

**Teachers' experiences of implementing the curriculum, abridged
version of section four amendments in Grade 12**

By

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Declaration

I, Juliet Bodibadi Mashaba, hereby certify that:

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As the supervisor of this candidate, I approve the submission of this dissertation for examination.

Supervisor: 
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Date: December 7, 2025

Dedication

I would like to begin by giving glory to God for granting me strength, protection, and resilience throughout this academic pursuit. His grace has carried me to this remarkable milestone.

This work is dedicated to my loving family, whose unwavering support has been the backbone of my journey. To my dear daughter, Katlego Mashaba, you are the greatest source of my motivation. May this achievement serve as a reminder that perseverance and education open pathways to a brighter future.

A heartfelt dedication also goes to my siblings, may this accomplishment inspire you to remain focused, work diligently, and continue striving for excellence in all that you do. As your elder sister, I hope my journey becomes a demonstration of the value of dedication and self-development.

To my late grandparents, thank you for instilling in me the belief that education is a powerful tool for transforming one's life. Your words of encouragement continue to live within me, and I carry your legacy with honour and gratitude.

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic significantly disrupted schooling and required education systems to adjust curriculum delivery to address learning losses. In South Africa, the Department of Basic Education introduced the abridged version of the Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS) Section Four amendments to support curriculum recovery and ensure coverage of essential content. This study explored the experiences of Grade 12 teachers implementing the abridged curriculum in a rural secondary school context after the COVID-19 disruptions. Guided by the interpretivist paradigm, the study employed a qualitative single case study design to gain an in-depth understanding of teachers' experiences. Data were generated through semi-structured interviews, non-participant classroom observations, and document analysis. Cultural-Historical Activity Theory (CHAT) informed the analysis of how contextual and systemic factors shaped teachers' curriculum implementation practices.

Thematic analysis identified key themes related to teacher preparedness and professional capacity, curriculum interpretation, resource availability and institutional support, classroom implementation practices, and teacher adaptation strategies. The findings indicate that teachers' experiences were influenced by their curriculum knowledge, access to professional development, and the contextual realities of the rural school environment. Teachers adopted various adaptive teaching and assessment strategies to respond to post-pandemic learning demands.

The study contributes to understanding how curriculum reforms are enacted in rural classrooms and offers insights for strengthening teacher support and curriculum implementation in post-pandemic education.

Keywords: curriculum implementation, abridged curriculum, CAPS Section Four amendments, Grade 12 teachers, rural schools, COVID-19.

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List of Abbreviations

Abbreviation	Full Meaning
4IR	Fourth Industrial Revolution
Act 27 of 1996	National Education Policy Act, 1996
Act 84 of 1996	South African Schools Act, 1996
ADDIE	Analysis, Design, Development, Implementation, Evaluation
ATP	Annual Teaching Plan
B.Ed	Bachelor of Education
CBE	Competency-Based Education
CAPS	Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement
CHAT	Cultural-Historical Activity Theory
CIPP	Context, Input, Process, Product
COVID-19	Coronavirus Disease 2019
DBE	Department of Basic Education
DepEd	Department of Education (Philippines)
DoE	Department of Education (South Africa)
EdTech	Educational Technology
FA	Formative Assessment
FET	Further Education and Training
GET	General Education and Training
ICT	Information and Communication Technology
ITE	Initial Teacher Education
IR	Interpretivist Research / Interpretivist Approach
K-12	Kindergarten through Grade 12
LTSM	Learning and Teaching Support Material
LO	Learning Outcome
MATATAG	“Matiatag” Curriculum

MoE	Ministry of Education
NCATT	National Curriculum and Assessment Task Team
NCF	National Curriculum Framework
NGO	Non-Governmental Organization
OBE	Outcomes-Based Education
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
OECD 2030	OECD Education 2030 Project
PD	Professional Development
PhD	Doctor of Philosophy
PLC	Professional Learning Community
POA	Programme of Assessment
PCK	Pedagogical Content Knowledge
R	Reception year / Grade R
RNCS	Revised National Curriculum Statement
SA	Summative Assessment
S4	Section Four
SLA	Second Language Acquisition
STEM	Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics
TPD	Teacher Professional Development
UK	United Kingdom
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
UNESCO-IBE	UNESCO International Bureau of Education
R&D	Research and Development

Project Title: Teachers' experiences of implementing the curriculum, abridged version of section four amendments in Grade 12

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION OF THE STUDY

1.1. Introduction

This study examined the experiences of Grade 12 teachers in implementing the abridged version of the Section Four curriculum amendments introduced by the South African Department of Basic Education (DBE). Implemented in January 2021, the abridged curriculum sought to enhance teaching efficiency by emphasising essential content and reducing non-core material. As noted by Jacobs and Zmuda (2023), such curriculum reform centres on key concepts while excluding less critical components, and Liao and Ringler (2023) emphasise its focus on aligning instruction with core learning outcomes within constrained timeframes. Forms of curriculum abridgement typically encompass strategies such as content reduction, differentiated instruction, as well as individualised learning plans (Kaplan, 2021; Reis et al., 2021; Strogilos et al., 2021). The study drew on John Dewey's notion of experience, conceptualised as a dynamic interaction between the individual and their environment, one that is contextually grounded, integrative, communicative, historically situated, and socially oriented (Ruoppa, 2025; Mendonça, 2024; Johnson & Schulkin, 2023). Within this framework, the research explored how teachers navigated and adapted to the abridged curriculum following COVID-19 disruptions and evaluated its influence on sustaining meaningful and coherent learning experiences.

1.2. Background to the study

Across the globe, many nations have increasingly prioritised curriculum review as a strategic process to ensure that education systems remain relevant and responsive to rapidly changing social, economic, and technological demands. Periodic curriculum evaluation is widely recognised as essential for ensuring that learners acquire the knowledge, skills, and competencies required to function effectively in the twenty-first century. Countries such as Estonia, Finland, Japan, Norway, and Wales (UK) have undertaken significant curriculum reforms in recent years, reflecting a broader international movement toward educational transformation and improvement (OECD,

2018). The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development's Education 2030 project, which involved more than 40 countries, further emphasised the need for forward-looking curricula that prepare learners for complex and evolving global realities. These developments highlight the importance of continuously reviewing curriculum frameworks and incorporating the experiences of key stakeholders, particularly teachers, to ensure effective curriculum implementation.

The COVID-19 pandemic intensified the need for curriculum adaptation worldwide, as prolonged school closures and disruptions to teaching and learning created significant learning gaps. In response, several countries introduced abridged or modified curricula to recover lost instructional time and support learning continuity. For example, Uganda introduced an abridged secondary school curriculum in 2022 to address learning losses experienced between March 2020 and October 2021. The National Curriculum Development Centre explained that the abridged curriculum was designed as a modification of the existing curriculum rather than a replacement, with the aim of reducing learning loss and supporting socially responsive teaching approaches (National Planning Authority, 2021). Similarly, Finland implemented comprehensive curriculum reforms between 2014 and 2017 that emphasised reduced subject overload, stronger coherence across educational levels, and greater learner-centred approaches to teaching and learning (Halinen, 2018). The success of these reforms was partly attributed to the inclusive process through which teachers, municipalities, and other stakeholders actively contributed to curriculum development and implementation (Halinen et al., 2013; Pietarinen et al., 2017). In the Philippines, the MATATAG Curriculum introduced in 2023 aimed to address content overload and misalignment in the K–12 systems. Structured teacher training and clearer curriculum guidelines were implemented to strengthen classroom practices and improve learner outcomes (Department of Education (DepEd), 2023; Kilag et al., 2024). These international examples illustrate how curriculum reforms are frequently implemented to respond to emerging educational challenges and highlight the central role of teachers in translating curriculum policy into classroom practice.

In South Africa, the National Curriculum Statement (NCS) for Grades R–12 was implemented in 2011 as part of broader efforts to strengthen curriculum coherence and improve learning outcomes. However, over time, teachers, subject advisors, and other

stakeholders raised concerns regarding aspects of its implementation, including the heavy assessment load, insufficient clarity in assessment guidelines, and challenges related to curriculum coverage (Department of Basic Education [DBE], 2021). These concerns, together with the educational disruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, prompted the Department of Basic Education to review Section Four of the Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS), which focuses on school-based assessment. Guided by the National Curriculum and Assessment Task Team (NCATT), an abridged version of Section Four was developed to reduce assessment demands and provide teachers with more manageable guidelines for curriculum implementation. The revised framework was introduced for Grades 1–11 in 2020 and for Grade 12 in 2021, in accordance with Section 6A of the South African Schools Act (Act 84 of 1996) and Section 3(4)(l) of the National Education Policy Act (Act 27 of 1996). The intention of the abridged curriculum was to streamline assessment requirements, increase instructional time, and support meaningful learning following pandemic-related disruptions (DBE Circular S4 of 2021).

While curriculum reforms are designed at the national level, their implementation often varies across different educational contexts. In particular, rural schools frequently operate under conditions that differ from those in urban settings. These schools may face challenges such as limited teaching and learning resources, larger class sizes, reduced access to professional development opportunities, and infrastructural constraints. Such contextual factors can influence how teachers interpret curriculum guidelines, organise learning activities, and implement assessment requirements. Despite the significance of these contextual realities, limited research has explored how teachers in rural schools experienced and implemented the abridged CAPS Section Four amendments following the COVID-19 disruptions.

Given these considerations, it is important to understand how Grade 12 teachers working in rural school contexts experienced the implementation of the abridged curriculum and how they adapted their teaching and assessment practices to meet curriculum expectations. Exploring teachers' lived experiences provides valuable insight into the practical implications of curriculum reform and contributes to a deeper understanding of how policy changes are enacted in real classroom settings. Therefore, this study explored

the experiences of Grade 12 teachers in a rural South African school who implemented the abridged version of Section Four of the CAPS in the post-pandemic educational context.

1.3. Statement of the Problem

The global health crisis precipitated by COVID-19 caused significant disruptions in education worldwide and compelled the South African education system to introduce the abridged curriculum outlined in the Section Four amendments for Grade 12. This policy intervention required teachers to adjust instructional practices, curriculum pacing, and assessment strategies within a shortened academic timeframe. During this period, teachers were expected to adapt rapidly while managing varying levels of experience, preparedness, and contextual support. Previous studies highlight several contextual issues associated with the implementation of the abridged curriculum, including teacher preparedness, professional development needs, curriculum adaptation, learner engagement, and the sustainability of the reforms (Smith & Johnson, 2023). Research indicates that novice teachers often struggled with interpreting condensed content, managing scarce resources, and adapting pedagogical approaches to the shortened curriculum (Bertram, 2023; Stewart & Jansky, 2022; Nalbantoğlu & Bümen, 2024). In contrast, experienced teachers sometimes experienced reform fatigue and faced challenges integrating curriculum changes into established teaching practices (Hargreaves, 2023; Adel, 2025; Deng & Barros, 2024). These responses were further shaped by curriculum adaptation strategies such as content reduction, simplification, contextualisation, and prioritisation (Surma et al., 2025; Tomlinson & Imbeau, 2023; Khanal, 2023; LaFreniere & Newman, 2024).

In addition, systemic constraints such as limited resources, inadequate infrastructure, insufficient professional development opportunities, and resistance to change created further barriers to effective implementation (Ahmed, 2024). Teachers were also required to balance curriculum coverage with conceptual depth, maintain learner engagement, and conduct assessments within compressed timelines. Studies have further raised concerns about whether the abridged curriculum enabled learners to meet expected learning outcomes or whether the shortened syllabus compromised academic performance and

preparedness for further study (Sharp, 2024; Edwards, 2024; Seliskar, 2024; Galloway, 2025).

While these studies provide valuable insights into the broader challenges associated with curriculum reforms during the pandemic, there remains limited empirical understanding of how teachers themselves experienced the implementation of the abridged Section Four curriculum in specific local contexts, particularly in rural schools. Rural schools in provinces such as Limpopo, South Africa, often face additional contextual constraints including limited teaching resources, inadequate digital infrastructure, large class sizes, and restricted access to professional development opportunities. These contextual realities may shape how teachers interpret, adapt, and implement curriculum reforms in practice. The central problem addressed in this study is therefore the limited understanding of Grade 12 teachers' lived experiences of implementing the abridged version of the Section Four curriculum amendments within rural secondary schools in Limpopo, South Africa. Exploring these experiences is important for understanding how curriculum reforms are enacted in real classroom contexts and for informing future curriculum development, teacher support programmes, and education policy in post-pandemic schooling environments.

1.4. Focus/Purpose of the study

The purpose of this study is to explore Grade 12 teachers' experiences of implementing the abridged version of the Section Four curriculum amendments that were introduced as part of the educational response to the COVID-19 pandemic. The abridged curriculum was implemented to address learning disruptions and the loss of instructional time caused by school closures and other pandemic-related restrictions. Within the context of rural secondary schools in Limpopo Province, South Africa, the implementation of the abridged curriculum required teachers to adjust their teaching practices, pacing of content, and assessment approaches in order to ensure curriculum coverage and learner progression. This study therefore explores how Grade 12 teachers in rural schools in Limpopo experienced and interpreted the implementation of the abridged curriculum during and after the pandemic disruptions. By examining teachers' experiences in this context, the study seeks to provide insights into how the abridged curriculum shaped curriculum

delivery, teaching practices, and learner engagement in rural schooling environments affected by COVID-19.

1.5. Research Objectives

Aim

The study explores teachers' experiences of implementing the curriculum abridged version of section four amendments in Grade 12 within the context of rural secondary schools.

Objectives of the study

In order to achieve the above aim, the objectives outlined below are pursued:

- to explore teachers' experiences of implementing the curriculum abridged version of Section Four amendments in Grade 12; and
- to identify the factors that inform teachers' experiences when implementing the curriculum abridged version of Section Four amendments.

1.6. Research Questions

Main research question:

What are teachers' experiences of implementing the curriculum abridged version of section Four amendments in Grade 12?

Sub-questions

- How do teachers describe their experiences of implementing the curriculum abridged version of the Section Four amendments in Grade 12?
- What factors inform teachers' experiences of implementing the curriculum abridged version of Section Four amendments in Grade 12?

1.7. Rationale/Motivation

The motivation for undertaking this study emerges from the documented challenges associated with implementing curriculum reforms in secondary schools, particularly within contexts where teachers are required to manage multiple instructional and administrative responsibilities simultaneously. Research indicates that teachers often experience significant workload pressures resulting from overlapping assessment demands, including pre-tests, post-tests, mid-term assessments, and other forms of informal evaluation that must be completed alongside routine classroom activities such as lesson preparation, classwork supervision, and homework monitoring (Mncube et al., 2023;

Maharaj & Chauke, 2025). These overlapping responsibilities frequently reduce the amount of time available for effective curriculum delivery and may hinder comprehensive coverage of prescribed content. In some cases, the emphasis placed on informal assessments may also disrupt the balance between teaching and assessment, particularly when such tasks are not formally integrated within the Programme of Assessment (POA) or aligned with the Annual Teaching Plan (ATP). As a result, teachers may experience difficulty maintaining instructional continuity while simultaneously meeting administrative and assessment expectations.

Existing studies further indicate that the introduction of abridged or condensed curricula presents both opportunities and challenges for teachers and learners. Some scholars argue that reducing curriculum content can support more focused instruction and enable teachers to concentrate on core concepts and essential learning outcomes (Brown, 2024; Cheng & Lander, 2024). In this regard, curriculum abridgement may contribute to improved learner engagement and allow educators to prioritise foundational knowledge and skills. Similarly, Gabriel et al. (2025) and Rossiter (2025) suggest that streamlined curricula that emphasise essential competencies can enhance learner motivation, participation, and conceptual understanding, particularly when teaching time is limited. Such approaches may therefore provide practical solutions for addressing learning disruptions and curriculum overload.

However, other scholars caution that curriculum abridgement may also produce unintended consequences if not implemented carefully. Research by Smith (2022) and Surma et al. (2025) suggests that reducing curriculum content may limit opportunities for learners to develop higher-order cognitive skills such as critical thinking, analytical reasoning, and problem-solving abilities. In this regard, while abridged curricula may provide short-term relief by reducing workload and instructional pressure, they may simultaneously create gaps in deeper conceptual understanding that are necessary for long-term academic success. These contrasting perspectives highlight the complexity of curriculum abridgement and suggest that its effectiveness depends largely on how teachers interpret, adapt, and implement the revised curriculum within their classroom contexts.

Despite the growing body of literature on curriculum reform and abridgement, limited research has focused specifically on teachers' lived experiences of implementing the abridged version of the Section Four curriculum amendments at the Grade 12 level. Understanding teachers' perspectives is particularly important because teachers act as key mediators between curriculum policy and classroom practice. Their interpretations, pedagogical decisions, and professional judgments play a central role in determining how curriculum changes are enacted in real educational settings. Exploring teachers' experiences can therefore provide valuable insights into the practical realities of curriculum implementation, including the ways in which teachers negotiate policy expectations, manage instructional demands, and respond to contextual challenges within their schools.

This study therefore seeks to explore Grade 12 teachers' experiences in implementing the abridged curriculum amendments introduced under Section Four. By examining teachers' views, perceptions, and practical experiences, the study aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of how curriculum abridgement is enacted in classroom practice. The findings are expected to provide insights that may inform curriculum developers, education policymakers, and teacher support initiatives, ultimately contributing to more balanced curriculum policies and more effective strategies for supporting teachers in the implementation of curriculum reforms.

1.8. Significance of the study

This study considers the experiences of Grade 12 teachers in delivering the amended curriculum before and after the Coronavirus pandemic. The study's significance is reflected in its ability to inform curriculum developers and support Grade 12 teachers in South Africa by highlighting the challenges and strategies associated with implementing curriculum changes under different conditions. The insights gained from teachers' lived experiences are proposed to contribute to improving curriculum delivery, especially in times of disruption. Additionally, the findings aim to provide value to curriculum policy developers, offering an evidence-based understanding of how policy adjustments are received and enacted at the classroom level. This research may also contribute to the broader academic field by encouraging further studies on curriculum adaptation during

crises, ultimately aiming to build a more resilient and responsive education system in South Africa.

1.9. Chapter Overview

1.9.1. Chapter 1

The first chapter introduces the purpose and scope of the study by providing its background and outlining key elements, including the title, geographical setting, research questions, and associated objectives. It further articulates the research problem and the rationale that underpins exploration of the research. The chapter also discusses the significance of the study and offers a concise overview of the relevant literature. It concludes with a summary of the methodological orientation, encompassing the research paradigm, approach, and design, as well as the sampling procedures, data-collection and analysis methods, strategies employed to ensure trustworthiness, ethical considerations, and the acknowledged limitations of the study.

1.9.2. Chapter 2

The second chapter presents the literature review, focusing on two central areas relevant to the study, namely, the phenomenon of teachers' experiences and the curriculum as a disciplinary field. The discussion of the phenomenon, *teachers' experiences*, explores its definition, various types and levels, key characteristics, and its significance within educational contexts. Furthermore, the chapter examines the curriculum as a discipline by outlining its conceptual foundations, key components, major approaches, core activities, and different representations namely the intended, implemented, and attained curriculum. It also provides a historical overview of curriculum development to situate the study within its broader educational context.

1.9.3. Chapter 3

Chapter Three continues the literature review, concentrating on the third key area, the focus of the study, which is the abridged curriculum. This section explores the concept of the abridged curriculum by examining its definition, underlying reasons and key changes, as well as the various approaches used in its implementation, including their respective strengths and limitations. It also discusses perspectives on the abridged curriculum from both South African and global contexts. In addition, the chapter introduces the CHAT framework, which provides the theoretical basis for this study.

1.9.4. Chapter 4

The fourth chapter presents a comprehensive account of the research methodology adopted in the study. It outlines the research paradigm, approach, and design that guided the attainment of the study's objectives. The chapter further details the sampling strategies employed specifically, convenience and purposive sampling to select participants. In addition, it describes the data-generation methods used, including document analysis, non-participant observations, and semi-structured individual interviews. The chapter also elaborates on the processes of data analysis, which incorporated both deductive and inductive reasoning. It concludes by addressing the ethical considerations observed throughout the study and acknowledging the key limitations that may have influenced the exploration.

1.9.5. Chapter 5

The fifth chapter analyses and discusses the data gathered from interviews, observations, and document analysis. It illustrates the analytical process by demonstrating how themes were aligned with the principles of the CHAT framework through deductive reasoning. The chapter further explains how inductive reasoning was employed to generate and refine the central themes that emerged from the observational data.

1.9.6. Chapter 6

The sixth chapter provides a comprehensive synthesis of the preceding chapters. It revisits the first chapter, which contextualises the study and introduces its background; the second chapter, which reviews pertinent literature; the third chapter, which extends the review and outlines the theoretical foundation of the study; the fourth chapter, which elaborates on the research methodology; and the fifth chapter, which presents and interprets the study's findings. This chapter further consolidates the key insights derived from the research, addressing the identified limitations and challenges. It concludes by presenting overarching conclusions and practical recommendations, informed by the study's overall outcomes.

1.10. Chapter Summary

This chapter introduced the study by first providing the background on teachers' experiences of implementing the curriculum abridged version of the section 4 amendments in Grade 12. It then outlined the study's title, purpose, location, problem

statement, rationale, significance, and a brief review of relevant literature. It also outlined the theoretical framework that underpinned the study and articulated its objectives and research questions. Furthermore, it provided a synopsis of the methodological approach, encompassing the research paradigm, design, and sampling strategies, as well as the techniques employed for data generation and analysis. The discussion also addressed the strategies adopted to enhance trustworthiness, alongside the ethical considerations observed and the limitations acknowledged within the study. Finally, Chapter One concluded with a summary of all chapters in the research, providing an overview of chapters One to Six.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW: TEACHERS' EXPERIENCES AND UNPACKING CURRICULUM

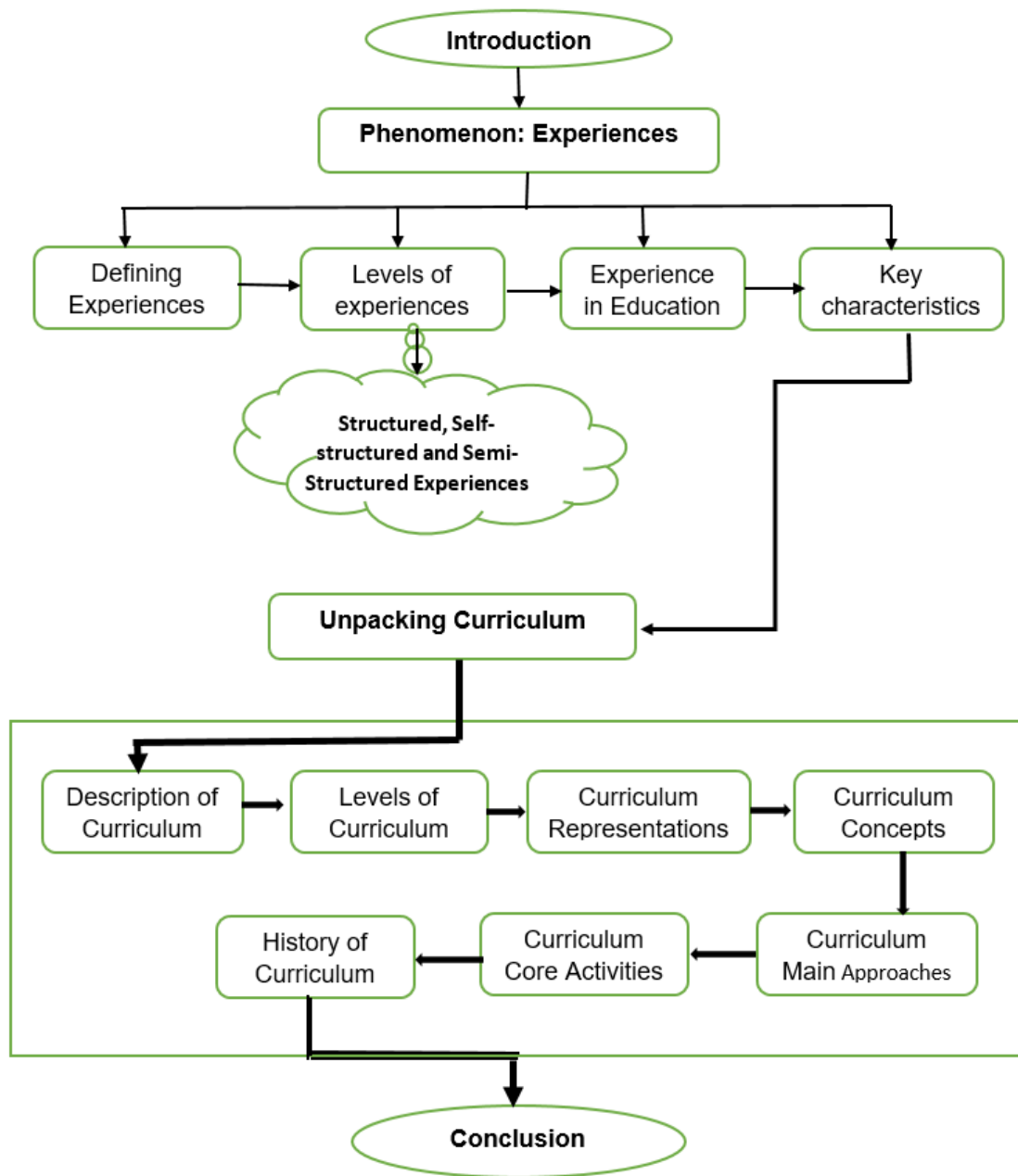


Figure 1: Chapter 2 (Flow Chart)

The above flowchart illustrates the organisational structure that guides Chapter 2: Literature Review on Teachers' Experiences (phenomenon) and unpacking Curriculum.

2.1. INTRODUCTION

The preceding chapter presented the background of the study, the problem statement, the purpose of the study, and the research questions and objectives guiding the inquiry. It further outlined the rationale and significance of the study and provided an overview of the structure of the dissertation. Building on this foundation, this chapter presents a review of literature relevant to teachers' experiences in implementing the abridged curriculum under Section Four amendments in Grade 12. This study is situated within a rural schooling context, which represents an important dimension in understanding teachers' experiences of curriculum implementation. Rurality refers not only to geographical location but also to the social, economic, and institutional conditions that shape schooling in sparsely populated areas (Bernard et al., 2023; Okushova et al., 2024). Rural schools often face challenges such as limited infrastructure, restricted access to resources, and fewer professional development opportunities for teachers. These contextual conditions can influence how curriculum policies are interpreted and implemented in classrooms. Within the South African education system, teachers in rural schools frequently navigate curriculum expectations while responding to contextual constraints related to resources, institutional support, and learner needs (Mncube et al., 2023; Maharaj & Chauke, 2025). These realities may shape how teachers adapt teaching practices and assessment strategies when implementing curriculum reforms such as the abridged Section Four amendments of the Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS).

