATION AND ACCOMMODATION OF KNOWLEDGE IN THE CLASSROOM

Renner (2022) pointed out that learners enter the classroom with a wide range of experiences that extend beyond prior knowledge and reading ability. These experiences shape how learners interpret and respond to new information. The researcher argues that learners continuously adjust their thinking based on their exposure to different contexts and ideas. For instance, learners who have been exposed to diverse ways of thinking are more likely to engage confidently with new and unfamiliar concepts. This diversity is not limited to academic knowledge, as Birnie (2022) emphasised that all experiences contribute meaningfully to the learning process.

Piaget conceptualised this adjustment through the processes of assimilation and accommodation, which explain how learners integrate new knowledge into existing cognitive structures or modify those structures when necessary. When learners encounter information that does not align with their prior understanding, they must either actively engage with it to construct meaning or disregard it altogether. The researcher contends that these cognitive processes have significant implications for curriculum implementation in diverse classrooms. Teachers are therefore required to adapt instructional strategies and curriculum delivery to align with learners'

developmental levels and prior experiences. This includes designing learning activities that support active engagement and cognitive restructuring. Failure to account for these differences may result in ineffective curriculum delivery, where learners are unable to meaningfully engage with the content.

2.2.1.2 IMPLICATIONS OF SCHEMA THEORY FOR CLASSROOM PRACTICE

1. Knowing the Basics

Schema theory conceptualises learners' knowledge as structured frameworks through which new information is interpreted. Understanding the distinction between assimilating knowledge and accommodating existing schemas is critical, as accommodation often requires more cognitive effort (Abraham, 2021). This suggests that teaching should account for the variability in learners' prior knowledge and cognitive readiness, highlighting the need for instructional approaches that scaffold complex concepts.

2. Cultural Background

Learners' schemas are shaped by their cultural and social contexts, including access to technology, geographic location, and family structure (Abraham, 2021). This implies that curriculum design and instructional strategies must recognise and accommodate the diversity of learners' experiences, as cognitive frameworks are not only individual but also culturally and environmentally influenced.

3. Diversify Teaching Strategies

Schema theory emphasises that learners benefit from varied instructional methods that connect new content to existing knowledge structures (Abraham & Michael, 2021). A uniform approach may fail to engage learners effectively, particularly when cognitive processes differ across individuals. Therefore, teaching strategies should be diverse and adaptable, fostering meaningful connections with learners' pre-existing schemas.

4. Encourage Learners' Self-Direction

Providing learners with opportunities for autonomous exploration enables them to engage critically with ideas that resonate with their prior knowledge and schemas (Renner, 2022). This supports cognitive development by allowing learners to reconcile

conflicting perspectives and construct more sophisticated understandings, promoting higher-order thinking.

5. Avoid Imposing Own Understanding

Teachers' schemas can influence their interpretation of content, potentially leading to the projection of personal understanding onto learners (Renner, 2022). Recognising this tendency is important for creating inclusive learning environments in which learners' unique schemas guide their engagement with knowledge.

6. Encourage Learners' Critical Thinking

Schema theory highlights the importance of repeated exposure to concepts through multiple instructional approaches to strengthen knowledge integration (Zhang, 2021). Encouraging learners to critically engage with diverse perspectives enhances their capacity to build flexible cognitive structures, which is essential for deeper understanding and long-term retention.

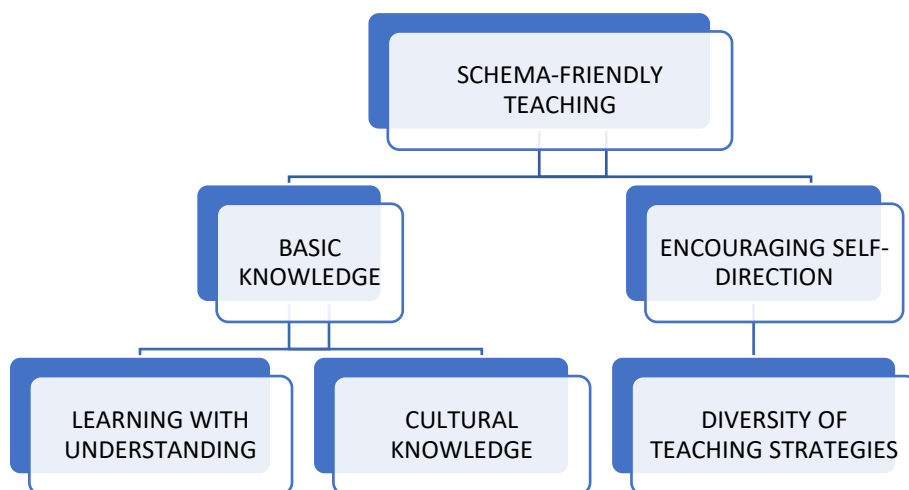


FIGURE 2.2: Schema theory for classroom practice (Renner 2022: 205)

2.3 LITERATURE REVIEW

A literature review is a comprehensive evaluation and synthesis of scholarly sources that are focused on a particular topic or research question. It serves as a critical overview of the current state of knowledge in a specific field, helping researchers to understand what has already been studied and published (McCombes, 2023). In conducting a literature review, researchers evaluate distinct types of sources, such as academic articles, books, and theses, to identify relevant theories and methodologies

that have been used in the past. McCombes (2023) further stipulated that this process not only highlights the significant findings and contributions from previous works but also reveals gaps in the existing literature, where further research may be needed. By analysing these gaps, researchers can form a solid foundation for their own studies, ensuring that their paper, thesis, or dissertation is built on a thorough understanding of the topic. A well-executed literature review not only situates one's research within the broader academic conversation but also enhances its credibility and relevance (McCombes, 2023).

2.3.1 CHALLENGES EXPERIENCED BY TEACHERS AND LEARNERS IN CURRICULUM IMPLEMENTATION IN SOUTH AFRICA

Educational reforms have introduced significant changes within education systems worldwide, often creating challenges for teachers who must adapt their teaching practices to new curriculum requirements. In South Africa, these challenges are particularly pronounced due to ongoing curriculum reforms aimed at improving the quality and inclusivity of education (Taole, 2024). Research indicates that teachers face numerous obstacles when implementing curriculum changes, including inadequate resources, increased administrative workloads, and insufficient institutional support. Similar challenges have been reported in both developed and developing countries, highlighting the complexity of implementing educational reforms in diverse contexts.

In South Africa specifically, curriculum implementation has encountered several difficulties that hinder the achievement of educational goals associated with democratic transformation (Monyane & Selesho, 2019). One major challenge relates to the lack of adequate teaching and learning materials, which limits teachers' ability to effectively deliver curriculum content and affects learners' learning experiences. Teachers also play a crucial role as agents of curriculum change. Their attitudes, perceptions, and understanding of the curriculum significantly influence how curriculum policies are translated into classroom practice (Menziwa & Mantjie, 2021). When teachers lack sufficient training or support, they may struggle to implement curriculum innovations effectively.

Furthermore, the rapid pace of curriculum reforms in South Africa has created additional pressure on teachers. New policies are often introduced before previous

reforms have been fully implemented, requiring teachers to continually adapt their teaching methods and assessment strategies (Mei & Wanderes, 2020). This constant cycle of change places considerable demands on teachers and may lead to uncertainty and implementation difficulties. Simela (2022) also noted that curriculum reforms require teachers to adopt innovative approaches to planning, teaching, and assessment. These demands can be particularly challenging in classrooms characterised by diverse learner needs and limited resources.

In addition, teachers frequently experience high levels of stress due to increasing classroom demands and administrative responsibilities. Summayya (2019) observed that many teachers feel overwhelmed by the complexity of modern classrooms, where they must address the diverse learning needs of large groups of learners while also meeting curriculum requirements. These challenges highlight the importance of providing adequate support, resources, and professional development opportunities to enable teachers to effectively implement the curriculum and improve learner outcomes.

2.3.2 TEACHER PARTICIPATION IN CURRICULUM DEVELOPMENT AND CURRICULUM IMPLEMENTATION

According to Mathabela (2021), the primary cause of failed curriculum implementation and growth in schools is a lack of teacher involvement and participation. Teachers play a significant role in facilitating learners' learning of desired information, abilities, values, and attitudes (Mathabela, 2021). Due to the critical role and duty placed on teachers throughout curriculum implementation, it is important that teachers are involved and actively participate in the whole curriculum creation process.

Teachers with expertise and classroom experience must contribute to curriculum creation by sharing their ideas; they must be in the planning stage of what they will execute (Morgan, Polikoff, and García, 2020). Markus and Sungkim (2021) also affirmed that teachers play an important part in the planning phase since there is a need to combine their theoretical and experiential knowledge, as writing down learning outcomes requires a field of expertise. Teacher skills and attitudes are far more important in curriculum development than material and procedures. As previously said, instructors are unquestionably at the centre of the situation. Authors have underlined

once more that anytime there is a need for curriculum development, the participation and engagement of teachers are essential (Barrot, 2019)

2.3.3 INFLUENCE OF OFF-CURRICULUM ISSUES (SOCIOECONOMIC BACKGROUND) ON LEARNER PERFORMANCE

Learner performance in schools is influenced not only by curriculum-related factors but also by various off-curriculum issues such as socioeconomic background, family environment, and community conditions. Socioeconomic status (SES) plays a significant role in shaping learners' academic experiences and outcomes.

Learners from disadvantaged socioeconomic backgrounds often encounter multiple barriers that can negatively affect their academic performance. According to Smit (2019), socioeconomic status includes factors such as family income, parental education levels, and access to educational resources at home. These factors can significantly influence learners' ability to engage effectively with the curriculum. Learners from low-income households may lack access to essential learning materials, stable study environments, and additional academic support, which may limit their educational achievement.

Furthermore, parental involvement in education is often linked to socioeconomic conditions. Parents with higher levels of education and stable employment are generally better positioned to support their children's academic development. In contrast, learners from economically disadvantaged families may receive limited academic support due to financial pressures or limited parental educational backgrounds (Janks, 2020). Socioeconomic challenges may also affect learners' psychological and emotional well-being. Issues such as poverty, food insecurity, and unstable living conditions can create stress and anxiety for learners, which may hinder their concentration and motivation to learn. According to Mullis et al. (2019), learners experiencing socioeconomic difficulties are more likely to demonstrate lower levels of academic performance compared to learners from more advantaged backgrounds.

In the South African context, socioeconomic inequality remains a significant concern within the education system. Many schools serve communities that face high levels of unemployment, poverty, and social inequality. These conditions can contribute to disparities in educational outcomes and create additional challenges for both teachers and learners. Despite these challenges, schools can play an important role in

mitigating the effects of socioeconomic disadvantages by providing supportive learning environments, additional academic assistance, and access to essential resources. Addressing off-curriculum issues is therefore crucial for improving learner performance and promoting equitable educational opportunities.

2.3.4 SCHOOL-LEVEL FACTORS AFFECTING CURRICULUM IMPLEMENTATION

Several school-level factors also influence the effectiveness of curriculum implementation. These include leadership support, teacher experience, professional development opportunities, and the availability of teaching resources.

2.3.4.1 Teaching Experience of Teachers

Several studies have indicated that learners tend to learn better when they are taught by experienced teachers as opposed to those with only a few years of experience (Mullis, 2019). However, the correlation between experience and academic performance may be influenced by several factors. For instance, school policies on teacher assignments might lead to more skilled teachers being assigned to specific classes, or older teachers being allocated higher-track classes. The necessity for veteran teachers to participate in ongoing professional development and the extent to which they engage in such activities can also affect their effectiveness.

2.3.4.2 Role of the School Management Team

According to Mandukwini (2021), there is a notable issue of school managers failing to adequately supervise and guide their teachers. This highlights the critical role that top managers, such as principals and deputy principals, play in comprehending educational policies and policy documents for the curriculum. As Yaşar and Aslan (2021) noted, teachers' personal dispositions, attitudes towards change, and actions towards policy ideas for educational improvement can influence curriculum implementations. Therefore, the success of implementing a curriculum change depends on identifying and deciding on the necessary human, financial, and physical resources required for successful implementation, as emphasised by Mei and Symaco (2022). Without proper procedures in place, curriculum changes may not succeed. It is worth noting that for successful implementation, any curriculum changes must reflect the unique environment of schools, as stated by Kennedy and Robinson (2023).

It is the responsibility of top managers to arrange school activities that align with the institution's objectives, fostering a connection between education and learning. Successful educational innovation and improved curriculum management necessitate a combination of knowledge, skills, and attitudes. Mathew (2019) has suggested that the level of effectiveness in the change process is linked to the abilities of those overseeing the change. As change is a gradual process, not a singular event, it is imperative that top managers meticulously plan, develop, and sustain change in schools (Mathew, 2019).

2.3.4.3 Lack of Clear Vision

In her 2021 research, Makamu highlighted a crucial issue in implementing curriculum changes, which is the lack of a clear vision. Trying to change a curriculum without a well-defined goal often leads to a disorderly and time-consuming process that fails to produce the desired results. Leaders often make the mistake of diving into implementation without first developing a comprehensive strategy that outlines the expected outcomes. A school cannot operate effectively without a clear vision that is communicated to all stakeholders, and the principal must collaborate with teachers to achieve that vision within a specific timeframe (Makamu, 2021).

2.3.4.4 Lack of Teacher Professional Development

Little (2021) contended that while investing in the pre-service education of prospective subject teachers is important for long-term benefits, efforts to enhance the knowledge and skills of existing teachers should prioritise professional development opportunities. Little (2021) further emphasised that without engaging in ongoing professional development activities, teachers' risk being uninformed about key developments in education and their subject areas that have occurred since their initial training. There is a particular concern that, without access to high-quality professional development, teachers will be unable to benefit from advances in information technology. Consequently, teachers need to acquire the skills to use computers and the Internet in their classrooms to create enriching and stimulating learning experiences for their learners (Mullis et al., 2019).

The professional development of teachers is essential for any attempts to change or reform an education system. Teacher development activities encompass expanding an individual's range of effective classroom practices through various methods such

as training, observation by other teachers, immersion or internship activities, teacher task forces, teacher collaboratives, subject-matter associations, collaborations targeted at specific initiatives, and special institutes and centres (Fraser and Wallberg, 2021). The frequency and type of development activities, the level of intellectual, social, and emotional engagement, and the degree to which the program is grounded in the larger contexts of school practice and the educational needs of the learners are important indicators of successful teacher development programs (Jinks, 2020).

Smit (2019) highlighted the problem of teacher incompetence, which often results from ineffective training and growth opportunities. Mere policy changes will not be enough to achieve the desired outcomes unless they are accompanied by a supportive strategy to strengthen teachers' involvement. Teachers are the most critical "implementation tool" in any curriculum reform, and they must be adequately trained and prepared to conduct the program. Basic teacher training is insufficient to equip teachers with the knowledge and skills necessary for lifelong learning, which is essential in any profession, including teaching. According to Hollard (2020), curriculum reform is necessary to expand teachers' knowledge and skills.

2.3.4.5 Lack of Teaching and Learning Materials

Another major issue that many schools encounter is a lack of adequate teaching and learning materials. According to the Department of Education (2020), school-based resources are essential for managing the curriculum effectively. A curriculum change without the necessary resources to teach could lead to disastrous results, stress, and demotivation among teachers in implementing the recommended changes (Hollard, 2019). Lack of teaching and learning resources may hinder successful curriculum implementation. Having essential materials on hand helps teachers focus more on content delivery rather than hunting for teaching materials they do not have.

Mayer (2022) inferred that, in addition to the utilization of standardised tests, inspections, and audits, nations can deploy a variety of other tactics to facilitate the execution of the intended curriculum. These measures encompass the training of teachers in the specific content and pedagogical methods delineated in the curriculum. Such training may form an integral component of the teacher education curriculum or may be incorporated into professional development initiatives. Furthermore, the implementation of the curriculum can be bolstered through the creation and utilization

of educational materials, encompassing textbooks, instructional guides, and ministerial directives, tailored to the curriculum's specifications (Mayer, Mullens, and Moore, 2022).

The performance of learners determines how successfully the program is applied. While instructors are at the forefront of curriculum implementation, learners may also provide valuable feedback through their performance. The curriculum must be organised in such a way that it fulfils the requirements of the learners. Not all learners are intellectually brilliant, and some have various abilities and talents; therefore, they should also be considered when the curriculum changes. When a curriculum no longer serves the specified aims and purposes, it is perceived as doomed and therefore should change.

2.3.5 CURRICULUM IMPLEMENTATION IN OTHER COUNTRIES

Countries across the globe increasingly view curriculum reform and implementation as crucial strategies for transforming educational systems to meet the demands of the 21st century. As highlighted by Gouedard and Pont (2020), this transformation is essential for schools to effectively respond to the challenges posed by a rapidly evolving world. In recent years, numerous member countries of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) have actively pursued curriculum reforms aimed at equipping students with the essential knowledge, skills, and competencies they will need to thrive in the future job market and society at large.

Gouedard and Pont (2020) further stipulated that, despite the recognition of the importance of these reforms, the process of initiating and executing such changes effectively and suitably presents significant challenges. Specifically, there seems to be a critical gap between the expressed intentions of educational policymakers and the actual implementation of curriculum renewal in schools. This phenomenon, commonly referred to in educational literature as the "implementation gap," encapsulates the difficulties faced in translating educational theories and goals into practical, actionable strategies within classroom settings. Addressing this gap requires a deeper understanding of the factors that contribute to successful reform implementation, including stakeholder engagement, professional development for educators, and the alignment of resources and assessment practices with new curricular objectives.

Modern societies are currently grappling with a multitude of new and complex challenges, as highlighted by Hyttinen (2020). These challenges span various domains, including environmental issues, economic instability, health crises, and changing societal dynamics. The pressing concern of climate change, coupled with the depletion of vital resources, calls into question our current consumption habits and lifestyles. Additionally, the rapid development of artificial intelligence and other advanced technologies is reshaping our traditional notions of work, raising critical questions about job security and the nature of employment in the future. Furthermore, ongoing globalization drives significant trends such as increased migration, urbanization, and growing diversity, profoundly influencing the social fabric and economic structures of nations (Huang, 2020).

Considering these transformative changes, the education system faces a pressing need to adapt. If children continue to learn the same content and skills that were imparted to their parents without any revision, they risk being ill-prepared for the uncertain and dynamic future that lies ahead (OECD, 2019). This reality underscores the importance of curriculum reform as a strategic response to equip learners with the essential knowledge, competencies, and skills that will enable them to thrive in an increasingly unpredictable world. According to Greening and Du Pleisis (2021), in recognition of the necessity for educational transformation, numerous countries have begun to undertake significant curriculum reviews and reforms aimed at modernizing educational frameworks. For instance, countries like Estonia, Finland, Japan, Norway, and Wales (part of the United Kingdom) have been at the forefront of such initiatives. These reforms reflect a collective understanding of the changing landscape of education and the skills required for the 21st century.

Notably, over 40 countries are currently engaged in the OECD-led Education 2030 project, an ambitious effort that aims to identify and clarify the competencies essential for children to prosper in today's globalised society (OECD, 2019). While each participating country possesses its own unique trajectory concerning educational reform, several common patterns have emerged across different contexts. These include a pronounced emphasis on learners' well-being, promoting learner agency, and fostering critical thinking and problem-solving abilities. Additionally, there is a focus on preparing learners to navigate the complexities and uncertainties of the modern world effectively (Greening and Du Pleisis, 2021). Such initiatives reflect an

understanding that education must evolve in tandem with the societal challenges of the 21st century, ensuring that future generations are not only informed but also empowered to contribute positively to society.

According to Gouedard and Pont (2020), the reform of educational curricula varies significantly across different countries, reflecting both similarities and unique characteristics that underscore a broader complexity regarding the nature of curriculum change. This complexity largely revolves around the dynamic interplay between global influences and local contexts. On the one hand, curriculum reform is predominantly a national endeavour. It is fundamentally rooted in the need to define the types of knowledge, skills, and competencies deemed most valuable for individuals within a specific society.

This societal need shapes the educational framework designed to prepare learners for the future demands of the workforce and civic life. National policymakers often consider cultural values, economic conditions, and social priorities when developing these curricula, striving to ensure that the education system aligns with the aspirations and needs of the community it serves. Conversely, curriculum reform is not insulated from international influences (Cohen, 2022). A variety of global trends, including the forces of globalization, significantly impact how education systems evolve. For instance, countries often look to high-performing education systems as benchmarks, particularly as reflected in international learner assessments such as the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS), and the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS). These assessments provide insights into educational effectiveness and can spur nations to adopt practices that have proven successful elsewhere, thereby creating a more interconnected global educational landscape (Cohen, 2022)

Thus, curriculum reform arises at the intersection of these global and local forces, leading to unique adaptations and innovations that vary from one context to another. According to Tim (2023), despite this rich tapestry of influences, a significant challenge remains, which is the effective implementation of curriculum reforms. Many countries encounter substantial obstacles when transitioning from reform planning to implementation. Issues such as inadequate teacher training, lack of resources, insufficient stakeholder engagement, and systemic resistance can hinder the

successful adoption of new curricular frameworks. As a result, actualizing the intended benefits of curriculum reform and implementation requires careful consideration of both the intended objectives and the practical realities of education delivery.

According to Fullan (2022), the process of curriculum implementation is essential for achieving desired educational objectives, emphasizing that for a new curriculum to be effective, it must translate into actionable classroom practices. The topic of curriculum implementation is not novel and has been explored extensively across various fields such as public management, public policy, organizational change, and education itself. Traditionally, discussions surrounding curriculum reform have adopted a top-down perspective, where the success of implementation was often evaluated by the degree of fidelity with which teachers adhered to the prescribed curricula (Marshall and Kelso, 2021; Wedell and Grassick, 2023).

This top-down view suggested that the outcomes of curriculum reforms relied heavily on teachers strictly following the outlined strategies and materials. However, this conventional approach does not align well with the contemporary trend of autonomy-centred curriculum enactment. In this emerging framework, teachers are recognised not just as implementers but as pivotal mediators of educational policy. This shift challenges the traditional notion of fidelity, highlighting that, in their professional autonomy, teachers play a crucial role in the adaptation and interpretation of the curriculum. Scholars Snyder, Bolin, and Zumwalt (2022) argued that viewing teachers solely as passive executors at the final stage of the reform process is inadequate and overlooks their influential role as active participants from the onset of curriculum development through implementation.