A literature review, as noted by Jon Sollenberger et al. (2021), involves a systematic process of identifying, evaluating, and interpreting existing research. Similarly, John W. Creswell et al. (2014) and Jerry Wellington (2015) explain that a literature review establishes the relevance of a study by identifying gaps in existing knowledge. In this study, the literature review synthesises research on teacher experiences of curriculum implementation while situating these discussions within the realities of rural schooling contexts. The chapter therefore examines existing literature on teachers' experiences, curriculum implementation, and contextual factors influencing educational practice. In doing so, it highlights key themes and gaps related to the implementation of the abridged Section Four amendments in Grade 12, particularly within rural school environments.

2.2. PHENOMENON (TEACHER'S EXPERIENCES)

2.2.1. Definition of Experience

Morris (2020), drawing on Dewey's philosophy, describes experience as inherently personal, subjective, and grounded in practical knowledge acquired through active involvement, observation, or direct engagement. In contrast, Minett-Smit and Davis (2020) present a more layered view, emphasising that experience includes cognitive, emotional, and social elements. Thorburn (2020) adds that experience is dynamic, subjective, and shaped by cultural and environmental factors. Similarly, Van Manen (2023) highlights the affective and emotional aspects of experience, particularly in teaching, where emotions significantly influence decision-making. Wenger (2022) also underscores how social and cultural contexts shape individuals' experiences. From a constructivist standpoint, experience is not static, but is continuously formed through personal interpretation (Clandinin, 2022). This aligns with interpretivist approaches, which argue that understanding human behaviour requires examining the meanings individuals ascribe to their experiences. In this light, experience is shaped by culture, context, and personal history, making it dynamic and deeply individualised.

Minett-Smit and Davis (2020) further explore the multifaceted nature of experience in the realm of curriculum implementation, where educators encounter emotional tensions, conflicts between autonomy and accountability, and the challenges of adopting innovative pedagogies. These insights point to the necessity for a nuanced understanding of experience within educational research. The word "experience" originates from the Latin term "experientia," meaning "trial" or "testing," which implies the acquisition of knowledge through exposure (Frey & Harper, 2023). Leddy (2023), building on Dewey's ideas, integrates them into current academic discussions, portraying experience as an interaction of perceptions, feelings, and interpretations. Similarly, Zahavi and Zelinsky (2024) portray experience as an active, interpretive process, aligning with Heidegger's (1962) phenomenological view of experience as fundamental to human consciousness (Mhatre & Mehta, 2023). Teacher experiences are pivotal to effective curriculum implementation (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2015; Anderman & Anderman, 2020). Nevertheless, Smit et al. (2020) and Davis et al. (2020) point out that existing literature on the intricacies of implementing condensed curricula is limited, indicating the need for deeper investigation into teachers' lived experiences during curriculum reform. Fullan

(2020) and Darling-Hammond et al. (2024) argue that involving teachers is critical for successful curriculum change, as they are the central agents of instruction and significantly influence student achievement and educational transformation. This means that teachers as primary facilitators of learning, directly impact learner outcomes and educational reforms.

However, barriers such as inadequate professional training, limited resources, and insufficient support from school leadership often hinder effective curriculum implementation (Lavigne & Good, 2019). Parrish (2024) demonstrates that teachers' individual and professional backgrounds shape how they interpret and implement curriculum policies. Educators who engage in reflective practice are better equipped to adapt curricula to meet diverse student needs. Smith et al. (2022) support this by emphasising the value of contextual awareness in allowing educators to personalise learning. Brown (2023) and Harrison and Williams (2023) further affirm that teachers' lived experiences guide how they respond to curriculum changes, often fostering creative instructional strategies. Garcia et al. (2023) stress the importance of capturing and analysing teacher experiences to build a knowledge base of best practices. Recognising and incorporating teacher experiences not only enhances curriculum implementation, but also supports professional development. When teachers are included in curriculum design, this fosters ownership and results in more effective educational practices and outcomes.

Kintner-Duffy et al. (2022) found that educators' pedagogical beliefs and prior experiences shape how they engage with curricula, with experiential learning improving adaptability and decision-making. Jones (2024) highlights the value of collaborative experiences in cultivating professional learning communities. Adams (2023) and Williams (2024) argue that acknowledging teacher experiences helps bridge the gap between theoretical knowledge and classroom application, thereby improving curriculum relevance. Thompson (2023) adds that discussing shared experiences promotes ownership, boosts motivation, and reduces resistance to change. Therefore, recognising teacher experiences supports curriculum reform and contributes to broader conversations on educational leadership and policy. Incorporating these insights into policymaking could lead to more impactful professional development initiatives.

Tran et al. (2023), in their study of high school educators navigating the 2020–2023 curriculum updates found that many felt ill-prepared for the newly required pedagogical approaches. Johnson (2023) supports this by linking teacher stress to a lack of adequate training. Moreover, administrative pressures often discourage teachers from openly sharing concerns, resulting in underreporting of negative experiences and emphasising the need for more transparent dialogue. Smith (2022) advocates for longitudinal studies that explore teacher experiences over time and across various educational contexts. This means that addressing these limitations proves crucial for fostering supportive environments that enhance professional development and curriculum effectiveness. In their investigation of the revised Grade 12 curriculum, Smith (2022) revealed both challenges and achievements, teachers appreciated the focus on critical thinking, but were hindered by a lack of resources and training. Johnson (2023) echoes these issues, noting disparities in professional development access and rising levels of teacher anxiety. These findings reflect the difficulty of translating theoretically sound curriculum reforms into effective practice. Thompson (2024) highlights the emotional strain associated with such changes, reinforcing previous research on stress and burnout among educators. This indicates that while curriculum reforms aim to enhance education, where their success depends on adequate support and realistic implementation timelines. Policymakers must prioritise teacher experiences to ensure curriculum reforms are both sustainable and beneficial for educators and students alike.

In rural schooling contexts, teacher experiences are shaped by conditions such as limited infrastructure, large class sizes, and restricted access to professional development opportunities. These factors influence how teachers interpret and respond to curriculum reforms. Understanding teachers' experiences in rural settings is essential for examining how the abridged CAPS Section Four amendments were implemented in Grade 12 classrooms.

2.2.2. Levels/Types of Experience

Hess and Bradley (2020) classify teachers' experiences into three categories: informal (skill-based), non-formal (attitude-based), and formal (knowledge-based), underscoring their importance in implementing curricula. Building on this, Wijnen-Meijer et al. (2022) elaborate on experiential learning by identifying a range of experience types, including direct, indirect, formal, informal, reflective, emotional, social, and transformative. Direct

experience involves active participation in teaching, while indirect ones include observing and receiving feedback. Wenger and Lave (2022) highlight the value of indirect experiences for reflective learning, particularly for new teachers, emphasising the crucial role of reflection in curriculum reform. This suggests that reflective experiences are critical in curriculum reform. Reflective practices, as noted by Machost and Stains (2023), enhance teachers' comprehension of instructional methods. This perspective is supported by Hoxsey (2023) and Johnson (2023), who assert that reflective dialogue fosters better teaching and improved student learning. Karatas and Yüce (2024) also point out that reflection significantly improves instructional planning and implementation. By nurturing a reflective approach, educators can become transformative agents, adapting their teaching strategies to meet evolving educational demands.

Emotional experiences are defined by Vaccaro et al. (2020) as emotions that influence teaching and they play a vital role, with Thorburn (2020) highlighting how social interactions impact teaching methods. Moran and Moloney (2022) describe transformative experiences as those that lead to deep shifts in teaching perspectives. Emotional struggles during curriculum changes, as explored by Kim and Wright (2024), align with the findings of Vaccaro et al. (2020). Likewise, Cong-Lem (2024) and Thorburn (2020) emphasize the role of social experiences in fostering collaboration and adaptability. López-Rodríguez and Núñez-Delgado (2024) and Hossain (2023) meanwhile highlight the transformative impact of professional development in shaping teaching identities. Altogether, these studies stress the significance of emotional, social, and transformative experiences in driving teacher development and enhancing student outcomes. Therefore, these experience types are pivotal to professional growth in teaching.

Reichert (2020) highlights how teachers' cultural backgrounds influence their responses to educational reforms. Sent and Kroese (2022) differentiate how collectivist and individualist cultures perceive curriculum shifts, while Smit (2020) and Davis (2020) note that cultural diversity enriches instructional methods. Afolabi and Olajuyigbe (2022) found that teachers' varied backgrounds contribute distinct insights into curriculum implementation, typically categorised as formal learning within academic settings. These experiences fall largely under formal learning within educational institutions. These findings reveal that cultural influences plays a critical role in shaping teachers'

experiences with curriculum change. However, cultural differences can also present obstacles, such as communication issues and value conflicts (Reichert et al., 2020). Schools can mitigate these challenges through initiatives like cultural competence training and promoting cross-cultural collaboration (Gay, 2021), which are part of non-formal learning experiences. Furthermore, cultural norms influence teachers' emotional experiences (Immordio-Yang & Gotlieb, 2020; Frenzel et al., 2021). Insights from critical race theory and postcolonial studies (Ladson-Billings, 2021; Busey & Coleman-King, 2023) draw attention to power imbalances in education, urging a critical examination of dominant cultural assumptions. Teachers' emotional reactions to curriculum changes often stem from informal, personal, and social experiences. Recognising and integrating all these varied types of experiences is crucial for fostering teacher growth, improving instructional quality, and boosting student success.

Biyela (2018) divides experiences into three categories, namely: knowledge (professional); skills (social); and attitude (personal). To put it another way, experiences can be semi-structured (societal); structured (professional); or self-structured (personal). As a result, as illustrated in Figure 1, experiences in this study are categorised into three levels: self-structured, semi-structured, and structured.

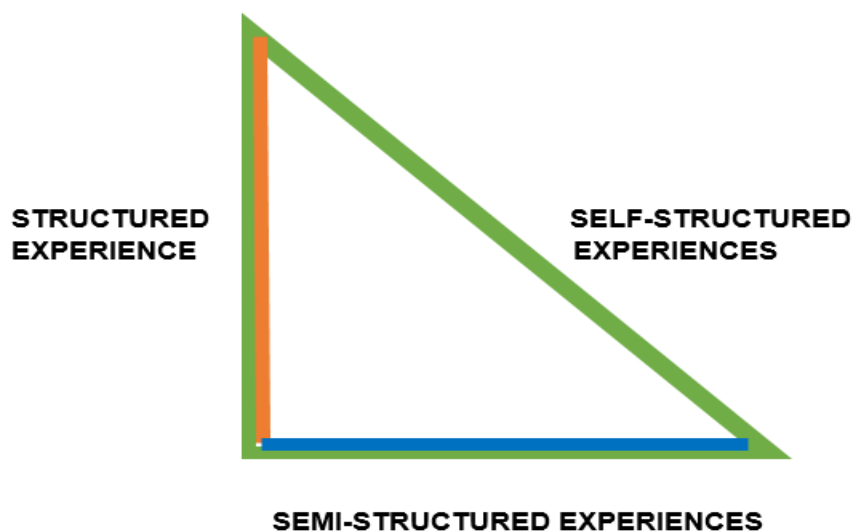


Figure 2: Defining experience in the context of experiential learning framework or model.

2.2.2.1. Structured experience

People's thoughts and actions are shaped and influenced by structured experiences in a specific way (Nani, 2019). According to Fink (2013), structured experience is defined as organised information, derived from formal educational institutions such as colleges, universities, training centres, and schools. This means that teachers are professional teachers due to the professional knowledge and content they acquire in higher education. It also implies that teachers enroll in postsecondary institutions to earn a degree (e.g., a Bachelor of Education degree) that enables them to acquire content knowledge of specialized subjects or disciplines (e.g., economics, mathematics, geography, and others) as preservice teachers. In other words, the influence of teachers' organised experiences starts at the university level and does not start when they start instructing students. Furthermore, Orhan and Beyhan (2020) argue along with Bazerman (1994) that the formal teaching and learning process makes use of teachers' organised experience. For example, teachers implementing abridged curriculum amendments in Grade 12 often rely on their structured experience to ensure effective delivery. For instance, a teacher who has previously navigated curriculum changes may strategically adjust lesson pacing to accommodate the condensed content, while ensuring students grasp key concepts. Additionally, formal education uses structured experience to meet the needs of the students (Dewey, 1986). Teachers may face challenges in aligning assessment methods with the abridged curriculum. Those with prior experience in curriculum adaptations might design formative assessments that focus on essential competencies, ensuring learners remain on track despite the modifications. These examples demonstrate the way in which teachers utilise their structured experience to adapt their teaching methods, address student needs, and facilitate the seamless implementation of the amended Grade 12 curriculum. This indicates that, in responding to the specific needs of their subjects, teachers tend to rely on their structured experiences to facilitate the effective and seamless implementation of the intended curriculum.

2.2.2.2. Semi-structured Experience

Literature indicates that semi-structured experiences involve social interactions through which individuals share knowledge and skills outside formal educational settings (Cindi, 2021; McKnight, 2015; Nani, 2019). In essence, these experiences encompass the learning of knowledge and skills in informal contexts, occurring both consciously and

unconsciously. Mpungose and Khoza (2022) further argue that semi-structured experience is a social experience that centres teaching and learning around society. As a result, teachers on school grounds socialise with their peers to get informal experience. This type of encounter is less regimented in terms of learning location, time, and topic. Rather, it is contingent information that is typically picked up in informal social situations (Ekborg et al., 2013). In a study focused on the essential aspects of effective professional practice during initial teacher training, Le Cornu (2015) asserts that workplace learning is intended to foster the creation of new knowledge through hands-on practice, rather than merely applying theoretical understanding. Therefore, the curriculum amendments require teachers to navigate curriculum changes in real-time, adapting their instructional strategies based on both structured knowledge (the curriculum content) and semi-structured experience (contextual and situational problem-solving). Teachers must apply social reasoning (Khoza, 2018; Makumane & Khoza, 2020) in managing classroom dynamics, addressing learners' diverse needs, and achieving intended learning outcomes despite curriculum modifications. The ability to integrate subject knowledge with the practical realities of the classroom underscores the importance of both professional and situational expertise in fostering effective learning experiences. This reflects the broader understanding that curriculum implementation is not merely about delivering prescribed content but also about responding flexibly to social and pedagogical demands.

2.2.2.3. Self-Structured Experience

Rafique et al. (2024) align with Luff (2018) in defining self-structured experience as knowledge gained through an individual's purposeful and unintentional observations of their environment, including interactions with societal elements and physical materials. In the context of curriculum implementation, adapting to the abridged version requires teachers to modify their instructional approaches, lesson plans, and assessment strategies. This perspective aligns with the findings of Suyatno et al. (2023) and Özüdogru (2021), who observed that teachers' habitual actions not only help them understand themselves but also enable them to anticipate societal responses based on their developmental stages and prior experiences. Consequently, teachers implementing the abridged curriculum may draw upon past experiences, classroom dynamics, and intuitive judgment to facilitate smooth adaptation while maintaining educational quality. Similarly, Twala (2024) and Mtshali and Singh-Pillay (2023) assert that, when teachers are

cognisant of their personal identity, they are better able to set self-directed goals in both teaching and learning, ultimately facilitating self-actualisation. The introduction of curriculum changes often requires teachers to take initiative in self-learning and to explore innovative strategies for integrating revised content while sustaining engagement and effectiveness. For instance, Hathaway et al. (2024) observed that when teaching transitioned from traditional face-to-face methods to technology-based approaches, teachers' positive attitudes were instrumental in addressing challenges arising from limited training and experience with digital tools. In the case of the curriculum abridgment, teachers faced the challenge of adjusting to a condensed syllabus, requiring them to prioritize essential content and develop efficient teaching strategies based on their self-structured experience. In other words, self-structured experience is a crucial tool in overcoming curriculum-related challenges. Therefore, teachers need to rely on their instincts, habitual actions, and self-reflection to ensure smooth curriculum delivery while addressing the needs of their learners. This supports the broader claim that structured training alone is insufficient -personal experience and adaptability play a significant role in curriculum implementation.

Although structured, semi-structured, and self-structured experiences are presented as distinct forms of professional engagement, they often interact in practice. Teachers may simultaneously draw on formal curriculum guidance, institutional expectations, and personal professional judgment when implementing curriculum reforms. In the context of the abridged CAPS Section Four amendments, these overlapping forms of experience help explain how Grade 12 teachers adapted curriculum expectations to the realities of teaching in rural schools.

2.2.3. Experience in Education

Experience-based learning has been shown to enhance student engagement, retention, and deep understanding of complex concepts (Kolb, 2014; Dewey, 1986). Teachers' experiences in implementing curriculum changes, for instance, can foster professional growth, innovation, and improved instructional practices (Mercer et al., 2021). However, research also reveals that teachers' experiences are often shaped by institutional constraints, policy mandates, and societal expectations (Dimitriadou et al., 2021). Some scholars argue that experience-based education can address the limitations of traditional pedagogies, promoting more authentic and relevant learning experiences (Salimas-

Navarro, 2024). Others contend that experience alone is insufficient, emphasising the need for critical reflection, mentorship, and intentional learning design (Duffy, 2024). The role of technology in mediating experience has also emerged as a critical consideration, with research exploring the potential of digital platforms to enhance or hinder experiential learning (Walli & Popal, 2020).

Moreover, studies have underscored the importance of teacher experience in shaping learner outcomes. Teacher experience has been linked to improved student achievement, increased student motivation, and enhanced teacher-student relationships (Kalim & Bibi, 2024). However, this also highlights the need to reconceptualise teacher experience, moving beyond mere years of service to consider the quality, diversity, and relevance of teachers' experiences (Jensel et al., 2024). The intersection of experience and social justice has also emerged as a critical theme. Researchers have explored how experience-based education can address issues of equity, diversity, and inclusion, highlighting the potential for experiential learning to empower marginalised voices and challenge dominant narratives (Zorba, 2020). Overall, the dialogue surrounding experience in education emphasizes the need for a more nuanced understanding of its complexities, challenges, and potential. By engaging with recent research and diverse perspectives, educators can harness the transformative power of experience to enhance teaching, learning, and student outcomes. Therefore, this discussion forms part of formal experience as it highlights the importance of structured, institutionalised learning and professional development in shaping both teachers' instructional practices and learners' learning outcomes within formal educational systems.

2.2.4. Key Characteristics of Experience

Helleve (2022) identifies several key characteristics of experience that shape teachers' professional lives and instructional practices. These characteristics include Subjectivity, Contextuality, Dynamic nature, Emotional dimension, Intentionality, Reflectivity, Holism, and Agency (Helleve, 2022).

According to Jean Clandinin and Connelly (2004) Subjectivity experiences are personal, unique, and influenced by individual perspectives, values, and beliefs. Teachers' experiences in implementing curriculum changes, for instance, are shaped by their subjective interpretations. This demonstrates that, since experiences are shaped by individual perspectives, values, and beliefs, teachers interpret and implement curriculum

changes differently. It also indicates that their personal teaching philosophies influence how they adapt instructional strategies to meet students' needs. Lave and Wenger (1991) explain Contextuality experiences as situated within specific social, cultural, and environmental contexts. This means that the school culture, colleague support, and learner need all influence teachers' experiences. Where, as a consequence, curriculum implementation depends on the specific social, cultural, and environmental context of a school. Factors such as school policies, student demographics, and peer collaboration shape how teachers engage with the curriculum.

Kolb (2014) highlighted that Dynamic nature experiences evolve and change over time, influenced by new information, reflections, and interactions, where teachers' experiences with curriculum implementation, for example, may shift as they gain more experience. This means that curriculum is not static but that it evolves over time based on teachers' ongoing learning, professional development, and classroom interactions. Teachers continuously refine instructional methods as they gain experience and receive feedback. Damasio (2004) indicates that Emotional dimension experiences involve emotions, feelings, and affective responses. This highlights that teachers' emotional experiences, such as anxiety or joy, impact their instructional practices. In other words, teachers' emotions, such as stress, excitement, or frustration, impact their engagement with the curriculum. Positive emotional experiences may enhance motivation and innovation, while negative emotions can hinder effective implementation. Brooks and Kandel (2024) explain that Intentionality experiences are purposeful and goal-oriented, with teachers actively seeking to achieve specific outcomes. Therefore, intentionality shapes teachers' experiences with curriculum design and implementation. Moreover, teachers' goals and objectives shape how they implement curriculum content. A strong sense of purpose leads to more structured lesson planning, targeted instructional strategies, and better student outcomes.

2.3. Unpacking curriculum

2.3.1. Description

Curriculum, as discussed by Johnson (2024), originates from the Latin word "currere," meaning "to run" or "to progress." Traditionally, it refers to a course of study provided by educational institutions, but it has evolved to encompass a broader understanding of the educational experience, reflecting the dynamic interactions between knowledge,

pedagogy, and societal context. Supporting this perspective, scholars such as Duran (2021), Pinar (2022), Krstic (2024), and Cruz (2024) argue that the curriculum is not a static document, but a lived experience, shaped by cultural and personal narratives. Similarly, Erdamar (2023) highlights that curriculum includes both planned and enacted learning experiences that educators design in order to facilitate student development in a structured way. Smith (2024) reinforces that curriculum is more than a list of subjects; rather, it embodies the values, goals, and context of education. As a result, teachers play a crucial role in understanding curriculum as a dynamic framework, adapting their instructional strategies based on learner needs, societal changes, and technological advancements to ensure learning remains relevant and meaningful. A well-developed curriculum should not only transmit knowledge, but may also foster critical thinking, creativity, and meaningful engagement with real-world issues, continuously integrating new insights and methodologies to enhance learning experiences.

Several scholars, including Pinar et al. (2022) and Kelly (2023), emphasise that curriculum ought to be viewed as a dynamic and relational construct that adapts to the needs and realities of learners in specific contexts. Kelly (2022) argues that the curriculum must respond to cultural, social, and economic factors to remain relevant, while Swargiary (2024) describes curriculum as a multifaceted concept, encompassing both planned educational experiences that guide students in their learning journey. Belbase et al. (2022) further stress that curriculum is not merely a collection of subjects, but a comprehensive framework shaping the learning process. Avci (2023) and Thomas (2024) highlight that curriculum is continually influenced by cultural, political, and social factors, requiring adaptation to prepare students academically, socially, and emotionally. Deniz (2024), along with Göloglu Demir and Kizilhan (2021), emphasise curriculum to also be about relationships within the educational space, where student-teacher interactions play a crucial role in learning. This perspective suggests that an effective curriculum ought to be flexible, inclusive, and learner-centered, integrating diverse perspectives and fostering adaptability to prepare learners for a rapidly changing world. For this reason, curriculum designers and educators ought to ensure that learning experiences are continuously refined to remain relevant, inclusive, and meaningful.

2.3.2. Levels of curriculum

Alvunger (2024) asserts that curriculum development occurs at multiple levels, each providing a distinct perspective and addressing different aspects of educational planning and implementation. The constructs of macro, meso, micro, nano, and supra levels prove essential to understanding how curricula evolve, and help to consider how teachers experience curriculum development. Alvunger (2024) adds that within the context of teacher experiences, these levels shape how educators navigate curriculum design, implementation, and adaptation in diverse learning environments. Corroborating this, Thijs and Van den Akker (2009) add that levels of curriculum development ensure a structured approach to curriculum design, aligning broad educational goals with localised teaching and learning needs. Priestley et al. (2021) emphasise that teachers play a crucial role in developing comprehensive, learner-centered learning experiences that cater to diverse student needs, and which equip them for success in an increasingly dynamic and interconnected world. Effective curriculum development, therefore, requires a holistic approach that incorporates insights from various levels, ensuring coherence, relevance, and high-quality education (McGuinness, 2023).

According to Kneen et al. (2023) as well as Alvunger (2024), the micro level considers how teachers craft lesson plans, employ instructional strategies, and design assessments within their classrooms. This indicates that, while teachers have some room for creativity, it is necessary for them to align lessons with overarching curriculum guidelines, making it a semi-structured experience. Consequently, this level reflects educators' daily experiences as they translate curriculum frameworks into meaningful learning activities. Thijs and Van den Akker (2009) extend this discussion to highlight that the micro level of curriculum development is focused on the implementation of instruction and learning within the classroom context, while the meso level examines the broader organisational and systemic factors that shape a curriculum across schools and educational systems. The latter authors add that the meso level connects individual lessons to broader units or courses, highlighting teachers' role in structuring learning sequences to enhance student understanding. Therefore, it can be structured or semi-structured, depending on institutional constraints. This means that both levels are interrelated, with the meso level influencing the micro level, and vice versa. Westbury (2008) shifts the focus to the macro level, addressing how educational policies, standards, and frameworks shape curriculum

decisions at the system-wide level. This means that educators ought to align their teaching with these requirements, making this a structured experience. In other words, teachers often engage with this level when aligning their instructional practices with mandated policies and curriculum standards.

As explained by Doyle (2019), the supra level explores the broader philosophical, cultural, and societal influences that inform educational values and goals. Therefore, while teachers may engage with these ideas, they largely operate within societal expectations and norms, making this experience structured in nature. Teachers experience this level when they navigate the expectations and norms of their communities while fostering critical thinking and global awareness among students. This means that the supra level ensures that education aligns with cultural and societal values, but it also raises questions about whose values are prioritised. A critical approach is necessary to foster inclusivity and global awareness. Finally, Alvunger (2024) introduces the nano level, where curriculum development involves the fine-grained details of instructional content, learning resources, and lesson-specific strategies. Craig and Ross (2008) reinforce that nano level requires educators to carefully select materials and tailor their approaches to meet students' unique learning needs. Teachers exercise professional judgment in adapting content to students' needs, making this a self-structured experience. This means that the level highlights the artistry of teaching, allowing educators to innovate and personalise learning experiences. However, it requires deep content knowledge and adaptability. Therefore, all the levels show curriculum development is deeply intertwined with teacher experiences. Educators operate across multiple levels, translating policies into practice, connecting broader frameworks to classroom realities, and adapting instructional content to support student learning. A comprehensive understanding of these levels fosters a more holistic and effective approach in understanding representations, ultimately enhancing educational outcomes for learners.

2.3.3. Curriculum representations

Frater (2023) describe curriculum representation as the structuring, organisation, and delivery of educational content, encompassing the intended, implemented, and attained curriculum.

2.3.3.1. Intended Curriculum

Choppin et al. (2022) describe curriculum representations as referring to the official documentation, frameworks, and models outlining educational objectives, content, and assessment standards tailored to specific educational contexts of a given curriculum. These representations play a pivotal role in guiding educational practices and shaping student learning experiences. Building on this, Özaydınlı (2023) emphasises that the intended curriculum functions as a roadmap, helping educators comprehend the goals and expectations set forth by governing education bodies. This perspective is further supported by Poulton (2025), who notes that the intended curriculum reflects broader societal values and educational priorities, thereby aligning with national standards and accountability frameworks. Together, these studies underscore the significance of a clear and coherent intended curriculum in enhancing consistency and quality in teaching and learning. Extending this understanding to the classroom level, Ibrahim (2022) illustrates the way in which the intended curriculum directly influences formal experiences with organised and structured instructional settings, through the use of backward design, as proposed by Wiggins and McTighe. Under this model, educators begin lesson planning with the desired outcomes in mind, using the intended curriculum as a foundation to develop aligned instructional strategies and assessments. This alignment is critical to ensuring that students are systematically guided toward achieving established educational goals.

Avci (2023) further explains that the intended curriculum encompasses defined goals, objectives, and content structured around curriculum standards, clarifying the competencies, understandings, and dispositions that learners are intended to develop. These components naturally align with formal learning experiences, which are institutionally sponsored, organized, and designed to produce specific outcomes. Reinforcing this link, D'Souza et al. (2024), drawing on Tyler's model, highlight the role of structured, planned instruction in delivering the intended curriculum. Within this framework, learning is executed through predetermined pathways, ensuring consistency and fidelity to educational policies. While informal and non-formal learning contexts offer valuable opportunities, the strength of the intended curriculum lies in its ability to provide a coherent, measurable, and standardised foundation for student learning. As such, formal experiences serve as the primary conduit for the implementation of the intended

curriculum, ensuring that educational objectives are purposefully achieved within structured environments.

2.3.3.2. Implemented Curriculum

Anteneh and Anshu (2024) explore the way in which the implemented curriculum is shaped by educators who translate the intended curriculum into practical classroom experiences. This transformation is influenced by instructional strategies, available resources, and educational policies. They emphasise that both formal and non-formal education play crucial roles, as teachers adapt their approaches to suit diverse learning environments.

Building on this, King (2024) underscores that curriculum implementation does not only involve delivering content. Rather, it depends heavily on teachers' interpretations, student engagement, and the specific teaching context. Kirby (2024) further supports this view, highlighting the importance of teacher autonomy and learner-centered approaches in shaping curricular outcomes. Extending beyond formal educational settings, informal learning experiences play a significant role in curriculum implementation. Anteneh and Anshu (2024) note that these include learning that emerges through everyday life, digital media, peer interactions, and cultural participation. Such informal experiences often reinforce or even reshape formal learning, highlighting the interconnectedness of learning across domains.

This interconnectedness is echoed by Darling-Hammond (2021), who stresses that the implemented curriculum comprises the actual teaching methodologies and learning activities adopted by educators. Van Gronigen et al. (2023), referencing Tyack and Tobin, add that the implementation is also shaped by teacher autonomy, classroom dynamics, and students' socio-cultural backgrounds which are factors that can lead to considerable variation in practice. Knobloch and Smith (2024), drawing on Dewey, further elaborate on the significance of informal experiences in curriculum implementation. They argue that these experiences foster an experiential learning approach, enabling students to interact with content in more organic and socially relevant contexts. Therefore, together these studies emphasise that the success of an implemented curriculum lies in its flexibility and responsiveness to diverse contexts. When educators recognise and integrate informal learning into their practices, they create opportunities for deeper, more meaningful

learning that transcends institutional boundaries. This approach supports lifelong development by bridging the gap between theoretical knowledge and practical application.

2.3.3.3. Attained Curriculum

Öner and Cırık (2023) discuss the attained curriculum as what students actually learn, shaped by assessment, feedback, and student engagement, emphasising the interconnectedness of these curriculum aspects and the necessity of alignment for effective education. Therefore, attained curriculum extends to non-formal level of experience shaped by cultural contexts and interactions. For instance, a study by Mahadevan (2022) emphasises the role of teacher collaboration and adaptive teaching strategies in improving student learning outcomes. Similarly, Campbell et al. (2021) argues that formative assessments and personalised learning approaches significantly impact the extent to which students achieve curriculum objectives. Furthermore, research by Hattie (2024) underscores the importance of feedback and student agency in maximising curriculum attainment. Digital transformation in education has also influenced the attained curriculum, as indicated by studies showing that blended learning models and technology integration enhance student comprehension and retention (Wang et al., 2024). These findings suggest that, while the intended curriculum sets learning goals, the attained curriculum reflects how effectively students internalise and apply knowledge in real-world contexts.

Expanding the scope Kusmawan et al. (2025) explain that curriculum representations under the attained curriculum focus on the actual learning outcomes and competencies that students demonstrate after engaging with the intended and implemented curricula. This is echoed by Mohan (2023), who emphasises that the attained curriculum reflects what students have learned, as measured through assessments, evaluations, and their ability to apply knowledge in practical situations. Similarly, Rahaman (2023, citing Stiggins) stresses that meaningful assessments not only gauges how well students have absorbed curriculum content, but also capture the extent to which they can transfer this knowledge to real-world contexts. Linking the attained curriculum with non-formal experiences, such as community service projects, internships, and workshops illustrates how learning can extend beyond traditional classroom settings. Caldana et al. (2023) assert that non-formal experiences can provide unique avenues for students to develop

competencies and skills that may not be measured through standard assessments but are crucial for personal and professional development. In my view, integrating non-formal experiences into the assessment of the attained curriculum can provide a more holistic understanding of students' capabilities, ensuring that educational practices cultivate well-rounded individuals prepared for the complexities of modern life.

Below is a structured table that visually and conceptually links the above discussion. The table shows how each curriculum representation connects with the dominant form of experience (structured, semi-structured, self-structured) and the nature of experience.

Table 1: Linking Curriculum Representations with Forms of Educational Experiences

Curriculum Representation	Dominant Experience Type	Description / Nature of Experience
Intended Curriculum	Structured Experiences	Represents formal, organized, and institutionally sanctioned learning settings where educational goals, content, and assessment standards are predefined and standardized.
Implemented Curriculum	Semi-Structured Experiences	Reflects flexible classroom practices where teachers interpret and adapt the intended curriculum to their local context, using both formal and informal strategies.
Attained Curriculum	Self-Structured Experiences	Represents learners' personal construction of knowledge through formal, non-formal, and informal engagements that demonstrate understanding and skill mastery.

Table Adapted from various sources, including Choppin et al. (2022), Özaydınlı (2023), Anteneh and Anshu (2024), Hattie (2024), and others discussed in the preceding section.

2.3.4. Curriculum concepts

Thijs and Van Den Akker (2009) explain a conceptual framework that outlines the essential components of a curriculum and highlighted that the model helps educators and curriculum developers to visualise and analyse the interconnected elements that shape effective curricula.

Rationale is one of the concepts/components of curriculum highlighted by Van Ooijen-van der Linden et al. (2022) as the underlying reasons and vision for the curriculum and added that it serves as foundational justification, connecting educational aims with

societal needs and learners' interests. Moreover, Aboderin and Havenga (2024), in their study of critical skills and educational strategies required in higher education within the context of 4IR states that a clear rationale ensures that curricular goals are aligned with the demands of the 21st century, emphasising skills like critical thinking, collaboration, and adaptability. The latter authors highlight the importance of context in curriculum design, advocating for a rationale that responds dynamically to societal and educational changes. Therefore, the concept of rationale supports a semi-structured teachers' experiences model that balances prescribed instruction with teacher autonomy. It empowers educators to act as curriculum agents by using their professional judgment to adapt content while aligning with broader educational goals. This means that a clear rationale ensures curriculum integrity and coherence, enabling a flexible yet purposeful education system.

Vreuls et al. (2022) in their study of responsive curriculum development for professional education mentioned that aims and objectives refer to the specific goals and intended outcomes of the curriculum. This reflects the structured aspect of curriculum planning, but when embedded into semi-structured experiences, teachers interpret and adapt these outcomes based on learners' needs and contextual variables. Schoots et al. (2025) highlight however that curriculum goals are the foundational aims intended to guide education. As noted by Jwan et al. (2025), effective curriculum goals should not only encompass academic skills, but also promote critical thinking, creativity, and emotional intelligence. The latter authors further highlight the importance of inclusivity in curricular objectives, ensuring that goals cater to diverse learning needs. In examining learners' motivation through gamified formative assessment, Zhang and Crawford (2024) maintain that specific and achievable objectives not only guide instructional strategies, but also serve to motivate learners by establishing clear benchmarks for success. This aligns with the assertion by Thijs and Van Den Akker (2009) that well-defined objectives are essential for evaluating the effectiveness of a curriculum in meeting educational goals. Semi-structured teachers' experiences serve as a practical bridge between the theoretical underpinnings of curriculum design, and the dynamic nature of classroom implementation. They offer a balance between structure and flexibility, enabling the effective realisation of curriculum goals while fostering inclusivity, responsiveness, and learner motivation. This means that semi-structured teacher experiences balance

curriculum structure with professional flexibility, empowering educators to adapt to student needs while maintaining core goals. This approach fosters innovation, responsiveness, and meaningful, inclusive teaching.

Dlamini and Mabuza (2025), in their study *Untangling the Quandary of the Teacher's Role in the Curriculum Enactment Space*, highlight the teacher's role as encompassing the responsibilities and approaches educators adopt to facilitate learning. They further explain that the role of the teacher is evolving in modern educational paradigms. In the study of design-based research in education, Reinking (2021) highlights that teachers are no longer mere dispensers of knowledge but facilitators and co-learners. This perspective aligns with that of Thijs and Van Den Akker (2009), which suggests that teachers ought to be adaptable to new roles depending on the context and needs of the learners. Furthermore, the development of professional learning communities, as discussed by Smith-Ellis (2023) and Wilson (2024), positions teachers as collaborative participants in curriculum design, thereby fostering a dynamic learning environment. This means that semi-structured experiences best support contemporary teaching practices, by offering a balance between guidance and autonomy. In such experiences, educators work within a flexible framework that enables them to adapt and respond to learners' needs. Therefore, semi-structured experiences are regarded as the most effective model, promoting teacher agency, creativity, and collaboration while maintaining curriculum consistency.

Van Den Akker and Kippels (2022), in their study of supporting learning following COVID-19, explain Location to be the physical or virtual settings in which learning takes place, and added that location plays a crucial role in curriculum implementation. Whereas Bouw et al. (2021) note that the learning environment, whether it be urban, rural, or virtual, significantly affects how curriculum is perceived and enacted. Van Bemmelen et al. (2024), in their study of exploring the concept of a responsive curriculum, argue that a contextualised curriculum that reflects the local community and culture can lead to deeper engagement and relevance for students. This assertion aligns with Thijs and Van Den Akker's component of the location aspect of the Spider Web, suggesting that curriculum ought to be sensitive to the geographical and cultural contexts within which it is delivered. The above discussion is therefore connected to semi-structured teachers' experiences as it allows educators a balance between guided curricular frameworks and the freedom to adapt based on contextual demands. This flexibility is particularly important when

considering location as a determinant of curricular effectiveness. Teachers working in semi-structured environments can respond to the diverse needs presented by urban vs. rural schools, or the shift from face-to-face to virtual learning. They can localise content, integrate community-relevant themes, and modify delivery strategies so as to enhance engagement and approaches that are much harder to achieve within a strictly structured system. Semi-structured teacher in a rural school might integrate local agricultural practices into science lessons, while a counterpart in an urban school may draw on city planning or pollution issues. Consequently, semi-structured teacher experiences provide the most conducive environment for implementing a responsive curriculum that reflects the local setting. This means that educators operate within a framework that provides direction, but not prescription, enabling them to act as curriculum designers in their own right.

Schoots et al. (2025) explain assessment as those methods used to evaluate student learning and curriculum effectiveness and added that formative and summative assessments play distinct roles in the educational process. While Alaziby and Aldabbus (2023) advocate that assessment should be continuous and aligned with curriculum goals, allowing for adjustments in teaching to meet learners' needs. Building on existing work, Van den Akker and Rahimi (2024) investigate how design principles can guide the creation of automated formative feedback systems based on software metrics. Their findings highlight the value of incorporating assessment approaches that replicate real-life professional demands. This is then linked to semi-structured teachers' experiences, where educators operate within a flexible framework allowing them to adapt assessments based on both curriculum goals and students' needs. Semi-structured experiences give teachers the autonomy to balance both formative and summative assessments, while also continuously aligning assessment practices with learning objectives. Furthermore, the emphasis on authentic, real-world tasks by Van Den Akker and Rahimi resonates strongly with semi-structured settings, where teachers can design or select assessment tools that go beyond standardised tests to include practical, context-rich tasks such as code quality evaluations. In other words, semi-structured experiences empower teachers to be reflective and adaptive, allowing for meaningful integration of innovative assessment practices.

2.3.5. Curriculum Main Approaches

According to Habiburrahim (2021), a curricular approach refers to a structured plan or framework designed by teachers to guide teaching and learning processes within an educational system.

2.3.5.1. Instrumental Approach

Osberg and Biesta (2021) describes an instrumental approach that takes curriculum as a tool or instrument designed to achieve specific outcomes or goals. The study further indicates that instrumental approach focuses on the transfer of knowledge and skills deemed essential for students to succeed in the workforce or society. This means that the approach is about equipping students with the tools they need for academic or career success. McCloat and Caraher (2023) examine teachers in the Republic of Ireland during curriculum reforms, using Bernstein's pedagogic device theory. Their study found that the balance between common and specialised discourses influences subject status and impacts teachers' ability to align content with policy objectives. Dhlamini (2022) explored professional learning among Foundation Phase teachers, highlighting the way in which non-formal experiences, such as school meetings and district workshops, support pedagogical development. However, challenges like under-resourced schools and limited parental support hinder effective learning. Owaduge (2023) emphasised the role of informal learning through extracurricular activities and social interactions, which enhance creativity and critical thinking alongside the formal curriculum. These studies reveal that, while the instrumental curriculum aims for specific outcomes, its success depends on teachers' experiences across formal, non-formal, and informal contexts. Addressing challenges in these areas is essential for effective implementation.

2.3.5.2. Communicative Approach

According to Chew and Ng (2021), a communicative approach highlights the importance of communication, dialogue, and interaction in the curriculum. The latter author continues explaining that it emphasises the influence of language and social engagement on the teaching and learning process. This means that the approach emphasises the importance of using language in practical contexts, prioritising fluency and real-life communication over accuracy in grammar. Selvam (2023) further explains communication as a fundamental curriculum approach that enhances the teaching and learning process by fostering engagement, understanding, and collaboration among learners and teachers.

The latter highlights the importance of communication in creating an interactive learning environment that encourages learners to articulate their thoughts and ideas. For instance, İsmailoğulları (2024) discusses the way in which effective communication strategies can promote critical thinking and problem-solving skills, enabling learners to engage deeply with content. These strategies are particularly effective in semi-structured experiences, where students are provided with guidance while still having the freedom to express themselves and explore topics of interest. Moreover, Mandouit and Hattie (2023) emphasise the role of feedback in communication, suggesting that timely and constructive feedback can significantly influence student learning outcomes. This aligns with the notion of self-structured experiences, where students take ownership of their learning receive feedback that enables them to reflect and improve. This means that integrating communication as a core element of the curriculum not only elevates student learning, but also prepares them for future collaboration and problem-solving in diverse contexts.

2.3.5.3. Artistic Approach

Tian and Isa (2024) highlight that an artistic approach understands curriculum development as a creative process that involves aesthetics, imagination, and personal expression. It focuses on engaging students through artistic practices such as storytelling, drama, music, and visual arts. In other words, this approach fosters creativity and self-expression, and it views education as a holistic experience. De Kock et al. (2023) examine the pedagogical practices of Foundation Phase teachers in visual arts through participatory action learning, employing arts-based strategies such as photo-voice and visual journaling. The study highlighted extrinsic and intrinsic barriers to visual arts education and emphasised the need for greater support and training to help teachers foster creativity and self-expression. Teachers' experiences with artistic approaches varied across formal, non-formal, and informal settings. Mesuwini (2021) explored how Foundation Phase teachers in KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa, engaged in professional learning beyond formal training. The study revealed that educators enhanced their pedagogical understanding through informal avenues such as school-based meetings, workshops, and collaborative social interactions. Semi-structured experiences significantly shaped their teaching practices. Nevertheless, the study also highlighted several barriers to implementing arts integration, including a lack of resources and minimal parental involvement. Despite these obstacles, embracing an arts-based

approach to curriculum design can foster a well-rounded educational experience that promotes creativity, emotional development, and social harmony among learners. Therefore, semi-structured experiences, like those discussed in the study, serve as powerful avenues for professional growth because they combine guidance with flexibility.

2.3.5.4. Pragmatic Approach

Winje and Løndal (2021) a pragmatic approach stresses the importance of applying knowledge and skills to authentic, real-life situations. The latter study indicates that the approach focuses on preparing learners to deal with everyday challenges and problem-solving situations. In other words, this method emphasises experiential learning, where learners learn through action and reflection. Mayer (2023) further explains that this approach prepares learners to deal with everyday challenges and problem-solving situations. In other words, this method promotes experiential learning, where students acquire knowledge through action and reflection. Badari (2024) add that the pragmatic approach in curriculum design emphasises the importance of real-world applications and learner engagement, integrating structured, semi-structured, and self-structured experiences to enhance educational outcomes. Barber (2023) further indicates that the integration of practical experiences in learning, arguing that educational curricula should connect with learners' lived experiences and societal needs. Likewise, Ahmed (2025) supports this notion, emphasising the necessity of semi-structured experiences, where learners can navigate through guided frameworks yet retain the flexibility to explore personal interests. Additionally, Mulenga (2022) reinforces the value of self-structured learning experiences that empower students to take ownership of their educational journeys, encouraging critical thinking and problem-solving skills. Therefore, a pragmatic curriculum that emphasises experiential learning not only aids in knowledge acquisition but also prepares learners for the complexities of real-world challenges.

2.3.6. Curriculum Core Activities

According to Abuhassna et al. (2024), the ADDIE model, which comprises the phases of analysis, design, development, implementation, and evaluation, serves as a widely accepted framework in curriculum development literature. In addition, Chhatra et al. (2024) highlight that curriculum core concepts are fundamental to creating an effective educational experience. Below are many scholars and curriculum theorists who have

expanded on these phases to describe their significance in creating effective educational programmes.

2.3.6.1. Analysis

According to Balbase et al. (2022), analysis is the foundational step in curriculum development, focusing on identifying learners' needs, subject matter relevance, and the educational context. In the study of the concept of school curriculum Dulo (2021) emphasises the importance of defining objectives based on societal needs, learner characteristics, and subject matter analysis. Gough and Kemp (2025) highlight that this phase of analysis includes assessing learning gaps, stakeholder expectations, and available resources. For Catal et al. (2023), curriculum analysis involves evaluating existing programmes and identifying gaps or areas for improvement. According to Meylani (2023), assessment plays a crucial role in curriculum analysis as it provides data on student performance and informs necessary adjustments. Furthermore, a multi case study by Avci (2023) stresses the importance of contextual factors in analysing curricula, including social, political, and cultural influences that shape educational practices. These analyses can utilise both semi-structured experiences, which involve some level of guidance while allowing for learner expression, and structured experiences, which offer clear frameworks for assessment and reiteration of learning objectives. Therefore, by combining semi-structured experiences with structured experiences can enhance curriculum effectiveness by ensuring that it is responsive and relevant.

2.3.6.2. Design

According to Ibeh (2022), curriculum design ought to focus on clear objectives, content, and assessment to ensure students achieve desired learning outcomes. Hussaini, Adam and Kerkeb (2004) stress that the design phase involves sequencing learning experiences logically and aligning them with instructional strategies. Additionally, Wong-Ratcliff (2023) advocates for the use of backward design, an approach in which teachers begin with identifying learning objectives and then guides the development of corresponding instructional strategies and assessment methods. This approach represents a form of structured experience, as it promotes a coherent learning process and ensures that the curriculum effectively addresses students' needs. This means that curriculum design is important as the foundation upon which educational experiences are built.

2.3.6.3. Development

Chhatria et al. (2024) describe curriculum development as a core concept that encapsulates the systematic processes of planning, designing, and implementing educational programmes to ensure they meet the needs of learners and society. Mpuangnan and Ntombela (2024) highlight the importance of a collaborative approach in curriculum development, emphasising that teachers, administrators, and stakeholders should work together to create a curriculum that is both responsive and inclusive. A case study of teacher educators' collaboration by Yidana (2025) insists that collaboration fosters a sense of ownership among educators and enhances the curriculum's practical relevance. Furthermore, Steyn (2024) underscores the need to consider socio-cultural contexts, ensuring that the curriculum reflects the diverse backgrounds of students. This integration is particularly evident in semi-structured experiences, which allow for adaptability and responsiveness to real-time feedback and contextual needs during the instructional process. By engaging with community knowledge and experiences, developers can craft a curriculum that not only aligns with educational standards, but also resonates with students, thereby promoting deeper engagement and learning outcomes (McTighe & Ferrara, 2021). Ultimately, the curriculum development process constitutes an iterative cycle of design and reflection that seeks continuous improvement and adaptation.

2.3.6.4. Implementation

Null (2023) posits that, once the analysis is complete, implementation becomes the focus, where curriculum developers translate theory into practice. According to a qualitative study by Saro et al. (2024), successful implementation requires not only a well-designed curriculum, but also buy-in from educators and institutional support. The latter authors further highlight that it is crucial for educators to be trained in the new curriculum and understand its purpose and scope. A multiple case study of implementing education reforms by Ho (2024) asserts that the involvement of teachers in the implementation phase can lead to greater ownership and adaptability of the curriculum, based on classroom realities. Therefore, self-structured experiences can play a key role, as they allow teachers the flexibility to adjust and personalise their teaching methods, while still adhering to curricular guidelines.

In rural schools, curriculum implementation is frequently influenced by constraints such as limited teaching resources, delayed policy communication, and restricted institutional support. These contextual realities shape how teachers interpret curriculum guidelines and adapt their instructional practices, particularly in the implementation of the abridged CAPS Section Four amendments.

2.3.6.5. Evaluation

Garris and Fleck (2022), in their study of students' evaluations of courses adapted to online formats amid the COVID-19 pandemic, highlight that curriculum evaluation proves essential to assessing the effectiveness of educational programmes. As posited by Guskey and Bailey (2024), rigorous evaluation focuses on measuring the impact of the curriculum on student learning outcomes, which can inform future improvements. Kumar and Praveenakumar (2025) further elaborate that the evaluation process often includes both qualitative and quantitative measures and is inherently linked to design and implementation. Joseph (2021) distinguishes between formative evaluation (continuous feedback during curriculum implementation) and summative evaluation (assessing overall curriculum effectiveness). In the work of Dzon (2023), Stufflebeam's CIPP model, which includes the Context, Input, Process, and Product components, is presented as a guiding framework for programme evaluation in education. Abdusattorovna and Ajikulloevna (2023) emphasise the need for evaluating whether curriculum objectives have been met, utilising the results to refine instructional strategies. Irons and Elkington (2021) highlight the role of formative evaluations, continuously assessing the curriculum during its rollout as a method to refine and enhance programmes effectively. This iterative process fosters a culture of continuous improvement and responsiveness to student needs, affirming the importance of using structured, semi-structured, and self-structured experiences in providing varied pathways for learning and engagement. This means that by incorporating these core activities into cohesive curriculum frameworks, educators can create dynamic, responsive educational experiences that meet diverse student needs.

2.3.7. History of Curriculum

The evolution of curriculum in South Africa has been strongly affected by the country's political, social, and cultural transformations (Chisholm, 2024). From the colonial and apartheid eras to the present, these shifts have significantly shaped both the content and purpose of education.

2.3.7.1. Pre-Apartheid Era (1910–1948)

Chetty (2023) explains that, during this period, the education system of the Union of South Africa was modelled after the British system, with a curriculum that prioritised European languages, literature, and cultural values. This system largely neglected African education, providing limited access to schools and resources (Kallaway, 2022). These early inequalities laid the foundation for the formal educational disparities that would be entrenched under apartheid. In terms of informal learning experiences, African communities relied on indigenous knowledge systems, oral traditions, and practical skills passed through generations. These cultural forms of learning, though rich and meaningful, were systematically undermined by colonial and Eurocentric curricula, diminishing their value in formal settings.

2.3.7.2. Apartheid Era (1948–1994)

During apartheid, education was formally segregated and explicitly designed to reinforce racial hierarchies. Houser (2023) notes that the National Party introduced the Bantu Education Act in 1953, which structured black education to prepare learners for subservient labor roles. The curriculum emphasised Christian National Education, Afrikaans and English instruction, and vocational training, while excluding critical engagement and academic advancement (Shabangu, 2021). This resulted in deeply unequal formal educational experiences, where Black students faced overcrowded classrooms, under-resourced schools, and a curriculum that denied them access to higher education and skilled professions. However, non-formal education experiences emerged as a powerful site of resistance. The Black Consciousness Movement and other grassroots organisations provided underground education focused on political awareness and cultural identity, bypassing state-controlled schooling (Aiken, 2025). These movements were essential in supplementing the limited formal education provided under apartheid.

2.3.7.3. Transition and Post-Apartheid Reforms (1990s–2000s)

The dismantling of apartheid in the early 1990s initiated a wave of curriculum reform aimed at redressing past injustices. Ngubane (2024) highlights the introduction of Curriculum 2005 (C2005), which promoted inclusivity, relevance, and an outcomes-based approach. Hamidi (2024) elaborates that OBE emphasised learner-centered pedagogy, critical thinking, and problem-solving. However, despite the progressive intentions, many

formal learning environments particularly in previously disadvantaged communities struggled to implement these reforms due to inadequate teacher training and a lack of resources. This created a mismatch between the curriculum's ideals and classroom realities. In response, non-formal education experiences programs proliferated. NGOs and community groups stepped in with tutoring services and supplementary learning initiatives aimed at addressing learning gaps and supporting learners in adapting to the new OBE framework.