As a result, there is a growing emphasis on a bottom-up approach that acknowledges the significance of teachers' agency in the curriculum implementation process. This perspective recognises that teachers adapt materials and methods to better suit their classrooms, learners, and contextual needs (Braun, Maguire, and Ball, 2022). In this regard, the concept of implementation fidelity, which focuses on strict adherence to the reform, has gradually been supplanted by implementation integrity. This new concept refers to the degree to which teachers' modifications and adaptations align with the overarching curricular goals and principles that underlie the educational structures. This approach not only respects the expertise and insights of educators but

also promotes a more dynamic and responsive educational environment that can lead to more meaningful learning experiences for learners.

2.3.6 PEDAGOGICAL CHOICES FOR INTEGRATING THEORY AND PRACTICE

The gap between theory and practice has remained a significant issue in education. Korthagen (2019) pointed out that the relationship between these two elements continues to be a fundamental challenge in teacher education globally. As noted by Wubbels, Korthagen, and Brekelmans (2021), this gap exists because the contexts of teaching practice often differ from the contexts in which theoretical concepts were developed. Additionally, theory is typically abstract, while practice is concrete. Gravett (2022) explained that theory encompasses formal knowledge of ideas, known as declarative knowledge or episteme, whereas practice involves the practical knowledge of how to perform the work of teaching, referred to as procedural knowledge.

In response to this issue, the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE 2010) recommended a shift in teacher education from an emphasis on academic preparation (theory) and coursework that is only loosely connected to school-based experiences (practice). Instead, programs should be designed to be firmly grounded in practical experience and closely aligned with academic content. A growing body of evidence suggests that learning should take place not only in schools and university lecture halls but also in workplaces and communities (Barends, 2022). As a result of the current disconnect between theory and practice, the educational theories taught in teacher education programs are often not reflected in the practical teaching process.

Informed pedagogical choices have the potential to enhance the quality of teacher education. This is an important topic in the literature, as many universities are actively working to improve how they prepare future teachers for classroom challenges. Critics often highlight the need for a more effective approach, as some programs have been perceived as inadequate in equipping new teachers with the necessary skills (Gravett, 2022). To address this, teacher education programs are increasingly recognizing the importance of balancing theoretical knowledge with practical application. One effective method is the “translating-theory-to-practice” approach (Gravett, 2022). In this model, learners engage with theoretical concepts through their coursework, which they then apply in real-world settings during assignments and practical experiences. This

includes the Work Integrated Learning (WIL) component, where learners can evaluate and refine their understanding in a supportive environment. Additionally, many programs are enhancing their practicum components, providing learners with more extensive opportunities to gain firsthand experience (Gravett, 2022). This dual approach not only enriches the educational experience but also better prepares future teachers for the dynamic realities of the classroom.

2.3.7 HOW TEACHERS INTEGRATE THEORY INTO PRACTICE.

Wrenn and Wrenn (2019) contended that effective professional training for teachers encompasses not only theoretical knowledge but also a substantial amount of practical experience. A key consideration regarding this practical work is its intended purpose. Two distinct objectives may be pursued, each of which can significantly influence the scope, conditions, and methods of practice work (Wrenn and Wrenn, 2019). They further highlighted that practical work should aim to provide trainee teachers with a solid command of the essential tools necessary for their profession. This includes mastering classroom instruction and management techniques, as well as developing the skills and proficiency required for effective teaching. With this objective in mind, practical work can be likened to an apprenticeship. Alternatively, practical work may also serve to enhance the relevance and vitality of theoretical instruction, enabling teachers to gain a more profound understanding of subject matter and educational principles (Wrenn and Wrenn, 2019).

Mayor (2020) posited that teachers within professional or service-related fields seek to ensure that their learners not only acquire theoretical knowledge and comprehend its significance but also effectively apply theoretical frameworks in practical settings. He observed that it is frequently reported that learners participating in internships encounter challenges in transitioning from theory to practice with the requisite confidence and efficacy (Mayor, 2020). This difficulty may, at least in part, arise from a pedagogical shortcoming in which instructors fail to integrate theory and practice within the same course, thereby rendering the content less relevant and meaningful to learners. Such integration is essential, as it enables learners to recognise the practical value inherent in the theoretical concepts they are learning (Mayor, 2020). According to Hutchings (2019), it is essential for learners enrolled in professional programs to effectively apply the knowledge acquired in the classroom to practical situations. He

indicated that "What's at stake is the capacity to perform, to put what one knows into practice" (Hutchings, 2019).

To cultivate capable and competent practitioners, learners must receive training in self-awareness, knowledge acquisition, and skill development (Kramer, 2021). Shebib (2023) asserted that practitioners should possess competencies in four fundamental areas: relationship building, exploration or probing, empowerment, and challenging existing norms. Additionally, an indispensable skill is the ability to obtain and utilise knowledge derived from practical experience (Dorfman, 2019). Mendenhall (2021) emphasised that the development of these skills necessitates both advanced education at the master's level and relevant practical experience, which are both essential and anticipated.

Sheila Lawlor (2020) asserted that, school practice is regarded by education departments as an opportunity to implement theoretical knowledge in a practical context. Learners are expected to integrate the generalised educational theories they have acquired into their teaching. The teaching profession fundamentally revolves around practice, and teacher training institutions recognise the necessity of adequately preparing scholars for real-world classroom experiences. As a result, teachers need to engage in teaching practice, thereby acquiring the requisite skills necessary for their post-training careers. Participation in teacher practice during their training is a requirement for all aspiring teachers, as it allows them to experience authentic teaching environments in alignment with the policies of their respective institutions. Such practice enables prospective teachers to gain valuable insights into the realities of the teaching and learning process. Kasanda (2022) highlighted that during the period of school practice, teachers are allowed to explore the dynamics of teaching within the context of an actual classroom before fully entering the teaching profession.

2.4 CONCLUSION

This chapter has outlined the theoretical framework underpinning the study, while also providing a comprehensive review of the existing literature relevant to the topic. This review serves to inform the reader of the foundational concepts and previous findings that shape the current research. The next chapter focused on Research Methodology and Design.

CHAPTER 3

RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

3.1 INTRODUCTION

This chapter delves into the research design and methodology employed to thoroughly analyse the research problem: Current challenges in implementing the school-level curriculum in South Africa. It provides a comprehensive overview of the selected research design, detailing the specific methods utilised for data collection and analysis. Furthermore, it addresses the measures taken to ensure the trustworthiness of the findings, including credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Additionally, the chapter discusses the ethical considerations that were implemented throughout the research process, ensuring the well-being and integrity of participants, as well as adherence to applicable ethical guidelines. By laying out these elements, this chapter aims to provide a clear framework for understanding the systematic approach taken in this study.

3.2 RESEARCH DESIGN

Gay, Mills, and Airasian (2018) defined research design as a strategy for conducting a research study. In simpler terms, it is the plan used to implement the proposed research work. Research designs encompass a range of strategies and methodologies used to conduct research effectively. According to Creswell (2019), these designs range from broad general assumptions about the nature of knowledge to specific data collection and analysis techniques. When selecting an appropriate research design, the researcher must reflect on their perspective, which influences their understanding of the research process. This includes considering different inquiry strategies such as qualitative, quantitative, or mixed methods, and the various methods of interpreting and analysing the collected data. However, several other factors play an essential role in selecting the research design, including the specific topic being investigated, the researcher's individual experiences, and the intended audience's characteristics. These elements influence the approach adopted in this study and help determine its effectiveness in addressing the research questions (Creswell, 2019).

This framework encompasses a wide range of decisions, beginning with broad overarching assumptions about the nature of the research and its theoretical underpinnings. As the design process progresses, it transitions into more specific details, including the selection of methodologies for data collection and the analytical approaches that will be employed to interpret the data. The research design acts as a guiding plan, ensuring that the research is systematic, coherent, and aligned with its objectives (Creswell, 2019).

The research design serves as a crucial framework for conducting a study, providing the necessary structure for how the research will be conducted (Sileyew, 2019). One of the most significant decisions in the research design process is selecting the appropriate research approach. This choice is critical as it directly influences the methods used to gather relevant information and data pertinent to the study. The research design process is not a singular decision but rather involves a series of interconnected choices that collectively shape the study's approach. Sileyew (2019) further alluded that these decisions encompass various aspects, including the research objectives, the nature of the data to be collected, the methods of data collection, and the techniques for data analysis. Each of these elements plays a vital role in ensuring that the research yields valid and reliable findings, making it essential to carefully consider all facets of the design process to achieve the intended outcomes of the study.

3.2.1 Research paradigm: Interpretative

The research paradigm refers to the theoretical or philosophical foundation that underpins a research endeavour, often considered a form of research philosophy. American philosopher Thomas Kuhn (2019) was the first to introduce the term "paradigm" in the context of research, using it to describe a philosophical perspective. In educational research, this term is employed to characterise a researcher's worldview (Mackenzie and Knipe, 2020). This worldview encompasses the perspective, thought process, school of thought, or set of shared beliefs that shapes the interpretation and meaning of research data. Similarly, Willis (2021) defined a research paradigm as a comprehensive belief system, worldview, or framework that directs research and practice within a specific field. In this study, the researcher used an interpretive research paradigm to gather the necessary information required to answer the research question.

According to Gordon (2021), interpretivism is a philosophical approach that assumes reality is subjective, multiple, and socially constructed. It believes that we can only understand an individual's reality through their personal experience, which can be different from another individual due to their historical or social perspective. Interpretive approaches rely on questioning and observation to gain a deep understanding of the phenomenon being investigated, as stated by Gordon (2021). Interpretive research operates under the fundamental belief that social reality is profoundly influenced by human experiences and the sociocultural contexts in which these experiences occur. This perspective makes interpretive research particularly effective for studying human behaviour as it relates to various social and cultural issues (Rehman and Alaharti, 2022; Shah et al. 2021; Bhattacharjee, 2019).

Researchers who adopt an interpretive approach view social truths as intricately woven into the fabric of their surrounding environments. They argued that it is nearly impossible to detach these truths from their social contexts. Instead of testing hypotheses in a traditional quantitative manner, interpretive researchers prioritise understanding by incorporating the subjective experiences, beliefs, and perceptions of participants. This involves engaging deeply with individuals to uncover how they interpret their realities within the specific cultural and social settings they inhabit (Rehman and Alahart, 2022; Shah et al., 2021; Bhattacharjee, 2019). By focusing on the lived experiences of participants, interpretive researchers aim to provide richer insights into human behaviour, acknowledging that social realities are not fixed but are constantly shaped and reshaped through human interaction and interpretation. This methodology reinforces the importance of context in understanding human actions and societal dynamics.

3.2.2 Research approach: Qualitative

A research approach refers to the systematic methodology that a researcher chooses to employ throughout the study to gather, analyse, and interpret data (Budert-Warltz 2023). This approach encompasses a variety of methods and techniques tailored to address specific research questions or hypotheses. Selecting an appropriate research approach involves considering factors such as the nature of the research problem, the type of data needed, and the desired outcomes of the study. Depending on the context, researchers may adopt qualitative methods, which focus on understanding experiences and perspectives, or quantitative methods, which involve statistical analysis of numerical data,

or a mixed-method approach that incorporates both quantitative and qualitative approaches. Furthermore, the research approach lays the foundation for the overall design of the study, influencing how data is collected, the analysis process, and the conclusions drawn from the findings. In this study, to address the research questions, a qualitative research approach was used.

According to Petersen (2021), researchers use a research approach to select appropriate data gathering and analysis techniques to investigate a specific subject. This method encourages participants to share their experiences and challenges in developing and overseeing the curriculum. As Makamu (2021) cited, qualitative research is a naturalistic inquiry that uses non-intrusive techniques to uncover events and processes and understand participant perspectives. As Kumar (2022) noted, qualitative research focuses on comprehending social phenomena from the participants' viewpoint, free from any biases. The researcher gathered information based on participants' beliefs, feelings, and perspectives, without any preconceived notions.

Qualitative research is fundamentally centred on interpreting and understanding social phenomena (Frankfort-Nachmias and Nachmias, 2020). This approach is inherently multi-method, encompassing a broad range of empirical materials and techniques for data collection and analysis. Qualitative research emphasises the importance of individuals' narratives and accounts, seeking to uncover their attitudes, motivations, and the contextual factors that shape their actions. Qualitative researchers investigate how people articulate their experiences in specific social settings and temporal moments, allowing for a richer understanding of events and situations. By considering the interplay between individual actions and the broader social, cultural, and institutional contexts in which they occur, qualitative research aims to provide nuanced insights into how meaning is constructed and understood in various environments (Morrill and Fine, 2019).

3.2.3 Research strategy: Phenomenology

According to Creswell (2019), a research strategy is a plan or system used to conduct the activity of looking for and evaluating information obtained. A research strategy often consists of several steps. The analysis of the topic's key concepts comes first. The second step is to specify pertinent keywords and their synonyms. In this study, the researcher adopted a phenomenology-based approach. This approach is particularly well-suited for exploring the lived experiences of teachers and learners as they navigate and confront

challenges associated with the implementation of school-level curricula. The focus is on understanding how these individuals experience and perceive the processes involved in adapting curricula to better meet the diverse needs of learners. Through this approach, the researchers' aim was to gain deep insights into the subjective experiences of both teachers and learners, ultimately contributing to the development of more effective educational strategies.

Hugh (2023) describes phenomenological research as a qualitative research approach based on the assumption that the universal essence of something is ultimately determined by how it is perceived by its audience. In this study, the researcher will employ phenomenology to document and examine the beliefs, emotions, and outlooks of the audience under investigation. According to Hugh (2023), the researcher's opinions and reflections on the subject must be disregarded, and only the audience's opinions (of those who have experienced the phenomenon) should be considered.

Phenomenology encompasses various approaches, each grounded in different philosophical interpretations of human experience. These approaches focus on understanding how individuals perceive and make meaning of their lived experiences. In this study, a phenomenological approach was considered appropriate because the research sought to explore the lived experiences of teachers, learners, and school managers in relation to the implementation of the school-level curriculum. By examining participants' perspectives and interpretations of the challenges they encounter in implementing the curriculum, the study aimed to gain deeper insight into how these experiences influence teaching and learning practices within the school context.

Momah and Gasco (2023) distinguish between the hermeneutic and transcendental approaches to phenomenology. Hermeneutic phenomenology focuses on the study of firsthand experiences, offering both a description and an interpretation of the meaning behind those lived phenomena. Phenomenology can be broadly categorised into transcendental and hermeneutic approaches, each guided by different philosophical perspectives. Transcendental phenomenology focuses on describing the essence of a phenomenon by setting aside the researcher's interpretations, whereas hermeneutic phenomenology emphasises the interpretation of individuals' lived experiences within their social contexts. This study adopted a hermeneutic phenomenological approach because it sought to interpret and understand the lived experiences of teachers, learners, and

school managers regarding the challenges of curriculum implementation in schools. The approach was therefore suitable for exploring how participants make sense of these experiences within their specific educational contexts.

On the other hand, transcendental phenomenology, also known as descriptive phenomenology, is a method that aims to uncover the fundamental structures and meanings of experiences without any preconceptions or explanations (Momah and Gasco, 2023). However, they further stipulated that the data analysis in phenomenology involves four steps: textualization, grouping, horizontalization, and bracketing. Bracketing involves setting aside one's personal biases and assumptions to focus on the facts. Horizontalization involves treating each speech or expression as equally significant and relevant. Clustering involves sorting the statements into themes or categories based on their similarities and differences. Textualization is the process of creating a comprehensive account of the phenomena and their essential elements (Momah and Gasco, 2023).

Table 3.1 outlines the differences between transcendental and hermeneutic phenomenology.

	Transcendental phenomenology (Descriptive)	Hermeneutic phenomenology (Interpretive)
Ontological assumptions	The nature of reality is fundamentally contingent upon the subjective experience of the individual perceiver; it is characterised by the phenomena that manifest within their conscious awareness.	Lived experience is how people understand their own lives based on their situations and feelings.
Epistemological assumptions	To understand phenomena without bias, the observer needs to distance themselves from the world and their physical presence. This helps them reach a transcendental state and perceive things more clearly.	The observer is part of the world and is not free from bias. The researcher understands events through interpretation.
Researchers' role in data collection	Limit individual opinions while collecting and analysing data.	Contemplates the key themes of participant experience with the phenomenon while also reflecting on individual experiences.

<p>Researchers' role in data analysis/writing</p>	<p>Look at events from different viewpoints, find key ideas, and group them into themes to describe the phenomenon (the what). Use creative thinking to explain how the phenomenon occurs (the how). Combine these descriptions to capture the essence of the phenomenon.</p>	<p>Take time to capture and write reflections in cycles. This helps create a strong and detailed analysis. Think about how different pieces of data contribute to a deeper understanding of the whole situation.</p>
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Table 3.1: Differences between transcendental and hermeneutic phenomenology

(Momah and Gasco, 2023).

3.3 RESEARCH METHODS: Data collection

Creswell (2019) defined research methodology as the methods or strategies used to find, select, process, and analyse information on a topic. The methodology portion of a research study helps the reader to objectively examine the overall validity and reliability of the study. The methods section provides solutions to two major questions: (How was the information gathered or generated? How was it examined?). Qualitative semi-structured interviews and documentation analysis were used to collect data in this study. Additionally, the interviews were recorded using voice to capture the minutes. Top managers participated in focus group interviews, while subject teachers and learners had one-on-one interviews. Individual participants were awarded an hour, and group participants were awarded an hour and 20 minutes to engage with the researcher.

3.3.1 Qualitative semi-structured interviews

Dejonckheere and Vaughn (2019) explained that semi-structured interviews are a type of qualitative research method where participants are asked a set of open-ended questions, followed by follow-up questions to gain more insight into their answers and the topic being studied. These interviews incorporate both structured and unstructured formats, with some questions being predetermined while others are not (Dejonckheere and Vaughn, 2019). Moreover, the flexible nature of a semi-structured interview provides the researcher with the opportunity to seek more information from the interviewee and encourages them to continue when they provide interesting responses. This approach offers the researcher the freedom to ask follow-up questions or redirect the conversation based on the interviewee's

response. Semi-structured interviews also allow the interviewee to express their opinions in their own words.

To ensure accurate and detailed responses, the researcher employed a range of probing techniques designed to delve more deeply into the participants' answers. Probing is defined as a systematic method that allows researchers to elicit clearer and more precise perceptions from respondents (Thesaurus, 2019). This approach requires a thorough and diligent investigation aimed at uncovering underlying facts and nuanced knowledge by asking relevant and appropriately tailored questions. In this study, both face-to-face and phone interviews were meticulously recorded to facilitate the subsequent data reporting and analysis phases. Recording the interviews serves multiple purposes: it allows for the preservation of the participants' exact words, which enhances the reliability of the data collected and reduces the likelihood of misinterpretation. Furthermore, this method ensures that the flow of conversation remains uninterrupted, allowing participants to fully concentrate on the questions being posed without the distraction of taking notes during the discussion.

Moreover, when follow-up questions became necessary to obtain clarification or explore a response in greater depth, the researcher took detailed field notes. These notes will capture key themes, insights, and any non-verbal cues observed during the interview. By combining audio recordings with these notes, the researcher aims to create a comprehensive dataset that accurately reflects the participants' viewpoints and experiences. This dual approach not only enhances the quality of the data but also fosters a more engaging and responsive dialogue between the researcher and the participants, leading to richer and more meaningful insights.

The following steps for preparing and conducting research interviews, adapted from Turner (2020), were meticulously followed to ensure the effectiveness of the interview process.

Step one: Selecting a setting.

The researcher carefully chose a serene and inviting environment for conducting the interviews, ensuring that it was both comfortable and free from distractions. This thoughtful selection aimed to create a welcoming atmosphere where participants could feel at ease, allowing them to share their thoughts and experiences openly and honestly during the session. By prioritizing a setting that fostered trust and relaxation, the researcher hoped to encourage more genuine and engaging discussions with each participant.

Step two: Explaining the purpose of the interview.

The purpose of this study is to thoroughly investigate the current challenges in the implementation the school-level curriculum in South Africa. This includes an examination of factors such as resource availability, teacher training, administrative support, and contextual issues within schools that may hinder effective curriculum execution. The researcher emphasised the importance of understanding these challenges to inform potential improvements and strategies for enhancing educational practices in the country.

Step three: Selecting a sample.

In this study, purposive sampling was employed to select ten participants who were directly involved in curriculum implementation. The sample comprised seven secondary school teachers (Post Levels 1–5), two learners aged between 18 and 20 years, and one curriculum district official.

Step four: Addressing confidentiality.

Before the commencement of each interview session, participants were presented with a comprehensive consent form that outlined the study's purpose, procedures, and their rights as participants. This document ensured that they were fully informed about their involvement and the measures taken to protect their personal information. Additionally, to establish a foundation of trust and maintain ethical standards, the researcher provided a signed confidentiality agreement. This agreement assured participants that their responses would remain confidential and that their identities would be protected throughout the research process.

Step five: Designing the interview format.

In this study, open-ended semi-structured interviews were employed as the primary data collection method. This approach allowed for the formulation of a flexible interview framework, enabling the interviewer to explore a wide range of pertinent questions related to the topic under investigation. By using open-ended questions, participants were encouraged to share their thoughts and experiences in depth, allowing for richer and more nuanced responses. The semi-structured format ensured that all relevant areas of interest were covered while still allowing for spontaneity and follow-up questions based on participants' answers. This method facilitated a comprehensive understanding of the subject matter, promoting meaningful dialogue and insights.

Step six: Formulating the interview questions.

In the research process, a series of open-ended questions was meticulously formulated to encourage deeper exploration of the topic at hand. These questions were designed to elicit comprehensive responses, allowing participants the freedom to express their thoughts and insights without the constraints of predefined answers. By employing this approach, the researcher aimed to foster rich dialogue and gather diverse perspectives, leading to a more nuanced understanding of the subject matter. The formulation of these questions involved careful consideration of the objectives of the study, ensuring that they were relevant, clear, and engaging for participants.