2.3.7.4. Contemporary Curriculum (2010s–Present)

According to Ajani and Gamede (2021), in 2012, OBE was replaced by the Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS), streamlining the curriculum with a focus on content knowledge and standardisation. Chisholm (2024) adds that the CAPS aimed to resolve implementation challenges by offering clearer guidelines and assessments. At the formal education level, CAPS provided a more structured learning experience. However, disparities in school infrastructure and teacher preparedness meant that rural and township schools continued to face systemic barriers. The curriculum further evolved with the Revised National Curriculum Statement (RNCS) 2020, which emphasised 21st-century competencies such as digital literacy, entrepreneurship, and critical thinking (English & Heilbronn, 2024). In tandem, the National Curriculum Framework for Children from Birth to Four (NCF) (Mbembe, as cited in Ajani & Gamede, 2021) prioritised early childhood development, recognising the importance of foundational learning. These changes have deeply influenced non-formal learning experiences environments. Organisations now offer digital literacy workshops, entrepreneurship boot camps, and other skills-based programmes that align with the updated curriculum priorities. Social initiatives often fill in where formal systems fall short, particularly in underserved areas. In terms of informal education experiences, there has been a resurgence in African cultural knowledge and traditions. Learners increasingly engage with African literature, history, and indigenous philosophies at home or through digital platforms. These experiences reflect ongoing debates around curriculum decolonisation and the Africanisation of education (Kadhila & Nyambe, 2022). Social media and community-led dialogues now serve as informal yet impactful spaces of learning that challenge dominant, Eurocentric narratives.

As a consequence, the trajectory of South Africa's curriculum development from colonial mimicry to apartheid engineering, through to democratic reform reveals the profound influence of politics and culture on education. As Chisholm (2024) and Nkosi (2021) argue, curriculum is not merely a set of academic subjects, but a reflection of broader societal values and struggles. Today, formal education experiences continue to be shaped by national policies like CAPS and RNCS, while non-formal and informal learning experiences play a critical role in bridging gaps, fostering equity, and pushing for an education system embracing inclusivity and African epistemologies.

These challenges are often more pronounced in rural schools, where teachers may face greater difficulty accessing professional development, curriculum resources, and timely policy guidance. As a result, teachers rely more heavily on their professional judgment when implementing reforms such as the abridged Section Four amendments. The table below outlines the historical development of curriculum in South Africa.

Table 2: A historical perspective on curriculum development in South Africa.

<u>Name/Period</u>	<u>Democracy/Political Context</u>	<u>Year/Duration</u>	<u>Phase</u>
Pre-Apartheid Era	Colonial and Union of South Africa	1910–1948	Early formal schooling (limited African access)
Apartheid Era – Bantu Education	Apartheid regime under National Party	1948–1994	Primary – Secondary (racially segregated)
Transition to Democracy – C2005	Democratic reforms and education transformation	1994–2005	GET – FET
RNCS and NCS	Post-OBE review and curriculum refinement	2002–2011	GET – FET
CAPS	Consolidation of national education system	2012–Present	GET – FET
RNCS (Revised) and NCF	Modernization and focus on early childhood & digital skills	2020–Present	Birth–FET

2.4. Conclusion

Understanding experiences as a phenomenon and curriculum as a discipline offers a nuanced lens through which to examine teachers' lived realities in implementing the abridged version of Section Four amendments. By viewing experience as central to the teaching process, it is possible to acknowledge the personal, emotional, and professional dimensions that shape educators' engagement with curriculum reforms. Simultaneously, approaching curriculum as a scholarly discipline allows for critical reflection on its design,

intent, and practical impact. This dual perspective reveals the complexities teachers face as they interpret, adapt, and enact the amended curriculum, highlighting the interplay between policy and practice. Ultimately, such an approach deepens our appreciation of teachers not merely as implementers of policy, but as active agents whose experiences are vital to meaningful educational change.

CHAPTER 3

FOCUS AREA AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

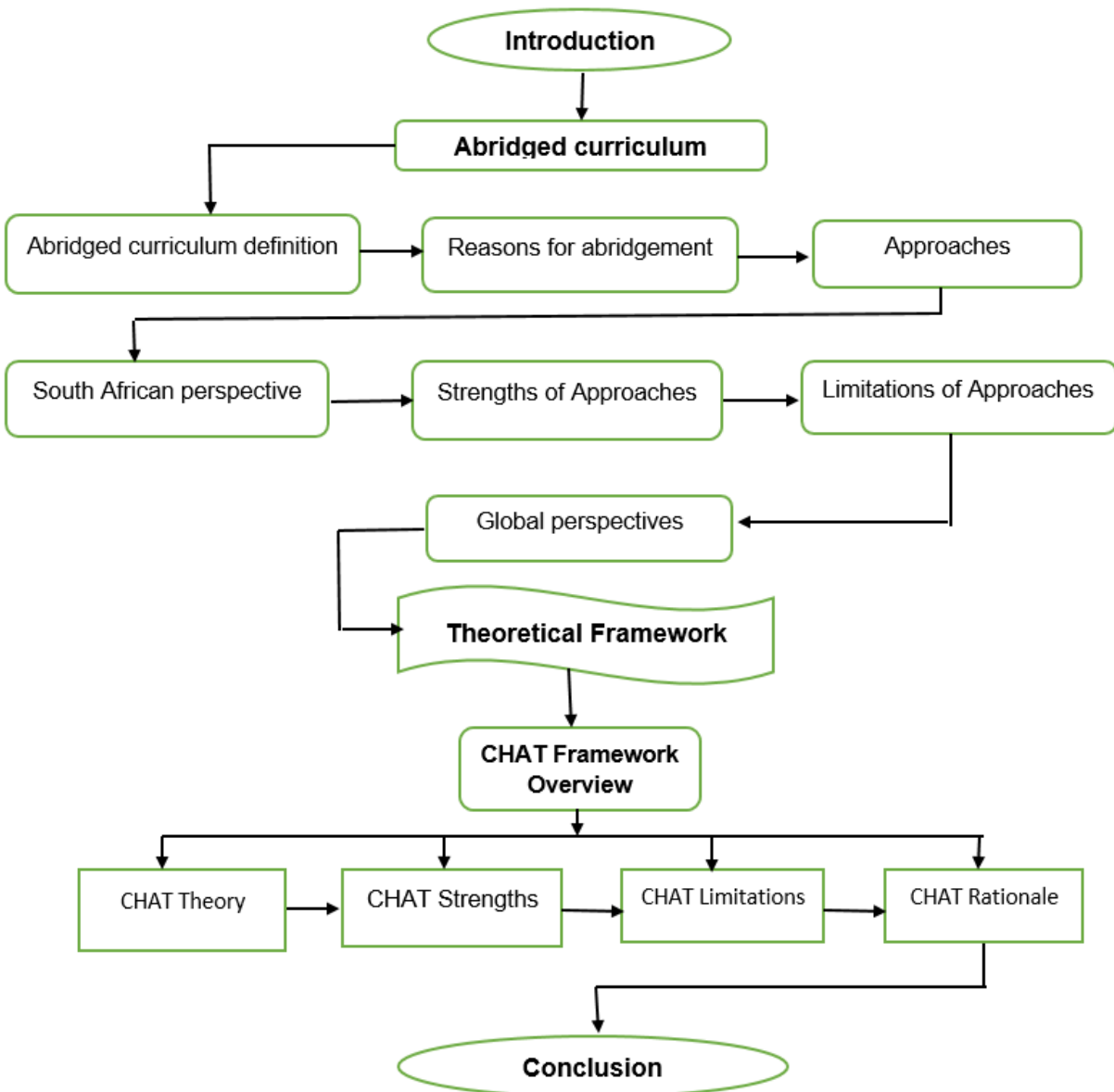


Figure 3: Chapter3 (Flow chat)

The above flow chart illustrates the organisational structure that guides Chapter 3, which focuses on the study's focus area (Abridged Curriculum) and theoretical framework.

3.1. INTRODUCTION

The preceding chapter presented an overview of the literature review; however, this chapter continues that discussion by focusing more specifically on the central theme of the study of teachers' experiences in implementing the abridged version of the curriculum following the Section Four amendments at the Grade 12 level. This chapter extends the literature review by narrowing in on the core area of interest, namely curriculum abridgement. Additionally, it introduces and elaborates on CHAT as part of the theoretical framework. The chapter begins by further exploring literature related to the curriculum abridgement, then presents a comprehensive examination of the CHAT framework, as introduced in the previous chapter. This theoretical perspective was selected due to its alignment with the study's objectives and its relevance for analysing how teachers navigate and respond to changes introduced through the curriculum amendments. A critical analysis of the CHAT framework is also provided, discussing both its strengths and limitations in relation to the current study. The chapter concludes with a justification for selecting CHAT as the guiding theoretical lens. The subsequent chapter will detail the research methodology employed in this study.

3.2. FOCUS AREA (ABRIDGED CURRICULUM)

3.2.1. Defining abridged curriculum

In 2021, South Africa introduced the abridged version of the Grade 12 curriculum as part of the Section Four amendments, which were implemented by the DBE in response to the instructional time lost during the COVID-19 pandemic. These amendments were designed to streamline the curriculum by identifying and focusing on core content, allowing teachers to manage time more effectively while still meeting essential learning outcomes. Bolino (2024) explains that an abridged curriculum constitutes a streamlined version that focuses on essential knowledge and skills, while omitting less critical content. This is supported by Barron (2024), who similarly describes the abridged curriculum as a modified version of the educational programme that distills content down to its essential elements, allowing educators to focus on core competencies and critical concepts. Consequently, teachers generally view the abridged curriculum positively, as it offers several practical and pedagogical benefits. Jacobs and Zmuda (2023) build on this by suggesting that teachers may favour an abridged curriculum, because it allows them to concentrate on core competencies that are most relevant to student needs and the

demands of standardised assessments. This means that the targeted approach helps reduce the pressure of covering an overly broad curriculum, giving educators more time to delve deeper into critical concepts and ensure meaningful understanding.

Fournier and Gregory (2024) argue that an abridged curriculum can make teaching more focused by empowering educators to identify key learning objectives aligned with student needs and assessment standards. Likewise, Pinar (2022) emphasises that such a curriculum can alleviate the pressures of curriculum overload, thereby enabling teachers to explore subject matter more deeply and create a more enriching learning environment. Van Deventer and Steyn (2022) contribute additional support in the context of the Grade 12 curriculum, particularly the section 4 amendments, reporting that teachers' experiences indicate improved student engagement and understanding when an abridged curriculum is implemented. The latter study further reports that teachers' informal experiences indicate improved learner engagement and understanding when an abridged curriculum is implemented. For this reason, according to the above studies, teachers find the abridged curriculum to be more manageable, focused, and conducive to meaningful teaching and learning. Additionally, teachers find the abridged curriculum to be beneficial, as it enhances instructional clarity, supports learner outcomes, and provides a more manageable teaching framework.

Chen et al. (2023) further elaborate that the abridged curriculum helps to manage curriculum overload and supports teachers in crafting engaging lessons that foster deeper understanding. Carter (2021) moreover highlights how teachers enrich the abridged curriculum through non-formal experiences such as community partnerships and experiential learning opportunities, making content more relatable and applicable in real-world contexts. This linkage between abridged curricula and non-formal learning is echoed by Souto-Otero (2024), who indicates that non-formal experiences enable educators to enhance the learning process through practical applications outside the traditional classroom. Furthermore, Swargiary (2024), Dewey expands on this by highlighting that community projects, internships, and collaborative learning opportunities provide invaluable contexts for applying knowledge. Caulfield (2023) reinforces this by explaining how teachers utilise such experiences to create meaningful connections between theoretical concepts and practical skills. In my own view, the use of an abridged curriculum, when complemented by non-formal experiences, enhances educational

relevance and student engagement, enabling learners to connect theoretical concepts with authentic applications. The integration of formal and non-formal learning experiences nurtures active participation, deeper analytical thought, and adaptive problem-solving with core competencies necessary for success in a rapidly evolving world.

3.2.2. Reasons for abridgement/ Curriculum policy key changes

Van Deventer and Steyn (2022) assert that the impetus behind implementing an abridged curriculum through policy changes, such as those outlined in the Section Four amendments for Grade 12, stems from a broader intention to enhance educational outcomes. This is echoed by Askary et al. (2024), who highlight that a key motivation for curriculum abridgement is the need to mitigate curriculum overload, which often leads to a superficial treatment of content. In this regard, Alharbi (2021) supports the argument by emphasising that teachers frequently struggle to cover expansive syllabi within constrained timeframes, which ultimately compromises the depth and quality of student learning. This suggests that the struggle is not merely logistical but pedagogical, as educators are forced to prioritise breadth over understanding. Yildiz (2024) and Meng (2023) extend this argument by underscoring the increasing demand for educational systems to align with evolving standards and accountability measures. The latter authors argue that these pressures necessitate more targeted and efficient instructional strategies that prioritise core competencies and essential skills, thereby supporting the rationale for curriculum abridgement. Similarly, Khethwa and Mabalane (2022) point out that changes in curriculum policy are closely linked to teachers lived experiences in the classroom, which further validates the need for reform aimed at balancing content delivery with meaningful engagement. Consequently, this shift toward a more streamlined curriculum is not only a response to systemic constraints but also a pedagogical opportunity.

Mantshongo (2023) emphasises that abridgement allows educators to cultivate critical thinking and adaptability traits vital for student success in an ever-changing global economy. Elliott (2024) notes in this regard that curriculum overload often impedes deep student engagement and meaningful teaching, reinforcing the call for a more focused and flexible curriculum structure. This means that, beyond the structural and policy considerations, the integration of non-formal learning experiences provides a crucial complement to abridged curricula. Saquing (2023) asserts that embedding non-formal experiences within teacher education programs helps close the gap between theoretical

knowledge and its practical application in teaching contexts. This perspective is bolstered by Kicherova and Trifonova (2023), who argue that non-formal education offers a practical framework for reinforcing core concepts, thereby enhancing student comprehension and long-term retention. Swargiary (2024) further elaborates that community involvement and real-world projects enables teachers to create learning experiences that resonate with students' lives, making education more relevant and engaging. Taken together, these perspectives illustrate a dynamic interplay between policy-driven curriculum changes and on-the-ground teaching practices. The abridged curriculum, when complemented with non-formal experiences, addresses the dual challenge of curriculum overload and superficial learning while fostering deeper, contextually relevant educational experiences. In my view, this integration not only strengthens the alignment between educational standards and student needs but also promotes holistic, adaptive, and future-focused learning environments. By responding to the complexities of the modern world through both policy reform and innovative pedagogy, the education system can better prepare learners for the realities they will face beyond the classroom.

3.2.3. Approaches of curriculum abridgement

Curriculum abridgement, reform, modification, or condensation, as defined by Hidiwakusha (2022), involves the intentional restructuring of educational content and delivery methods to enhance efficiency, accessibility, and learner engagement while safeguarding learning quality. This process often results in structured teacher experiences, where top-down policy reforms guide curriculum implementation. Valiyaveetil (cited in Hidiwakusha, 2022) similarly considers such restructuring as a strategic response to evolving educational needs, requiring teacher adaptation within defined frameworks. Aithal and Maiya (2023) suggest in this regard that as educational demands shift, institutions increasingly adopt innovative strategies to refine curriculum delivery, creating opportunities for semi-structured teacher experiences where educators exercise some flexibility. Van Wyk (2023) highlights that effective curriculum reforms prioritise depth and meaningful learning, fostering self-structured teacher experiences where educators independently tailor content to student needs. Similarly, Lawrence (2022) emphasises curriculum reform as a form of reorganisation of learning experiences that promotes relevance and learner ownership, aligning with semi-structured approaches. Haynes Brown and Gentles (2024) further advocate for curriculum

abridgement strategies that reduce inefficiencies and enhance educational impact, stressing the value of integrating teachers' experiential realities, particularly within self-structured and semi-structured contexts. Overall, recognising teachers as co-constructors of curriculum is crucial for sustainable and meaningful educational reform. Following this theoretical foundation, specific approaches to curriculum abridgement including streamlining content, integrated curriculum, project-based learning, competency-based education, experiential learning, thematic units, differentiated instruction, collaborative learning, cultural relevance, feedback-responsive policy, and assessment-driven design will be discussed below.

3.2.3.1. Streamlining Content

Shamim (2024) highlights that curriculum abridgement, rooted in Ralph Tyler's curriculum theory, emphasises aligning teaching with clear learning objectives and focusing on essential, measurable outcomes. This approach aligns with semi-structured teacher experiences, where educators experience flexibility within a guided framework to streamline content, while staying aligned with broader goals (Shamim, 2024). Felder and Brent (2024) describe streamlining as reducing material to focus on core knowledge and skills, which resonate with self-structured experiences where teachers tailor content based on student needs. Zhao et al. (2024) argue that streamlining ensures relevance and efficiency, particularly in structured settings with clear guidelines. Jacobs and Zmuda (2023) advocate for backward design, which focuses on desired outcomes and assessments, fitting well with semi-structured experiences, where teachers adjust content based on classroom dynamics. Bloomberg (2021) and Hansen (2023) emphasise backward design's role in prioritising essential understandings in a condensed curriculum, with teachers curating content in self-structured experiences. Tame (2023) and Sharma (2024) support using strategic design for deeper engagement, while Chen et al. (2023) stress the importance of focusing on key competencies to manage curriculum overload, making these strategies effective in semi-structured experiences.

3.2.3.2. Integrated Curriculum

The integrated curriculum model, rooted in John Dewey's progressive education theory, emphasises experiential, real-world learning, and is particularly suited to self-structured teacher experiences. In these contexts, teachers have sufficient autonomy to design curricula that connect knowledge across disciplines. Kreijkes and Greateorex (2024) define

an integrated curriculum as merging multiple subject areas into cohesive units, fostering interdisciplinary connections. This approach reduces content redundancy and encourages holistic understanding, which is also applicable in semi-structured settings in which teachers balance flexibility with guidance. Kuwar and Acharya (2024) note that integrated curriculum abridgement focuses on essential concepts, streamlining content to ensure depth rather than breadth. Berrio Rincón and Vanegas Ramírez (2024) emphasise that integrated curricula reduce cognitive overload while enhancing cross-disciplinary connections, benefiting both teachers and students. The latter authors also highlight integrated curriculum to be particularly effective in self-structured experiences, where teachers can creatively integrate content and adapt instruction to students' needs and contexts, making integration a practical approach that resonates with real-world learning. Therefore, integrated curriculum supported by self-structured teacher experiences represents a powerful convergence of theory and practice, enhancing both teaching effectiveness and student engagement.

3.2.3.3. Project-Based Learning (PBL)

Rooted in John Dewey's progressive education and further developed by William Heard Kilpatrick, Project-Based Learning (PBL) engages students in practical, self-directed learning experiences via projects. It is particularly suited to self-structured teacher experiences, where educators have the freedom to design projects aligned with students' interests and real-world contexts. Silma et al. (2024) and Ni'mah et al. (2024) highlight the way in which PBL fosters deeper understanding through active knowledge application. It also works well in semi-structured experiences, where teachers balance curricular goals with the flexibility to create meaningful projects. Rubino (2024) and Río Vega (2024) demonstrate that PBL fosters greater student engagement and motivation, promotes critical thinking, and facilitates real-world application of content, while Elkhamisy (2022) argues that PBL ensures meaningful learning through the application of knowledge. Wijnia (2024) reinforces that PBL, especially in interdisciplinary contexts, improving retention and engagement. In structured environments, PBL can be implemented within institutional frameworks, maintaining alignment with educational standards. Therefore, PBL is adaptable across various teaching settings, offering transformative learning opportunities that bridge the gap between structured expectations and creative teaching.

3.2.3.4. Competency-Based Education

Finkelstein (2023) and Kircher (2024) trace competency-based education (CBE) to the 1960s and 1970s, highlighting its roots in behavioural objectives and its institutionalisation through organisations like Western Governors University. This historical foundation aligns with semi-structured teacher experiences, where educators adapt their teaching strategies within established frameworks to meet students' competency needs. Tarmo and Kimaro (2021) explain that CBE focuses on mastery of specific competencies rather than time-based instruction, which teachers in semi-structured experiences can implement using formative assessments and individualised learning plans. Kohale et al. (2024) and Johnson (2021) emphasise that CBE supports personalised learning pathways, accommodating different student paces, a flexibility well-suited to semi-structured experiences. Witham and Plaman (2023) affirm that CBE enhances student engagement and achievement, particularly when implemented in adaptive learning environments, such as those in semi-structured experiences. In my view, CBE fits well with semi-structured teacher experiences, where educators can personalise instruction and adjust pacing, while maintaining consistency with competency standards, empowering teachers to align their teaching to students' needs while achieving shared educational goals.

3.2.3.5. Experiential Learning

Grounded in Kolb's experiential learning theory (ELT), experiential learning is described by Passarelli and Kolb (2023) as a process by which knowledge is constructed through engagement and reflective consideration of practical experiences. This approach closely aligns with self-structured teacher experiences, in which educators exercise autonomy in designing learning activities that address students' diverse needs. Grant (2025) supports this, noting that experiential learning allows for real-world integration into the curriculum, fostering hands-on, active participation in self-structured experiences. Swargiary (2024) further emphasises that Kolb's theory situates knowledge in authentic, contextualised settings, which fit well with semi-structured experiences, in which teachers can incorporate real-world tasks while still adhering to guidelines.

Alabi (2024) stresses that experiential learning boosts engagement, retention, and practical knowledge application, especially in self-structured experiences, where teachers can create relevant, applicable learning experiences. For this reason, this approach also aids in curriculum abridgement, focusing on core skills and knowledge through deep

exploration rather than covering excessive content. This means that the experiential learning thrives in self-structured teacher experiences, where educators have the autonomy to design meaningful, relevant, and reflective learning experiences tailored to their students.

3.2.3.6. Thematic Units

Wargiary (2024) explains that thematic units, rooted in interdisciplinary education and John Dewey's philosophy of experiential learning, thrive in semi-structured teacher experiences, where educators can design integrated curricula that bridge disciplines while adhering to institutional standards. Roehrig et al. (2021) support this, noting that thematic instruction fosters cohesive learning and cross-disciplinary connections. Burke and Lehané (2023) add that such units enhance critical thinking and engagement, particularly when teachers have autonomy to innovate within structured frameworks. Kosi (2024) shows through research that thematic curricula improve motivation, comprehension, and retention, especially when aligned with real-world contexts, a benefit enhanced in self-structured experiences where teachers have full autonomy. Jacobs and Zmuda (2023) emphasise curriculum mapping's role in improving coherence and long-term planning, a process facilitated in semi-structured experiences. Martinez (2022) discusses how thematic units facilitate differentiated instruction and 21st-century skills, underscoring the importance of teacher input in shaping curriculum reforms. According to the above studies it is clear that thematic units are highly effective in semi-structured settings, where teachers have flexibility to innovate, while maintaining alignment with standards, encouraging cross-disciplinary learning and fostering student engagement.

3.2.3.7. Differentiated Instruction

Kuhr (2023) highlights differentiated instruction, rooted in Carol Ann Tomlinson's framework, as an effective method to adapt the curriculum to diverse student needs, while adhering to standardised benchmarks. In structured teacher experiences, where educators follow defined curricular frameworks, differentiated instruction allows for systematic adjustments to content, process, and product, ensuring inclusivity without overwhelming the system (Goyibova et al., 2025). Siregar (2024) emphasises that Tomlinson's approach maintains balance between depth and manageability, which prove essential in structured experiences. Ituma (2025) explains that differentiated instruction promotes equity and improves academic performance by addressing diverse learning

styles and abilities, with structured teachers' experiences providing necessary guidelines for effective implementation. Halil (2024) reinforces that differentiation supports inclusive education by meeting varying readiness levels, interests, and profiles. Moreover, Subban et al. (2024) show that differentiated instruction increases engagement and success, especially in diverse classrooms. Insorio (2014) demonstrates its role in bridging achievement gaps, while Tomlinson and Jarvis (2023) argue that differentiation aligns with the evolving demographics of classrooms and supports curriculum reform. Therefore, differentiated instruction is particularly effective in structured teacher experiences, where it allows teachers to meet diverse needs within established curricular frameworks, ensuring equity and inclusivity across classroom settings.

3.2.3.8. Collaborative Learning

Kasimovna (2024) highlights collaborative learning's roots in Vygotsky's social development theory, emphasising social interaction in cognitive development. This approach aligns with structured teacher experiences, where peer-based activities are integrated into curricula. Millis (2023) explains that collaborative learning enhances group interaction and reduces reliance on individual instruction, fitting well within structured experiences with clear objectives. Zhang (2023) further supports this, noting that collaborative learning promotes knowledge construction through dialogue and problem-solving, which is well-suited to semi-structured experiences with flexibility in facilitating group interactions. Mugabekazi et al. (2025) provide evidence showing that structured collaborative learning improves higher-order thinking, especially in science, while Slavin (2022) finds that cooperative learning boosts achievement and motivation in structured curricula. Harrison and Williams (2023) argue that collaborative learning fosters inclusive, student-centered pedagogy, which is particularly effective in semi-structured experiences that allow pedagogical innovation. Sharma (2024) reinforces the effectiveness of collaborative learning in higher education, where it deepens engagement and content understanding, especially in self-structured environments where teachers have more autonomy. This means that collaborative learning is adaptable to structured, semi-structured, and self-structured experiences, thriving in contexts with varying levels of teacher autonomy and institutional flexibility.

3.2.3.9. Cultural Relevance

Ladson-Billings (2021) introduced culturally relevant pedagogy (CRP) to bridge the gap between mainstream curricula and the lived experiences of diverse learners, thriving in semi-structured teacher experiences where educators can adapt content within institutional frameworks. Mensah (2021) defines cultural relevance as the integration of culturally meaningful materials to foster engagement and equity, a process facilitated in semi-structured experiences that allow curricular autonomy. Fitch (2024) emphasises the need for alignment between curriculum and students' sociocultural contexts, which is best achieved through adaptive strategies in semi-structured experiences. Ladson-Billings (2021) further argues that CRP enhances student identity and academic engagement, particularly in self-structured experiences, where teachers have the freedom to incorporate diverse cultural narratives. Gay (2021) supports this, noting the effectiveness of culturally responsive teaching in improving participation and academic outcomes, even within structured experiences with careful adaptation. Soli (2024) expands on this with culturally sustaining pedagogy, advocating for the active preservation of cultural practices, a concept most feasible in self-structured experiences where teachers can innovate. Sleeter (2021) finds that culturally relevant content boosts motivation and achievement, especially among marginalised students, a benefit seen in semi-structured experiences. Lozano Castillo (2024) stresses the importance of preparing culturally responsive educators, noting the critical role of teacher agency in driving equity-driven educational transformation in semi-structured and self-structured experiences. Therefore, CRP and culturally sustaining pedagogy emphasise the importance of teacher autonomy in integrating cultural relevance, with significant benefits in student engagement and achievement across different teaching contexts.

3.2.3.10. Feedback-Responsive Policy

Kartha and Turyahebwa (2025) define feedback-responsive policy as a key element in modern curriculum design, thriving in self-structured teacher experiences where educators can incorporate feedback into their instructional decisions. Çobanoğlu (2024) places this policy within agile education models, emphasising responsiveness and adaptability, particularly in semi-structured experiences where teachers balance institutional expectations with real-time feedback. Dumbuya (2023) highlights the importance of continuously revising curricula based on feedback from teachers, students, and stakeholders, a process driven by self-structured teachers' experiences prioritising

flexibility over rigid compliance. Millians (2022) underscores the need for flexible, iterative feedback mechanisms in policy reform, especially in semi-structured experiences where teachers have institutional flexibility within standards. Farmer (2024) stresses that embedding feedback loops empowers educators and communities, strengthening curriculum ownership, and improving student outcomes, particularly in self-structured experiences where teachers' judgments shape curriculum development. Hodge-McClure (2023) emphasise data-informed decision-making, showing that formative assessments enable more precise, student-centered adjustments, a practice also applicable in structured experiences. Stein et al. (2024) argue that feedback-integrated systems promote equity and relevance, driving sustainable reform across structured, semi-structured, and self-structured teachers' experiences. This means that feedback-responsive policies empower teachers, bridge the gap between policy design and classroom practice, and foster adaptive, inclusive, and relevant curricula, essential for sustainable educational change.

3.2.3.11. Assessment-Driven Design

Holly (2023) highlights that assessment-driven design is part of the broader movement of data-informed practices, which is particularly effective within semi-structured teacher experiences where curriculum flexibility is key. Tovani (2023), drawing on Stiggins and Marzano, stresses the central role of assessment in shaping curriculum and instructional decisions, a model that fits well in structured experiences where standardised assessments drive revisions. Hunter et al. (2022) define this as curriculum design grounded in assessment results, focusing on high-impact areas, adaptable in semi-structured experiences through real-time feedback. Fitrah et al. (2025) advocate for assessment for learning, emphasising formative assessments to refine curricula, a practice most effective in self-structured teacher experiences where teachers adjust curriculum autonomously. Rochester (2021) supports leveraging both formative and summative assessments to guide instruction, which benefits both structured and semi-structured settings, depending on autonomy levels. Boström and Palm (2023) reinforce that formative assessments improve learner achievement, especially in self-structured experiences, where assessments are dynamic and context-specific. Berisha et al. (2024) argue that aligning assessment with curriculum ensures coherence and sharpens focus on student needs, particularly in structured experiences, where alignment with standards

proves crucial. Yakimowski et al. (2025) suggest that effective use of assessment-driven design promotes educational equity by identifying gaps across student demographics, a critical factor in semi-structured teachers' experiences settings in which teachers can interpret data flexibly. Therefore, assessment-driven design enhances instructional effectiveness and learner equity by making the curriculum a dynamic, evidence-based tool that fosters a responsive, student-focused learning environment.

3.2.4. Limitations of Approaches to Curriculum Abridgement

Van Deventer and Steyn (2022) discuss how curriculum abridgement, particularly in the context of reforms such as the section 4 amendments, has gained considerable attention. However, the implementation of such reforms faces significant challenges, especially within structured teacher experiences, where rigid curricular frameworks limit the flexibility needed for adaptation. Smith (2022) and Hill (2023) highlight that educators often struggle with a lack of clarity and practical guidance from educational authorities, a challenge that is particularly pronounced in structured settings, where teachers heavily rely on formal directives and have limited autonomy to fill gaps independently. From this perspective, the rigidity of these structured experiences can exacerbate teacher frustration and hinder the creative responsiveness needed during reform periods. Agbaje (2023) emphasises that the success of curriculum reform in African higher education hinges on teachers' understanding of the changes and their ability to realign instructional strategies effectively. This challenge is more manageable in semi-structured teacher experiences, where a balance between institutional expectations and professional discretion allows for more thoughtful realignment. Thompson (2024) further stresses that, without targeted and responsive professional development, teachers are ill-equipped to adapt to rapid shifts; an issue that is particularly problematic in structured contexts, where professional development tends to be generic and fails to address the nuances needs arising from curriculum changes. From this perspective, semi-structured models offer a more supportive environment for reform, by providing professional learning that is contextually embedded and directly relevant to emerging instructional needs. King (2024) observes that classroom realities often diverge from policy intentions, creating a gap between reform and practice. Teachers in self-structured experiences often attempt to bridge this gap by adjusting their methods independently, albeit without formal institutional support.

This highlights the critical role of teacher agency in reform, but also underscores the vulnerability of teachers navigating these changes who go largely unsupported.

Nerlino (2022) and Selvakumar et al. (2025) further report that many teachers feel overwhelmed by the dual pressures of adapting instruction and addressing student diversity, a burden that is particularly heavy in structured settings where deviation from prescribed methods is often discouraged, leaving little flexibility for individualised responses. In semi-structured environments, teachers may have greater capacity to innovate and differentiate their teaching, while maintaining alignment with curriculum goals, therein offering a more sustainable model for addressing these challenges. As a result of these systemic pressures, educators often rely on informal support systems rather than formal institutional structures. Warren (2021) and Van Buuren (2023) both highlight this reliance on informal networks, indicating a shortfall in formalised professional development mechanisms. This trend is particularly evident in self-structured experiences, where collaboration and peer support become critical strategies for survival amidst institutional gaps. This organic networking reflects both the resilience and vulnerability of teachers working under conditions of uncertainty, suggesting the need for greater formal recognition and support of peer-driven professional learning during curriculum reforms. The experiences of teachers navigating curriculum reforms within structured, semi-structured, and self-structured environments reveal significant challenges and opportunities. Structured environments often lack the flexibility needed for adaptation, while semi-structured and self-structured contexts offer greater opportunities for teacher agency, innovation, and the development of peer support systems. For curriculum reforms to succeed, it is essential to provide responsive professional development, support teacher autonomy, and recognise the value of informal communities of practice in driving sustainable change.

3.2.5. Strengths of Approaches to Curriculum Abridgement

In examining the potential of curriculum abridgement, several studies highlight the positive outcomes that may arise when it is appropriately supported. Ali et al. (2023) emphasise the significance of sustained professional development and structured collaborative networks to facilitate successful curricular reform. These factors are particularly effective within structured teacher experiences, where formalised support systems provide the necessary scaffolding for navigating curriculum changes. Structured

support not only boosts teacher confidence, but also ensures consistent outcomes across various educational settings, enhancing the overall effectiveness of reform efforts. Smith (2023) and Jones et al. (2025) advocate for the role of communities of practice in supporting curriculum reform. These communities allow educators to share strategies, foster professional relationships, and exchange resources, which can lead to a more cohesive response to curricular changes. Such communities thrive in semi-structured teacher experiences, where institutional frameworks provide support without overly constraining professional collaboration. Semi-structured environments allow teachers to internalise reforms in a meaningful way, bridging the gap between policy directives and classroom practice, creating a space for authentic adaptation. In self-structured teacher experiences, where formal professional development may be lacking, informal peer support networks often emerge as crucial. These networks empower teachers by reducing feelings of isolation and supporting resilience during times of transition. Empowering teachers through self-organised communities not only fosters resilience but also democratises the curriculum reform process, by giving value to teacher agency.

Badal (2024) underscores the importance of teacher voice in curriculum abridgement, asserting that the success of abridged curricula is closely tied to teachers' experiences and input. This is particularly evident within semi-structured environments, where educators have both the responsibility and the freedom to influence curricular interpretation and adaptation. From a broader perspective, integrating teacher voice at this level transforms curriculum reform from a top-down mandate into a collaborative, evolving process that acknowledges and values professional expertise. Chand (2024) and Law (2022) further stress the importance of structured support systems and collaborative engagement in bridging the gap between policy intent and classroom practice. Their work aligns with structured teacher experiences, where institutionalised professional learning communities drive coherent and large-scale implementation. However, the authors suggest that a hybrid model, drawing on the positive aspects of both structured and semi-structured experiences, may provide the most robust pathway forward. This approach would combine the clarity and consistency of formalised support with the adaptability required for genuine curriculum innovation. The successful implementation of curriculum abridgement is deeply intertwined with the type of teacher experiences involved. Structured, semi-structured, and self-structured experiences each

offer unique advantages and challenges. When teachers are provided with the right level of support, whether through formal professional development, communities of practice, or self-organised networks, curriculum reforms can be more effectively adapted and implemented, fostering both teacher empowerment and educational equity.

3.2.6. South African perspectives of abridged curriculum

In South Africa, curriculum abridgement emerged as a crucial response to the educational disruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as pre-existing systemic challenges. The Department of Basic Education (DBE) implemented this recovery and trimming process so as to ensure that essential learning outcomes could still be achieved within shortened academic years, considering the extended school closures and inconsistent attendance (Moodley, 2022). Mhlolo (2022) highlighted that the main goal of curriculum abridgement was to address "lost learning time," preserving the integrity of core knowledge and competencies. The DBE recognised that expecting students to cover the entire pre-pandemic curriculum within a truncated timeline was unrealistic, particularly for under-resourced schools struggling with limited access to remote learning tools (Spaull & Van der Berg, 2020). Additionally, Wolhuter (2021) emphasised that the abridgement aimed not only to salvage the academic year, but also to prioritise foundational skills such as literacy and numeracy, essential for long-term educational progress. Teachers' experiences in implementing the abridged curriculum revealed a multifaceted and uneven landscape. Van Deventer and Steyn (2022) found that many teachers faced significant challenges, due to unclear communication and lack of practical guidance from the DBE, leading to uncertainty regarding content prioritisation and the balancing of abridged learning with formative assessment. These challenges reflect structured teacher experiences, in which teachers worked within a framework but struggled with the lack of support needed to navigate the changes. Furthermore, Govender (2022) found that, while some teachers appreciated the focus on core concepts, others were overwhelmed by the increased workload of adapting curriculum documents and redesigning lesson plans in a compressed timeframe. A recurring issue in these structured environments was the absence of targeted professional development, which forced many teachers to rely on informal peer networks for support. Thompson (2024) argued that the lack of structured, responsive training left teachers vulnerable, while Warren (2021) and Van Buuren (2023) underscored the role of informal

communities of practice in providing semi-structured teacher experiences. In these environments, teachers exercised some autonomy, though they still adhered to partial institutional guidance.

In rural and under-resourced schools, where teachers had minimal institutional support, their experiences mirrored self-structured teacher environments. These teachers were often left to interpret and implement the curriculum independently, resulting in considerable variations in how the abridged curriculum was enacted across different provinces and schools. As Selvakumar et al. (2025) has noted, this lack of support further complicated efforts to standardise learning recovery, highlighting the challenges of implementing reforms in self-structured environments. Despite these challenges, there were also positive outcomes linked to teacher agency. When teachers were given the autonomy to make instructional decisions within the abridged framework, they were able to focus more deeply on essential content and student needs. Badal (2024) emphasised that this empowerment fostered greater professional agency and innovation. Chand (2024) similarly suggests that successful curriculum abridgement relies on teachers not merely following directives, but co-constructing the dynamics of instruction and learning. The experience of curriculum abridgement highlights the significant role of teachers' experiences, which vary across structured, semi-structured, and self-structured environments. The success of curriculum abridgement largely depended on the level of institutional support, professional autonomy, and clarity provided during the reform process. When teachers were empowered with professional development, peer collaboration, and the autonomy to adapt the curriculum, the abridgement became a platform for innovation. However, without clear guidance and structured support, particularly in under-resourced areas, these reforms risked becoming an additional burden. Therefore, for curriculum reforms to be effective and sustainable, they must be accompanied by responsive professional development, clear communication, and genuine teacher involvement, allowing teachers to navigate and adapt the curriculum in ways that align with broader educational goals.

3.2.7. Global perspectives on abridged curriculum

Globally, curriculum abridgement or similar processes has been a significant focus in response to crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic, economic instability, and ongoing educational reforms. Interestingly, in many contexts, the term "curriculum prioritisation",

"curriculum streamlining", "curriculum compression", or "curriculum rationalisation" is used rather than "abridgement." These terms reflect efforts to condense, refocus, or realign curriculum content to meet practical constraints while safeguarding essential learning outcomes.

3.2.7.1. Reasons for Curriculum Abridgement/Streamlining Globally

Across various education systems, curriculum abridgement emerged primarily as a response to lost instructional time and the need to address curriculum overload. Reimers et al. (2021), in their global analysis of educational responses during the pandemic, note that numerous education ministries engaged in "curriculum prioritisation," which involved identifying essential learning outcomes and postponing or integrating less critical content into subsequent academic years (p. 45). Similarly, UNESCO (2020) advocated for strategies such as "curriculum adaptation" and "condensed curricula" to help countries mitigate learning loss. UNESCO stressed the importance of focusing on fundamental competencies and critical skills during periods of disruption, warning that failure to adjust overly ambitious curricula could exacerbate educational inequalities. In countries like Canada and Australia, the concept of "curriculum rationalisation" was more commonly employed. According to Martin and Brown (2023), Australian states adopted rationalised curriculum plans to manage significant constraints on instructional time, particularly in disadvantaged communities. Despite differences in terminology, the overarching goal was consistent worldwide, namely: to create curricula that were more manageable, focused, and responsive to unprecedented challenges.

3.2.7.2. Teachers' Experiences Implementing Abridged Curricula Globally

While the motivations for streamlining curricula were broadly accepted, teachers' experiences with implementation reveals a far more complex and uneven reality across different contexts. A common challenge was the lack of clarity and preparedness, where many educators reported insufficient guidance and professional development, leaving them to make difficult content prioritization decisions independently, often resulting in inconsistencies across schools (Hodgen et al., 2021; Darling-Hammond, 2021). These conditions reflect predominantly self-structured experiences, where teachers were required to interpret and enact abridged curricula with minimal external scaffolding. Although curriculum abridgement sometimes expanded teachers' professional autonomy, this autonomy often came without the necessary institutional support, creating a sense of

both empowerment and burden (Gillespie & McFadden, 2022; Oduor, 2023). In such instances, teachers operated in a semi-structured experience, where limited guidelines existed, but much was left to professional discretion and peer collaboration. In the absence of robust formal structures, teachers increasingly relied on informal professional networks, such as social media groups and grassroots collaborations, to navigate these changes (Berliner & Glass, 2021; Moodley & Singh, 2022), further emphasising the self-organised nature of their adaptation efforts. The emotional and pedagogical impacts were significant as well; teachers expressed a sense of loss over the reduction of rich, exploratory learning opportunities, particularly in creative disciplines (Cheng & Mok, 2022), suggesting that where experiences were largely self-structured, the burden on emotional and professional wellbeing was greater. Nevertheless, some educators leveraged the abridged curriculum as an opportunity for innovation, experimenting with interdisciplinary learning and competency-based approaches when supported by collaborative decision-making structures (Sahlberg, 2021; Ali et al., 2023), indicating that where semi-structured or more fully structured experiences were provided, innovation and professional growth were more likely. Ultimately, global experiences suggest that successful curriculum adaptation depends heavily on clear communication, meaningful professional development, collaborative support, and the recognition of teachers as key agents of change, reinforcing the idea that reforms must move toward structured or semi-structured experiences to genuinely benefit education systems (Darling-Hammond, 2021). Therefore, fostering semi-structured experiences where teachers have autonomy within a coherent, supportive framework strikes the most effective balance, empowering educators while mitigating the uncertainty and emotional strain associated with fully self-structured approaches.

3.3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

3.3.1. Identifying the theory based on the study focus

The CHAT framework has been identified as the guiding theoretical approach for examining teachers' experiences with the curriculum abridgement resulting from the section 4 amendments. As Clifford (2022) emphasises, CHAT foregrounds the complex, socially mediated nature of human activities within specific historical and cultural contexts. Similarly, Nunez (2021), drawing on Engeström's (1987) foundational work, notes that CHAT serves as a valuable perspective for analysing how individuals use and engage

with various tools, community norms, rules, and divisions of labour, while pursuing collective objectives. Dimmock et al. (2021) further explain that when teachers navigate curriculum reforms, their practices are influenced not only by the content of the reforms but also by institutional expectations, available resources, and collaborative dynamics. In line with this, Stephens (2024) highlights that CHAT facilitates the investigation of contradictions and tensions that emerge during implementation, offering insights into both the challenges and the innovations that teachers encounter. Additionally, Buns et al. (2022) argue that CHAT supports the analysis of how teachers exercise professional agency as they interpret and adapt policies within their specific classroom contexts. Thus, by applying the CHAT framework, the purpose of this study is to present a rich, systemic understanding of how teachers experience and respond to curriculum changes, particularly within the complex realities introduced by the section 4 amendments.

3.3.2. CHAT Framework overview

The CHAT framework has its origins in the work of Soviet psychologists during the 1920s and 1930s, most notably Lev Vygotsky and A. N. Leontiev, and was later expanded by scholars such as Alexei Leontiev and Yrjö Engeström (Nechaev, 2022; Veresov, 2025). Although the foundational ideas were established early on, Engeström and Sannino (2021) note that the structured "framework" commonly referenced today began to take a more recognisable form only in the late 20th century. Johnsen (2022) elaborates that Yrjö Engeström, a Finnish researcher, formally developed and expanded CHAT into a modern framework with the publication of *Learning by Expanding* in 1987. Building upon Vygotsky's foundational concepts and Leontiev's notion of activity systems, Engeström proposed a model that better captured the complexity of human practices and learning environments (Cong-Lem, 2022). According to Stetsenko (2021), CHAT has evolved through several distinct "generations." The first generation, associated with Vygotsky, centres on mediated action, emphasising that human actions are always mediated through cultural artifacts, particularly language. The second generation, as explained by Engeström and Sannino (2021), introduced the concept of collective activity systems, shifting the focus from individual actions to the social and communal dimensions of human activity. The third generation, developed by Engeström during the 1990s and early 2000s, further expanded CHAT by addressing the interaction between multiple activity systems, particularly within contexts of networked collaboration and globalisation. Each

subsequent development extended the theoretical reach of CHAT to tackle increasingly complex societal and organisational challenges (Engeström & Sannino, 2021). At its core, CHAT seeks to understand and analyse human activities as systemic and socially situated phenomena (Nunez, 2021). It explores how individuals collectively achieve goals by utilising cultural tools within a community, governed by social rules and organised through a division of labor. This framework emphasises that individual actions cannot be fully comprehended without considering the broader social and historical contexts that both shape and are shaped by those actions (Casstevens & Stansbury, 2023).

The fundamental principles of an activity system in CHAT include several core components as shown below:

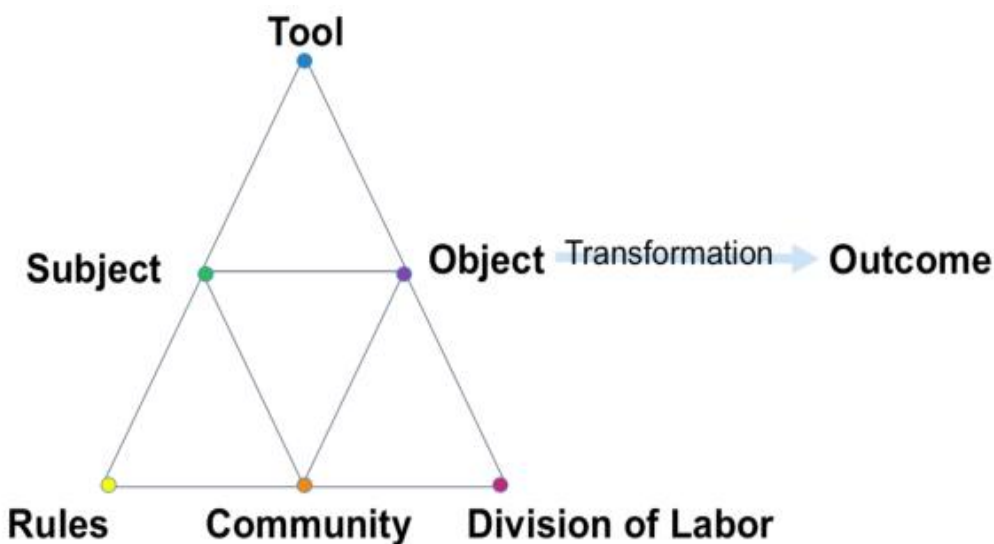


Figure 4: CHAT Framework principles

Within the CHAT framework, several interconnected principles structure the analysis of human activities (Engeström, 1987; Engeström & Sannino, 2021). In CHAT, the **subject** represents the individual or collective whose agency is being analysed within the activity system (Casstevens & Stansbury, 2023). According to Engeström (1987), the subject represents the point of view from which the activity is understood, with their perspectives, motivations, and actions being central to grasping the dynamics of the activity. The **object** refers to the target or “problem space” toward which the activity is focused, giving the activity its meaning and direction (Johnsen, 2022; Cong-Lem, 2022). In CHAT, the object is not a static goal, but a dynamic and evolving entity that drives the development of the activity and transforms as the activity progresses (Engeström & Sannino, 2021). **Tools**

(or mediating artifacts) are the instruments, whether physical, symbolic, or conceptual that mediate the subject's interaction with the object. Vygotsky originally introduced the idea of mediation through cultural artifacts, particularly emphasising language (Nechaev, 2022), while Engeström (1987) expanded this to include technological tools, conceptual models, and other symbolic means, showing that tools both enable and constrain human action.

Rules include both stated and unwritten norms, conventions, and regulations that influence how an activity is conducted. As Stetsenko (2021) highlights, these rules embody cultural and historical patterns that participants must navigate, shaping the ways individuals interact within the community and with the object. The **community** encompasses the broader social group or groups who share the same object and are involved in or affected by the activity. Casstevens and Stansbury (2023) note that understanding any activity requires examining the social relationships and cultural contexts in which it is embedded, recognising that human activities are inherently social and collective rather than isolated. **Division of labour** can be understood as the way tasks, roles, and responsibilities are distributed among members of a community. Engeström and Sannino (2021) argue that the division of labour shapes not only practical tasks but also power dynamics and the distribution of authority within the activity system. Understanding these divisions is crucial for analysing contradictions and tensions within the system. Finally, the **outcome** is the intended or unintended result emerging from the transformation of the object through collective activity (Nunez, 2021). Outcomes reflect both the success and the developmental potential of the activity, and as Engeström (1987) notes, unintended outcomes often reveal contradictions in the activity system, serving as drivers for change and innovation. Through the interplay of these principles, CHAT provides a systemic and dynamic lens for understanding how human actions are socially mediated, historically situated, and oriented toward meaningful transformation.

3.3.3. Theory used in CHAT Framework

CHAT remains an influential framework for understanding complex social and educational processes and for examining teachers' experiences with curriculum changes, particularly the implementation of abridged curricula (Pillai, 2024). CHAT's focus on embedding human activities within their broader cultural and historical contexts makes it highly suitable to the task of understanding how teachers respond to curriculum modifications

(Andrews, 2021). Sterling (2024) highlights that, in highly structured educational settings, where curriculum delivery is closely directed by official mandates, teachers often experience restrictions that diminish their professional autonomy. For example, Hardman and Borges Corte (2023) applied CHAT to study interdisciplinary teaching in Brazilian secondary schools, finding that tensions and contradictions within and across activity systems often prompted adjustments in teaching practices, exposing the friction between policy demands and the realities of classroom instruction. In contrast, self-structured experiences, where teachers independently interpret and adapt curricular changes, have highlighted CHAT's utility in revealing processes of expansive learning (Bound et al., 2024). De Beer and Kriek (2021) utilised third-generation CHAT to explore how indigenous knowledge was incorporated into South African science education. Their research showed that, when teachers were granted the freedom to tailor the curriculum to fit their classroom contexts, they engaged in expansive learning cycles, fostering more impactful and contextually relevant implementations (De Beer and Kriek, 2021). Andrews et al. (2021) mentioned that semi-structured experiences, where teachers operate with some degree of flexibility, further demonstrate CHAT's ability to capture the complexities of educational practice. Ballantyne et al. (2022) investigated pre-service teachers' interactions with an intelligent tutoring system aimed at improving English proficiency. Their findings revealed that teachers actively balanced compliance with standardised requirements and customised adaptations, using collaboration and negotiation as key mediators within their activity systems (Ballantyne et al., 2022). Consequently, overall contemporary research confirms that CHAT offers critical insight into the lived realities of curriculum abridgement implementation. This shows that, regardless of whether teachers work within structured, self-structured, or semi-structured experiences, their activities are shaped by multiple interacting components, such as tools, community, rules, division of labour, and the evolving goals of education. Finally, CHAT not only captures the intricate nature of curriculum change, but also underscores the essential role of teacher agency and continuous professional development in navigating educational reforms.