Step seven: Selection and training of interviewers

In this study, the researcher opted to personally conduct all interviews without enlisting the help of external interviewers. This decision allowed the researcher to engage directly with each participant, facilitating a more in-depth understanding of their perspectives and experiences. By taking on this responsibility, the researcher aimed to establish a stronger rapport with participants, ensuring that the nuances of their responses were captured accurately and authentically.

Step eight: Interview data analysis

The researcher used thematic data analysis in line with Caulfield (2019) six-phase thematic analysis guide. This guide involves the following six steps, 1: familiarizing oneself with the idea, 2: generating initial codes, 3: searching for themes, 4: reviewing themes, 5: defining themes, and 6: writing up the findings, as noted by (Mathabela, 2021). These six processes enabled the researcher to analyse the data by topic.

3.3.2 Qualitative Documentation Analysis

The researcher employed document analysis as an additional method for data collection to investigate and gain a deeper understanding of how teacher development establishments construct their curriculum. As stated by Carling (2020), document analysis is a systematic approach that involves the interpretation of various documents to extract meaningful insights relevant to a particular evaluation issue. This process requires the researcher to meticulously organise and categorise the content of these documents, like the analytical techniques used in focus groups or interviews (Carling, 2020). In this study, the researcher specifically examined policy documents that serve as foundational texts,

providing essential guidelines for planning and implementing the curriculum. By analysing these policy documents, the researcher aimed to uncover the underlying principles, objectives, and frameworks that inform curriculum design within teacher development establishments, thus enriching the understanding of their educational practices.

3.3.3 Data recording

Data gathered through one-on-one interviews was recorded using a digital voice recorder, ensuring clarity and accuracy in capturing the responses of participants. For telephonic interviews, a specialised telephone recorder was employed, allowing for seamless documentation of conversations while maintaining high audio quality. This approach facilitated a thorough analysis of the information collected, enhancing the quality of the research findings.

3.4 POPULATION AND SAMPLING SIZE

According to Mill (2020), sampling is a method used by researchers to thoroughly select from an established population to a smaller number of representative individuals. Probability and nonprobability samplings are the two most common types of samples. Probability sampling, which is also called random sampling, is any sampling system in which the manner of selecting individual participants is the same and can be statistically modified. Conversely, the method of nonprobability sampling is determined by the opinions and beliefs of others. Simple Random Sampling, Systematic Sampling, Stratified Sampling, and Cluster Selection are examples of probability sampling. Non-probability sampling incorporates quota sampling, purposive sampling, self-selection sampling, and snowball sampling (Mill, 2020).

3.4.1 Population

The target population for this study comprised teachers, learners, and curriculum officials involved in curriculum implementation within high schools in the Johannesburg Central District. The population included: Teachers occupying Post Level 1 (PL1) to Post Level 5 (PL5) positions, who are directly responsible for delivering the curriculum in classrooms.

Learners aged 18–20 years who are directly affected by curriculum delivery. Curriculum advisors at the district level are responsible for supporting schools in curriculum implementation. This population was chosen because these groups are directly engaged

in curriculum implementation and can provide first-hand insights into the challenges experienced at the school level.

3.4.2 Sampling and sampling procedures

Purposeful sampling was employed to select participants who could provide rich, relevant, and detailed information about curriculum implementation challenges. A total of 10 participants were selected for the study: Seven teachers from PL1 to PL5, two learners aged between 18 and 20 years from the same schools. One curriculum advisor from the district, who could provide insights into curriculum support and reform. The use of purposeful sampling ensured that participants had direct experience with the phenomena under investigation, which strengthened the credibility and relevance of the data collected.

Purposeful sampling is defined by Green et al. (2021) as a technique that focuses on selecting individuals who possess a deep understanding and extensive knowledge regarding the specific topic under investigation. This method is particularly valuable in qualitative research, where the goal is to gather rich, detailed insights. To be included in this study, participants were required to meet certain criteria outlined by Bernard (2019). This included being influential figures within their respective roles, demonstrating a prominent level of self-awareness, and having a solid expertise in curriculum implementation. Furthermore, the participants were expected to be willing and eager to share their perspectives and insights, thereby contributing to a comprehensive understanding of the research topic.

3.5 ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION OF DATA

Initially, the researcher transcribed all the audio-recorded interviews to analyse the data gathered from this study. Subsequently, the researcher employed thematic data analysis to further examine the acquired information. In qualitative research, thematic analysis plays a crucial role in identifying interconnected themes. This method enables researchers to recognise and categorise themes that are pertinent to and build upon the existing literature. This method was originally developed by Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke and reviewed by Caulfield in 2019. According to Caulfield (2019), it is a systematic approach for identifying, organizing, and gaining insights into significant patterns (themes) present within a dataset.

The researcher used thematic data analysis in line with Caulfield's (2019) six-phase thematic analysis guide. This guide involves the following six steps: 1. familiarizing oneself with the idea, 2. generating initial codes, 3. searching for themes, 4. reviewing themes, 5. defining themes, and 6. writing up the findings, as noted by Mathabela (2021). These six processes enabled the researcher to analyse the data by topics. In alignment with the comprehensive framework provided by Caulfield (2021), the following is a six-phase guide for conducting thematic analysis:

1. Familiarization with the data

Engaging deeply with the transcripts to gain a thorough understanding of the content and context.

2. Generating initial codes

Systematically coding the data by highlighting significant pieces of information that relate to the research questions.

3. Searching for themes

Identifying broader patterns that can encapsulate the initial codes into recognizable themes.

4. Reviewing themes

Refining and reassessing the identified themes to ensure they accurately represent the data's essence and significance.

5. Defining themes

Clearly articulating each theme's meaning, specifics, and relevance to the overall research objective.

6. Writing up the findings

Compiling a comprehensive report that presents the analysis, supports it with evidence from the data, and discusses its implications.

By rigorously following these six phases, the researcher methodically analysed the qualitative data according to thematic topics, thereby providing valuable insights into the study's focus and enhancing the understanding of the phenomena under investigation, as suggested by Mathabela (2021).

3.6 MEASURES FOR TRUSTWORTHINESS

Credibility

In qualitative research, internal reliability is often associated with the concept of credibility, which refers to the confidence in the truth and accuracy of the study's findings (Benner et al., 2019). In this study, credibility was ensured through several strategies. First, prolonged engagement with participants allowed the researcher to gain a deeper understanding of the context and the challenges associated with curriculum implementation. Second, triangulation was employed by collecting data from multiple sources, including teachers, learners, and a curriculum district official, as well as through semi-structured interviews and document analysis. Third, member checking was conducted by allowing participants to review and confirm the accuracy of the information they provided during the interviews. Finally, thick description was used in the presentation of the findings to provide detailed accounts of participants' experiences and the research context, thereby enabling readers to understand the situation more clearly and assess the credibility of the interpretations.

Transferability

External validity is more important in terms of transferability. According to Rheinhardt et al. (2019), External validity refers to the ability of study findings to be applied to other settings or populations. According to Robertson (2021), the findings of any study must be transferable, which means that they can be applied to a wider community. To ensure transferability, the researcher afforded complete and accurate information in the study, including references to sources, so that readers can access and understand how the findings were obtained.

Dependability

The reliability of research findings is crucial to ensure their relevance in the future. To guarantee the trustworthiness of the study, the researcher used various data collection methods. This was to ensure that the conclusions drawn from different data sources are consistent and correspond with each other.

Confirmability

In qualitative research, confirmability refers to the extent to which the findings of a study are shaped by the participants' experiences and perspectives rather than researcher bias or personal assumptions. It ensures that the results are grounded in the data and can be

traced and verified by others (Frey, 2019). In this study, confirmability was enhanced through several strategies. First, an audit trail was maintained to document the research process, including data collection procedures, coding decisions, and analytical steps. Second, the researcher engaged in reflexive journaling to reflect on personal assumptions and potential biases throughout the study. Third, triangulation was used by collecting data from multiple participants, including teachers, learners, and a curriculum district official, as well as through different data sources such as interviews and document analysis. Finally, careful documentation of methodological and analytical decisions was maintained to ensure transparency and allow others to follow the research process.

Triangulation

Researchers often use alternative forms of surveys to assess the reliability of the data collected. By comparing the responses from the interviews, they can determine if the data is consistent and dependable (Best and Kahn, 2019). Additionally, researchers may use a technique called triangulation, where multiple investigators or peer researchers participate in the analysis of data at separate times or locations. This approach can help to improve the accuracy and understanding of the data. (Best and Kahn, 2019) further stated that, in qualitative research, investigator triangulation involves incorporating multiple perspectives from researchers who have studied the same research to enhance the validity and credibility of the findings.

Moreover, in research, triangulation refers to the process of using multiple data sources to verify findings and explore themes created by the study's results to improve credibility. To ensure the accuracy, validity, and reliability of the conclusions drawn from the study, the researcher had extended interactions with participants through interviews and consulted the necessary literature to understand the phenomena surrounding the participants' responses. Triangulation in research can be classified into four groups: data triangulation, methodological triangulation, investigator triangulation, and theory triangulation.

Triangulation in research

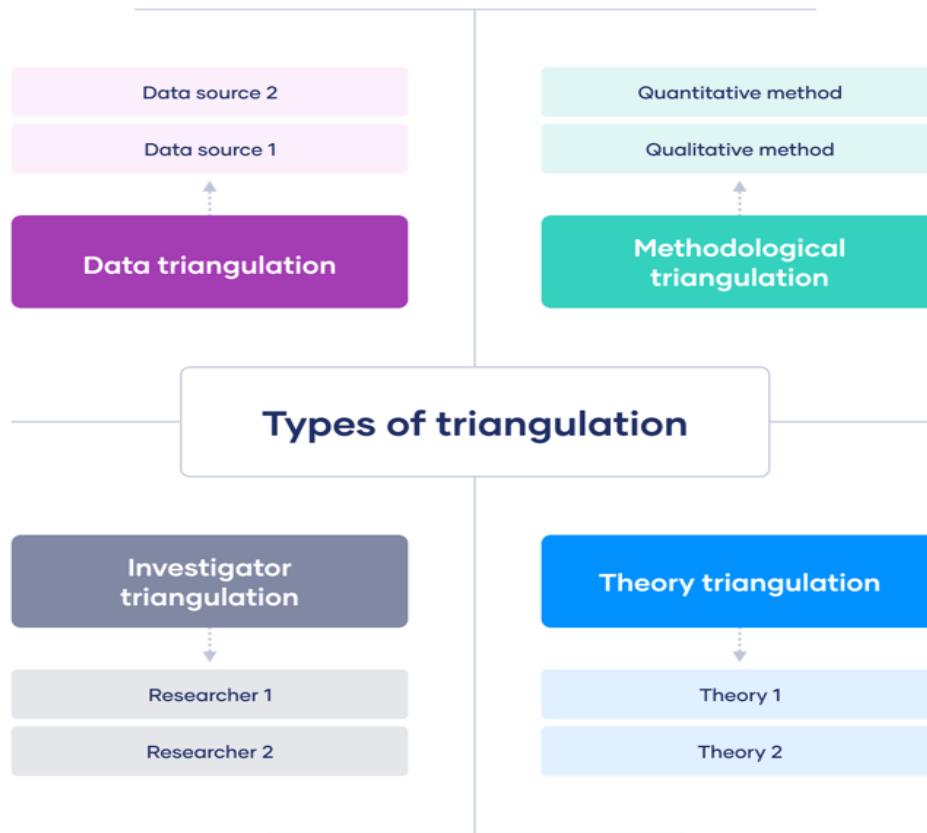


Figure 3.1: Types of triangulations in research (Bhandari, 2023)

3.7 ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Ethical standards were rigorously observed throughout this study to ensure the protection of all participants and the integrity of the research process. Before data collection, ethical clearance was obtained from the University, and formal permission to conduct the study was granted by the relevant district education office. All participants were provided with detailed informed consent forms, which explained the purpose of the study, the nature of their involvement, and the anticipated use of the findings. Participation was entirely voluntary, and participants were explicitly informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any time without penalty. Measures were taken to ensure confidentiality and anonymity, including the use of codes in place of participants' names and secure storage of all data. Throughout data collection and reporting, the researcher remained truthful and unbiased, accurately representing participants' responses without alterations, exclusions, or misrepresentations. These measures collectively ensured that the study complied with ethical research standards and respected the rights and dignity of all participants.

3.8 CONCLUSION

This chapter provided an in-depth description of the research design and methodology used throughout the investigation. It began by outlining the specific methods employed for data collection, ensuring a comprehensive understanding of the research context. The researcher in this chapter also elaborated on the selection criteria for participants, the tools used for gathering data, such as interviews, document analysis, and the process by which data was analysed. This chapter also placed significant emphasis on the ethical considerations that were considered to guarantee the reliability and validity of the findings. This includes discussions on informed consent, confidentiality measures for participants, and the steps taken to minimise any potential biases. Furthermore, the study addressed the safeguards implemented to protect participants' rights and well-being, ensuring that the research adheres to established ethical guidelines. Overall, this thorough exploration of both methodology and ethics underlines the integrity and rigor of the research conducted. The next chapter focused on the analysis of the findings.

CHAPTER 4

DATA PRESENTATION, ANALYSIS, AND INTERPRETATION

4.1 Introduction

This chapter presents the findings derived from a series of qualitative interviews conducted with a diverse group of participants, including teachers, learners, and a facilitator, regarding the current challenges they face in implementing the school-level curriculum in South Africa. The interview data are organised thematically to facilitate a structured presentation of the key issues. Each identified theme is further substantiated with direct quotes from participants, providing insights into their firsthand experiences and perspectives.

Beyond identifying shared experiences, the chapter also examines different viewpoints, reflecting the complex nature of curriculum implementation. This dual focus not only enriches the analysis but also underscores the varied experiences and opinions within the educational community. Through careful analysis and interpretation, connections are drawn between the participants' experiences and the broader implications for effective curriculum delivery. The insights gained from these interviews offer invaluable context for understanding the systemic challenges and potential opportunities for improvement in the South African educational system. The sections that follow will present and analyse these themes in detail.

4.2 Thematic Presentation of Findings

The findings of this study were guided by the research questions outlined below:

1. What are the recent issues experienced by teachers and learners in schools that affect curriculum delivery?
2. What impact does a teacher's lack of participation in curriculum development have on the success of curriculum implementation?
3. How do off-curriculum issues (socioeconomic backgrounds) influence the performance of learners in schools?

Sub-questions and themes were generated based on these research questions.

4.2.1 Research sub-questions and generated themes

The research sub-questions and corresponding themes are delineated in Table 4.1. Following this presentation, a comprehensive analysis and elucidation of the identified themes is provided.

Table 4.1: Research questions and generated themes

Research Sub-Questions	Generated Themes
1. How do resource constraints impact teaching and learning?	<p>Resource Constraints and Their Impact on Teaching and Learning:</p> <p>Theme 1: Material scarcity and pedagogical adaptation.</p> <p>Theme 2: increased teacher workload and overcrowded classrooms</p> <p>Theme 3: Educational inequality and resource distributions</p>
2. What is your perspective on teachers teaching subjects outside of their areas of expertise?	<p>Teachers Teaching Outside Their Areas of Expertise.</p> <p>Theme 1: Knowledge deficits and erosion of teacher confidence</p> <p>Theme 2: pedagogical stress and instructional frustration</p> <p>Theme 3: Professional growth through adaptability</p>
3. Do you think experienced teachers deliver content better than novice teachers? If yes, how? If No, why?	<p>Experienced vs Novice teachers</p> <p>Theme 1: Value and experience</p> <p>Theme 2: Novices bring innovation</p>

	Theme 3: Need for balance
4. In most schools, there are infrastructure deficiencies. How does a lack of access to advanced teaching tools and proper infrastructure pose significant obstacles to teaching and learning?	<p>Systemic infrastructural issues</p> <p>Theme 1: Poor infrastructure impedes effective teaching</p> <p>Theme 2: Lack of technological resources limits modern teaching</p> <p>Theme 3: Basic infrastructure gaps</p>
5. How does the socio-economic background of learners affect their performance in school?	<p>Socio-economic Background of Learners</p> <p>Theme 1: Food insecurity and hunger</p> <p>Theme 2: Bullying and inequality</p> <p>Theme 3: Family struggles, stress, and lack of parental support</p>
6. How does a manager's (DH, Dept. Principal, Principal) failure to adequately supervise and guide teachers affect effective curriculum implementation?	<p>Management failures in supervision</p> <p>Theme 1: Deficient instructional support and feedback mechanism</p> <p>Theme 2: Leadership behaviours that undermine teacher motivation</p> <p>Theme 3: Weak accountability</p>
7. What impact does a teacher's lack of participation in curriculum development have on the success of curriculum implementation?	<p>Teachers' lack of participation in curriculum development</p> <p>Theme 1: Limited understanding of curriculum goals</p> <p>Theme 2: Reduced motivation and innovation</p> <p>Theme 3: Continuous professional development as a solution</p>

<p>8. Do you think English being the language of proficiency can be a barrier for some learners, particularly in content and specialised subjects?</p>	<p>English as the language of teaching and learning</p> <p>Theme 1: Barrier to comprehension</p> <p>Theme 2: Terminology challenges</p> <p>Theme 3: Cultural mismatch</p>
<p>9. In addition to the already mentioned factors, what other issues do teachers and learners face in schools that impact curriculum delivery?</p>	<p>Other issues affecting curriculum delivery</p> <p>Theme: School-level operational challenges affecting curriculum delivery</p> <p>Sub-theme 1: Absenteeism and attendance issues</p> <p>Sub-theme 2: Discipline and classroom management</p> <p>Sub-theme 3: Safety and gangsterism</p> <p>Sub-theme 4: Teacher workload and staffing</p> <p>Sub-theme 5: Communication and administrative support</p>
<p>10. What support do you think is needed by teachers from the department to ensure a successful curriculum delivery?</p>	<p>Support is needed from the district.</p> <p>Theme 1: Professional development and training</p> <p>Theme 2: Provision of resources and funding</p> <p>Theme 3: Staffing and psychosocial support</p>

Table 4.2: Thematic Grouping of Clusters and Generated Themes

Thematic Cluster	Linked Research Sub-Questions	Generated Themes
Theme Cluster 1: Structural and Resource Constraints	Q1, Q4, Q10	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Material scarcity and pedagogical adaptation • Workload intensification and instructional fatigue • Educational inequality and learning environment conditions • Poor infrastructure impedes effective teaching • Lack of technological resources limits modern instruction • Basic infrastructure gaps • Provision of resources and funding
Theme Cluster 2: Teacher Capacity and Expertise	Q2, Q3, Q7, Q10	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Knowledge and confidence gaps • Stress and frustration • Opportunities for growth • Value and experience • Novices bring innovation • Need for balance • Limited understanding of the curriculum • Reduced motivation and creativity • Professional development and training
Theme Cluster 3: Learner-Related Challenges	Q5, Q8, Q9	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Food insecurity and hunger • Bullying and inequality • Family struggles and stress • English as a barrier to comprehension • Terminology challenges

		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cultural mismatch • Teacher and learner absenteeism • Gang-related disruptions
Theme Cluster 4: Leadership and Management Factors	Q6, Q9, Q10	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lack of feedback and guidance • Demotivating leadership • Weak accountability • Communication breakdown between stakeholders • Staffing and leadership support

The raw data collected from face-to-face and telephone interviews were thoroughly studied and analysed, with the findings presented in the sections below. All participants responded to every question posed. The data was gathered based on the responses to the interview questions outlined in the problem statement in Chapter One. Insights into the challenges of curriculum implementation were derived from the perspectives of subject teachers, School Management Teams (SMTs), learners, and a curriculum facilitator. Detailed discussions of the findings from these interviews are provided below.

4.3 Themes generated and interpretation

Below is a discussion of the themes identified in Table 4.1, supported by direct quotes from the interviews and relevant literature referenced in Chapter Two. Each theme is explored in detail, highlighting key insights and connections drawn from both the participant responses and existing research.

4.3.1 Resource Constraints and Their Impact on Teaching and Learning

Theme 1: Material scarcity and pedagogical adaptation.

Participants consistently identified resource shortages as a significant obstacle to effective teaching and learning within the educational environment. They voiced their frustration over the inadequate availability of essential materials, such as textbooks that are crucial for learning, laboratory equipment necessary for firsthand experiments, and technological tools that facilitate modern instructional methods. Participants

emphasised that limited access to textbooks and other resources hinders both teaching and learning.

Resources

Participant 2 explained:

“When schools have a shortage of textbooks, it is incredibly challenging for learners... Without textbooks, they lack access to study material and cannot read effectively.”

Participant 7 echoed:

“When schools lack sufficient books and resources, teachers find it challenging to deliver effective lessons. Learners lose interest and fall behind.”

Participant 9 shared the same sentiments as other participants:

“The lack of resources has a significant impact on teaching and learning. One example of this is the shortage of textbooks... if one learner has a textbook while the others do not, the chances of the latter being unable to complete their homework increase greatly.”

Participant 10 added:

“Resources play a crucial role... in township schools, I often face a lack of essential materials. In mathematics and sciences, resources are necessary to facilitate learning, but their absence hinders outcomes.”

Inequalities

Participant 8 reinforced inequalities:

“Resource constraints worsen existing inequalities, particularly impacting disadvantaged learners and continuing achievement gaps.”

Theme 2: Increased teacher workload and overcrowded classrooms

Participants argued that teachers must invest additional time in sourcing materials, diverting focus from content delivery, which creates so much work on their end. The issue of overcrowded classrooms was particularly highlighted as a pressing concern, with many participants noting that an excess of learners not only hampers individual attention but also contributes to a chaotic and less productive learning environment. In this regard, the increased workload negatively influences the teaching and learning process by lowering instructional quality and teacher motivation, which in turn diminishes learner engagement. These factors are interdependent, forming a feedback loop where declining motivation and engagement further reduce instructional effectiveness.