3.3.4. Strengths of CHAT Framework

One of the key strengths of employing CHAT in studying teachers' experiences with curriculum abridgement lies in its ability to capture the complexity and interconnectedness of real-life educational practices (Coelho, 2023). According to Engeström (1987), CHAT

situates human activity within broader socio-cultural and historical contexts, recognising that teaching practices are shaped not only by individual actions but also by collective norms, institutional rules, community values, and historical developments (Sumbera, 2021). In the context of curriculum abridgement, CHAT offers a dynamic framework for exploring how various elements such as teachers' roles, the introduction of new syllabi or guidelines, shifting community expectations, and evolving policy directives interact and influence practice (Behizadeh, 2023). This systemic approach allows researchers to move beyond surface-level analysis, providing a nuanced understanding of how educational reforms are experienced and enacted at multiple levels. Furthermore, the strength of CHAT, as explained by Cole and Engeström and elaborated by Ash and Ward (2023), lies in its ability to reveal contradictions and tensions within the educational system. Such contradictions, often amplified during periods of reform like curriculum abridgement, serve not only as indicators of conflict, but also as catalysts for innovation and change (Salloum & BouJaoude, 2021). In identifying these tensions, researchers can gain deeper insights into how teachers adapt, resist, or transform their practices in response to systemic disruptions (Ash & Ward, 2023; Engeström, 1987). Importantly, CHAT does not merely document the challenges associated with curriculum changes; it also offers pathways for fostering systemic improvements (Rutt & Mumba, 2023). It acknowledges teachers as active agents in reform processes rather than passive recipients of top-down mandates, highlighting their critical role in shaping and navigating educational change. This emancipatory perspective aligns with broader educational research that emphasises teacher agency and professional autonomy (Case, 2023). Therefore, CHAT's comprehensive, systemic, and agentic lens makes it a powerful theoretical framework for studying the implementation of abridged curricula. It enables researchers to understand not only the difficulties teachers encounter, but also the transformative possibilities that arise from engaging with these challenges.

3.3.5. Limitations of CHAT Framework

Despite its analytical strengths, the use of CHAT in the study of curriculum abridgement presents several notable limitations. One significant challenge is the inherent complexity of the framework itself. As Andrews et al. (2021) note, researchers ought to account for multiple linked elements like subject, object, tools, community, rules, and division of labour which can make data collection and analysis highly demanding. This complexity

often results in overwhelming data sets that are difficult to synthesise effectively (Lupton-Smith, 2025). Furthermore, the urgency and fluidity associated with implementing a rapidly abridged curriculum, such as in response to amendments, may not align neatly with the structured and relatively static model offered by CHAT (Bolino, 2024). The framework's emphasis on systemic structures can also overshadow subtle and informal aspects of teachers' experiences, for instance, Giudici (2021) highlights that teachers' emotional responses and micro-political dynamics within schools may be marginalised when the focus remains predominantly on structural elements. Another limitation is CHAT's tendency to excel at diagnosing contradictions and tensions without necessarily offering practical or immediate solutions, as Rodrigues (2024) points out, in fast-moving contexts like policy-driven curriculum reform, stakeholders often require actionable recommendations rather than purely theoretical insights. Dadvand et al. (2025) similarly argue that teachers and policymakers facing rapid changes need pragmatic strategies that CHAT may not readily provide. Lastly, CHAT traditionally relies on expansive learning cycles that presuppose time for reflection, iteration, and gradual transformation (Al-Ali, 2021). This means that, in reality, during abrupt curricular reforms, educators are often under significant time pressure and may lack the necessary conditions to engage in such reflective processes. Collectively, these limitations suggest that, while CHAT offers a rich and nuanced lens for understanding systemic changes, it may not always be the most practical or responsive framework for studying urgent and dynamic processes like curriculum abridgement.

3.3.6. Rationale behind choosing the CHAT theory

The choice of CHAT implementing the abridged version of section 4 amendments is grounded in the need to capture the complexity of educational practices within their social, historical, and cultural contexts. Originally developed by Vygotsky, and later expanded by Engeström (1987, 2001), CHAT takes human activities such as teaching not as isolated actions, but as parts of broader systems of mediated activities (Stetsenko, 2021). Ikeda and Binarkaheni (2024), in their study on leveraging CHAT in education, explain that Engeström (1987) emphasised the way in which teaching activities are embedded within systems involving mediating tools, community, rules, and division of labour. Consequently, CHAT provides a comprehensive framework for examining the dynamics of educational practices. Mchawa (2023) states that curriculum implementation, as Rogan

and Aldous (2005) highlighted, is not merely a technical procedure but a deeply social and negotiated process. In alignment with this perspective, Behizadeh (2023) asserts that CHAT offers a conceptual perspective for exploring teachers' engagement with new curriculum initiatives, while navigating institutional expectations, resource constraints, and their evolving professional identities. Further supporting this approach, Code (2025) notes that, since curriculum implementation is a socially embedded and mediated practice rather than a purely technical task, CHAT is particularly well-suited to explore the complexity of teachers' lived experiences during curriculum changes. Therefore, by adopting CHAT as the theoretical framework, this study aims to offer a nuanced and comprehensive understanding of teachers' experiences with the implementation of the abridged Section Four curriculum amendments.

This research is grounded in CHAT as its guiding framework due to its systemic emphasis on understanding human activity within its social, cultural, and historical context. Central to CHAT is the concept of the **subject**, in this case, teachers, who are viewed as active agents whose practices are shaped by, and in turn shape, their surrounding contexts (Cong-Lem, 2022). CHAT posits that the subject cannot be fully understood in isolation but must be examined alongside the **tools** they employ. Teachers interact with a range of mediating tools, including lesson plans, abridged curriculum documents, teaching aids, and digital resources, all of which influence their professional practice and lived experiences (Cong-Lem, 2022). Following Vygotsky's (1978) insights, Hopwood (2022) highlights that such tools are not neutral; they carry cultural and historical meanings that impact how teachers interpret and enact curriculum changes. Therefore, understanding the nature and role of these tools is fundamental to capturing the complexities of teacher practice during curriculum reforms. Another crucial principle in CHAT is the **object** of the activity, which represents the goal toward which the subject's activities are directed. Ke et al. (2023) explain that, in the context of this study, the object would be the delivery of quality education aligned with the newly amended curriculum. However, as Nunez (2021) argues, the object is often dynamic, contested, and evolves over time, particularly in response to external factors such as policy shifts. Teachers' interpretations of the abridged curriculum, and the strategies they adopt to meet its demands, are therefore key areas of investigation (Trinter & Hughes, 2021). Exploring the evolving nature of the

object can illuminate how teachers adapt, resist, or reframe their practices in response to change (Behizadeh, 2023).

CHAT also foregrounds the importance of **rules** both formal and informal that regulate actions within the activity system. As Uden and Ching (2024) note, these rules, which include national education policies and school-level expectations, simultaneously enable and constrain teacher activity. According to Cong-Lem (2022), examining these regulatory frameworks is vital for understanding the tensions and contradictions teachers encounter when implementing the abridged curriculum. The **community** is another fundamental component in CHAT. Teachers operate within a broader community of colleagues, administrators, students, and parents who share a collective object (Uffen et al., 2022). Community dynamics profoundly shape teachers' perceptions and practices, as noted by Ash and Ward (2023), influencing how contradictions are addressed and negotiated. Thus, analysing community interactions provides insight into the collective forces that support or hinder curriculum implementation. Additionally, the allocation of tasks, authority, and responsibilities within the activity system is shaped by the division of labour. Durkheim (2023) and Cong-Lem (2022), drawing on the research of Vygotsky and Engeström, highlight the way in which divisions of labour influence the nature and outcomes of collective activities. In schools, leadership responsibilities for curriculum change often fall to heads of departments, while classroom teachers are tasked with operationalizing these changes. Where the division of labour is unequal or poorly supported, tensions and misalignments can emerge, making this an essential area for investigation. Finally, CHAT's conceptualisation of **outcomes** underscores that results are not always linear or predetermined. Rather, outcomes are often emergent and shaped by ongoing contradictions within the activity system. Shachak (2024) emphasises that unintended practices or new understandings may develop as a result of curriculum implementation efforts, echoing Cole and Engeström's (1993) assertion that contradictions are drivers of change and innovation (Weir, 2021). Thus, by adopting CHAT, this study can move beyond surface-level analyses to uncover the complex, systemic interrelations and tensions that influence teachers' curriculum implementation experiences following the Section Four amendments. Accordingly, the study utilises CHAT's elements known as subject, tools, object, rules, community, division of labour,

and outcomes as guiding principles which provides a comprehensive framework for examining the socio-cultural context in which curriculum changes are enacted.

3.4. CONCLUSION

This study explored teachers' experiences in implementing the abridged version of Section Four amendments in the Grade 12 curriculum, using CHAT as the analytical framework and informed by existing literature on curriculum abridgement. The literature review revealed that curriculum abridgement, often introduced in response to time constraints, policy shifts, or systemic disruptions, significantly reshapes teachers' pedagogical practices and demands adaptive strategies to meet revised learning outcomes. Teachers are often caught between institutional expectations and classroom realities, particularly in contexts where abridgement leads to intensified pacing or reduced content depth. The application of CHAT provided a comprehensive lens through which to interpret the complex, mediated activity systems within which teachers operate. By examining the contradictions between tools (abridged curriculum documents), subjects (teachers), community (school systems), and rules (policy directives), the study illuminated both the affordances and constraints that shaped teachers' responses. Notably, contradictions emerged where teachers' professional agency conflicted with systemic pressures to adhere rigidly to abridged timelines and assessment standards. The CHAT framework thus enabled a deeper understanding of curriculum implementation not as a linear policy process but as a dynamic and contextually embedded practice. The integration of curriculum abridgement literature with the CHAT framework underscores the need for ongoing professional support, inclusive policy dialogues, and context-sensitive curriculum planning so as to ensure that abridgement efforts enhance rather than hinder educational equity and quality in Grade 12 classrooms.

CHAPTER 4

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

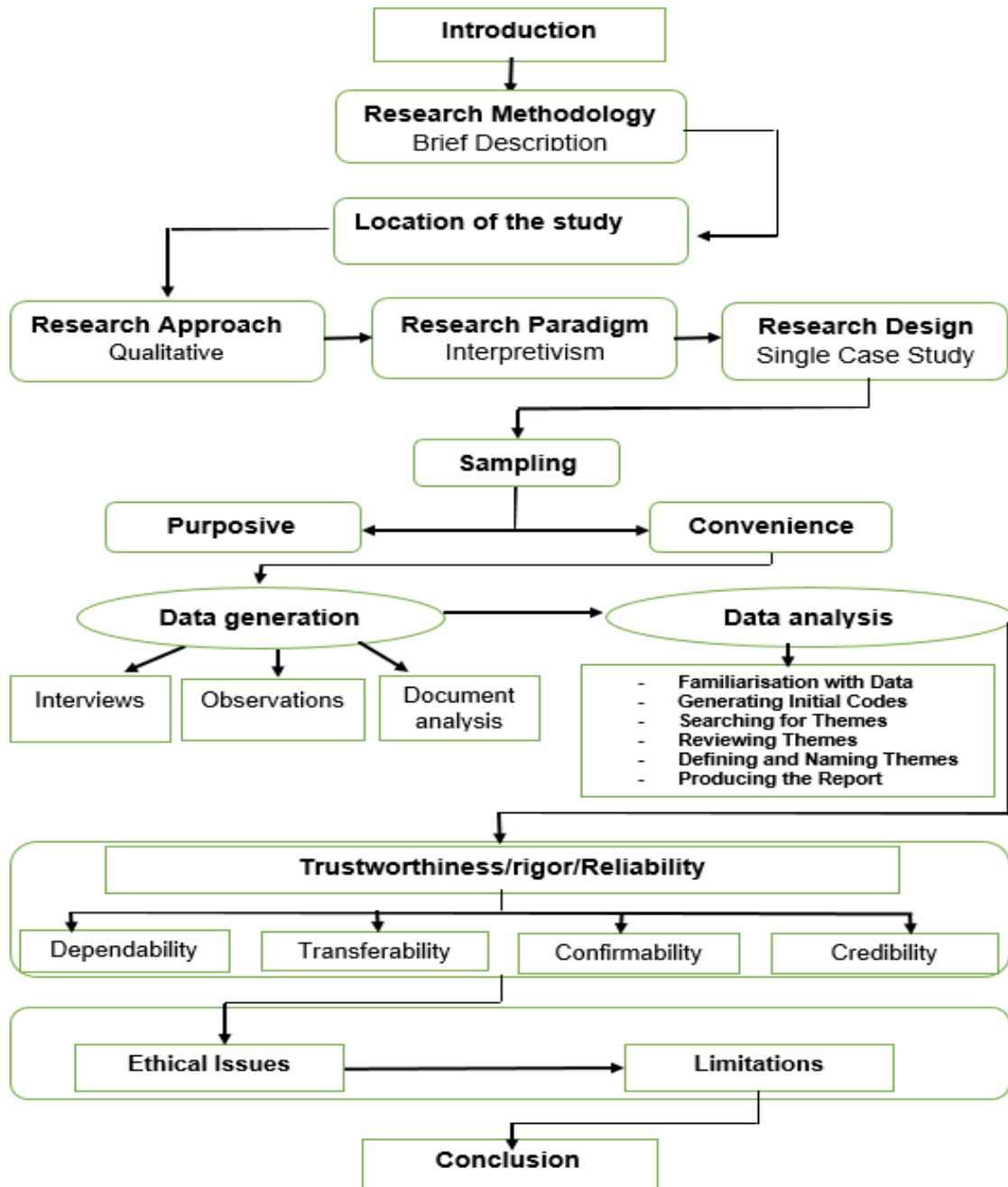


Figure 5: Chapter 4 (flow chat)

The flow chart above illustrates the organisational framework that guides the structure of Chapter 4 (Methodology and Research Design).

4.1. Introduction

The preceding chapters outlined the review of relevant literature and the theoretical framework that form the foundation of this study. As previously indicated, the primary objective of the research was to explore teachers' experiences in implementing the abridged curriculum aligned with Section Four Amendments in Grade 12. Accordingly, this chapter elaborates on the methodological orientation, research design, and paradigm that informed the study. It begins by describing the qualitative research approach and the interpretivist paradigm employed to interpret the data generated, followed by a discussion of the single-case study design and its suitability within the study's context. Subsequently, the chapter elaborates on the sampling strategies employed, specifically convenience and purposive sampling which are the data generation instruments, and the analytical procedures used. The discussion then turns to ethical considerations, issues of trustworthiness, and the methodological limitations encountered. The chapter concludes by introducing the next section, which presents and analyses the research findings.

4.2. Research Methodology (Brief description)

Tracy (2024) defines research methodology as a systematic and evidence-based process used by scholars to gather, interpret, and analyse data in order to respond to specific research objectives and questions. Likewise, Dehalwar and Sharma (2023) view research methodology as an organised framework that directs researchers in selecting suitable paradigms, designs, strategies, sampling approaches, data-generation tools, and analytical procedures. In the present study, the methodological orientation is qualitative in nature, framed within an interpretivist paradigm and operationalised through a single-case study design. Participants, comprising Grade 12 teachers, were selected using purposive and convenience sampling to ensure relevance to the research focus. Information was obtained through semi-structured interviews, observation of classroom practices, and an analysis of relevant documents, enabling a deeper insight into the issue explored. The analysis process employed both data driven(inductive) and theory-informed (deductive) thematic approaches in order to reveal key patterns and meanings within the data. Additionally, the choice and application of instruments were critically aligned with the purpose and scope of the research. Overall, the adopted methodology established a coherent structure for exploring teachers' involvement in experiences that

were structured, semi-structured, and self-structured in implementing the abridged curriculum under section 4 amendments in Grade 12.

4.3. Location of the study

The research took place in Limpopo Province, South Africa, in the 2025 academic calendar period. It focused on six Grade 12 teachers from a single rural secondary school situated in the Tubatse Circuit of the Sekhukhune East District. The participants were purposively selected based on their teaching experience, spanning both the pre- and post-COVID-19 periods, as well as their direct involvement in implementing the abridged version of the Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS) Section Four amendments.

4.4. Research Approach: Qualitative Research

The study is underpinned by a qualitative research methodology, guiding the collection and interpretation of data. According to Hirose and Creswell (2023), a research approach constitutes a systematic and structured process of inquiry that involves the process of generating and analysing data to respond to the study's research questions. Similarly, Mbanaso et al. (2023) define a research approach as a way of thinking about and addressing research problems, incorporating philosophical assumptions, research design, and methodological choices. Saxena (2024) describes it as a systematic method for investigating research problems through data collection, analysis, and interpretation. This study utilised a qualitative research approach, as it is well-suited for gaining a thorough grasp of the nuanced and complex experiences of teachers. Pregoner (2024), citing Creswell (2023), emphasises that a qualitative approach enables in-depth exploration of lived experiences and personal perspectives. As outlined by Pandey (2025), qualitative research in the field of ELT involves non-numerical data collection and analysis methods designed to understand teacher perspectives, contextual meanings, and individual experiences, rather than focusing on quantification or generalisation of results.

Lim (2025) also defines qualitative research as a process involving the exploration of issues through the analysis of non-numerical data, including text, images, and observations. Oranga and Matere (2023) describe the key characteristics of qualitative research as being subjective, interpretive, and context dependent. It is also exploratory

and descriptive, focusing on meaning-making and perspective-taking. As a result, the qualitative approach in this study creates the opportunity for a detailed and contextually grounded exploration of teachers' experiences in implementing the section 4 abridged curriculum in Grade 12. This, in turn, provides insights that can inform professional development, improve curriculum design and policy, and foster reflective and collaborative teaching practices. Further, Prosek and Gibson (2021) note that structured experiences within qualitative research involve the use of predefined frameworks or guiding questions, which ensure consistency while enabling the collection of rich and detailed data. Barboza-Wilkes and Le (2024) highlight that self-structured experiences emphasise participant agency, allowing individuals to shape and voice their own narratives in a more open-ended manner. Additionally, Karcher et al. (2024) explain the value of reflexive or self-structured experiences, in which researchers consider their own roles, biases, and positionality in shaping the research process and interpreting the data.

The study made use of a qualitative research methodology, which effectively captured the complex and context-specific experiences of teachers implementing the abridged version of section 4 curriculum amendments in Grade 12. Aligned with Creswell's (2023) perspective, as cited by Pregoner (2024), qualitative research enables a detailed exploration of individual experiences and gives an essential lens for understanding how teachers respond to curriculum changes. Experienced teachers who taught before and after COVID-19 pandemic were selected using purposive and convenience sampling, and data collection involved the use of semi-structured interviews, classroom observations, and document review. These non-numerical data sources, highlighted by Pandey (2025) and Lim (2025), allowed for the collection of diverse and meaningful insights. The context-dependent and interpretive nature of qualitative research, as emphasised by Oranga and Matere (2023), supported a deeper analysis of the teachers' practices within their institutional settings. Moreover, the incorporation of both structured and self-structured experiences (Prosek & Gibson, 2021; Barboza-Wilkes & Le, 2024) facilitated a balance between methodological consistency and participant autonomy. Concurrently, reflexivity, as emphasised by Karcher et al. (2024), allowed researchers to critically examine their own positionality and potential influence throughout the processes of data collection and analysis. Overall, the study's qualitative methodology provided valuable insights to inform curriculum development, professional training, and educational policy.

Despite the strengths of the qualitative approach adopted in this study, which offered valuable insights into teachers' experiences, several limitations ought to be acknowledged. A primary concern is the inherent subjectivity of qualitative research, which may compromise the reliability and broader applicability of the findings. As Oranga and Matere (2023) emphasise, the context-specific and interpretive nature of such research, though beneficial for exploring localised experiences, limits generalisability. Moreover, the use of purposive and convenience sampling, while effective for accessing experienced participants, can result in sampling bias and underrepresentation of diverse viewpoints across educational settings (Pandey, 2025). Reflexivity, though essential for researcher self-awareness, may inadvertently shape data interpretation due to researchers' positionalities and assumptions (Karcher et al., 2024). Additionally, Prosek and Gibson (2021) caution that structured methods, despite their consistency, might restrict participants' spontaneity, potentially limiting the richness of narratives. Likewise, Barboza-Wilkes and Le (2024) argue that overly self-structured methods can produce inconsistent data, complicating the analytical process. Finally, the reliance on non-numerical data, such as interviews and observations, poses a challenge for comparative analysis, and may hinder the communication of results to stakeholders seeking quantifiable evidence (Lim, 2025). Therefore, while this qualitative design was appropriate for capturing the complexity of teachers' lived experiences, its interpretive nature necessitates careful consideration when extending findings beyond the immediate research context.

In order to overcome the limitations associated with the qualitative approach used in this study, a range of methodological and procedural strategies can be adopted to improve the study's credibility, transferability, and analytical depth. The subjective and context-bound nature of qualitative research, as highlighted by Oranga and Matere (2023), can be managed through triangulation, which incorporates the use of multiple data sources and research methods, or theoretical frameworks to cross-verify findings and provide a richer understanding of the experiences as a phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2018, as cited in Pregoner, 2024). Although purposive and convenience sampling may risk sampling bias (Pandey, 2025), this can be reduced by ensuring heterogeneity in the participant pool such as including educators from various geographic areas, types of institutions, and with differing professional backgrounds (Mbanaso et al., 2023). To

manage reflexivity challenges, researchers ought to maintain reflective journals and participate in peer review or debriefing sessions, practices that help uncover and critically assess their own influence on data collection and interpretation (Karcher et al., 2024). The potential rigidity of structured interview techniques, which may limit the spontaneity of participants' responses (Prosek & Gibson, 2021), can be mitigated by incorporating flexible, open-ended questions that still align with the research framework. Likewise, the inconsistencies arising from self-structured narratives, as discussed by Barboza-Wilkes and Le (2024), can be addressed through systematic coding procedures and iterative data analysis, enhancing coherence and reliability. Lastly, in order to make non-numerical findings more applicable to policy and practice, researchers may present data through thematic syntheses, illustrative quotations, and visual tools like diagrammes or concept maps, which Lim (2025) notes can enhance the transparency and applicability of qualitative findings. Together, these approaches reinforce the rigour within qualitative research and strengthen its capacity to produce meaningful, context-sensitive understandings of teachers' experiences.

4.5. Research paradigm: Interpretivism

According to Omodan (2024), a research paradigm reflects the positionality of the researcher, providing a particular perspective through which the world is interpreted in the pursuit of knowledge and understanding. Fundamentally, a paradigm serves as a conceptual framework that supports the exploration and understanding of social reality. Ugwu et al. (2021) and Omodan (2022) characterise a paradigm as a foundational system of beliefs and theoretical structure, incorporating underlying assumptions concerning ontology, epistemology, methodology, and research methods. Razali and Fernando (2024) further simplify this by defining a paradigm as a researcher's worldview or set of guiding assumptions that inform the research process. This highlights the critical role of ontology and epistemology as the central elements of a research paradigm, shaping one's perception of reality and the approaches considered appropriate for studying it. As MacLeod et al. (2022) stresses, researchers ought to be able to identify and clearly articulate their assumptions regarding the nature of reality, the scope of knowledge, and the methods by which it can be obtained.

This research is conducted within the framework of the interpretivist paradigm, which aims to provide rich and nuanced insights into teachers' experiences of implementing the abridged Section Four curriculum amendments in Grade 12. According to Omodan (2024), interpretivism is particularly suitable for such research, as it emphasises understanding individuals' subjective meanings and interpretations within their social and contextual settings. Guided by this paradigm, the study examines teachers' lived experiences, perspectives, and the significance they attach to curriculum implementation (Hambabi et al., 2024). The interpretive approach places value on participants' personal experiences, interacting with them via dialogue and attentive listening to understand their perspectives (epistemology), while acknowledging that reality is socially constructed and may manifest in multiple forms (ontology) (Pervin & Mokhtar, 2022). Thus, one teacher's perception of implementing the abridged curriculum may differ significantly from another's, reflecting the multiplicity of realities acknowledged within the interpretivist worldview.

The ontological stance of interpretivism aligns with the study's focus on teacher experiences, acknowledging reality as subjectively constructed through individual perspectives and personal interpretations (Pretorius, 2024). Moreover, this paradigm accommodates contextual factors such as school culture, institutional policies, and broader social influences that shape curriculum enactment (Maher, 2025). It also emphasises meaning-making, wherein teachers are seen as active agents constructing understanding from their professional experiences (Pervin & Mokhtar, 2023). Epistemology, on the other hand, refers to the philosophical study of knowledge, its nature, sources, and the processes through which it is acquired and validated (Sol & Heng, 2022). According to Luoma and Hietanen (2024), epistemological inquiry guides researchers to question the extent to which objectivity, subjectivity, causality, validity, and generalisability are possible and desirable within a study, where a person's ontological position shapes their epistemological assumptions. This means that a belief in a single, verifiable truth directs the researcher toward seeking an objective understanding of reality aiming to uncover how things truly are, and how they function. Conversely, when reality is understood as socially produced and diverse, the researcher is inclined to assume a subjective perspective, emphasising the importance of understanding phenomena within their specific social and contextual settings (Lim, 2025). From this perspective,

researchers reject the notion that individuals can be studied in the same way as objects in the natural sciences; instead, they strive to comprehend experiences and meanings as expressed by participants themselves.

The selection of the interpretive paradigm was guided by its inherent strengths, particularly its flexibility, which enables participants the opportunity to express thorough and meaningful insights into their experiences (Ugwu et al., 2021). Within this framework, the researcher was able to conduct semi-structured interviews that facilitated deeper reflection and elaboration, thereby producing comprehensive insights. The interpretive paradigm was also chosen due to its alignment with the study's aim of exploring teachers' experiences in implementing the abridged section 4 curriculum amendments in Grade 12. As Bertram and Christiansen (2014) note, this paradigm is especially suitable for research that aims to explore the personal and interpretive aspects of human experiences and the ways individuals construct meaning from them. Interpretivism allows for the exploration of complex themes such as teacher identity and emotional engagement during curriculum implementation (Farrugia, 2024), as well as collaborative practices and the role of social capital in curriculum reform efforts (Li & Lu, 2025). Consequently, this paradigm supports a rich, contextualised understanding of teacher experiences and provides insights that can inform professional development, curriculum design, and education policy. In this study, the interpretivist paradigm underpins the use of semi-structured experiences as a methodological approach, enabling a balance between guiding inquiry and allowing participants the flexibility to express nuanced, individualised perspectives on the implementation of the abridged version of section 4 curriculum amendments. Ontological and epistemological assumptions inherent in interpretivism and consequently guiding the design of the study, approaches to data gathering, and processes of analysis, ensuring a comprehensive understanding of teachers' engagement with curriculum changes.