Teacher workload

Participant 3 stated:

“This situation increases the teacher’s workload, as they are compelled to search for resource materials instead of focusing solely on delivering the content.”

Overcrowded classrooms

Participant 8 stated:

“Overcrowded classrooms make it difficult to move around, and teachers can’t see if all the learners are engaged.”

Participant 9 highlighted:

“In situations where a school has about 70 learners with only one teacher, it becomes extremely challenging for that teacher to ensure every learner grasps the concepts.”

Theme 3: Educational inequality and resource distribution

Unequal distribution of educational resources across schools reinforces existing patterns of educational inequality, as learners in under-resourced environments face limited access to quality instruction, learning materials, and opportunities for academic success compared to those in well-resourced settings. This contributes significantly to widening inequalities in education.

Learners attending wealthier schools, which have better facilities and resources, tend to perform better academically compared to their peers in less affluent schools. According to a report from the Department of Basic Education (DBE, 2022), the differences in infrastructure between schools located in affluent areas and those in disadvantaged communities continue to expand. This growing gap directly affects the academic performance and overall learning experiences of learners in under-resourced schools, making it harder for them to compete and succeed.

Participant 4 stated:

“Learners from well-resourced schools perform better because they have access to diverse learning resources than learners from under-resourced schools.”

Interpretation

Resource shortages in educational institutions are not merely logistical challenges but reflect systemic inequalities rooted in funding disparities, governance inefficiencies, and rural–urban divides. These constraints persist because under-resourced schools often lack the financial and institutional capacity to sustain effective teaching and learning conditions. As a result, learners in disadvantaged settings experience limited exposure to stimulating materials, qualified teachers, and enriched learning environments, all of which are critical for cognitive growth.

According to Piaget’s Cognitive Development Theory, children construct knowledge through active interaction with their environment. Learning occurs most effectively when learners can engage in exploration, problem-solving, and firsthand activities that promote cognitive development through assimilation and accommodation. In

resource-constrained environments, however, such opportunities are significantly reduced. The lack of learning materials, laboratories, and interactive teaching resources limits learners' ability to move through the developmental stages Piaget identified, particularly the concrete operational and formal operational stages, where abstract thinking and logical reasoning are cultivated.

This deprivation not only slows cognitive progression but also deepens educational inequality, as learners in well-resourced schools have greater access to the experiential learning necessary for higher-order thinking. Nonetheless, many teachers in disadvantaged contexts demonstrate resilience and creativity, adapting lessons and using improvised materials to stimulate cognitive engagement despite limitations. While such efforts show professional dedication, they cannot fully bridge the structural gaps caused by persistent inequities.

In conclusion, addressing resource shortages is vital not only for improving teaching conditions but also for supporting learners' cognitive development as outlined by Piaget. Equitable distribution of educational resources ensures that all learners, regardless of background, can engage meaningfully with their environment and develop the cognitive skills essential for academic success and lifelong learning. Therefore, policy reforms must prioritise equitable funding, adequate provision of learning materials, and teacher support to foster environments conducive to optimal cognitive growth. Literature also emphasised that inadequate learning resources lower learner achievement and reduce teacher morale (Spaull, 2019).

4.3.2 Teachers Teaching Outside Their Areas of Expertise.

Many participants shared their experiences regarding the challenges of teaching subjects that fell outside their areas of expertise. While a few viewed this situation as a valuable opportunity for personal and professional growth, the majority voiced their frustrations.

Theme 1: Knowledge Deficits and Erosion of Teacher Confidence

Most participants expressed feelings of inadequacy and diminished confidence when faced with unfamiliar content, leading to increased anxiety about their ability to

effectively engage and educate their learners. This struggle has highlighted the need for adequate support and resources for teachers tasked with teaching interdisciplinary subjects.

Participant 1 described the personal impact:

“I personally struggled when I was given a social sciences class that I had no background in. I often dreaded going to class.”

Participant 2 emphasised the lack of subject mastery:

“If teachers do not understand concepts well, they cannot explain them in detail. This reduces confidence, and learners take advantage.”

Participant 3 admitted it would be overwhelming:

“If that were to happen to me, I would struggle with confidence and constantly question how I could teach effectively.”

Participant 10 illustrated the issue through a metaphor:

“Some teachers lack proper training in the subjects they teach, which makes them less confident. Like bus drivers, if teachers are not well-equipped, they cannot guide learners to their destination successfully.”

These narratives reveal that insufficient subject mastery diminishes teachers' self-efficacy, creating anxiety that can impede effective instruction. This aligns with Bandura's self-efficacy theory, which posits that individuals' confidence in their competence is crucial for optimal performance and persistence in challenging tasks.

Theme 2: Pedagogical Stress and Instructional Frustration

Several individuals indicated that teaching subjects in which they are not specialised leads to frustration and contributes to ongoing stress.

Participant 4 found it frustrating:

“It is quite frustrating because this is not a subject in which you specialise. You may not be completely confident that you are teaching the correct content.”

Participant 6 said it weakens learner understanding:

“Teachers often only cover superficial aspects when they lack expertise. Learners miss out on the deeper concepts.”

Participant 7 added:

“When teachers lack expertise in a subject, their lessons tend to be weaker, making it hard for learners to understand.”

The lack of subject expertise leads to a cycle of uncertainty and stress, which compromises lesson depth and learners' comprehension. This is supported by literature indicating that teacher stress often correlates with lower instructional quality (Kyriacou, 2018).

Theme 3: Professional Growth Through Adaptability

Although most participants regarded teaching beyond their primary discipline as a significant challenge, a few interpreted it as an avenue for professional growth. Their reflections indicate that moments of uncertainty can prompt self-reflection and the acquisition of new instructional approaches. This perspective resonates with Mezirow's theory of transformative learning, which suggests that discomfort or disorientation can function as a stimulus for critical reflection and professional transformation.

Participant 2 proclaimed:

“Teaching a new subject allows them to learn and discover they can excel in it.”

Participant 5 reflected on alignment:

“If teachers could align the subjects they teach, it would help a lot. For example, teaching physics and mathematics together makes sense, but maths and English feel impossible.”

Participant 8 acknowledged adaptability:

“Teachers can adapt and learn alongside learners, but schools should provide training when assigning subjects outside expertise.”

Participant 9:

“If I were a math teacher suddenly tasked with teaching life sciences... I might misinterpret key concepts. On the positive side, transitioning could allow me to introduce new methods that enhance the learning experience.”

“On the other hand, teaching outside comfort zones can help novice teachers discover their potential.”

Interpretation

Collectively, these themes demonstrate a tension between the necessity for adaptability and the risks posed to instructional quality. Teachers' accounts reveal that while confidence gaps and anxiety frequently undermine effective teaching, some participants also identified these challenges as opportunities for professional growth. Consistent with Shulman's (2018) notion of pedagogical content knowledge (PCK), participants emphasised that mastery of subject matter is integral to teaching effectiveness and to maintaining confidence in the classroom. When teachers are required to instruct outside their disciplinary expertise, their limited subject knowledge can compromise both instructional clarity and learner engagement. This aligns with existing studies that highlight how subject misalignment contributes to teacher burnout and diminished learner outcomes (Ingersoll, 2019).

At the same time, a minority of participants reframed these difficulties as catalysts for reflection and skill enhancement, reflecting Mezirow's (2019) concept of transformative learning, in which professional discomfort can stimulate growth. These contrasting experiences reveal that institutional support through targeted training,

mentorship, and resource provision is essential in converting potential stressors into developmental opportunities. Overall, these findings underscore the importance of structured professional development and robust administrative support systems, which will be explored in Chapter 5.

4.3.3 Experienced vs. Novice Teachers

Most participants believed experienced teachers deliver content better, but a few noted the value of fresh perspectives from novice teachers.

Theme 1: Value and experience

Participants emphasised that experienced teachers tend to deliver content more effectively due to their extensive repertoire of instructional strategies, understanding of diverse learning styles, and ability to anticipate potential challenges. Their experience enables them to adapt lessons to learners' needs and provide personalised support, thereby fostering a more engaging and effective learning environment.

Participants highlighted that teaching experience enables educators to simplify complex material, pace lessons effectively, and manage diverse learner needs with confidence. This sentiment was captured in statements such as "Experience is the best teacher," underscoring the significant role of experience in enhancing classroom effectiveness and overall instructional quality.

Participant 1 explained:

"Experience is the best teacher. Universities give you unrealistic views of classrooms. Experienced teachers know how to navigate the system."

Participant 2:

"Experienced teachers know how to simplify material. Novice teachers may know the content but cannot explain it clearly."

Participant 4:

“Yes, experienced teachers know how to pace lessons and support learners at different levels.

Participant 6:

“Experience helps because you encounter many types of learners. You learn to adapt strategies over time.”

Participant 8:

“Yes, experienced teachers refine methods over time, making them more effective.

Theme 2: Novices bring innovation

Some participants noted that while experience is important in teaching, they observed that novice teachers contribute creativity, modern pedagogical approaches, and strong technological fluency to classroom practice. Their fresh perspectives often make learning more interactive and engaging, while their innovative methods complement the tried-and-tested strategies of experienced teachers, creating a dynamic and balanced teaching environment.

Participant 10

“New teachers are thriving. They research, bring fresh ideas, and relate well to learners.”

Some highlighted that experienced teachers may resist innovative ideas, making novices vital for innovation.

Participant 10

“Experienced teachers often become too relaxed... they may resist new ideas.”

Participant 9

“Experienced teachers possess a wealth of knowledge... they understand the challenges learners face. New teachers may struggle but bring fresh methods and innovative strategies.”

Theme 3: Need for balance

Others noted that times are changing; therefore, experienced and novice teachers must work together and share teaching strategies to enhance teaching and learning and keep up with the changing and technologically advanced World. They also emphasised that effective teaching environments thrive on collaboration between experienced and novice teachers. Through mentorship and reciprocal knowledge sharing, schools can combine the stability and pedagogical depth of veteran educators with the innovation and technological fluency of newer teachers. In rapidly changing technological and societal contexts, such collaboration fosters mutual growth, adaptability, and continuous learning for both groups.

Participant 5 described a balance:

“It is 50/50. Experienced teachers excel at classroom management. New teachers connect better with learners using technology.”

“Experienced teachers have the advantage, but times are changing. New technology and evolving lifestyles mean new teachers can also connect with learners.”

Quotes emphasise collaboration, such as “Both have unique advantages. Experienced teachers have depth, but novices bring fresh ideas.”

Participant 3:

“Both have unique advantages. Experienced teachers have depth, but novices bring fresh ideas. It depends on the classroom environment.”

Participant 7:

“Experienced teachers often explain concepts clearly and manage classrooms better, though novices bring energy.”

Interpretation

The themes underscore the complementary nature of experienced and novice teachers within the teaching profession. While experience contributes to consistency, clarity, and effective classroom management, novice teachers often bring innovation, creativity, and proficiency with contemporary pedagogical tools and technologies. This balance suggests that effective educational practice can be achieved when schools intentionally leverage the strengths of both groups. Experienced teachers offer institutional knowledge, pedagogical stability, and the ability to manage diverse learner behaviours with confidence. Their accumulated expertise enables them to anticipate challenges and maintain instructional coherence. Conversely, novice teachers tend to introduce fresh perspectives, enthusiasm, and adaptability to evolving educational demands, particularly in integrating digital learning strategies. Feiman-Nemser (2021) pointed out that both new and experienced teachers grow more when they work together. This teamwork combines their experience with new ideas.

Implementing structured mentorship programs or collaborative teaching models can therefore maximise the benefits of this intergenerational exchange. Such initiatives promote reciprocal learning: novice teachers gain confidence and practical wisdom, while experienced teachers remain professionally stimulated through exposure to innovative ideas and technologies. Research supports that mentoring relationships foster reflective practice and improve teacher retention and instructional quality (Ingersoll and Strong, 2011). Ultimately, fostering deliberate collaboration between experienced and novice teachers not only strengthens professional capacity but also enhances learner outcomes. These themes reinforce the importance of institutional strategies that support shared professional learning, an issue explored further in the following section on professional development and support systems.

4.3.4 Systemic infrastructural issues

Many participants emphasised that infrastructure challenges significantly affect teaching and learning. For instance, a lack of classrooms results in overcrowding. In overcrowded classes, managing the classroom becomes increasingly difficult. Movement is restricted, and teachers struggle to ensure that all learners are engaged. Teaching tends to be more effective in smaller classes with fewer learners. In

environments where overcrowding occurs, noise levels increase, hindering communication between teachers and students. This also complicates the grading process; with a larger number of learners, it becomes challenging to provide timely feedback. Additionally, there may be shortages of chairs, desks, and other teaching and learning materials, which highly affects teaching and learning.

Theme 1: Poor Infrastructure Impedes Effective Teaching

Adequate physical infrastructure, such as well-equipped classrooms, functional furniture, reliable electricity, and properly resourced laboratories, is fundamental to creating an effective learning environment. These elements provide the structural foundation that supports both teaching and learning processes. When such resources are lacking, teachers often struggle to implement interactive or practical lessons, and learners' engagement and achievement are adversely affected. Earthman (2018) argued that the quality of school facilities has a direct influence on instructional delivery and learner performance. Similarly, Barrett et al. (2019) emphasised that the physical learning environment significantly shapes learners' cognitive and emotional engagement. Ensuring that schools possess the necessary infrastructure is therefore not only a matter of comfort but also of pedagogical effectiveness. Well-maintained and adequately equipped facilities enhance teachers' motivation and learners' participation, reinforcing the broader educational goal of equitable access to quality education.

Participant 1 noted:

“Some schools lack furniture, which leads to discomfort during teaching and learning. Learners may fight over chairs for up to 30 minutes, distracting everyone from the lesson.”

Participant 9:

“If you are teaching Computer Application Technology in a rural area without electricity... this lack of essential technical resources can also affect a teacher's morale.”

Broken windows and poor classroom conditions reduce learner concentration and motivation.

This sentiment was echoed by Participant 3, who said:

“Some schools have broken windows, resulting in a cold and uncomfortable environment for both teachers and learners.”

Participants noted that overcrowded or poorly maintained classrooms undermine effective management and disrupt the learning process. Such physical deficiencies were perceived to correlate with reduced learner attendance, lower engagement, and diminished overall academic performance.

Such conditions result in decreased concentration, motivation, and attendance, creating an environment that is not conducive to learning. According to Spaul (2019), inadequate infrastructure contributes to unequal learning outcomes in South Africa, particularly in rural and township schools, where overcrowding and deteriorating buildings are common.

Theme 2: Lack of Technological Resources Limits Modern Teaching

Access to technology is critical for contemporary teaching and learner engagement. In today’s educational landscape, digital tools are no longer supplementary but integral to effective instruction, communication, and assessment. Technology enables teachers to diversify their pedagogical approaches, incorporating multimedia resources, online collaboration platforms, and interactive learning applications that foster deeper understanding and engagement. When effectively integrated, digital technologies can support differentiated instruction, catering to diverse learning styles and needs.

However, unequal access to technological resources can exacerbate educational disparities, particularly between well-resourced and under-resourced schools. As Mishra and Koehler’s (2022) Technological Pedagogical Content Knowledge (TPACK) framework suggests, the effective use of technology requires not only access to tools but also teachers’ confidence and competence in integrating them meaningfully into subject instruction. Teachers without adequate training or infrastructure may

experience frustration or diminished self-efficacy, which can limit the pedagogical potential of digital learning. Therefore, equitable access to technology paired with ongoing professional development is essential for promoting innovative teaching and sustaining learner engagement in the digital era.

Participants highlighted that schools lacking electricity or computer access face significant challenges in delivering ICT-related subjects effectively. The absence of essential resources such as projectors and printers, further hampers lesson delivery and limits teachers' ability to communicate and present learning materials efficiently.

Participant 9 highlighted:

“If you are teaching Computer Application Technology in a rural area without electricity, access to laptops and computers is crucial for students to understand the subject matter.”

Similarly, Participant 11 explained:

“If my school had working printers or projectors, I could send notes through Teams. With good infrastructure, learning happens faster and more effectively.”

Participants also emphasised the broader implications, noting that teachers are forced to rely on traditional methods, potentially reducing learner participation. Limited technological infrastructure slows the adoption of innovative teaching strategies.

Makgato and Mji (2020) argued that increased access to technology significantly enhances learner engagement and improves the quality of teaching. They emphasised that when learners can use digital tools and resources, their motivation to learn is heightened. This access allows teachers to incorporate interactive multimedia content, fostering a more dynamic and participatory classroom environment. Additionally, they further noted that technology facilitates personalised learning experiences, enabling instructors to tailor their teaching approaches to meet the diverse needs of individual learners. Overall, the integration of technology in educational settings not only enriches the learning experience but also helps in bridging the gap between different learning styles and paces.

Theme 3: Overcrowded classrooms and inequality

Insufficient infrastructure often results in overcrowded classrooms, which in turn negatively affects learning outcomes and perpetuate educational inequalities. Overcrowding limits teachers' ability to provide individualised attention, manage behaviour effectively, and employ interactive or learner-centred pedagogies. In such environments, instructional quality tends to decline as teachers are forced to prioritise classroom control over meaningful engagement. Research indicates that high learner–teacher ratios correlate with reduced academic achievement and lower learner motivation (Blatchford et al., 2019). Moreover, overcrowding disproportionately affects schools in under-resourced communities, thereby reinforcing systemic inequities in educational access and quality. As UNESCO (2020) noted, disparities in infrastructure contribute to persistent achievement gaps between learners from different socioeconomic backgrounds. Addressing infrastructural deficits is therefore essential not only for improving pedagogical effectiveness but also for promoting equity and inclusivity within the education system.

Participant 1 explained:

“I once worked in a school that did not have any science lab facilities. During practical lessons, I had to get creative, for example, using a cut-up two-litre bottle as a beaker.”

Participant 5 highlighted delays in teaching due to poor infrastructure:

“What I can cover in four periods may take six or seven because I only have one chalkboard. Learners do not have textbooks, so I must write everything down, erase, and start again.”

Participant 6 mentioned overcrowding:

“If learners do not have enough chairs, they cannot sit comfortably. Some even stand during lessons. This wastes time and distracts everyone.”

Participants noted that inadequate infrastructure contributes to widening both academic and socio-economic disparities among learners. This observation aligns

with the Department of Basic Education (DBE, 2022), which highlights persistent inequalities between schools in disadvantaged communities and those in affluent areas, underscoring the systemic nature of resource imbalances in South Africa's education system.

Interpretation

Inadequate infrastructure has a direct and detrimental impact on both teaching and learning processes. Teachers working in poorly resourced environments often experience demotivation and frustration, as the absence of essential facilities disrupts lesson flow and limits their ability to employ effective instructional strategies. Such conditions also hinder learner engagement, as physical discomfort, noise, or overcrowding diminishes concentration and participation. As noted by Earthman (2021), the physical environment serves as a key determinant of instructional quality, influencing both teacher performance and learner achievement.

Resource disparities between schools reinforce structural inequalities within the education system. Learners in rural or underfunded contexts are often disadvantaged by inadequate facilities, limited access to technology, and overcrowded classrooms. These inequities create a persistent achievement gap between privileged and marginalised learners, reflecting what UNESCO (2020) describes as the "infrastructure divide." Consequently, disparities in the learning environment extend beyond physical comfort, they shape learners' educational opportunities and long-term trajectories.

Bronfenbrenner's *Ecological Systems Theory* (2019 revision) provides a valuable framework for understanding the broader implications of infrastructural inadequacy. The theory posits that learning and development are shaped by multiple interrelated environmental systems, from the immediate classroom context to broader institutional and societal structures. Poor infrastructure thus represents a significant environmental barrier within the microsystem that affects daily teaching and learning interactions, while also influencing learners' mesosystem and exosystemic experiences over time. This perspective underscores that infrastructural investment is not merely a logistical concern but a fundamental component of equitable and effective education.

4.3.5 Socio-economic Background of Learners

Participants emphasised the significant impact of various socioeconomic factors on learner performance, specifically pointing out issues such as poverty and hunger. They noted that learners from low-income backgrounds often face inadequate access to essential resources, such as educational materials and technology, which hinders their ability to succeed. Additionally, limited parental support was highlighted as a crucial factor, as many parents are unable to provide the necessary guidance and encouragement due to their own struggles with financial stability and time constraints. This combination of challenges creates a barrier for learners and ultimately affecting their academic achievement and overall development.

Theme 1: Food insecurity and hunger

Participants emphasised that hunger and inadequate nutrition severely hinder learners' cognitive functioning, concentration, and school attendance. Many reported that learners often arrive at school without having eaten, a situation exacerbated by family instability and parental unemployment. For some learners, school-provided meals represent their only reliable source of nutrition. The effects include diminished attention and memory, reduced participation in classroom activities, and compromised physical health that negatively influences long-term development. Multiple participants (P1, P5, P7, P8, P9, P10) explicitly linked hunger to lower academic performance, underscoring the profound connection between nutrition and learning outcomes.

Participant 1:

“Some learners may come to school with empty stomachs, unstable family situations, or unemployed parents. This stress affects learning.”

Participant 5:

“Imagine a learner who comes to class without having eaten. How can you expect them to focus?”

Participant 7:

“Hunger, lack of internet, and family stress make it difficult for disadvantaged learners to keep up.”

Participant 8:

“Learners from low-income families face poor nutrition and unstable home lives, while wealthy learners thrive with support.”

Participant 9 added:

“Food insecurity... many learners arrive at school without having eaten, which hinders their performance.”

Participant 10

“Learners may rely on school meals as their only food source... Without a proper meal, they cannot focus.”

Theme 2: Bullying and inequality

Participants highlighted that socioeconomic disparities within and between schools foster environments where bullying, stigma, and unequal access to educational resources are prevalent. Learners from low-income backgrounds often face discrimination due to differences in clothing, stationery, technology, and family support, which can erode self-esteem and a sense of belonging. These inequities contribute to emotional distress, disengagement from learning, and, in some cases, exposure to violence or unsafe community environments. Several participants (P2, P5, P6, P9) specifically linked social comparison and bullying to diminished learner well-being and academic participation, underscoring the social-emotional impact of poverty on education.

Participant 2:

“A child from a rich family has textbooks and Wi-Fi. A disadvantaged child may not even have basic supplies like pens.”

Participant 5 added:

“Learners from impoverished backgrounds may be subjected to bullying due to differences in attire.”

Participant 6 described low confidence:

“When learners see others with better shoes and stationery, they feel insecure. This affects confidence and performance.”

Participant 9 added:

“Learners from impoverished backgrounds may be bullied due to uniforms, lowering self-esteem.”

“High-crime areas expose learners to violence and substance abuse as coping mechanisms.”

Theme 3: Family struggles, stress, and lack of parental support

Participants noted that family hardships such as financial strain, domestic instability, and insufficient parental guidance significantly affect learners' motivation, attendance, and academic performance. Many learners are compelled to assume adult-like responsibilities, including caring for siblings, working part-time, or managing household duties, which detract from their academic focus. Parents facing their own socioeconomic or emotional challenges often struggle to provide consistent educational support. As a result, learners experience reduced motivation, heightened absenteeism, and behavioural difficulties rooted in domestic stress. Several participants (P3, P4, P7, P10) underscored that a stable and supportive family environment is essential for academic success, noting that poverty intensifies these challenges and perpetuates cycles of disadvantage.

Participant 3 added nuance:

“A learner may have all needs met yet still lack interest in school. Motivation is also a factor.”

Participant 4 emphasised hopelessness:

“Many disadvantaged learners deal with feelings of hopelessness and low motivation, which affects their outlook on the future.”

Participant 7 emphasised:

“Learners from unfortunate family backgrounds may struggle academically... the burden of household chores can add additional strain.”

Participant 10

“Domestic abuse and parental separation lead to disruptive behaviours in class.”

“Some learners miss school to work part-time or care for family members.”

Interpretation

Poverty emerged as a cross-cutting factor influencing multiple dimensions of learners' educational experiences. Economic deprivation manifests in hunger, limited access to educational resources, and family instability, all of which directly impede learning. Beyond material constraints, poverty exerts profound socio-emotional effects, diminishing learners' confidence, motivation, and emotional well-being, which in turn hinder academic achievement. Participants also recognised that factors such as intrinsic motivation, parental support, and learner resilience can partially mitigate these effects, illustrating that educational challenges are multifactorial rather than solely economic. Overall, the findings underscore that systemic socio-economic inequality perpetuates educational disparities, as disadvantaged learners confront intersecting barriers within both school and home environments. Hunger, poverty, and lack of parental support are recurring barriers to learning (Van der Berg, 2023).

4.3.6 Management failures in supervision

School leadership faced ongoing criticism due to insufficient supervision and a lack of effective guidance. Many participants expressed concerns regarding the leaders' inability to provide clear direction and support. This criticism underscored specific

instances where decisions made by school administrators did not align with the needs of the school community, resulting in a decline in morale and performance. Consequently, the necessity for stronger, more engaged leadership became increasingly apparent, with growing calls for improvements in oversight practices and a more initiative-taking approach to nurturing a positive educational environment.

Theme 1: Deficient Instructional Support and Feedback Mechanisms

Participants identified a systemic weakness in instructional support and feedback processes within schools. Many teachers reported receiving limited or inconsistent guidance from school leadership, which hindered opportunities for professional growth and reflective practice. The absence of structured feedback mechanisms was perceived to reduce teacher efficacy, as teachers lacked constructive input to refine their instructional strategies or address pedagogical challenges effectively. This finding aligns with Hallinger and Murphy's (1985) instructional leadership model, revised by Hook (2021), which underscores the principal's role in supervising instruction, providing formative feedback, and fostering professional learning. Similarly, transformational leadership theory highlights the importance of mentoring, vision-sharing, and empowerment in promoting teacher development. The data thus suggest that strengthening feedback and support structures is critical to enhancing teacher performance, motivation, and continuous improvement in teaching practice.

Participant 1:

"If my manager does not provide oversight, I could make mistakes for an extended period without realizing it."

Participant 2:

"When managers do not guide colleagues, teachers end up teaching in their own ways. This lack of direction affects the curriculum."

Participant 7:

"Without constructive feedback, teachers cannot improve. Leadership is essential."

Participant 9 alluded:

“A lack of effective feedback mechanisms hinders progress. Without proper supervision, subject-specific needs are overlooked, resulting in unbalanced resource distribution.”

“Unclear communication between management and staff further impedes teaching.”

Theme 2: Leadership Behaviours that Undermine Teacher Motivation

Participants described leadership practices that negatively influenced teacher morale, engagement, and professional commitment. Reports of authoritarian management styles, lack of recognition, poor communication, and limited opportunities for professional input contributed to feelings of frustration and disengagement among teachers. Such behaviours were perceived to erode trust and collegiality, ultimately diminishing collaboration, creativity, and instructional quality within schools.

These findings can be understood through Herzberg's Two-Factor Theory, which distinguishes between motivators, such as recognition and professional growth, and hygiene factors such as administrative support and working conditions. In this context, ineffective leadership functions as a demotivating hygiene factor, reducing job satisfaction and performance. Similarly, Transformational Leadership Theory emphasises the role of inspirational and supportive leadership in enhancing motivation, commitment, and teacher efficacy. The absence of these qualities in school leadership not only undermines teacher motivation but also threatens long-term teacher retention and the overall quality of teaching and learning.

Participant 6 stated:

“If managers do not support teachers, it creates an unfriendly work environment. New teachers especially lose motivation.”

Participant 7 added:

“Managers should support teachers in a way that makes them feel valued, not belittled.”

Participant 10:

“Managers often relax and assume teachers know what they are doing. Instead, they should collaborate, support, and adopt democratic leadership.”

Theme 3: Weak accountability

Participants reported that weak accountability mechanisms within schools undermine the consistency and quality of teaching and learning. Monitoring and evaluation processes were often described as irregular, superficial, or overly compliance-driven, focusing on administrative checklists rather than meaningful professional development. This lack of systematic oversight was perceived to erode responsibility among staff, diminish institutional trust, and hinder efforts to sustain high professional standards. In many cases, teachers expressed uncertainty about performance expectations and limited follow-up after classroom observations, contributing to a culture of minimal accountability.

This theme aligns with educational governance theory and accountability frameworks such as those outlined by Bush and Glover (2016), which emphasised that robust monitoring systems are essential for maintaining professional integrity and promoting organisational learning. When accountability structures are ineffective, opportunities for reflection, feedback, and collective improvement are lost. Consequently, the absence of transparent evaluation practices not only weakens institutional trust but also impedes schools' capacity to learn from experience, adapt to challenges, and drive sustained improvement in teaching quality.

Participant 3:

“If a principal fails to provide adequate supervision, it leads to inconsistency and teacher demotivation.”

Participant 4:

“Inadequate supervision results in gaps in what learners are taught. Teachers may not feel accountable.”

Participant 5 shared personal experience:

“I was made HOD but received no guidance. I struggled with classroom management and did not know it was my responsibility to order textbooks.”

Participant 8:

“A manager’s failure to guide teachers leads to inconsistent curriculum implementation and uneven learner outcomes.”

Interpretation:

The themes reveal significant weaknesses in school leadership and accountability structures. Participants’ accounts suggest that evaluation processes are often procedural rather than developmental, focusing on compliance instead of enhancing instructional quality. This approach diminishes teacher motivation and limits opportunities for professional reflection and growth. The lack of systematic follow-up or constructive feedback also erodes institutional trust and constrains schools’ capacity to sustain improvement. The findings align with principles of instructional leadership, which emphasise the leader’s role in supervising teaching and providing formative feedback to promote learning effectiveness (Hallinger and Murphy, 1985) revised by Hook (2021). From a transformational leadership perspective, the absence of inspiring and supportive leadership undermines the relational and motivational aspects necessary for collective engagement and school improvement.

Similarly, distributed leadership theory highlights that accountability and improvement are most effective when leadership responsibilities are shared across the school community, fostering collaboration and ownership of outcomes. Taken together, these theoretical perspectives underscore that strong monitoring and evaluation systems are not merely administrative functions; they are central to pedagogical leadership and organisational learning. To address these challenges, schools should implement

leadership development initiatives, structured feedback systems, and transparent performance monitoring frameworks. Such measures can build a culture of trust, shared accountability, and continuous professional development, ultimately strengthening teaching quality and learner outcomes.

4.3.7 Teachers' lack of participation in curriculum development

Many participants noted that a significant challenge to effective curriculum implementation is the lack of teacher involvement in the development of the curriculum. Teachers are the primary individuals responsible for implementing the curriculum, so when they are excluded from the design process, they often feel a lack of ownership, commitment, and understanding of the intended learning outcomes. Teachers in this study expressed that they frequently feel excluded from decision-making. They noted that changes to the curriculum happen without proper consultation or training. Participants also argued that this lack of involvement creates gaps in implementation, as teachers may not fully understand the reasons behind certain reforms or may lack the necessary skills and resources to use innovative approaches effectively.

Theme 1: Limited Understanding of Curriculum Goals

Participants reported that many teachers demonstrated an incomplete or inconsistent understanding of curriculum objectives and expected learning outcomes. This limited conceptual clarity often manifests in classroom practice through misaligned lesson planning, inappropriate assessment methods, and inconsistent pacing of content delivery. As a result, learners experience fragmented and uneven learning experiences, with confusion surrounding assessment expectations and progression from one topic to another. Such inconsistencies were perceived to undermine learner engagement, conceptual understanding, and overall academic achievement.

This theme resonates with instructional leadership theory, which underscores the role of school leaders in guiding teachers' curriculum interpretation and ensuring alignment between teaching, assessment, and learning outcomes. From a distributed leadership perspective, curriculum understanding should be a shared professional responsibility, reinforced through collaborative planning, peer mentoring, and reflective dialogue.

Furthermore, transformational leadership theory suggests that visionary and supportive leadership can help cultivate teachers' capacity to internalise and implement curriculum goals effectively.

In light of these insights, the findings point to the need for targeted professional development, collaborative curriculum planning, and ongoing instructional support. Strengthening teachers' curriculum literacy through structured training and feedback mechanisms could promote consistency in instructional delivery, improve assessment validity, and ultimately enhance learner achievement and equity across classrooms.

Participant 2 stated:

“When teachers are not involved in the development process, they may not fully understand the curriculum’s goals, objectives, or underlying principles.”

Participant 4 further added:

“If teachers are not involved in developing the curriculum, they may not support initiatives. They might feel excluded, thinking, ‘I wasn’t part of this development, so why should I support it?’”

This suggests that active teacher involvement is imperative in fostering a sense of ownership, increasing motivation, and ensuring a strong alignment between educational policy and classroom practice. Research conducted by Fullan (2022) underlines the critical nature of this involvement, emphasizing that successful curriculum reform hinges on the meaningful participation of teachers. As the primary implementers of change within educational settings, teachers bring invaluable insights and real-world experiences that can transform theoretical policy into effective, practical applications in the classroom. Their engagement not only bolsters their commitment to the reforms but also enhances the overall impact of the educational initiatives on learning outcomes. According to Vygotsky's Social Constructivist Theory (revised 2020), this theme reflects how exclusion from collaborative curriculum dialogue restricts teachers' ability to co-construct shared interpretations of learning outcomes. Without spaces for peer discussion or guided reflection, teachers' curriculum understanding remains fragmented and inconsistent.

Theme 2: Reduced Motivation and Innovation

Beyond misunderstanding curriculum goals, participants revealed that exclusion from decision-making processes and limited professional involvement also undermine teachers' intrinsic motivation and creativity. When teachers are excluded from key discussions such as curriculum planning, school leadership decisions, or professional development initiatives, they often experience a deep sense of undervaluation and disengagement. This exclusion conveys that their expertise and insights are not recognised, diminishing their professional agency and sense of belonging. The resulting demotivation is found to weaken teachers' willingness to experiment, collaborate, or take initiative in improving their instructional practices.

Participants explained that this disengagement hampers multiple forms of innovation, including pedagogical innovation, such as adopting learner-centred or inquiry-based methods, which becomes rare as teachers default to routine, compliance-driven practices. Assessment innovation, including formative feedback and performance-based approaches, declines when teachers feel unsupported or disconnected from policy intent. Lastly, technological innovation, like integrating digital tools and blended learning, is limited by both a lack of motivation and inadequate institutional encouragement. To counteract these effects, schools should cultivate inclusive and participatory leadership cultures that value teacher input, provide recognition, and encourage experimentation in pedagogy, assessment, and technology. Implementing transformational and distributed leadership practices can restore motivation, stimulate innovation, and enhance both teaching quality and learner engagement.

Participant 9 observed:

“When teachers are not involved in developing the curriculum, they often feel excluded. This can make teaching less creative and more mechanical.”

Participant 7 highlighted the benefit of participation:

“Participating in training and sharing ideas about curriculum development boosts my confidence in the classroom and helps me adjust my teaching to help learners succeed.”

This aligns with the findings of Hargreaves and Fullan (2022), who emphasised that fostering professional collaboration among teachers, coupled with active inclusion in the curriculum design process, significantly enhances both teacher efficacy and creativity. They suggest that when teachers collaborate, sharing insights and strategies, it not only empowers them but also leads to innovative approaches in curriculum development. This collaborative environment facilitates a richer exchange of ideas, allowing teachers to tailor learning experiences that meet the diverse needs of their learners while fostering a sense of ownership and commitment to the educational process. Moreover, Vygotsky's Social Constructivist Theory (revised 2020) highlighted how collaboration functions as a driver of collective motivation and creativity, central to social constructivist principles. When teachers are excluded from professional conversations and decision-making, opportunities for shared problem-solving, innovation, and mutual support are lost, diminishing both individual and collective growth.

Theme 3: Continuous Professional Development as a Solution

Participants consistently identified Continuous Professional Development (CPD) as a key strategy for addressing the challenges of limited curriculum understanding and reduced teacher motivation. However, the data revealed that access to meaningful CPD opportunities was uneven and often insufficient. Many teachers reported that available workshops were infrequent, generic, or disconnected from their classroom realities. As a result, professional growth remained limited, and existing knowledge gaps in curriculum interpretation, assessment practices, and instructional innovation persisted. For most participants, therefore, CPD emerged not as a currently effective support mechanism but as a proposed solution to enhance teaching quality and confidence. They emphasised the need for contextually relevant, sustained, and collaborative professional learning rather than one-off compliance-based training sessions.

Specifically, teachers suggested that impactful CPD should include curriculum interpretation workshops to improve understanding of learning outcomes and content sequencing, assessment literacy training to support valid, reliable, and learner-centred assessment design, instructional design and co-planning sessions to promote collaborative lesson development and reflective practice, and technology integration

workshops to strengthen digital pedagogy and modern teaching methods. Vygotsky's revised theory of social constructivism demonstrates that CPD serves as a structured avenue for social learning, allowing teachers to co-create pedagogical understanding, share best practices, and construct new professional identities through collaboration and reflective dialogue.

The findings underscore that sustained, needs-based professional development is essential for improving curriculum implementation and instructional quality. School leaders should therefore prioritise strategic investment in CPD programmes that integrate collaborative learning, mentorship, and feedback mechanisms. Doing so can bridge the gap between policy and practice, enhance teacher competence and morale, and thereby leading to a more coherent and effective learning experiences for learners.

Participant 8 said:

“If a teacher does not engage in ongoing development, they risk teaching outdated material that no longer aligns with the curriculum.”

Professional development ensures that teachers stay informed about new curriculum changes, which in turn improves classroom practices. Darling-Hammond (2021) also stressed that teacher learning communities and workshops lead to better curriculum delivery and learner achievement.

Interpretation

The findings demonstrate that engaging teachers in curriculum development fosters a sense of ownership, motivation, and understanding, elements crucial for successful implementation. Conversely, excluding teachers can lead to resistance, misinterpretation, and ineffective teaching practices. Thus, involving educators in the processes of curriculum design, review, and training is vital for sustainable educational reform. This perspective aligns with Vygotsky's revised Social Constructivist Theory, published in 2020, which views learning and teaching as a collaborative endeavour where the shared experiences of teachers enhance the effectiveness of curriculum implementation. In the South African context, studies by Chisholm (2020) and Jansen

(2019) have indicated that significant curriculum reforms, such as Curriculum 2005 and the CAPS system, encountered resistance and confusion. This was primarily due to insufficient consultation and training for teachers. When educators are excluded from the process, they tend to become passive implementers rather than active contributors, which diminishes innovation and decreases motivation.

4.3.8 English as Language of Learning and Teaching (LoLT)

Theme 1: Barrier to comprehension

Participants identified that many learners struggle with general comprehension, which encompasses both linguistic and cognitive dimensions of understanding. Linguistic comprehension refers to learners' difficulty in processing spoken or written English, particularly when instructions, discussions, or reading materials are not presented in their home language. This language barrier often results in limited participation, misinterpretation of questions, and superficial engagement with learning tasks. Cognitive comprehension challenges, on the other hand, relate to learners' difficulty in grasping core subject concepts even when language is not the primary obstacle. Participants explained that learners often memorise information without deep understanding, indicating that they struggle to connect updated content to prior knowledge. Such difficulties are exacerbated when lessons rely heavily on verbal instruction, with limited use of visual aids or contextual examples to support meaning-making.

These comprehension barriers collectively hinder learners' ability to express their understanding, formulate coherent responses, or engage critically with content. The issue is not limited to vocabulary or technical terminology, which is addressed in Theme 2, but rather reflects broader challenges in constructing meaning and reasoning conceptually. When teachers engage learners through dialogue, collaborative activities, and context-rich explanations, they enable learners to bridge both linguistic and cognitive gaps, fostering deeper and more sustained understanding.

For instance, one participant (P2) stated:

“Learners may know the content well but cannot express themselves in English.”

Participant 3 added:

“The language barrier restricts comprehension, especially for complex terms in science like ‘intermolecular forces.’”

“Most of our learners can’t understand English properly, so they struggle to follow lessons.”

Another participant echoed this by saying:

“Sometimes learners know the answer but can’t explain it in English, so they fail even when they understand the topic.”

Theme 2: Terminology challenges

Participants consistently highlighted that terminology confusion presents a major barrier to effective teaching and learning. This challenge operates on two distinct but interconnected levels: curriculum-level terminology and subject-level terminology, each influencing how teachers interpret, plan, and deliver instruction. At the curriculum level, teachers reported struggling with terms used in policy documents, assessment guidelines, and curriculum frameworks. Phrases such as learning outcomes, assessment standards, and competencies are often interpreted inconsistently, leading to uncertainty in lesson planning and assessment alignment. This lack of shared understanding among teachers and school leaders contributes to variation in curriculum implementation across schools, echoing earlier concerns about inadequate feedback and guidance.

At the subject level, participants noted challenges with discipline-specific terminology, for instance, scientific, mathematical, or literary concepts that require precise interpretation. Learners frequently memorise such terms without fully grasping their meaning or application, resulting in superficial learning. Teachers, particularly those

with limited subject-specialist training, also struggle to simplify complex academic vocabulary without distorting conceptual accuracy. These dual layers of terminology confusion reduce teachers' confidence and learners' comprehension, reinforcing gaps between intended curriculum outcomes and actual classroom practices. In some cases, teachers rely on rote instruction or textbook definitions rather than encouraging critical engagement with key terms, thereby limiting learners' cognitive development.

Both teachers and learners need structured opportunities to negotiate and internalise complex terminology through dialogue, exemplification, and contextual use. Consequently, there is a clear implication for teacher professional development, schools, and education departments should prioritise curriculum interpretation workshops, subject-specific terminology training, and collaborative communities of practice where educators can co-construct shared understandings of key terms. Enhancing conceptual clarity at both curriculum and classroom levels would help bridge the gap between policy language and pedagogical practice, promoting consistency and deeper learning outcomes.

Participant 1:

“Learners struggle not because they lack knowledge, but because of the way questions are phrased.”

Participant 3:

“Some of the terms used in the curriculum are too academic; we have to guess what they mean in practice.”

Participant 7:

“I find it difficult to understand certain terminologies used in the policy documents; it's not written in simple language for teachers.”

Participant 9

“If a learner does not understand the question, it becomes very challenging for them to provide an answer. English can be a significant barrier, especially in subjects like science and mathematics.”

Participant 10:

“The terminology is confusing, especially when new curriculum frameworks are introduced without clear explanations.”

Theme 3: Cultural mismatch

Participants revealed that the disconnect between learners’ cultural backgrounds and the curriculum content often hinders engagement, comprehension, and motivation. This theme comprises two interrelated subdimensions: the cultural irrelevance of curriculum content and tensions between cultural identity and pragmatic English use.

1. Cultural Irrelevance of Curriculum Content

Teachers noted that much of the prescribed curriculum, particularly English-language texts and examples, reflects Western or urban-centric experiences that do not resonate with learners in rural or township contexts. Learners struggle to relate to unfamiliar cultural references, idiomatic expressions, or examples drawn from foreign lifestyles. This disconnects limits both linguistic understanding and emotional engagement, as learners fail to see their own realities represented in classroom materials. Participants explained that culturally distant content not only reduces motivation but also discourages learners from active participation, as they may perceive school knowledge as irrelevant to their lived experiences.

2. Tensions Between Cultural Identity and Pragmatic English Use

A second layer of cultural mismatch arises from the tension between preserving local linguistic and cultural identities and the instrumental value of English as the language of academic and economic opportunity. Teachers described learners’ ambivalence toward English as simultaneously a tool for empowerment and a source of alienation.

Some learners feel pressured to adopt English linguistic norms at the expense of their home languages, which can evoke feelings of inferiority or loss of identity. This tension contributes to emotional disengagement and diminished self-esteem, particularly among learners who equate language proficiency with intelligence or social status.

From the lens of Vygotsky's Social Constructivist Theory (revised 2020), learning is deeply social and contextually situated. When instructional content aligns with learners' cultural and linguistic backgrounds, it promotes authentic meaning-making and inclusive participation within the "zone of proximal development." Conversely, cultural mismatch disrupts this process, impeding learners' ability to connect new knowledge with their prior experiences. This theme underscores the need for culturally responsive pedagogy, where teachers consciously integrate local examples, multilingual strategies, and culturally familiar contexts into instruction. Doing so not only enhances comprehension but also strengthens motivation and identity, affirming learners' sense of belonging and validating their cultural knowledge as a foundation for academic success.