In applying the interpretivist paradigm within the field, the study translated its ontological and epistemological principles into practice by treating Grade 12 teachers as informed contributors whose lived realities and subjective interpretations informed the understanding of how the abridged section 4 curriculum amendments were implemented. Reflecting the ontological view that reality is individually and socially constructed (Pretorius, 2024), the researcher engaged with participants in their natural school contexts to explore the various ways they made sense of and responded to curriculum

changes. The application of semi-structured interviews allowed for the elicitation of deep, contextually grounded narratives, in line with Chikoko and Moyo's (2023) advocacy for open-ended qualitative methods that privilege educators' authentic perspectives. From an epistemological standpoint, the study embraced the notion that meaning is jointly produced through conversational interaction and mutual interpretation (Farrugia, 2024), shaping both the data collection process and subsequent follow-ups. The researcher's commitment to reflexivity acknowledged the interactive nature of knowledge construction, consistent with emphasis placed by Naidoo (2023) and Mishra (2024) on the researcher's role in shaping interpretive outcomes. Data analysis drew out themes related to professional identity, emotional investment, and the influence of contextual factors, all examined through the lens of participants' social and institutional environments. This aligns with Maher's (2025) argument that interpretivist research must remain attentive to the broader systemic influences on teacher practice. Ultimately, this practical application of the paradigm ensured that the study produced nuanced, context-sensitive insights that contribute meaningfully to both academic discourse and practical curriculum development efforts.

A key limitation of the interpretive research paradigm is its reliance on a limited sample size, which restricts the extent to which the findings can be generalised to the broader population (Pervin & Mokhtar, 2022). Because interpretivism emphasises depth over breadth and context-specific understanding over universal application, its findings often reflect particular experiences that cannot be statistically generalised (Omodan, 2024). This limitation poses challenges in extending the insights gained to wider educational settings or teacher populations. However, to address this weakness and enhance the trustworthiness of the study, triangulation of data methods was employed. Triangulation, which relies on data derived from several distinct sources, methods, or perspectives, helps ensure the credibility and robustness of research outcomes by cross-validating findings (Meydan & Akkaş, 2024). This approach strengthens confidence in the interpretations drawn, despite their context-specific nature, and supports the methodological rigor expected in qualitative research (Patton, 2015; Tracy, 2020). By incorporating triangulation, the study aligns with best practices in interpretive research, allowing for richer, more dependable insights while mitigating concerns over limited generalisability (Singh et al., 2021; Lim, 2025). Thus, while the interpretivist paradigm

may not yield widely generalisable results, the use of triangulation enhances the trustworthiness, credibility, and contextual relevance of the study's findings.

4.6. Research design: Case study (Single case)

As noted by Dehalwar and Sharma (2023), an effective research design underpins a study by providing a coherent structure for responding to its research questions. Tracy (2024) portrays research design as a guiding framework that sets out how data will be generated and analysed to provide meaningful answers to the research questions. Similarly, Padmavathy et al. (2023) describe research design as the practical or “doing” aspect of a study, serving as a key tool that guides the research process. In this study, the research design is situated within a qualitative research paradigm, which aims to explore and interpret complex phenomena by engaging with participants' lived experiences and personal perspectives (Muzari et al., 2022). This approach is particularly suited for research questions that aim to uncover meaning, context, and process, rather than measuring variables or testing hypotheses (Dehalwar & Sharma, 2023). In alignment with this philosophical orientation, the study adopted a descriptive single case study design, which aligns with the ontological and epistemological assumptions of interpretivism recognizing multiple realities constructed through individuals' subjective experiences (Akotia et al., 2023). Priya (2021) explains that a case-based research approach enables researchers to conduct a thorough investigation of a focus of inquiry within its authentic, real-world setting, especially when the distinction between the phenomenon and its contextual environment is not clearly defined. Guided by this theoretical perspective, the study adopted a descriptive case study focused on one context as the most suitable approach for gaining a comprehensive understanding of teachers' lived experiences in carrying out the abridged curriculum amendments in Grade 12.

The case in this study refers to the implementation of the abridged version of Section Four of the Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS) in Grade 12 within a single rural secondary school in South Africa. The spatial boundary of the case is the selected rural school where the participating teachers were employed. The temporal boundary of the case covers the period following the introduction of the abridged Section Four amendments after the COVID-19 disruptions, when teachers were required to

implement the revised assessment and curriculum guidelines. Conceptually, the case focuses on teachers' experiences of interpreting and implementing the abridged curriculum within their classroom practices, including the challenges encountered, the strategies adopted, and the contextual conditions influencing their work. Defining the case in this manner enabled the study to explore the interaction between curriculum policy and classroom practice within a clearly bounded educational context.

The single case study approach offered several strengths that justified its selection. First, it allowed for a contextualised and nuanced understanding of a single phenomenon in its specific environment, which is essential for understanding educational reforms at the grassroots level (Cleland, 2021). Second, the design enabled the capture of deep, textured narratives from teachers, revealing the complexity and multidimensionality of implementing curriculum changes (Hawkins, 2021). Unlike multiple case studies, which aim to compare across different contexts, the single case design focuses on intensive analysis and depth, in line with the study's objective of exploring lived experiences rather than making broad generalizations (Prosek & Gibson, 2021). The choice was further supported by Hancock et al. (2021), who advocate for descriptive case studies in educational settings where rich insight into a specific context is needed to inform policy and practice. In this study, the descriptive study of a single case was used to explore teachers' experiences of implementing the curriculum abridged version of Section 4 amendments in Grade 12. This design guided the formulation of research questions, focusing on how the implementation was experienced, what challenges and adaptations occurred, and which contextual factors influenced these experiences. Through semi-structured interviews, participants shared their insights into instructional planning, classroom delivery, resource availability, and emotional responses to the reform, enabling the researcher to build a detailed narrative grounded in authentic voices.

The selection of a rural secondary school as the case was analytically significant because rural schooling contexts often present distinctive conditions that shape how curriculum reforms are implemented in practice. Factors such as limited access to teaching resources, infrastructural constraints, and varying levels of professional support can influence how teachers interpret and enact curriculum policy. Investigating the implementation of the abridged Section Four curriculum within this rural context therefore

provided an opportunity to understand how broader curriculum reforms interact with local educational realities. The case study design further enabled the study to examine these interactions holistically, while the Cultural-Historical Activity Theory (CHAT) framework supported the interpretation of how different elements within the school system such as rules, tools, community, and division of labour influenced teachers' curriculum practices.

Despite its strengths, the single case study design presents certain limitations. One major concern is the issue of limited generalisability due to the focus on a single context (Osbeck & Antczak, 2021). To address this, the study emphasised transferability rather than generalisability, providing thick descriptions and contextual details so that readers can determine the applicability of findings to their own settings (Hays & McKibben, 2021). Another limitation is the potential for researcher bias, particularly when it comes to data interpretation. To mitigate this, the study incorporated strategies such as member checking, where participants reviewed their interview transcripts and emerging interpretations for accuracy (Motulsky, 2021). Peer debriefing was also used to ensure critical reflexivity and challenge researcher assumptions (Karcher et al., 2024). Lastly, the narrow focus on one school may restrict the diversity of perspectives. This was addressed by ensuring variation in participant selection, involving teachers with different years of experience and subject areas within Grade 12, thereby enhancing the richness and representativeness of the data.

4.7. Sampling

Sampling refers to the process by which a researcher selects specific individuals, objects, or entities from a defined population for inclusion in a study (Lohr, 2021; Kumar, 2025). As noted by Hazari (2024), researchers have access to a range of sampling strategies, including random, stratified, purposive, opportunistic, convenience, and snowball sampling. Nyimbili and Nyimbili (2024) highlight that random and purposive sampling are among the most frequently employed approaches, each comprising distinct sub-techniques. For example, convenience sampling is often viewed as a subset of purposive sampling. Although both methods serve different research goals, they differ fundamentally in their underlying principles. Random selection method ensures that every individual within the target population has an equal chance of being selected, whereas judgmental sampling involves the deliberate selection of participants based on specific

attributes or their relevance to the study (Narayan et al., 2023). In accordance with the aims of the study, this research utilised purposive sampling, complemented by convenience sampling, to identify participants who were both most relevant and readily accessible for the research.

4.7.1. Purposive Sampling

Also known as judgmental sampling, purposive sampling involves the deliberate selection of participants who exhibit characteristics pertinent to the aims of the study. Ahmad and Wilkins (2024) explain that this method allows the researcher to use their discretion in identifying individuals or cases most capable of providing insightful responses to the research questions. In the same vein, Tajik et al. (2024) emphasise that purposive sampling is a deliberate process of choosing participants likely to contribute meaningful and contextually relevant data to the study. Robinson (2024) further emphasises that this method involves selecting individuals based on predefined and justified criteria established prior to participant recruitment. This sampling technique was selected for the current study because it aligns closely with the study's aim of exploring specific experiences within a defined group. Hossan et al. (2023) note that purposive sampling is commonly used in case where the researcher seeks to represent a particular targeted group within the population. The primary aim of this study was to explore Grade 12 teachers' experiences in implementing the abridged curriculum amendments specified in Section Four during and after the COVID-19 pandemic. Consequently, purposive sampling was deemed the most suitable approach, as it allowed for the selection of participants with the requisite background and contextual understanding to provide meaningful and informed contributions to the study.

In this study, purposive sampling was applied by intentionally selecting six Grade 12 teachers who had direct experience with implementing the abridged curriculum amendments during and following the COVID-19 pandemic. This group was deliberately targeted due to their firsthand involvement, enabling a thorough exploration of the subject matter. The study sought to explore not only the implementation process, but also the underlying factors that shaped teachers' experiences, thus requiring participants with relevant and specific expertise. To ensure transparency in participant selection, clear inclusion criteria were established prior to recruitment. Participants were required to meet the following criteria: (1) be currently teaching Grade 12 at the selected rural secondary

school; (2) have direct experience in implementing the abridged version of Section Four of the CAPS following the COVID-19 pandemic; and (3) have sufficient teaching experience to reflect meaningfully on curriculum implementation practices. The selection of experienced teachers was intentional, as such participants were more likely to have a deeper understanding of curriculum processes, assessment requirements, and the practical challenges associated with implementing curriculum reforms. Their professional experience enabled them to provide reflective and contextually informed accounts of how the abridged curriculum was interpreted and enacted in classroom practice.

A key strength of purposive sampling is its close alignment with the specific aims of a study. According to Casteel and Bridger (2021), the research's fundamental nature dictates the type of data needed, which subsequently informs the choice of sampling strategy. Through purposive sampling, researchers are able to select individuals who possess the most relevant knowledge and experience, thereby enriching the depth and contextual significance of the data collected. This approach is especially valuable when investigating complex or nuanced phenomena that demand insights from participants with informed and contextually grounded perspectives.

Despite its strengths, purposive sampling is not without limitations. One notable drawback is the risk of bias introduced by the researcher during participant selection, as the process relies heavily on the researcher's subjective judgment (Nyimbili & Nyimbili, 2024). This risk is amplified if the selection criteria are not clearly defined or transparently communicated. Robinson (2024) cautions that the absence of explicit and justified criteria can undermine the credibility of the participant selection process. To mitigate the limitations associated with purposive sampling, this study employed clear and well-defined selection criteria. Participants were required to be Grade 12 teachers who had implemented the abridged curriculum amendments during and after the Covid-19 pandemic. This specific requirement ensured that participant selection was based on transparent and justifiable parameters, thereby reducing the risk of arbitrary or biased inclusion. Additionally, the study supplemented purposive sampling with convenience sampling, as further discussed in a subsequent section, to enhance accessibility and participation.

4.7.2. Convenience Sampling

This sampling method, known as convenience sampling, entails selecting participants who are readily available to the researcher, primarily based on their accessibility and willingness to participate. According to Golzar et al. (2009), this method allows researchers to engage individuals who are most easily reachable and available for inclusion in the study. Emerson (2021) adds that this method is typically applied at the initial stages of participant recruitment to facilitate the selection of accessible individuals. As Stratton (2021) notes, convenience sampling often includes voluntary participants who opt into the study without the researcher actively seeking them out. This method offers a practical and straightforward means of participant selection. The rationale for employing convenience sampling in this study stems primarily from logistical and financial considerations. As a self-funded research project, the study required a cost-effective and time-efficient approach to data collection. Ahmed (2024) highlights that convenience sampling is advantageous for researchers working with limited resources, as it requires minimal effort, time, and financial input. Consequently, this method aligned well with the circumstances under which the current research was conducted.

Convenience sampling was utilised in the selection of six Grade 12 teachers from a secondary school located in the Tubatse Circuit of the Sekhukhune East District. The school was selected due to its proximity to the researcher, allowing for ease of access. This allowed for efficient data collection while accommodating the study's limited budget and resources. The participants were not only conveniently located, but also matched the study's purposive criteria, as they were involved in implementing the abridged curriculum amendments during and after the COVID-19 pandemic. One of the key advantages of convenience sampling is its simplicity and efficiency in acquiring participants. Stratton (2021) emphasises that this method streamlines the participant recruitment process by relying on willing and available individuals. Furthermore, Ahmed (2024) notes that convenience sampling minimises the financial and temporal burden on researchers, making it an attractive option in studies with constrained budgets and limited timelines. The method's ease of use allowed the researcher to proceed with data collection without extensive planning or logistical challenges.

Despite its practical benefits, convenience sampling carries notable limitations. A major limitation of this method is the possibility of bias in the sample, since the participants

selected may not adequately reflect the characteristics of the wider population (Emerson, 2021). This may result in findings that are limited in their generalisability beyond the selected group. Stratton (2021) further cautions that individuals recruited through convenience sampling may not always provide the most comprehensive or insightful information relevant to the research topic. This limitation can affect the depth and applicability of the research outcomes. To address the inherent limitations of convenience sampling, this study combined it with purposive sampling. Participants were not selected solely based on convenience, but also had to meet predetermined criteria, ensuring their relevance to the research focus. Specifically, four of the six teachers were chosen both for their accessibility and for their experience with implementing the curriculum amendments during and post-pandemic. As Bekele and Ago (2022) suggest, the appropriateness of a qualitative sample is determined by its ability to effectively answer the research questions. By incorporating both purposive and convenience sampling strategies, the study sought to balance practicality with the need for meaningful and contextually rich data. For this study, six teachers were deliberately chosen using a combination of purposive and convenience sampling based on predefined criteria.

Table 3: Participants profiles

Teacher	School	Teaching subject	Grade	Gender	Experience
1	Secondary	English	12	Male	15 years
2	Secondary	Life Sciences	12	Female	10 years
3	Secondary	Mathematics	12	Female	12 years
4	Secondary	Business Studies	12	Male	08 years
5	Secondary	Geography	12	Male	20 years
6	Secondary	Physical Sciences	12	Female	11 years

The participant profiles presented in Table 3 illustrate the diversity of the selected teachers in terms of teaching experience and subject specialisation within Grade 12. This variation was important for ensuring that the study captured a range of perspectives on

the implementation of the abridged curriculum across different subject contexts. Although all participants met the inclusion criteria, differences in years of teaching experience and subject areas allowed the researcher to explore how teachers with varying professional backgrounds interpreted and responded to the curriculum amendments. This diversity contributed to the richness and depth of the data generated in the study.

4.8. Data Generation Method

In qualitative research, data generation entails a systematic process of selecting, capturing, and interpreting detailed, descriptive information to address the research questions (Cherkaoui & Oudrhough, 2024). Unlike quantitative approaches that prioritise numerical data, qualitative inquiry focuses on understanding lived experiences through verbal or textual narratives (AdeyinkaOjo, 2025). The study utilised a qualitative case study framework to explore the experiences of six Grade 12 teachers in implementing the curriculum abridged version of the Section Four Amendments, both before and after the COVID-19 pandemic. In order to maintain methodological rigour and reinforce the robustness of the results, complementary information-gathering procedures included: semi-structured interviews, non-participant classroom observations, and document analysis.

4.8.1. Semi-Structured Interviews

A semi-structured interview represents a qualitative research method that blends the systematic nature of structured interviews with the adaptability found in unstructured approaches. Researchers utilise a predetermined set of open-ended questions, while retaining the flexibility to explore emerging topics prompted by participants' responses (Ruslin et al., 2022; Croucher & Cronn-Mills, 2021). This method facilitates in-depth examination of complex social issues, enabling the discovery of new insights while preserving a coherent thematic direction. Contemporary research continues to enhance its utility for instance, Parfenova (2024) developed an automated system using BERT and HDBSCAN to efficiently analyse thematic patterns within semi-structured interview transcripts, offering a solution to common analytical challenges (Ruslin et al., 2022). The semi-structured interview can be situated within the interpretivist tradition of qualitative inquiry, which prioritises understanding individuals' experiences from their own viewpoints (Adeoye-Olatunde & Olenik, 2021). Drawing on constructivist epistemology, this method recognises knowledge as being jointly constructed through the interactive

dynamics of the interview process (Kingsman & Davis, 2024). Theoretically, it resonates with symbolic interactionism, highlighting how meaning is created through language, situational context, and shared understanding during the interview (Karatsareas, 2022). This approach offers a balance between guiding the discussion and allowing space for unanticipated themes to surface. Scholars such as Buys et al. (2022) and Schäfer (2025) describe the semi-structured interview as a dialogic process, where the research objectives intersect with the participants' lived experiences. According to Ruslin et al. (2022), its flexibility enhances the depth of inquiry into personal narratives, proving especially valuable in areas like education, healthcare, and organisational studies, where complex and subjective experiences are explored. Therefore, from a theoretical lens, the semi-structured interview transcends its role as a data-gathering instrument; it becomes a reflexive, context-sensitive encounter that centers participant voice and meaning-making (Mauldin & Chambers, 2023).

Semi-structured interviews hold significant value in qualitative research as they enable participants to express rich, reflective accounts of their experiences in their own words (Saunders & Stephenson, 2025). In this study, individual interviews were conducted with each of the six participants, providing a comfortable and confidential space for them to discuss their experiences of implementing the abridged curriculum. The interview guide comprised open-ended questions aimed at eliciting detailed insights into the challenges faced and successes achieved throughout the implementation process. The strength of this method lies in its ability to generate rich, individualised accounts and its flexibility, which allows for probing and clarification of participants' responses (Thorne et al., 2024). Furthermore, participants had the space to critically reflect on their teaching practices, fostering deeper self-awareness (Ortiz & Patton, 2023). However, limitations included the risk of interviewer bias and the time-consuming nature of scheduling interviews around teachers' responsibilities. These issues were addressed by conducting interviews after their periods, ensuring minimal disruption. A standardised interview protocol was used, and all interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed word for word to ensure accuracy and consistency in analysis.

In this study, one individual interview was conducted with each of the six participating teachers. Each interview lasted approximately 45–60 minutes, allowing sufficient time for participants to provide detailed reflections on their experiences. The interviews were

conducted after the classroom observation sessions, enabling participants to reflect on both their general experiences and their observed teaching practices. All interviews were audio-recorded using a digital voice recorder, with the consent of the participants, to ensure that responses were captured accurately. The recordings were later transcribed verbatim to preserve the authenticity of participants' accounts and to facilitate detailed analysis during the coding and theme development stages.

4.8.2. Non-Participant Observations

Non-participant observation is recognised as a qualitative method of data collection wherein the researcher systematically observes and records behaviours, events, and interactions within their natural context without engaging directly with the participants (Kumar & Sharma, 2023). By means of this approach, observation entails a deliberate and focused process of collecting data primarily through visual and auditory perception, aiming to identify recurring patterns, practices, and social meanings within a given setting (Uwamusi & Ajisebiyawo, 2023). Distinct from participant observation, this method requires the researcher to maintain a non-intrusive stance, thereby reducing the likelihood of influencing the environment under study (Mtshali & Msimango, 2023). As noted by Lofland et al. (2022) and Hurst (2023), such observational techniques offer valuable, objective insights into social interactions and contextual behaviors, particularly in settings such as schools or organisations, where participant awareness may impact the authenticity of responses. From a constructivist perspective, non-participant observation serves as a lens through which researchers can interpret how individuals navigate and relate to established routines, structures, and symbolic systems in real-world contexts (Muzari, 2022; Mirgissa, 2024). Moreover, recent research highlights its effectiveness in accessing implicit knowledge and unspoken social norms that are often difficult to capture through more direct methods like interviews or surveys (Hietaranta, 2025).

Observations are widely recognised in qualitative research for their ability to capture naturalistic behaviour and contextual realities (Ernest et al., 2023). For this study, non-participant observations were conducted in Grade 12 classrooms during the periods of the participants to examine how the abridged curriculum was implemented in practice. This method provided direct insight into teaching strategies, classroom interactions, and the integration (or lack thereof) of the abridged content. Among its strengths, observation

enables the researcher to witness real-time enactments of the curriculum, offering a level of detail that complements interview data. It also captures non-verbal cues and pedagogical patterns that might otherwise be overlooked. However, the observer effect where the presence of the researcher alters participant behavior was a key limitation. To address this, multiple observations were conducted to allow participants to acclimatise to the researcher's presence. The researcher maintained a passive role throughout, avoiding interference in the natural flow of the lesson.

In total, two classroom observations were conducted for each participating teacher, resulting in twelve observed lessons. Each observation lasted for the full duration of the teaching period, approximately 50–60 minutes, depending on the school timetable. The observed lessons focused on Grade 12 curriculum content relevant to the subjects taught by the participating teachers, allowing the researcher to examine how the abridged curriculum guidelines were enacted in real classroom settings. During the observations, the researcher recorded field notes on instructional strategies, learner engagement, use of teaching resources, and assessment practices. These contextual details enabled the researcher to document how teachers organised learning activities and interpreted curriculum expectations within the classroom environment.

4.8.3. Document Analysis

The analysis of documents is a well-established method for gathering qualitative data that entails a careful and structured review of documents to extract meaning, foster understanding, and build empirical insight (Morgan, 2022; Kumar & Praveenakumar, 2025). This approach incorporates a wide spectrum of sources, including policy documents, institutional records, instructional resources, and media texts, which are interpreted not simply as factual records but as products embedded with ideological, cultural, and historical significance (Davie & Wyatt, 2021; Parthasarathi & Sinha, 2022). Grounded in interpretivist and constructivist theoretical frameworks, document analysis understands texts as dynamic and influential constructs that both mirror and shape social realities (Sankofa, 2023; William, 2024). Recent research, such as the works of Topp (2021) and Sorensen (2023), illustrates the method's utility in unpacking institutional rhetoric and policy developments, uncovering latent power structures and normative frameworks. This method proves particularly useful in situations where participant access

is restricted, or when used in conjunction with other qualitative techniques like interviews and observations to enhance interpretive depth (Armstrong, 2021; Morgan, 2022). Consequently, document analysis serves as both a methodological tool and a theoretical approach for critically engaging with texts in order to construct richly situated understandings.

Document analysis was employed to complement the other methods and provide evidence of curriculum planning and policy interpretation (Setiawan & Suwandi, 2022). Reviewed documents included lesson plans, assessment guidelines, learner support materials, and official departmental circulars related to the abridged curriculum. These documents were essential in understanding how policy-level decisions were translated into classroom practice. The strength of document analysis lies in its unobtrusive nature and its ability to provide historical and policy-oriented context. It offers a concrete trail of how teachers adapted to or complied with curriculum changes. However, certain limitations emerged, such as incomplete records and outdated material that did not fully capture recent shifts or teacher rationale. To mitigate these limitations, document data were triangulated with interviews and observations. Where documents lacked clarity, follow-up questions were posed during interviews to verify interpretations and intentions behind curricular decisions.

The documents analysed in this study included teachers' lesson plans, assessment tasks, learner support materials, and official departmental circulars related to the abridged Section Four curriculum amendments. These documents were selected because they provided insight into how curriculum guidelines were interpreted and translated into classroom practice. Lesson plans were examined to understand how teachers structured instructional content and aligned teaching activities with the abridged curriculum requirements. Assessment tasks and guidelines were reviewed to determine how teachers implemented the revised school-based assessment policies. Departmental circulars were analysed to identify the official directives and expectations communicated to schools regarding the implementation of the abridged curriculum. The inclusion of these documents therefore allowed the researcher to compare policy intentions with actual classroom practices observed during the study.

Through the combined use of semi-structured interviews, classroom observations, and document analysis, this study achieved methodological triangulation and produced a holistic account of teachers' experiences in implementing the abridged Section Four curriculum. Each method offered unique contributions: interviews yielded personal narratives, observations captured real-time practices, and document analysis anchored the study in policy and planning contexts. Potential limitations related to access, time constraints, and participant dynamics were thoughtfully managed through structured scheduling, researcher reflexivity, and methodological complementarity. This comprehensive, multi-method approach enhanced the credibility, richness, and depth of the collected data, thereby establishing a solid foundation for the subsequent critical examination and interpretation of the study's findings.

4.9. Data analysis

In the context of qualitative studies, analysing data is defined as the structured and purposeful process of organising, interpreting, and deriving meaning from textual or visual data for the identification of patterns, thematic categories, and analytical insights aligned with the study's objectives (Tracy, 2024; Salmona & Kaczynski, 2024). This process is theoretically rooted in interpretivist and constructivist traditions, which prioritise the collaborative construction of meaning between the researcher and the data (Rowland, 2025; Scott, 2025). Unlike approaches that pursue objective truths, qualitative data analysis seeks to explore and interpret the nuanced dimensions of human experiences within their social and cultural contexts. Contemporary research underscores the iterative and reflective character of the analytic process, wherein data are continuously examined, coded, and reinterpreted in response to evolving understandings (Locke et al., 2022; Wright et al., 2024). Analytical techniques such as thematic analysis, narrative analysis, and grounded theory coding are frequently employed to draw out meaningful patterns and build theoretical interpretations. According to Ahmed (2025), effective qualitative analysis necessitates methodological transparency, coherence, and a high level of reflexivity to maintain analytical integrity. Thus, data analysis serves not merely as a procedural task, but as a core, theory-driven component of qualitative research.

In qualitative research, data analysis is a systematic and iterative process aimed at uncovering patterns, meanings, and themes within the collected data (Ahmed et al., 2025). In this study, the analysis was guided by the approach of thematic analysis outlined

by Braun and Clarke (2006) and applied in line with Byrne (2022), providing a clear and structured framework for identifying recurring themes in participants' narratives. This approach facilitated an in-depth exploration of Grade 12 teachers' experiences in implementing the abridged curriculum as introduced through the Section Four amendments. The analytical process in this study was guided by both inductive and deductive reasoning within the framework of CHAT. As described by Calvo and De la Cova (2023); Qaissi (2024), deductive reasoning involves the use of pre-established categories or themes to guide the organisation and interpretation of data. In contrast, inductive reasoning allows themes arising directly from participants' responses, without the imposition of external structures.