Participant 2 alluded:

"Some topics in the curriculum do not match our learners' cultural experiences; it feels foreign to them."

Participant 5 added:

"The curriculum examples are based on Western culture, which makes it hard to connect the lessons to our learners' daily lives."

Participant 8:

"It's difficult to teach concepts that are not relevant to our community; learners lose interest."

Participant 10

"Other languages should be included in content subjects to make learners comfortable and motivated."

Participant 4 shared learners views after writing a history paper:

“Learners expressed that if only they were taught in their vernacular languages, it would be better.”

Some participants believe that, although English is a second or additional language for learners in townships and public schools, we cannot ignore the fact that they need English for future career paths and in the workplace.

Participant 5 argued:

“We must accept that English will remain the language of learning. Switching to African languages will be difficult in such a diverse society.”

“Learners are still going to need English outside of school level, for better careers and job opportunities.”

Participant 6 added:

“English is not a barrier. Learners are taught English from a young age. The real challenge is mastering subject-specific terminology.”

Participant 8, however, noted that:

“Language differences can lead to inconsistent interpretation of curriculum objectives and affect results.”

Interpretation

The three themes collectively illustrate how language, cognition, and culture intersect to shape learners' educational experiences. Using Vygotsky's Social Constructivist Theory (revised 2020) as an interpretive lens, the analysis underscores that learning is a socially mediated process in which meaning is constructed through language, interaction, and contextual relevance. The findings highlight that learners' difficulties stem from both linguistic and cognitive comprehension gaps, which undermine their capacity to engage meaningfully with content. Learners' low levels of English proficiency restrict their participation in classroom dialogue, while conceptual

misunderstandings hinder deeper reasoning. This dual challenge aligns with Cummins' (2020) distinction between Basic Interpersonal Communicative Skills (BICS) and Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP), suggesting that while learners may manage everyday communication, they often struggle with the more abstract academic language required for schooling.

Similarly, Heugh (2019) argues that the overemphasis on English as a medium of instruction in multilingual contexts disadvantages learners by severing the link between language, cognition, and identity. The evidence from this study supports this view: comprehension barriers are not merely linguistic deficits but structural inequities that restrict access to knowledge construction and self-expression. Confusion over both curriculum-level and subject-specific terminology reflects systemic misalignment between policy language and pedagogical practice. Teachers' inconsistent interpretation of curriculum terms such as learning outcomes and competencies leads to uneven implementation, while learners' difficulties with subject-specific terminology hinder conceptual mastery.

This resonates with Hoadley (2019), who contends that the language of policy and pedagogy often fails to translate effectively into classroom practice, especially in under-resourced schools. Similarly, Jansen (2021) highlights how "curriculum speak" can alienate teachers when not grounded in clear, context-sensitive professional development. The study's findings affirm that without a shared understanding of terminology, teachers and learners operate within fragmented linguistic and cognitive frameworks. Addressing this requires targeted curriculum interpretation workshops and collaborative professional learning aligned with constructivist principles of co-creating meaning through interaction and dialogue.

The analysis further reveals that the cultural disconnect between the curriculum and learners' lived experiences undermines motivation, identity, and engagement. When classroom content lacks cultural resonance or prioritises Western norms, learners experience alienation and reduced confidence. Tabulawa (2022) argues that such cultural misalignment reflects a deeper tension between imported pedagogical models and local epistemologies, often resulting in superficial learning.

Likewise, Chisholm (2023) emphasises that culturally unresponsive curricula perpetuate inequities by delegitimising local knowledge systems and linguistic diversity. The present findings support these perspectives, showing that learners' engagement and motivation increase when teachers incorporate culturally relevant pedagogy using local examples, multilingual strategies, and inclusive discussions that affirm learners' identities. Taken together, the three themes reveal a complex interplay between language, culture, and cognition. Linguistic barriers (Theme 1) constrain learners' ability to engage with academic content; inconsistent understanding of terminology (Theme 2) compounds these difficulties by limiting clarity in instruction; and cultural mismatch (Theme 3) further reduces motivation and belonging. Collectively, these dynamics reinforce patterns of educational inequity, particularly for learners from multilingual or marginalised communities.

Viewed through Vygotsky's constructivist lens, addressing these challenges requires an interactive, culturally grounded, and linguistically inclusive approach to teaching and professional development, one that values dialogue, contextual relevance, and social collaboration as the foundation for equitable learning outcomes.

4.3.9 Other issues affecting curriculum delivery

Theme: School-Level Operational Challenges Affecting Curriculum Delivery

Participants identified a range of systemic and contextual factors that hinder effective curriculum implementation. To enhance clarity and analytical coherence, these findings are presented under five interrelated sub-themes: Absenteeism and Attendance Issues, Discipline and Classroom Management, Safety and Gangsterism, Teacher Workload and Staffing Challenges, and Communication and Administrative Support.

Sub-theme 1: Absenteeism and Attendance Issues

High learner absenteeism was repeatedly cited as a significant barrier to instructional continuity. Participants explained that irregular attendance disrupts lesson sequencing, diminishes learning momentum, and forces teachers to reteach content, thereby constraining curriculum coverage. Chronic absenteeism also weakens peer

learning and collaborative classroom dynamics, reducing learners' sense of belonging and engagement. From a theoretical perspective, Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory (2019 revision) highlights how home, community, and school environments interact to influence attendance patterns. Factors such as family instability, poverty, and community violence were identified as key external drivers. These findings echo Rumberger and Lim (2020), who emphasise that absenteeism is both a symptom and a cause of broader social inequality.

Sub-theme 2: Discipline and Classroom Management

Participants expressed concern that disciplinary issues and behavioural disruptions impede the flow of teaching and learning. Large class sizes and limited institutional support make it difficult for teachers to maintain order, leading to lost instructional time and heightened stress. Misbehaviour was often linked to learners' socio-economic hardships, emotional distress, or disengagement from school culture. Drawing on Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, learners struggling with unmet physiological or safety needs are less likely to exhibit positive classroom behaviour. Consistent with Mncube and Harber (2021), the findings suggest that discipline challenges are symptomatic of deeper social insecurities rather than simple defiance, underscoring the importance of psychosocial support and inclusive behavioural management strategies.

Sub-theme 3: Safety and Gangsterism

School safety emerged as a major concern, particularly in communities affected by prominent levels of crime and gang violence. Participants described instances of violence, intimidation, and substance abuse that create a climate of fear among both teachers and learners. Unsafe environments undermine concentration, attendance, and teacher morale, as educators often prioritise security over pedagogy. This aligns with Xaba (2011), who found that perceived insecurity in schools severely compromises curriculum implementation and teacher retention. Within Bronfenbrenner's ecological model, school safety represents a critical component of the microsystem influencing both emotional well-being and academic engagement.

Sub-theme 4: Teacher Workload and Staffing Challenges

Participants reported that excessive workloads, compounded by staff shortages and administrative demands, diminish instructional quality. Teachers often manage overcrowded classrooms and multiple subjects, limiting their ability to provide differentiated support. This strain leads to burnout and reduced morale, with direct consequences for teaching effectiveness. Systems theory provides a useful lens here, as inefficiencies at the organisational level, such as resource allocation, role distribution, cascade into the classroom, disrupting the overall functioning of the educational system. Chisholm (2019) similarly observes that structural constraints such as inadequate staffing ratios and bureaucratic demands erode teachers' capacity to deliver learner-centred instruction.

Sub-theme 5: Communication and Administrative Support

Participants highlighted inconsistent communication between school leadership and teaching staff, particularly regarding curriculum expectations and policy updates. Ineffective communication channels foster uncertainty, duplication of effort, and frustration among educators. Teachers expressed a need for clearer guidance, timely feedback, and more supportive administrative systems. This finding resonates with Bush and Glover (2016), who emphasise that effective instructional leadership relies on transparent communication and collaborative planning structures. Schools with strong communicative practices enable teachers to align efforts and sustain collective accountability for learning outcomes.

Resilience and Coping Strategies

Despite these challenges, participants also described instances of resilience. Teachers frequently collaborated informally to share resources, mentor peers, and adapt lesson plans to learners' needs. Such practices reflect collective efficacy (Bandura, 2020), where shared commitment and teamwork mitigate systemic limitations. These positive behaviours demonstrate that, even within constrained environments, educators actively seek to maintain professionalism and learner progress.

These findings directly address Research Question 1, which sought to explore factors influencing effective curriculum delivery in resource-constrained schools. The analysis reveals that those operational challenges, ranging from absenteeism to leadership communication, are interconnected and systemic rather than isolated incidents. Addressing them requires a whole-school approach, combining leadership development, psychosocial support, and organisational reform.

Participant 1 shared:

“I don’t recall anyone in university telling me I would be teaching a class of 60 learners.”

Participant 3 raised safety concerns:

“Gang-related activities contribute to an unsafe environment in schools. Bullying is also a major issue.”

Participant 4 emphasised absenteeism:

“When learners frequently miss school, they miss important lessons and disrupt classroom flow.”

Participant 5 added:

“Absenteeism is a huge problem. Sometimes I walk into class and only six learners are present.”

Participant 6 noted staff shortages:

“Teachers are expected to teach too many classes. Teaching 60 students in one classroom is not sustainable.”

Participant 7 added:

“Discipline issues and heavy workload consume valuable teaching time.”

Participant 8:

“Poor communication from the department and delayed replacement of teachers during leave disrupts curriculum delivery.”

Interpretation:

Beyond limited resources and inconsistent leadership, several systemic issues significantly impact the learning environment. Prominent levels of absenteeism among both learners and staff create disruptions that hinder academic progress and affect classroom dynamics. Additionally, disciplinary problems, including behavioural incidents and a lack of consistent enforcement of rules, further contribute to an unstable atmosphere that is not conducive to learning. The ongoing shortage of qualified teachers not only strains existing teachers but also diminishes the educational experience for learners, as classes may be oversized or inadequately supported. Moreover, pervasive safety concerns, ranging from bullying to violence, undermine teacher morale and jeopardise the well-being of learners, creating an environment where both teachers and learners feel insecure and unsupported.

4.3.10 Support needed from the district

Participants expressed a strong need for specialised workshops that cater to their unique learning goals, emphasising the importance of practical skills and firsthand experience. They highlighted the demand for timely resources, including up-to-date educational materials and online tools to facilitate learning outside of traditional settings. Additionally, many participants emphasised the importance of smaller class sizes to facilitate more personalised instruction and enhance engagement. Finally, they emphasised the crucial role of psychosocial support, advocating for access to counselling services and community-building activities to promote mental well-being and foster a supportive environment for all.

Theme 1: Professional development and training

Participants consistently emphasised that insufficient professional development opportunities hinder teachers' ability to implement the curriculum effectively and adapt to evolving educational demands. Although occasional workshops and departmental

meetings are provided, many participants described them as infrequent, overly theoretical, or poorly aligned with classroom realities. Specific gaps were noted in three key areas. The first one identified was Subject Knowledge and Pedagogical Skills in which teachers expressed the need for continuous upskilling in curriculum interpretation, lesson planning, and assessment strategies. In some instances, teachers felt inadequately prepared to teach newly introduced subjects or updated syllabi. The second one was Technology Integration, where participants noted that the rapid shift toward digital learning environments has outpaced teachers' technological proficiency. Participants highlighted the lack of structured training on how to use digital tools effectively for teaching, assessment, and learner engagement. Lastly, Assessment Literacy, several participants noted uncertainty in applying diverse assessment methods and interpreting policy-aligned assessment standards, leading to inconsistencies in evaluation and feedback.

This gap in professional development directly impacts learner outcomes. As participants observed, teachers who feel underprepared or unsupported struggle to design engaging lessons, differentiate instruction, and provide timely, constructive feedback. Consequently, effective professional development not only enhances teacher competency but also improves learner achievement by strengthening instructional quality and classroom engagement. From a theoretical standpoint, Vygotsky's Social Constructivist Theory (revised 2020) underscores that professional learning is a socially mediated process where knowledge is co-constructed through collaboration, reflection, and shared practice. Likewise, Guskey (2018) argued that sustained, context-specific professional development is essential for improving both teacher efficacy and learner learning outcomes.

Participant 1 stated:

"We have training in Gauteng that has been immensely beneficial... but the pressure to promote learners undermines quality."

Participant 2:

"The department should offer workshops relevant to each subject. Teachers need to participate in curriculum development."

Participant 4:

“Continuous professional development incorporating the latest technology is essential.”

These findings suggest the need for structured, ongoing professional development programmes that are participatory, contextually relevant, and responsive to teachers’ evolving instructional challenges. Workshops focusing on curriculum interpretation, digital literacy, assessment design, and collaborative lesson study would ensure that professional development becomes a catalyst for both teacher growth and learner success.

Theme 2: Provision of resources and funding

Participants highlighted that inadequate and uneven resource distribution continues to undermine curriculum delivery and teacher effectiveness. Many schools operate without sufficient teaching materials, up-to-date textbooks, technological tools, or functional infrastructure, creating a persistent gap between policy expectations and classroom realities. While participants acknowledged efforts by the Department of Basic Education (DBE) to improve resource access, they emphasised that such initiatives remain inconsistent and often fail to address deep-rooted systemic disparities.

Participants reported that curriculum planning and implementation are particularly constrained by these shortages. In under-resourced contexts, educators struggle to design interactive, contextually relevant lessons or incorporate diverse instructional strategies. Several participants noted that planning often becomes an exercise in “doing what is possible with what is available,” rather than delivering lessons aligned with curriculum standards. The lack of teaching aids, laboratory equipment, and ICT facilities further limits experiential and technology-enhanced learning opportunities, reinforcing inequalities between affluent and disadvantaged schools.

From a theoretical standpoint, Bronfenbrenner’s Ecological Systems Theory (2019 revision) provides a useful lens for understanding these dynamics. Resource deprivation at the Exosystem level, including policy decisions, funding allocation, and

community infrastructure, has cascading effects on the microsystem, where daily teaching and learning occur. This ecological imbalance constrains teachers' capacity to implement the curriculum effectively and limits learners' opportunities for cognitive and social development.

To address these inequities, participants recommended equitable funding models, improved school infrastructure, and targeted resource allocation to historically disadvantaged areas. By ensuring that all schools have access to essential teaching materials and functional facilities, the education system can promote not only more consistent curriculum delivery but also greater teacher motivation and learner success.

Theme 3: Staffing and psychosocial support.

Participants identified both staffing shortages and limited psychosocial support as key barriers to effective teaching and learning. Many schools face inadequate teacher–learner ratios, forcing educators to manage large classes and multiple subjects, which reduces instructional quality and increases fatigue. Insufficient administrative and support staff further compounds these pressures, leaving teachers overstretched and demotivated. Separately, participants highlighted the lack of structured psychosocial support for both teachers and learners. Beyond traditional counselling, schools seldom provide stress management programmes, peer support groups, or wellness initiatives that address emotional strain and burnout. Teachers noted that such interventions could enhance resilience and sustain professional engagement, particularly in high-stress, under-resourced contexts.

Participant 6:

“The department needs to hire more teachers and train managers effectively.”

Participant 7:

“Teachers need training, workshops, and mental health support to manage stress.”

These findings align with Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, suggesting that without emotional well-being and manageable workloads, neither teachers nor learners can

fully engage in the learning process. Strengthening both staffing capacity and psychosocial support systems is therefore essential for improving morale, retention, and overall school performance.

Interpretation:

Participants emphasised that effective educational support must be multifaceted, integrating material resources, professional development, and psychosocial assistance to address the interconnected challenges facing schools. This holistic view aligns with the Department of Basic Education's (DBE) Integrated School Health and Support Policy (2022), which underscores the importance of comprehensive teacher and learner support systems for sustainable school improvement. The call for professional learning communities (PLCs) reflects a growing recognition in the literature that collaborative professional networks enhance teacher efficacy and instructional quality (Stoll et al., 2018; Hord, 2020). Through shared reflection and peer mentoring, PLCs promote collective problem-solving and continuous professional growth, directly improving classroom practice and learner achievement.

Participants also highlighted the urgent need for adequate teaching resources, technology access, and targeted training workshops. These findings resonate with Spaul (2022), who argued that resource provision and pedagogical support are mutually reinforcing; resources alone are insufficient without the professional capacity to use them effectively. In terms of prioritisation, participants identified reducing class sizes as the most immediate and impactful intervention. Smaller classes enable more personalised instruction, closer learner monitoring, and greater teacher well-being factors consistently linked to improved academic outcomes (Blatchford et al., 2019). Where funding constraints limit simultaneous reform, investment in teacher development and classroom resourcing should follow as the next priorities, ensuring that teachers are empowered to deliver quality education within the available infrastructure.

Overall, the findings affirm that sustainable educational improvement depends on a systemic approach balancing investment in human capacity, material resources, and psychosocial well-being to strengthen both teacher performance and learner success.

4.4 Diagrammatic Representation of Themes

Figure 4.1: Bar chart showing frequency of challenges across themes.

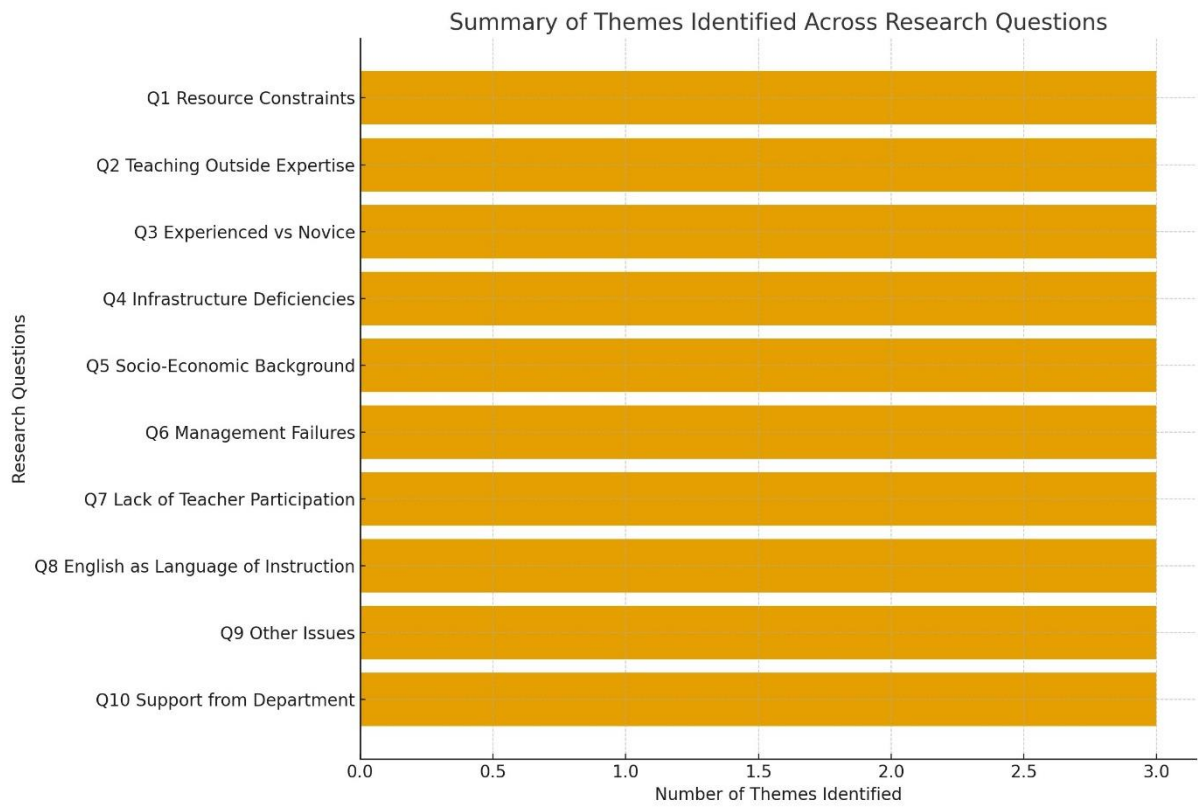
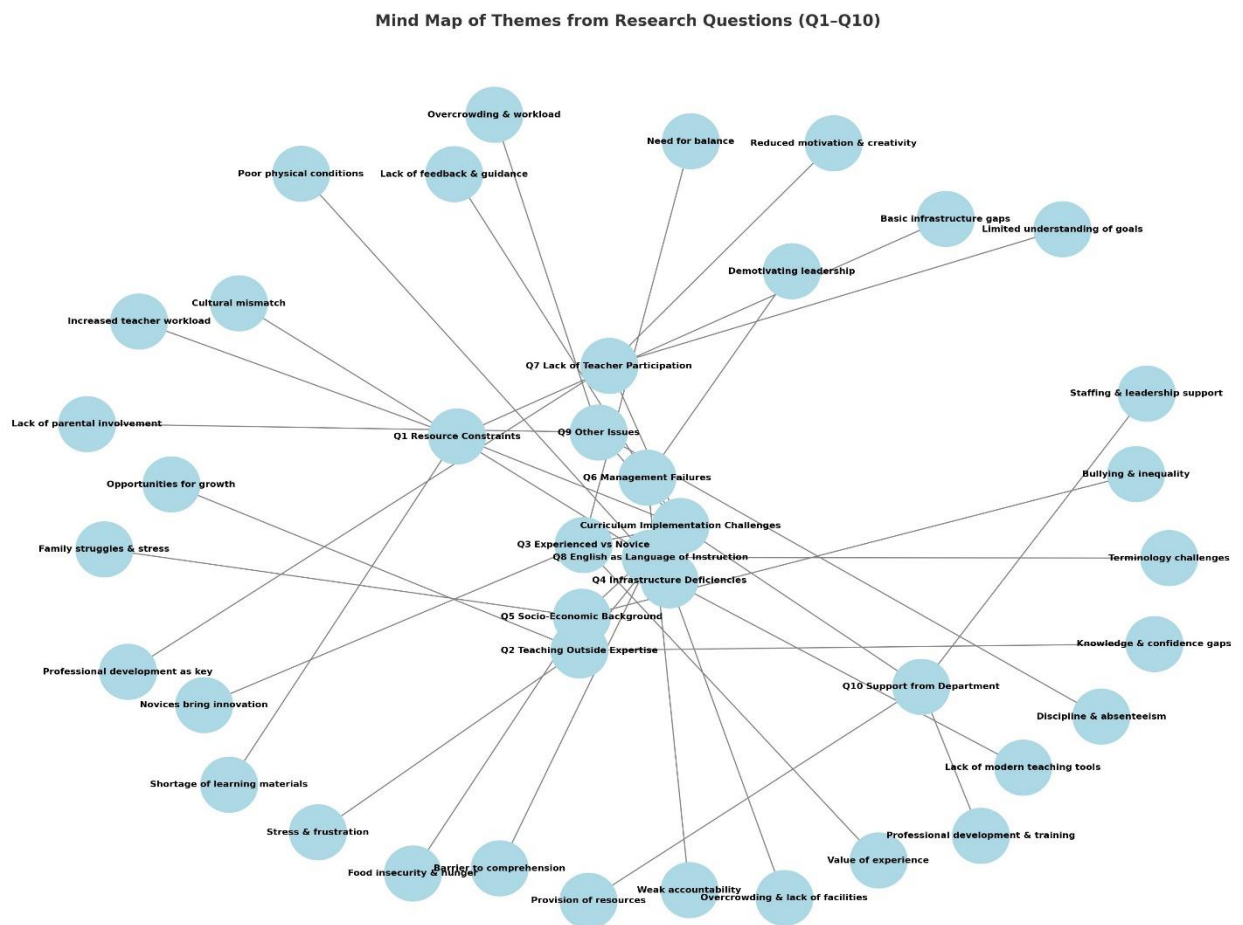


Figure 4.2: Mind map illustrating interconnectedness of challenges and their impact on curriculum delivery.



4.5 Document analysis

The document analysis was conducted to complement interview findings and provide a deeper understanding of how curriculum implementation policies are interpreted and enacted within the South African education system. Various policy documents, including the Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS), provincial implementation guidelines, and school improvement plans, were systematically reviewed to identify recurring themes and alignments with the study's research questions. According to Bowen (2019), document analysis serves as an effective technique for triangulating data sources and improving the credibility of qualitative research findings.

A thematic content analysis approach was employed, focusing on how policy directives address teacher support, resource allocation, and professional development. Documents were coded for key concepts related to leadership practices, curriculum alignment, and systemic challenges, enabling the identification of patterns that either reinforced or contrasted with participants' perspectives. However, a critical limitation of this method lies in the fact that official documents often reflect idealised representations of practice, rather than the realities experienced by teachers. To mitigate this bias, document findings were triangulated with interview data, ensuring that interpretations remained grounded in both policy intent and lived experience.

Overall, the document analysis provided valuable contextual insight, clarifying how national and provincial frameworks shape and sometimes constrain effective curriculum implementation. This process enriched the overall understanding of the research problem by linking institutional policy to classroom-level realities.

4.5.1 Policy Documents

The school's code of conduct, inclusive education policy, language policy, and assessment policy were examined to provide insight into the formal regulations and guiding values that underpin teaching, learning, and discipline. The analysis focused on how these documents interpret and operationalise departmental directives, assessing their alignment with national curriculum frameworks. Particular attention was given to provisions related to inclusivity, assessment practices, and language support, which revealed how institutional policies translate national mandates into everyday school practice.

4.5.2 Curriculum and Instructional Documents

Annual Teaching Plans (ATPs), lesson plans, subject syllabi, and assessment guidelines were examined using a content analysis approach to explore how teachers interpret curriculum requirements and structure learning activities. Analysis of these materials revealed how curriculum policy is enacted in classroom practice and the extent to which teachers adapt lessons to accommodate diverse learner needs, for instance, by differentiating assessment tasks or integrating additional support activities for struggling learners.

4.5.3 Administrative and Record-Keeping Documents

Attendance registers, learner performance records, and School Improvement Plans (SIPs) from the 2023–2024 academic year were analysed to identify trends in learner attendance, academic achievement, and institutional development priorities. Examination of these records provided insights into the schools' operational efficiency and accountability mechanisms, illustrating how attendance patterns and performance data reflect both teacher effectiveness and the overall quality of school management.

4.5.4 Meeting Minutes and Reports

Minutes from ten School Management Team (SMT) and School Governing Body (SGB) meetings held between January and April 2025 were examined to gain insight into school-level decision-making processes and collaborative practices. These documents revealed how teachers and other stakeholders contributed to discussions on curriculum delivery, assessment strategies, and school governance through verbal input, proposals, and decision-making activities, thereby highlighting the participatory dynamics within the school community.

4.5.5 Communication Documents

The researcher conducted a content analysis of circulars, memos, newsletters, and notices to evaluate how information was communicated among members of the school community, including staff, learners, and parents. Analysis of these materials revealed the clarity, frequency, and inclusivity of communication practices, offering insights into the effectiveness of information dissemination and stakeholder engagement within the school.

4.5.6 External and Evaluation Documents

District and moderation inspection reports were reviewed to provide an external perspective on school performance and compliance with educational standards. Through this review, the documents offered corroborating evidence on the effectiveness of teaching, management practices, and learner outcomes. Analysis of these reports deepened understanding of school operations and curriculum

implementation, revealing patterns such as gaps in learner achievement, inconsistencies in policy implementation, and disparities between official directives and actual classroom practices.

4.6 Summary of Findings

The analysis revealed that challenges to curriculum implementation in South Africa are multifaceted and deeply systemic, arising from resource limitations, teacher-related factors, and structural issues. The findings were triangulated using semi-structured interviews with participants and document analysis of relevant policy documents, curriculum guidelines, and school reports, which strengthened the credibility of the results. Resource shortages and leadership gaps: All participants (100%) highlighted persistent deficiencies in educational materials, outdated technology, inadequate funding, and inconsistent leadership support across school levels. Document analysis supported these perceptions, revealing discrepancies between curriculum policy requirements and the actual resources provided to schools.

Teacher-related and contextual factors: Most participants (approximately 80%) identified misalignment between teachers' instructional practices and curriculum goals, poverty, and language barriers as major obstacles to effective learning. Participants were divided on the role of English: some viewed it as a minimal concern, while others reported that it hinders comprehension and engagement among learners whose first language is not English. Document analysis of school performance reports and learner assessments corroborated these challenges, showing patterns of underperformance linked to language and socio-economic factors.

Systemic and structural issues: Overcrowded classrooms, high rates of absenteeism among teachers and learners, and limited recognition or support from educational authorities were recurring concerns. These factors collectively undermine teaching quality, learner motivation, and institutional efficiency. Policy documents reviewed highlighted similar structural challenges, indicating that these issues are persistent and affect multiple schools across the district.

Holistic support and reform: Participants consistently emphasised the need for sustained professional development, equitable access to modern teaching resources, psychosocial support mechanisms, and reduced class sizes to create more manageable and effective learning environments. Document analysis of curriculum support guidelines confirmed the importance of these measures but revealed gaps in implementation at the school level. Moreover, triangulating interview data with document analysis strengthened the study's findings by providing a broader, evidence-based perspective on the challenges affecting curriculum implementation in South African high schools.

4.7 Chapter Summary

This chapter presented, analysed, and interpreted findings derived from interviews and document analysis to examine the challenges associated with curriculum implementation at the school level in South Africa. The analysis was organised thematically to provide deeper insight into the experiences and perceptions of teachers, School Management Teams (SMTs), and other key stakeholders. The findings revealed a range of systemic, pedagogical, and socio-cultural barriers that hinder effective curriculum implementation. A central issue identified was teachers' limited involvement in curriculum development and decision-making, which weakens their sense of ownership and commitment to the process. Most participants noted that curriculum reforms are frequently introduced without sufficient consultation, training, or support. This often results in uncertainty about how to interpret or adapt curriculum content to meet learners' needs.

Another prominent theme concerned language and terminology challenges. Teachers reported that using English as the medium of instruction often restricts comprehension, particularly in schools where learners are not proficient in the language. Complex curriculum terminology further complicates lesson delivery, reducing both teacher confidence and learner engagement. A related finding highlighted a cultural mismatch between the curriculum content and learners' lived experience. Participants noted that some topics appear culturally irrelevant, particularly in rural and disadvantaged contexts. This misalignment reduces learner motivation and leads to surface-level understanding rather than meaningful engagement. A stronger emphasis on culturally

responsive and contextually relevant curriculum materials was therefore seen as essential.

The chapter also identified ineffective school leadership and management practices as critical barriers. Participants described limited feedback, inadequate instructional support, and weak accountability systems within SMTs. Such leadership shortcomings demotivate teachers, restrict professional growth, and impede curriculum monitoring and evaluation. Furthermore, socioeconomic constraints including poverty, food insecurity, and resource scarcity, were found to significantly influence teaching and learning. Teachers reported that hunger and inadequate materials reduce learners' concentration and attendance while exacerbating teacher workload and burnout.

Moreover, the findings illustrate that the challenges of curriculum implementation are interconnected and systemic, spanning teacher capacity, leadership, language, culture, and socio-economic conditions. These insights confirm that curriculum reform cannot be effectively addressed without acknowledging the broader contextual realities shaping school environments.

CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS, RECOMMENDATIONS, AND CONCLUSION

5.1 Introduction

This chapter summarises the study's key findings, presents practical and policy-oriented recommendations to address the identified challenges, and draws conclusions based on the analysis. The previous chapter examined the qualitative data gathered from teachers, learners, and curriculum facilitators to investigate the realities of curriculum implementation in South African schools. The findings highlighted a range of complex and systemic obstacles that affect the effectiveness of curriculum delivery, including resource constraints, issues related to teacher capacity, infrastructural deficiencies, socio-economic barriers, inadequate leadership support, language challenges, and limited teacher involvement in curriculum development. The objectives of this chapter are threefold: first, to summarise the key findings in relation to each research question; second, to draw evidence-based conclusions rooted in both empirical data and theoretical frameworks; and third, to propose recommendations designed to enhance curriculum implementation throughout the education system.

The discussion was organised according to the four research questions identified in Chapter One, ensuring that each finding is systematically addressed in relation to the study's stated objectives. In doing so, the analysis remains firmly grounded in the theoretical framework that guided this investigation, thereby reinforcing the interpretive lens through which the empirical data are understood. The following section begins with an overview of the resource-related challenges, before moving sequentially through issues of teacher capacity, infrastructural constraints, socio-economic barriers, leadership support, language considerations, and teacher involvement in curriculum development.

5.2 Discussion of Key Findings

5.2.1 Curriculum Challenges Experienced by Teachers and Learners

The findings indicated that multifaceted contextual and structural factors within the schooling environment constrain the effective implementation of the school-level curriculum. Both teachers and learners encounter difficulties stemming from limited

resources, overcrowded classrooms, and inadequate infrastructure. Many participants reported that it is difficult to teach in environments that lack essential materials, such as textbooks, desks, laboratory equipment, and technological tools. This shortage of fundamental resources undermines effective lesson delivery and learners' engagement, compelling teachers to resort to improvised methods that are often time-consuming and less effective (Spaull, 2019).

Overcrowded classrooms were mentioned as a significant challenge during teaching and learning. Teachers noted that having classes with up to sixty learners weakens the quality of interaction and complicates assessment and feedback processes. The large class sizes also intensify disciplinary issues, as teachers struggle to maintain control and offer individualised support. Consequently, learners receive minimal attention, leading to underperforming learners falling behind. These findings align with broader research showing that South African classrooms often exceed the national learner–educator ratio of 33:1, with some schools reporting ratios of 50:1 or higher, which significantly undermines teaching quality (Department of Basic Education, 2018; UNESCO, 2021).

The substantial workload assigned to teachers further exacerbates the challenges they already face. Participants noted that curriculum coverage expectations remain high despite contextual constraints. Teachers are expected to complete administrative work, manage assessments, and prepare lessons simultaneously, leaving little time for creative teaching or remedial support. These workload pressures contribute to teacher fatigue and lower morale, which in turn affect curriculum delivery and learner outcomes. Studies confirm that teacher workload in overcrowded classrooms leads to diminished instructional quality and increased stress (Chisholm, 2018; Muthivhi, 2019).

Infrastructure deficiencies, including poor classroom conditions, lack of laboratories, and unreliable electricity, were also identified as barriers. The absence of a conducive learning environment disrupts lesson continuity and diminishes learners' enthusiasm for learning. Participants noted that schools in wealthier areas, which possess advanced resources, consistently perform better than under-resourced schools, illustrating a persistent inequality within the education system. This observation is consistent with national reports that highlight how inadequate infrastructure

perpetuates educational inequality, particularly in historically disadvantaged communities (Taylor, 2019; Spaul and Jansen, 2019).

These challenges resonate with Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory, which emphasises how multiple layers of context, ranging from immediate classroom conditions, "microsystem," to broader socio-economic and policy environments, "macrosystem", interact to shape educational outcomes. The findings also reflected the resource-based view of education, which posited that access to material, human, and infrastructural resources is central to effective curriculum implementation. By situating empirical evidence within these theoretical frameworks, the analysis underscores that curriculum delivery is not merely a pedagogical issue but a systemic one, deeply embedded in structural inequalities and contextual realities.

5.2.2 Influence of Teacher Engagement in Curriculum Development

Another finding of the study was that teachers' limited involvement in curriculum development negatively affects the successful delivery of the curriculum. Many participants expressed concern that curriculum reforms are often introduced without adequate consultation or participation of classroom teachers. As a result, teachers may not fully understand the objectives, content progression, or desired learning outcomes of the curriculum. Teachers felt that exclusion from curriculum development leads to poor ownership and low motivation in its implementation. Those who are not part of the development process tend to perceive the curriculum as imposed rather than collaborative, which affects their willingness to innovate or adapt lessons to learner needs. Some participants also stated that they feel unprepared to handle curriculum changes and that limited opportunities for professional development make it difficult to remain updated with new teaching methods and content areas.

Furthermore, teachers who lack exposure to curriculum workshops or professional learning communities (PLCs) often depend on outdated methods of instruction. This affects both their confidence and effectiveness in delivering lessons. Participants suggested that greater collaboration between the Department of Education and teachers could enhance curriculum coherence, foster professional growth, and ensure that implementation reflects classroom realities. Policy documents such as the Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement (Department of Basic Education, 2011) emphasise the importance of teacher participation in curriculum processes, while

studies have shown that participatory approaches strengthen teacher ownership and improve implementation outcomes (Jansen, 2018; Chisholm, 2022).

It is important to note, however, that teacher engagement in curriculum development varies across regions and policy structures. In some provinces, stronger mechanisms for consultation and professional development exist, while in others, participation remains limited due to resource constraints or administrative practices (Sayed and Motala, 2021). This variation highlights the need for context-sensitive strategies that recognise the diversity of schooling environments in South Africa.

5.2.3 Socioeconomic Factors and Learner Performance

The findings indicated that learners' socioeconomic backgrounds have a strong influence on their academic performance. Participants noted that learners from affluent families often perform better due to access to educational resources such as textbooks, internet connectivity, private tutoring, and parental support. In contrast, learners from disadvantaged families frequently struggle with basic needs such as food, stationery, and transportation, which affect their concentration and attendance. Several teachers highlighted that some learners come to school hungry or from unstable home environments, which leads to disengagement and absenteeism. These learners often lack motivation and emotional support at home, which undermines their academic progress.

According to Spaul (2019), the strong legacy of apartheid continues to shape educational outcomes, with poverty and wealth remaining closely correlated to learner performance. The present study's findings aligned with this national analysis, particularly in showing how disadvantaged learners face systemic barriers that hinder their academic progress. However, while Spaul's work highlighted inequality at a macro level, the data here provides a micro-level perspective, illustrating how hunger, household responsibilities, and lack of resources manifest in classrooms and directly affect learner engagement.

Participants also mentioned that socioeconomic inequalities are not only reflected in learners' academic outcomes but also in their exposure to technology and general awareness of the world beyond their communities. Moreover, teachers reported that the burden of social responsibilities, such as caring for younger siblings or performing

household chores, often causes learners from poor households to miss classes or arrive late. The cumulative effect of these challenges is a cycle of underperformance, where poverty, limited exposure, and lack of support reinforce poor educational outcomes.

At the same time, national interventions such as the Department of Basic Education's National School Nutrition Programme (NSNP) have been noted as mitigating factors. By providing daily meals to learners in disadvantaged schools, the NSNP helps improve attendance, concentration, and learner morale (Department of Basic Education, 2016). While the programme does not eliminate structural inequalities, it demonstrates how targeted policies can partially offset the negative effects of poverty on curriculum implementation and learner performance.

5.2.4 Management, Supervision, and Support in Curriculum Implementation

The findings revealed that effective supervision and managerial support are essential determinants of successful curriculum implementation. Teachers emphasised that when school managers, departmental heads, and principals fail to provide guidance, the quality of teaching declines. Participants observed that poor supervision results in inconsistency across subjects, as teachers may interpret and deliver the curriculum differently. The inconsistency leads to disparities in learner achievement within the school.

Furthermore, teachers noted that insufficient monitoring reduces accountability and professional growth. Regular classroom visits, constructive feedback, and mentorship were identified as essential practices for maintaining quality teaching. The lack of managerial support also contributes to teacher demotivation, particularly among novice teachers who rely on senior staff for guidance. Participants expressed that supportive leadership fosters collaboration and enhanced curriculum delivery, while weak management structures lead to confusion, poor planning, and decreased optimism.

These findings resonated with instructional leadership theory, which highlights the importance of leaders actively guiding teaching and learning processes through monitoring, feedback, and professional development (Hallinger, 2023). Similarly, transformational leadership frameworks emphasise the role of school leaders in

inspiring teachers, fostering collaboration, and creating a shared vision for curriculum implementation (Leithwood and Jantzi, 2019). The absence of such leadership practices, as reported by participants, undermines teacher morale and weakens curriculum coherence.

It is worth noting that some positive cases were identified, where principals and departmental heads provided consistent support through mentoring and collaborative planning. In these schools, teachers reported higher levels of motivation, improved curriculum alignment, and stronger learner outcomes. These examples demonstrate that effective leadership can mitigate systemic challenges and create enabling environments for curriculum delivery, reinforcing the argument that leadership practices are central to educational success.

5.2.5 Language and Resource Constraints

Another challenge highlighted in the data was the language barrier. Since English is the primary language of instruction in most South African schools, learners whose home language is not English often experience difficulties in understanding concepts and responding to assessment questions. Teachers reported that many learners struggle not because they lack knowledge but because they cannot interpret examination language or express their understanding effectively. The variation in linguistic backgrounds among learners further complicates instruction, especially in content-heavy subjects such as science and mathematics.

These findings resonate with the national Language-in-Education Policy (LiEP, 1997), which promotes multilingualism and the use of learners' home languages as a foundation for learning. However, in practice, English remains dominant in most classrooms, creating a disconnect between policy intentions and classroom realities. This tension reinforces the challenges identified in the present study, where learners' linguistic diversity often hinders equitable access to curriculum content.

While resource scarcity was noted by participants as compounding the language issue, this challenge has already been discussed on 5.2.1. It is important to acknowledge here that the lack of textbooks and visual aids exacerbates comprehension difficulties, but the central concern remains the language of instruction itself. Teachers reported that code-switching is sometimes used to bridge gaps, yet

this strategy is not always feasible in multilingual classrooms, leaving many learners disadvantaged.

Consequently, language continues to serve as an obstacle to effective teaching and equitable learning outcomes, underscoring the need for stronger implementation of LiEP principles and more systematic support for multilingual pedagogy.

5.3 Limitations of the Study

Although this study provided valuable insights into the challenges affecting the implementation of the school-level curriculum in South Africa, certain limitations should be acknowledged. Firstly, the study was limited to a relatively small sample drawn from selected schools within one province. As such, the findings cannot be generalised to represent all schools across South Africa, given the vast differences in context, infrastructure, and resource availability between provinces.

Secondly, the study relied primarily on qualitative data obtained through interviews. While this method offered rich, detailed perspectives, it also depended heavily on the participants' honesty and willingness to share their experiences. Subjectivity may have influenced some responses, as participants could have presented views shaped by personal emotions or professional frustrations. In addition, the researcher's professional background as a teacher may have influenced the interpretation of data, particularly in relation to classroom practices and teacher perspectives. This positionality should be acknowledged as both a strength, providing insider understanding, and a potential source of bias.

Lastly, time and logistical constraints limited the researcher's ability to conduct classroom observations, which could have provided first-hand evidence of curriculum delivery in practice. Future research should therefore consider incorporating both qualitative and quantitative methods to enhance the depth and generalizability of findings. Comparative studies across provinces would help to capture regional variations in curriculum implementation, while longitudinal research could track how reforms and interventions evolve and influence learner outcomes.

5.4 Recommendations

The recommendations presented below were designed to address the challenges identified in this study and are directly linked to the research objectives outlined in Chapter One. They aimed to provide practical strategies at multiple levels of the education system, policy, school, and classroom, while remaining sensitive to contextual variations across provinces and schools. Rather than prescribing fixed solutions, these recommendations highlight possible interventions that may foster improved curriculum implementation and learner outcomes.

5.4.1 Policy-Level Recommendations

Provision of Adequate Resources

The Department of Education should prioritise equitable resource allocation, ensuring that all schools, particularly those in underserved communities, receive essential educational materials. This may include sufficient textbooks aligned with current curricula, teaching aids to support lesson delivery, and technological tools such as computers and interactive software. Ongoing training for teachers on how to integrate these resources is expected to enhance their impact on learning.

Reduction of Class Sizes

Reducing overcrowding through the recruitment of additional qualified teachers and the construction of new classrooms may foster smaller learner-to-teacher ratios. Smaller classes are expected to improve learner engagement, facilitate classroom management, and enable teachers to provide more individualised support.

5.4.2 School-Level Interventions

Improved Supervision and Management

School leaders and departmental heads should prioritise consistent monitoring, constructive feedback, and mentorship. Regular observation schedules and collaborative planning sessions may foster accountability and professional growth. Strong leadership is expected to cultivate a culture of excellence and collaboration, thereby improving curriculum delivery (Modisaotsile, 2021).

Support for Learners from Disadvantaged Backgrounds

Targeted programmes such as nutritional support, counseling services, and after-school tutoring may help mitigate the effects of socioeconomic hardship. Initiatives like the National School Nutrition Programme (DBE, 2016) already demonstrate how nutritional support can improve attendance and concentration, and expanding such interventions is expected to further enhance learner resilience and academic success.

5.4.3 Teacher Development

Enhanced Teacher Involvement in Curriculum Development

Teachers should play a more integral role in curriculum review and development. Their classroom experiences provide valuable insights that may strengthen curriculum relevance and applicability. Greater participation is expected to foster ownership, collaboration, and improved implementation (Hoadley, 2018).

Continuous Professional Development

Structured programmes of in-service training, interactive workshops, and professional learning communities may help teachers remain updated on curriculum changes and pedagogical innovations. Such initiatives are expected to empower educators to adapt to evolving educational demands and improve learner outcomes.

Administrative Load Reduction

Delegating non-teaching duties to trained support staff may allow teachers to focus more on instructional activities and learner support. This is expected to enhance lesson planning, engagement, and tailored learning strategies.

5.4.4 Addressing Language Barriers

Schools should adopt comprehensive language support programmes that include reading clubs, vocabulary enrichment, and code-switching strategies. Training teachers in multilingual pedagogy may foster inclusivity and improve learner comprehension, thereby supporting the principles of the Language-in-Education Policy (Department of Education, 2019).

5.5 Conclusion

The study concluded that many interconnected challenges significantly impede the effective implementation of the curriculum in South African schools. Primary obstacles include ongoing resource shortages, overcrowded classrooms, and insufficient infrastructure, all of which critically undermine the provision of quality education. Teachers frequently find themselves overloaded with excessive administrative responsibilities, resulting in limited time and energy to devote to teaching and engaging with their students. Additionally, learners from disadvantaged socioeconomic backgrounds face challenges that extend beyond the classroom. These include restricted access to learning materials, inadequate nutrition, and a lack of supportive home environments, all of which negatively impact their educational outcomes.

The lack of active teacher involvement in the curriculum development process fosters weak ownership and inconsistent application of curricular guidelines, which diminishes the effectiveness of educational programs. Insufficient managerial supervision and support at various administrative levels further compromise the quality of education, resulting in a lack of accountability and adherence to established standards. Overall, the findings indicate that curriculum implementation challenges are not merely pedagogical issues but also systemic ones, deeply influenced by inequities in resources, gaps in leadership, and the contextual realities present within schools. Addressing these multifaceted challenges demands a holistic approach, one that not only empowers teachers through professional development and involvement in decision-making but also provides vital support for learners to overcome external barriers, ultimately enabling both teachers and learners to achieve the intended curriculum goals effectively.

Ultimately, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of how systemic inequalities and professional agency intersect in shaping curriculum implementation in South African schools. The insights generated here may also inform future policy reforms and guide comparative and longitudinal research across provinces, thereby strengthening the evidence base for more equitable and effective education systems.

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ANNEXURE A: Ethical clearance certificate



College of Education _ERC

Date: 15/08/2025

Dear: Ms Busisiwe Nyalunga

**Decision: Ethics Approval from
15/08/2025 to 14/08/2028**

NHREC Registration # : (if applicable)

Ref # : 8543

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Current challenges in implementing the school-level curriculum in South Africa.

Qualification: MEd

Thank you for the application for research ethics approval by the College of Education _ERC for the above-mentioned research study. Ethics approval is granted for **three years**.

The **medium risk application** was **reviewed** by the College of Education _ERC in compliance with the Unisa Policy on Research Ethics and the Standard Operating Procedure on Research Ethics Risk Assessment.

The proposed research may now commence with the provisions that:

1. The researcher(s) will ensure that the research project adheres to the values and principles expressed in the UNISA Policy on Research Ethics.
2. Any adverse circumstance arising during the undertaking of the research study that may affect the ethical integrity of the study, including those involving research participants, third parties, or juristic persons, must be reported in writing to the College of Education _ERC without delay.
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ANNEXURE B: Professional editor certificate

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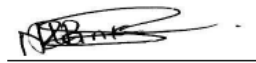
November 24, 2025

Dear Sir/Madam

This is to certify that the dissertation entitled "***Current Challenges in Implementing the School-Level Curriculum in South Africa***" by **Busisiwe Nyalunga**, student number **21005729**, has been edited and proofread for grammar, spelling, punctuation, overall style and logical flow. The edits were carried out using the "Track changes" feature in MS Word, giving the author final control over whether to accept or reject effected changes prior to submission, provided the changes I recommended are effected to the text, and the language is of an acceptable standard.

Please don't hesitate to contact me for any enquiries.

Kind regards



Ms NP Rankakane. (BAYID-UNIVEN, MA-UNIVEN, PGCE-STADIO, TEFL-TEACH
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ANNEXURE C: Similarity Report

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ANNEXURE D: Consent form



CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN THIS STUDY

I, _____ (participant name), confirm that the person asking my consent to take part in this research has told me about the nature, procedure, potential benefits and anticipated inconvenience of participation.

I have read (or had explained to me) and understood the study as explained in the information sheet.

I have had sufficient opportunity to ask questions and am prepared to participate in the study.

I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time without penalty (if applicable).

I am aware that the findings of this study will be processed into a research report, journal publications and/or conference proceedings, but that my participation will be kept confidential unless otherwise specified.

I agree to the recording of the <insert specific data collection method>.

I have received a signed copy of the informed consent agreement.

Participant Name & Surname..... (please print)

Participant Signature.....Date.....

Researcher's Name & Surname.....(please print)

Researcher's signature.....Date.....



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ANNEXURE E: Interview guidelines

1. BEFORE THE INTERVIEW

Preparation and Familiarization

Before the interview, take time to thoroughly prepare and familiarize yourself with the interview guide. This includes understanding the flow of questions, the key topics to cover, and the overall objectives of the interview.

Information and Consent

Prepare both verbal and written materials that clearly outline the purpose of the research and the consent process. Ensure these materials are easy to understand and provide comprehensive information on what the participant can expect during the interview and how their data will be used.

2. SETTING

Consideration of the Interview Environment

Choose a setting that is comfortable, private, and free from distractions, which can be crucial in fostering a positive atmosphere. This environment should allow for open communication and help establish a rapport between you and the interviewee. Think about factors such as lighting, seating, and potential interruptions to create an ideal setting.

3. DATA COLLECTION

Data Capture Methods

Decide in advance how you plan to record the information shared during the interview. Consider using audio recording devices or video tools, making sure to obtain consent for this use. Alternatively, if you choose to take handwritten notes, ensure that this won't detract from your engagement with the participant. If you can, having an assistant to help with note-taking can allow you to focus more on the conversation.

4. ROLE OF THE INTERVIEWER

Initiate with Clear Communication

Begin the interview by providing a clear and concise explanation of the study. This should detail the purpose of the interview and the importance of their participation, ensuring the individual feels informed and comfortable before consenting to take part in the research.

Introduce the Topics

Once consent is obtained, introduce the specific topics you will cover during the conversation. This sets the expectations for the interview and helps the interviewee to focus their thoughts on relevant points.

Maintain Focus and Sensitivity

Keep the interview on track by gently steering the conversation back to the topic if it begins to drift. Be sensitive to the interviewee's body language and non-verbal cues, as these can provide additional context to their responses and indicate their comfort level.

Prompting for Elaboration

Use prompts and open-ended questions to encourage thoughtful and expansive responses. If the interviewee seems hesitant or unsure, provide them with additional context or examples that can help guide their answers.

Ensure Key Points are Captured

Actively listen and ensure that you capture important insights and key points throughout the interview. Summarizing or paraphrasing responses can help clarify understanding and confirm that you have accurately recorded their thoughts.

5. AFTER THE INTERVIEW

Debriefing Consideration

After the interview concludes, assess whether a debriefing is necessary or beneficial for the participant. This could involve thanking them for their time, discussing their experiences during the interview, and providing any additional information about the

study or what happens next with their data. This step can help to reinforce trust and ensure that the participant feels valued and understood.

ANNEXURE F: Interview questions

1. How do resource constraints impact teaching and learning?
2. What is your perspective on teachers teaching subjects outside of their areas of expertise?
3. Do you think experienced teachers deliver content better than novice teachers? If yes, how? If No, why?
4. In most schools, there are infrastructure deficiencies. How does a lack of access to advanced teaching tools and proper infrastructure pose significant obstacles to teaching and learning?
5. How does the socio-economic background of learners affect their performance in school?
6. How does a manager's (DH, Dept. Principal, Principal) failure to adequately supervise and guide teachers affect effective curriculum implementation?
7. What impact does a teacher's lack of participation in curriculum development have on the success of curriculum implementation?
8. Do you think English being the language of proficiency can be a barrier for some learners, particularly in content & specialized subjects?
9. In addition to the already mentioned factors, what other issues do teachers and learners face in schools that impact curriculum delivery?
10. What support do you think is needed by teachers from the department to ensure a successful curriculum delivery?

ANNEXURE G: Participant transcript

PARTICIPANT 5

1. How do resource constraints impact teaching and learning?

The lack of resources greatly affects teaching, especially in public schools. As a teacher, I see this every day. Many learners do not have textbooks or technology at home, which makes it hard for them to learn. They often share textbooks in class, but this creates issues. For example, when a question starts at the end of one page and finishes on another, one learner may finish first and must wait for their classmate.

The government is trying to fix these problems, but there is also a lack of technology. Using certain apps, like Sketchpad, can help learners learn better. For instance, when we teach functions in Maths, technology helps them visualize shifts. If we change a value, they can see how it affects the graph. This makes learning easier and clearer for them. However, when learners lack resources, it allows them to have excuses for not doing their work. They might say they didn't complete an assignment because they didn't have a textbook. Even taking a picture of the textbook can be a challenge for those without a smartphone. This situation hinders their learning, as they feel discouraged and unprepared.

2. What is your perspective on teachers teaching subjects outside of their areas of expertise?

I don't usually refuse to do things because I like to try. However, I find that in my current environment, I have the freedom to express my opinions. If teachers could align the subjects they teach, it would help a lot. For example, teachers who teach physics and mathematics find their jobs easier. When teaching these subjects together, they can use different strategies to approach questions. I always find it helpful when subjects are connected. Once you touch on one subject, you start to see how it relates to another. If teachers are allowed to teach more than one subject, that's beneficial. But when I have to teach a subject outside of my expertise, like a language subject, I struggle. For me, teaching mathematics and English feels very different, and it's hard to connect them.

While all subjects can be linked in some way, languages and mathematics don't integrate easily. For example, if I teach English, I could also teach Afrikaans or Zulu because they are both languages, and the concepts are similar.

To me, physics is applied mathematics. Physics involves numbers, but it also has many words. Pure mathematics focuses more on numbers. That's why I see physics as closely related to mathematics. All right, all right.

3. Do you think experienced teachers deliver content better than novice teachers? If yes, how? If no, why?

For me, it's a 50/50 situation. First, experienced teachers bring valuable understanding. Teaching is real learning; every day, when you teach, you learn something new. Imagine someone who has been learning for 12 years. They know how to handle different questions and remember past experiences with certain topics. They adapt their methods based on how learners responded before. Experienced teachers have the advantage, but times are changing. New technology and evolving learner lifestyles mean that new teachers can also connect with learners outside the classroom. Learners relate more easily to these new teachers, who have modern strategies for using technology. Many experienced teachers struggle with this.

I believe the relationship between new and experienced teachers is essential. Experienced teachers excel in classroom management. Meanwhile, as a new teacher, I focus on delivering my content. I may deliver excellent content, but how I teach is crucial. I can speak fluent English, but some of my learners struggle to understand. I may use complicated words that don't resonate with them. As a new teacher, everything feels fresh from university, and my language might not connect. In contrast, experienced teachers often switch their language style to help learners understand better. This code-switching helps many learners grasp the material, while my direct English approach might only reach a few. So, experienced teachers can effectively bridge that gap.

4. In most schools there are infrastructure deficiencies. How does a lack of access to advanced teaching tools and proper infrastructure pose significant obstacles to teaching and learning?

Teaching takes longer due to poor infrastructure. What I can cover in four periods may take seven or six periods instead. For example, if I have only one chalkboard or whiteboard, I face challenges. When I draw a diagram, I also need to write down questions. My learners often don't have textbooks. I write down questions on the board, and the learners must copy them. After drawing the diagram, I must erase it so I can have space for other work. This delays the learning process because not all learners can focus on their books. If I use a projector to display questions, all learners can see them clearly. They can answer directly from the projector. With good infrastructure, I can send notes through platforms like Teams, and if my school has working printers, I can print notes for my learners. This way, learning happens faster and more effectively. That's how I feel about the lack of infrastructure.

5. How does the socioeconomic background of learners affect their performance in school?

Imagine a learner who comes to class without having eaten. It's early in the morning, and you expect them to focus and do their work. But they lack the energy to engage. Many learners think about food during class and just want to wait for break time to eat. Some schools, especially public ones, provide food. But even in those schools, some kids come without eating. They might look perfectly fine, but they face challenges at home. They might tell you they haven't eaten or that they don't have electricity at home. These emotional and physical struggles make it hard for them to focus in class. On the other hand, learners from better economic backgrounds often have resources like laptops. They believe they can do their work at home and rely on help from online resources. However, when they get home, many do not follow through. They often think they know more than they actually do, saying, "I'll just go home, get my laptop, and look for answers on YouTube," but in reality, they don't do anything.

6. How does a manager's failure to adequately supervise and guide teachers affect effective curriculum implementation?

I relate to this question because I am already a Head of Department (HOD), and I still have a lot to learn. My school told me I was the HOD, but no one guided me on what that meant. I need to create portfolios for my learners and ensure we have textbooks. I didn't know it was my responsibility to order them. There is often a belief from higher-ups that because we went to college or university, we should know how to handle

everything. However, I struggle with classroom management, especially dealing with learners who misbehave. For example, I had a learner who often disrupted the class, and when I tried to discipline them, nothing changed. When I sought help from my HOD at the time, I was told it was my responsibility to manage the classroom.

We need support from our supervisors. For instance, something as simple as taking attendance can be complicated. Sometimes I mark a learner absent when they were actually in another class. We need guidance so we can grow and deliver quality education. If management doesn't support teachers, it affects their ability to teach effectively. We often know the content we need to teach but delivering that content can be challenging. I might start teaching one way, but learners struggle to understand. Experienced teachers can help by offering advice on how to present material differently for better understanding.

I also believe public schools lack proper support for assessment. Teachers often don't understand why certain questions are asked on tests. After learners take an exam, we need to analyse their answers to see where they struggled. For instance, if question two was about exponents and many learners didn't do well, we need to look into that instead of assuming everyone is failing overall. Management should assist us with both administrative tasks and teaching methods. Teachers know the material, but we may not know the best way to present it.

7. What impact does a teacher's lack of participation in curriculum development have on the success of curriculum implementation?

As a teacher, participating in training is crucial. These sessions help you meet other teachers and share ideas about curriculum development. It's important to learn from different perspectives because we all have our own ways of understanding things.

I used to have a limited view of subjects like statistics. When I interacted with other teachers, I found new ways to teach that I hadn't considered before. Sometimes we teach based on our own understanding, but meeting other teachers showed me that I could add methods to my own. Now, when I teach, I am open to adjusting my approach based on learner feedback. If a learner doesn't understand, I try a different method. This interaction enriches my teaching and helps learners grasp concepts better.

Participating in curriculum development boosts my confidence in the classroom. Sharing ideas with fellow teachers enhances my confidence. I feel more prepared to answer learners' questions and tailor my teaching to help them succeed. Staying updated with curriculum changes is also important. For instance, teachers who started in 2005 might not be familiar with today's curriculum, which includes updates like geometry in CAPS. Without ongoing curriculum development, teachers may find it hard to stay current. Overall, curriculum development is essential, and I believe that all teachers should understand its relationship to grading and improving their teaching practices.

8. Do you think English being the language of proficiency can be a barrier for some learners, particularly in content and specialised subjects?

Here's my perspective on the issue. Many of us want to teach in our own languages, and I understand that desire. However, the reality is that the subjects we teach are often borrowed from others. For example, if I want to use the word "Tan" in Swati, it becomes challenging. Some subjects are specialized, and I believe it won't be easy to adapt them to our languages. I remember seeing a piece of paper in Maths that only had English written on it.

For subjects like these, it will take time for us to break away from English as the primary language. This is because we are not the original creators of these subjects. When you look at scientists from different countries, you find Spanish, French, and Greek contributors, which makes it easier for them to teach in their own languages. For Africans, the situation is different because many of our languages are derived from European languages. While some scientists can easily translate their work into African languages, English remains a teaching language for many of us.

This is particularly challenging in a diverse country like South Africa. For instance, in Gauteng, you might encounter learners who speak different home languages, including Zulu, Tswana, Sotho, Chinese, and more. I have learners in my school whose first language is a foreign language, making it harder for them to understand English. It raises the question: how do we support non-English speakers successfully?

As a nation, I believe we cannot simply ignore the language barrier. We must accept that English will serve as the learning language because our society is so diverse. If we want to teach in our languages, we first need to choose one African language to

standardize our teachings. It's crucial to understand that translating everything into one local language, like Setswana, may not work well due to the variety of home languages at our schools.

The original languages spoken in areas like Gauteng are often not part of the academic curriculum, which complicates the teaching process. We face difficulties in addressing employment opportunities when learners need to learn in languages they are not familiar with. When I move for better job prospects, I must consider my child's education and the language barrier they might face. As South Africans, we cannot assume that transitioning away from English is easy. We need to focus on improving English skills. I've noticed that with the rise of social media, many people are improving their English, as it is the primary means of communication there.

In conclusion, I believe English should be emphasized as a key language for education, rather than seeing it as a barrier. If we shift to other languages, we risk losing our competitiveness, especially in economically vibrant areas like Gauteng. Ultimately, we need to make sure that all learners across the country, regardless of their background, have access to quality education in a language they can understand.

9. In addition to the already mentioned factors, what other issues do teachers and learners face in schools that impact curriculum delivery?

The main issue with delivering the curriculum is the lack of resources, but absenteeism is a huge problem as well. Many school learners wake up feeling unwell, and their parents simply send an email to say they won't be attending school that day. For instance, I recently had a learner whose parent is a doctor. This child often brings a doctor's note, which raises concerns since it seems too easy for them to miss class. When learners are absent, you might go to class and find only six learners there. I must decide whether to continue teaching the lesson or just provide work for those present. Absenteeism impacts learner discipline, which then affects how well the content is delivered. Even when I teach well, if learners are distracted or misbehaving, the test results can reflect poorly on my teaching.

Another challenge is that materials are often delivered late, which hinders my ability to teach effectively. These days, learners are very sensitive and require careful handling. For example, when teaching subjects like life sciences or life orientation, I must be cautious about discussing personal topics. If I mention a specific disease, it

might upset a learner who is affected by it or cause others to laugh at their situation. Additionally, it takes a long time for the department to replace sick teachers. When a teacher is out, for instance, due to maternity leave, it can be weeks before a substitute is assigned. This delay means that a new person often has to catch up on weeks or even months of lessons. Teacher assistants could help in these situations, providing support when teachers are sick. Overall, the delay in replacing teachers negatively affects how well we can deliver the curriculum.

10. What support do you think is needed by teachers from the department to ensure a successful curriculum delivery?

There are problems with resources being delivered on time. Departments often promise to provide the resources but then send too much or too little. At the end of the year, they expect good results, often related to money. The Deputy Principal and Head of Department should visit classrooms to check if teachers are teaching effectively. They need to see if the content the teachers are delivering is accurate and suitable for the learners. It is also important to ensure that the teacher's delivery matches the learners' understanding. I wish the Head of the Department could come into the classroom and sign my learners' books. This way, I would know that they have acknowledged my teaching. The government needs to help teachers deliver the proper curriculum. They should ensure that the teacher-to-learner ratio is correct. For example, in some classes, sending the necessary books is unrealistic when there are 65 learners in one class. How can we expect teachers to manage all the administrative work? Private schools often have a better setup. Teachers in private schools usually have only 18 learners in a class, and that makes it easier for them. They also have a maximum of four classes per day and six periods. This allows teachers time for administrative tasks.

By the end of the week, they can review all their learners' work. However, when there are 50 or 60 learners in a classroom, it is difficult to check everyone's book. If a learner doesn't have their book or forgot it at home, it disrupts the process. Learners often say they forgot their books at home when they haven't done the work. It becomes a challenge when they don't take responsibility. In the past, the school was not effectively helping teachers or evolving its teaching methods. There needs to be consistency and thoughtful planning to support both teachers and students.

ANNEXURE H: Declaration

DECLARATION

Name: Busisiwe Pracy Nyalunga

Student number: 21005729

Degree: MED (in curriculum studies)

I declare that: (Exact wording of the title of the dissertation as appearing on the electronic copy submitted for examination)

Current challenges in implementing the school-level curriculum in South Africa.

I declare that the dissertation is my own work and that all the sources that I have used or quoted have been indicated and acknowledged by means of complete references, and that any use of Artificial Intelligence (AI) has been fully disclosed.

I further declare that I submitted the dissertation to the appropriate originality detection system which is endorsed by Unisa and that it falls within the accepted requirements for originality.

I further declare that I have not previously submitted this work, or part of it, for examination at Unisa for another qualification or at any other higher education institution.

I further declare that where Artificial Intelligence (AI) tools have been used in the preparation of this thesis/dissertation, their use has been limited to ethical permissible support, has been fully disclosed, and does not replace my own original research, my independent critical thinking and analysis, or authorship responsibilities.

I understand that failure to disclose AI use, plagiarism and/or lack of academic integrity may constitute academic misconduct under Unisa's policies.

(The dissertation will not be examined unless this statement has been included.)


SIGNATURE

12 January 2026
DATE