In addition to guiding the theoretical orientation of the study, Cultural-Historical Activity Theory (CHAT) also informed the analytical process by providing a conceptual structure through which teachers' experiences were interpreted. Within this framework, the activity system elements which are subject, object, tools, rules, community, and division of labour served as sensitising concepts during the coding and interpretation of the data. These elements assisted the researcher in identifying how individual teacher experiences were shaped by broader institutional and contextual conditions within the school environment. In this way, CHAT functioned not only as a theoretical lens but also as an organising framework that supported the systematic interpretation of patterns emerging from the data.

The study initially adopted an inductive approach during the open coding phase, wherein codes were generated directly from the participants' narratives. This data-driven method facilitated the identification of rich, context-sensitive insights into Grade 12 teachers' lived experiences, particularly their responses to the implementation of the abridged curriculum introduced through Section Four amendments. Subsequently, deductive analysis was employed by relating the emergent themes to the foundational components of the CHAT framework namely, the subject, object, tools, rules, community, and division of labour. This stage of analysis allowed for a more structured interpretation of the data by situating individual teacher experiences within broader systemic and institutional dynamics. During this process, the researcher examined how the elements of the activity system interacted to shape teachers' curriculum practices.

Within the CHAT framework, particular attention was given to identifying systemic tensions and contradictions between elements of the activity system. These contradictions were identified by examining instances where participants' narratives or observed practices revealed misalignment between components of the system. For example, tensions emerged when curriculum expectations (rules) required full coverage of the abridged syllabus while limited teaching resources (tools) constrained effective implementation. Such contradictions were coded and analysed as indicators of structural challenges influencing teachers' curriculum practices. For example, teachers (subjects) worked toward the successful implementation of the abridged curriculum (object) while drawing on mediating tools such as CAPS policy documents, lesson plans, and assessment guidelines. Institutional expectations and policy directives functioned as rules, while the school management team, learners, and subject advisors formed part of the community that influenced implementation. The division of labour reflected the different responsibilities assigned to teachers, school leadership, and education officials in supporting curriculum delivery.

Through this analytical lens, particular attention was given to identifying tensions and contradictions within the activity system. For instance, inconsistencies between curriculum expectations (rules) and the availability of teaching resources (tools), or between teachers' instructional responsibilities (division of labour) and limited institutional support (community), were interpreted as systemic contradictions influencing teachers' experiences. The integration of both inductive and deductive reasoning therefore enabled a balanced analytical approach, ensuring that interpretations remained grounded in participants' narratives while also being informed by the theoretical structure provided by CHAT. This recursive movement between data and theory contributed to a more comprehensive and coherent understanding of the complexities involved in curriculum implementation.

This method was selected because it is flexible, transparent, and particularly suitable for exploring experiences, perceptions, and contextual phenomena such as how teachers engaged with the implementation of the abridged Section Four curriculum amendments in Grade 12 (Germain, 2024 & Musundwa, 2024). Thematic analysis was chosen specifically due to its proven effectiveness in education research for uncovering the lived

realities of teachers in diverse contexts (Naeem et al., 2023). It enabled the researcher to explore how individual and collective experiences intersected around key issues such as curriculum structure, teaching support, and learner outcomes. Thematic analysis also supports reflexivity and data triangulation, as two key principles emphasised in recent qualitative research literature (Cena et al., 2024).

4.9.1. Coding Procedures and Development of the Codebook

To operationalise the thematic analysis process, coding was conducted in three systematic stages: initial coding, axial coding, and selective coding. During the initial coding stage, the researcher examined interview transcripts, observation notes, and relevant documents line by line to identify meaningful segments of data. Codes were generated inductively from participants' statements, classroom interactions, and documentary evidence related to curriculum implementation. During the axial coding stage, related codes were compared and grouped into broader conceptual categories. At this stage, the Cultural-Historical Activity Theory (CHAT) framework informed the deductive organisation of the codes. The elements of the activity system (subject, object, tools, rules, community, and division of labour) were used as sensitising concepts to organise emerging codes and identify relationships between teachers' actions and their institutional context. Finally, in the selective coding stage, the refined categories were synthesised into overarching themes that reflected patterns across the entire dataset. These themes were then reviewed in relation to the research questions and the CHAT activity system to ensure conceptual coherence.

Table 4: Example of the Coding Process

Data Extract	Initial Code	CHAT Element	Category	Theme
"We had very little time to finish the abridged syllabus."	Time constraints	Rules	Curriculum pressure	Curriculum Design and Interpretation
"We relied on past papers and CAPS documents to guide our lessons."	Use of policy documents	Tools	Instructional support	Teacher Preparedness and Capacity
Observation: Teacher skipped a planned activity due to lack of laboratory materials.	Resource limitation	Tools	Resource challenges	Resource Availability and Support

In line with Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step model, the data analysis process unfolded in the following phases:

4.9.1.1. Familiarisation with Data

The first stage involved immersion in raw data. Audio recordings from the semi-structured interviews, alongside data from document analysis and field notes from classroom observations, were transcribed verbatim. The researcher subsequently conducted multiple readings of the transcripts to develop a thorough and nuanced understanding of the participants' perspectives. This process facilitated the identification of preliminary meanings and provided a strong foundation for further analysis.

4.9.1.2. Generating Initial Codes

Following familiarisation, the researcher began coding the data manually. Coding involved identifying and labelling meaningful units of text that corresponded to significant experiences or concerns raised by the participants (Naeem et al., 2023). Codes such as *“lack of training,” “resource challenges,” “curriculum misalignment,”* and *“student motivation”* emerged repeatedly. Although the process was largely inductive, allowing patterns to emerge organically, it remained guided by the overarching research questions to ensure coherence. Although codes were initially generated inductively from the data, they were later examined in relation to the components of the CHAT activity system to determine how teachers' experiences were mediated by contextual and institutional factors within the school setting.

4.9.2.3. Searching for Themes

In the third phase of analysis, codes were organised into broader themes that reflected deeper, more abstract meanings within the data. This involved an iterative and reflective process where the researcher identified patterns, connections, and underlying concepts among related codes. For example, codes linked to teaching resources, digital inequalities, and limited departmental support were conceptually grouped to form the theme *“Resource Availability and Support.”* This thematic development marked a progression from descriptive to more analytical thinking, requiring both critical interpretation and alignment with the research aims to ensure the themes captured the essence of participant experiences. At this stage, the emerging themes were also examined through the CHAT framework to determine how the identified patterns reflected

interactions among the activity system elements such as rules, tools, and community structures shaping teachers' curriculum practices.

Data triangulation was applied during analysis by comparing evidence across the three data sources: interviews, classroom observations, and documents. Codes generated from interview transcripts were cross-checked against observational field notes and documentary evidence to confirm patterns or identify discrepancies. For instance, teachers' claims regarding limited instructional resources were verified through classroom observations and lesson planning documents. This triangulation process strengthened the credibility of the findings and ensured that the emerging themes reflected consistent patterns across multiple forms of evidence.

4.9.2.4. Reviewing Themes

All potential themes were reviewed against the data to ensure they accurately captured the depth and diversity of responses. At this stage, the researcher returned to the original transcripts to check the relevance and consistency of coded data within each theme. This stage also involved reflecting on whether the themes captured the systemic relationships and tensions highlighted within the CHAT activity system.

4.9.1.5. Defining and Naming Themes

Once themes were refined, each was defined clearly and given descriptive names that reflected the core idea behind the grouped data. The final themes that emerged included:

- Curriculum Design and Interpretation
- Teacher Preparedness and Capacity
- Resource Availability and Support
- Learner Engagement and Performance
- Post-Pandemic Teaching Realities

Each of these themes reflected central aspects of teachers' experiences and provided valuable insights into how the abridged curriculum was interpreted, adapted, and delivered across different classroom settings.

4.9.1.6. Producing the Report

The final stage of the analysis involved presenting the findings, incorporating illustrative quotations from participants, and integrating relevant literature to contextualise the

emerging themes. This process allowed for the identification of key insights regarding both the challenges encountered and the strategies employed by teachers in implementing the abridged curriculum. Thematic analysis offered several benefits to this study. First, its flexibility allowed the researcher to use both inductive and deductive approaches, accommodating emerging themes while remaining aligned with the research aims (Qaissi, 2024). Secondly, this approach facilitated the analysis of a substantial volume of rich qualitative data drawn from multiple sources such as interviews, observations, and document analysis without requiring the use of complex technical tools. Lastly, thematic analysis facilitated the comparison of teacher experiences across pre- and post-COVID 19 periods, offering meaningful insights into the temporal and contextual changes in curriculum implementation (Geldenhuys et al., 2022). During the reporting phase, the final themes were interpreted in relation to the CHAT activity system to illustrate how teachers' experiences were shaped by the interaction between policy expectations, available resources, institutional structures, and professional responsibilities. This theoretical integration enabled the study to highlight the systemic dynamics influencing the implementation of the abridged Section Four curriculum. Despite its strengths, thematic analysis has certain limitations. A notable concern is the inherent subjectivity in identifying and interpreting themes, which can introduce the potential for researcher bias. To address the potential for research bias, a reflexive journal was maintained throughout the data analysis process to record thoughts, decisions, and justifications, ensuring transparency and critical self-awareness (Yardley, 2024). Another limitation is that theme development can be inconsistent if not guided by a rigorous process. To address this, the six-step framework by Braun and Clarke (2006) was strictly followed, and the themes were continuously refined through peer debriefing and consultation with a research supervisor. Additionally, triangulation of data sources like interviews, observations, and documents helped validate findings and enhanced the credibility of the interpretations (Whyte, 2021 & Hendren, 2023).

In conclusion, thematic analysis provided a robust and methodologically sound framework for exploring the experiences of teachers implementing the abridged Section Four curriculum amendments in Grade 12. Through a structured six-step process, the study was able to uncover key patterns and themes that offer deep insight into the lived realities of educators before and after the COVID-19 pandemic. While thematic analysis is

inherently interpretive, the study ensured rigour through systematic coding, reflexivity, and methodological triangulation. This analytical approach effectively answered the research questions and generated findings that are both credible and relevant to the educational context in question.

4.10. Trustworthiness/rigour(Validity/Reliability)

In qualitative research, trustworthiness is fundamental to ensuring the soundness, rigour, and credibility of the study and its conclusions (Kocaman, 2025). As opposed to quantitative research, which centres on quantifiable data reliability, validity, and objectivity through statistical procedures, qualitative inquiry relies on contextual depth, reflexivity, and interpretive accuracy. To achieve this, trustworthiness is evaluated using four interrelated criteria: credibility, dependability, transferability, and confirmability. These dimensions were methodically applied throughout this study to ensure that the voices of Grade 12 teachers regarding their experiences with the abridged Section Four curriculum amendments were represented in a truthful, rigorous, and ethically grounded manner. The conscious pursuit of trustworthiness reinforced the significance and practical applicability of the findings within broader educational and academic landscapes.

4.10.1. Credibility

Credibility refers to the degree of trust that can be placed in the truthfulness and authenticity of research findings (Christou, 2025). In this study, credibility was achieved through prolonged engagement with the research site and participants. The researcher spent extended time conducting semi-structured interviews, conducting non-participant observations, and engaging in document analysis. These multiple points of contact provided rich, contextual insights into the real-world dynamics of curriculum implementation and policy interpretation within the school environment. To further ensure credibility, member validation was carried out. After the preliminary thematic analysis, participants were given synthesised summaries of their contributions and asked to verify or clarify interpretations. Specifically, all six participants were involved in member checking. Transcripts of their individual interviews were shared via email within two weeks of the interview. Each participant reviewed the summaries of preliminary codes and themes and provided written confirmation of accuracy. Two participants suggested minor clarifications regarding teaching practices, which were incorporated into the final analysis.

This process ensured that participants actively contributed to validating the interpretation of their experiences, enhancing the authenticity and trustworthiness of the findings.

This process not only enhanced the accuracy of the findings but also empowered participants by recognising their authority over their own narratives (Wainstein et al., 2023; Wa-Mbaleka & Rosario, 2022). In addition, peer debriefing was used through regular discussions with academic peers and the research supervisor. Peer debriefing involved three colleagues and the research supervisor. Meetings occurred biweekly over a three-month period, during which coding decisions, emerging themes, and interpretations were critically discussed. Feedback from these sessions led to refinement of two major themes and reorganisation of several sub-codes, ensuring alignment with the study's research objectives and methodological rigor. These engagements provided external perspectives that helped challenge assumptions and refine emerging themes. Lastly, thick description was employed to present rich, detailed accounts of teacher experiences, making the data more vivid and meaningful to readers (Lubbe, 2023). Thick description was supported by integrating direct quotations from all six participants, detailed observation notes from 12 classroom sessions (two per teacher), and extracts from eight official curriculum-related documents. This comprehensive contextualisation provided readers with clear evidence to judge the applicability of findings in other similar contexts. While some participants were occasionally unavailable for member checking due to time constraints, this limitation was mitigated through follow-ups conducted via email and phone calls. These efforts ensured that the majority of participants had the chance to review and confirm the accuracy of the findings.

4.10.2. Dependability

Dependability denotes the degree to which study results are consistent and reproducible over time and under different conditions (Janis, 2022). In this study, dependability was established through the maintenance of a detailed audit trail that documented all key research activities. This involved maintaining detailed documentation of data collection procedures, coding methods, theme development processes, and analytical decisions. The audit trail included: (1) raw interview transcripts of six participants, (2) 12 observation notes from classroom sessions, (3) coding memos for all initial, axial, and selective codes, (4) successive versions of the codebook, (5) reflexive journal entries documenting

methodological decisions and researcher reflections, and (6) records of theme refinement and validation. This detailed documentation allowed an independent reviewer (the research supervisor) to trace each step of the analytic process and confirm consistency in data interpretation. Additionally, a reflexive journal was kept throughout the study to record the researcher's evolving reflections, potential biases, and considerations of positionality. This was especially critical, as the researcher had prior professional experience in the same educational setting. By continuously reflecting on and disclosing these positional influences, the researcher strengthened the transparency and dependability of the study.

The study also utilised methodological triangulation by gathering data from multiple sources, including interviews, classroom observations, and curriculum documents. This strategy of data triangulation enabled the researcher to cross-check and validate findings while examining the consistency of themes across various data sources. Furthermore, data saturation was achieved, as no additional themes emerged during the concluding stages of data collection (Cena et al., 2024; Barnard & Janse van Rensburg, 2025). Data saturation was determined after the sixth interview and corresponding classroom observations, when no new codes or themes emerged, and participant responses became repetitive, confirming that the collected data sufficiently represented the range of experiences relevant to the study. Although time limitations restricted the possibility of repeating data collection for verification purposes, the rigorously documented processes and diverse data sources compensated for this challenge.

4.10.3. Transferability

Munthe-Kaas et al. (2022) define transferability as the degree to which research findings can be extended to other contexts or used to enhance understanding in similar settings. In this study, transferability was achieved through thick, contextualised description of the research setting, including detailed accounts of participants' backgrounds, teaching contexts, institutional environments, and challenges associated with implementing the curriculum amendments. The purposive and convenience sampling strategy ensured that teachers with diverse backgrounds both male and female, with teaching experience before and after the COVID-19 pandemic were represented. This diversity enriched the dataset and offered a more holistic understanding of how curriculum reform was experienced across time and personal contexts. Additionally, findings were embedded

within the broader South African policy landscape and linked to global discussions on post-pandemic curriculum recovery (Naeem et al., 2023; Corfah, 2024 & Chaney, 2025). These comparisons facilitated conceptual generalisability, allowing readers and practitioners in similar educational systems to apply the insights to their own curriculum reform processes. Though the research was conducted within a single school context, potentially limiting generalisability, the deliberate use of context-rich data and connection to broader literature supported its informed transferability.

4.10.4. Confirmability

According to Williams (2025), confirmability refers to the extent to which research findings faithfully represent participants' experiences, rather than being influenced by the researcher's own biases or theoretical assumptions. In the present study, employing multiple data sources and methods through triangulation enhanced the trustworthiness and impartiality of the findings. The alignment of evidence obtained from interviews, observations, and document analysis contributed to verifying the consistency and authenticity of the themes that emerged. Moreover, the researcher invited external reviewers, including the research supervisor and an experienced qualitative research mentor, to examine a sample of transcribed data, coding schemes, and theme development matrices. The external audit involved the research supervisor and one qualitative research mentor, who reviewed all six interview transcripts, 12 observation notes, coding memos, and preliminary themes. They provided written and verbal feedback focusing on consistency of coding, clarity of theme definitions, and alignment with the CHAT framework. Recommendations from this audit led to minor adjustments in code labels and enhanced documentation of contradictions within the activity system, strengthening the impartiality and confirmability of the findings. These external audits offered critical feedback and served as a check against subjective interpretations. All key decisions from sampling and instrument design to data coding and thematic interpretation were documented in a dedicated research logbook.

This transparency enabled a clear audit trail and enhanced the accountability of the research process. Although complete elimination of bias is never entirely possible in qualitative research, the use of reflexivity, external validation, and method triangulation minimised its influence and enhanced the confirmability of the findings (Ritter et al., 2023). In sum, trustworthiness was an integral and active component of this study's design, data

collection, analysis, and reporting. By systematically applying the principles of credibility, dependability, transferability, and confirmability, the study upheld the standards of rigorous qualitative research. Though minor limitations were encountered such as participant availability or contextual constraints, they were proactively addressed through thoughtful mitigation strategies. This commitment to trustworthiness not only strengthened the authenticity and academic value of the study, but also ensured that the voices of Grade 12 teachers were faithfully and ethically represented as they navigated the complex process of implementing the abridged Section Four curriculum amendments.

4.11. Ethical issues

Ethical considerations are fundamental in qualitative research, especially when the study involves human participants. According to Khan (2024), research ethics refer to the moral principles and frameworks that guide researchers in protecting the dignity, rights, and well-being of participants. In this study, ethical protocols were applied in line with global standards, including the Helsinki Declaration (2013) and Nuremberg Code (1949), which emphasize voluntary participation, informed consent, and protection from harm (Schmidt, 2023; Kurihara et al., 2023; Farré, M., & Baños, J. E. (2023). These principles were not only acknowledged at the proposal stage but were fully operationalised during the data collection process to protect the Grade 12 teachers who participated in the study on the implementation of the abridged Section Four curriculum amendments.

4.11.1. Ethical Clearance and Gatekeeper Permissions

Prior to engaging with participants, the researcher obtained ethical approval from the University of South Africa (UNISA), as required for studies involving human subjects (Drolet, 2023). This process validated the research design against ethical standards and signified institutional approval. Following this, permission was formally requested and obtained from the Department of Education and school principal, respectively, who both served as the local gatekeepers. This comprehensive ethical process ensured that all relevant stakeholders were adequately informed and that permission to access the research site was obtained through proper institutional channels. The ethical clearance also provided a foundation for building trust with participants, reinforcing the legitimacy and integrity of the process of conducting the research.

4.11.2. Informed Consent

Participant consent based on full understanding was central to the ethical conduct of this study. As emphasised by Smith et al. (2023), it is necessary to supply participants with clear and comprehensive information regarding the research goals, potential hazards and benefits, and their right to withdraw at any point without penalty. In line with this, each teacher was provided with a written information sheet and consent document specifying the purpose of the research and what participation entails, and how the collected data would be utilised. The researcher ensured that teachers were given ample time to consider participation, and that consent was obtained in writing before any data collection began. This process upheld the principle of autonomy, as participants voluntarily chose to engage with full knowledge of their rights and responsibilities (Nwali, 2021 & Adegbite, 2024).

4.11.3. Confidentiality and Anonymity

Protecting participant identity was a critical ethical responsibility. Following the guidance of Dang et al. (2024) and Musundire (2025), all data collected were treated as confidential and securely stored. Participants were assured that their names would not appear in any published material, and pseudonyms were assigned to protect their anonymity. Only the researcher had access to the real identities of participants, and anonymised codes were used in transcription and analysis. These measures helped maintain participant trust and created a safe space for open and honest reflection. Nduna et al. (2022) explain anonymity according to the National Research Council, maintaining that is vital for promoting candidness and preventing potential reputational harm. The strength of this approach lay in the open dialogue it enabled; however, a minor limitation was that teachers occasionally referred to colleagues by name during interviews. To resolve this, identifying details were redacted from the transcripts during data cleaning.

4.11.4. Safety, Risk, and Non-Maleficence

As highlighted by Resnik (2025), researchers must minimise harm and maximise safety throughout the research process. In this study, psychological and professional safety were prioritised. Interview questions were sensitively worded, avoiding potentially distressing topics or evaluative judgments about teaching performance. Sessions were conducted at times and locations agreed upon by the participants to reduce disruption to their routines. The researcher remained alert to signs of discomfort and reiterated at every stage that participants could withdraw at any time. In line with non-maleficence principles

(Whitter, 2025), the study avoided any practices that could strain teacher-learner relationships or institutional dynamics. While the risk was minimal, the potential for emotional discomfort when reflecting on the challenges of curriculum reform was acknowledged and addressed by offering debriefing opportunities post-interview.

4.11.5. Honesty, Trust, and Rapport Building

Establishing trust and transparency was essential to the success of this study. As noted by Humphreys (2021), trust allows participants to disclose authentic experiences, while honesty reinforces research credibility. From the outset, the researcher openly communicated the goals and relevance of the study, explaining that the findings could potentially inform better support structures for teachers. Time was taken during initial meetings to build rapport, ensuring that teachers felt comfortable and respected. This approach helped participants engage meaningfully during interviews and discussions, resulting in richer, more reflective data. A notable strength here was the depth of narrative accounts gathered, thanks to the environment of mutual respect. The main limitation was initial participant hesitancy, due to fear of institutional scrutiny; this was mitigated by re-emphasising the confidential nature of the study and the separation of research from school evaluations.

4.11.6. Respect for Persons, Beneficence, and Autonomy

According to Fathallah (2023), the ethical principle of respect for individuals, as highlighted in the Belmont Report (1979) and reiterated by Gabriele (2003), was carefully upheld. Participants were treated as autonomous individuals, capable of making voluntary and informed decisions. Beneficence, or the obligation to do good, was also prioritised. The study was designed to potentially benefit teachers by highlighting areas of support needed for effective curriculum implementation (DBE, 2020). Findings may assist schools in requesting professional development from curriculum advisors, or revising instructional strategies to better align with the abridged policy. Furthermore, the teachers' input could contribute to improved curriculum design and learner outcomes. In terms of autonomy, the research respected participants' rights to withdraw, ensured voluntary participation, and provided detailed explanations of their role in the study. These efforts ensured that ethical engagement was not a mere procedural requirement, but instead, a living practice throughout the research.

In conclusion, ethical integrity was not just a procedural requirement, but an embedded aspect of the research design, data collection, and analysis phases. The study followed the ethical framework outlined in the proposal, ensuring compliance with principles of informed consent, anonymity, participant safety, trust-building, and autonomy. Strengths included transparent communication, participant empowerment, and contextual sensitivity. Minor limitations, such as hesitancy in disclosing sensitive information or scheduling challenges, were addressed through flexibility, assurance of confidentiality, and ethical reflexivity. Ultimately, ethical considerations enhanced the validity, credibility, and social value of the study by protecting participants and fostering honest, reflective participation in the exploration of teachers' experiences with curriculum reform.

4.12. Limitations and Delimiters of the Study

In qualitative research, limitations and delimiters play a vital role in defining the boundaries, scope, and trustworthiness of a study. As acknowledged by Lowe (2024) according to Creswell and Poth (2018), limitations refer to the potential weaknesses or constraints inherent in a study's design, while delimiters are the intentional boundaries set by the researcher to focus the inquiry. For this research, which explored Grade 12 teachers' experiences in implementing the abridged version of the Section Four curriculum amendments, limitations and delimiters were transparently recognised both at the proposal stage and during the research process. Their identification and mitigation contributed to the credibility, dependability, and interpretative clarity of the study (Chakma & Li, 2025). Therefore, this study, which explored Grade 12 teachers' experiences in implementing the abridged Section Four curriculum amendments, acknowledged and addressed several limitations and delimiters to enhance research trustworthiness and clarity.

4.12.1. Limitations

A limited number of six participants was involved, which are teachers from one public school in Limpopo, which limited the diversity and generalisability of findings. Relying on participants' self-reported responses created a risk of social desirability bias, and the lack of a longitudinal design limited the ability to examine long-term effects. Additionally, the researcher's prior experience in similar educational contexts posed a risk of bias. These limitations were mitigated through strategies such as ensuring anonymity, triangulating data, maintaining a reflexive journal, and engaging in peer debriefing.

4.12.2. Delimiters

These included concentrating on Grade 12 teachers only, limiting the scope to public schools, and conducting research in a single geographic location. The study also focused exclusively on the abridged Section Four amendments and used selected qualitative methods (interviews, observations and document analysis). While these delimiters narrowed the scope, they allowed for an in-depth and contextually rich investigation.

The transparent identification and management of limitations and delimiters strengthened the study's credibility, provided clarity in interpretation, and laid the groundwork for future research in broader contexts. In conclusion, the limitations and delimiters of this study were thoughtfully considered and rigorously addressed throughout the research process. While certain constraints, such as small sample size and geographic specificity, may affect the broader applicability of findings, they also contributed to a focused, in-depth exploration of a pressing educational issue. The clear articulation of these boundaries contributed to the robustness and transparency of the research, while also highlighting areas for methodological refinement and future exploration. As such, this study offers both robust insights and a well-scaffolded foundation for continued inquiry into curriculum reform and teacher experiences in post-pandemic South Africa.

4.13. Conclusion

This chapter provided a comprehensive overview of the methodological framework adopted in the study of exploring teachers' experiences of implementing the curriculum abridged version of Section Four amendments in grade 12. The research approach was qualitatively grounded, aligning with the interpretive paradigm to facilitate an enriched understanding of the lived experiences of participants. A descriptive case study design was employed to capture the nuanced realities within a bounded context. The study utilized purposive and convenient sampling techniques to identify information-rich participants capable of offering meaningful insights. Data were generated through appropriate qualitative methods and subjected to thematic analysis, ensuring patterns and themes were systematically derived. Ethical considerations such as informed consent, confidentiality, and voluntary participation were rigorously observed. Trustworthiness was maintained through credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability, enhancing the study's rigour. Furthermore, the study clearly acknowledged its limitations and delimiters to define its scope and contextual relevance. Collectively,

these methodological choices ensured that the research process was ethically sound, methodologically coherent, and aligned with the study's objectives.

CHAPTER 5

DATA PRESENTATION AND DISCUSSION

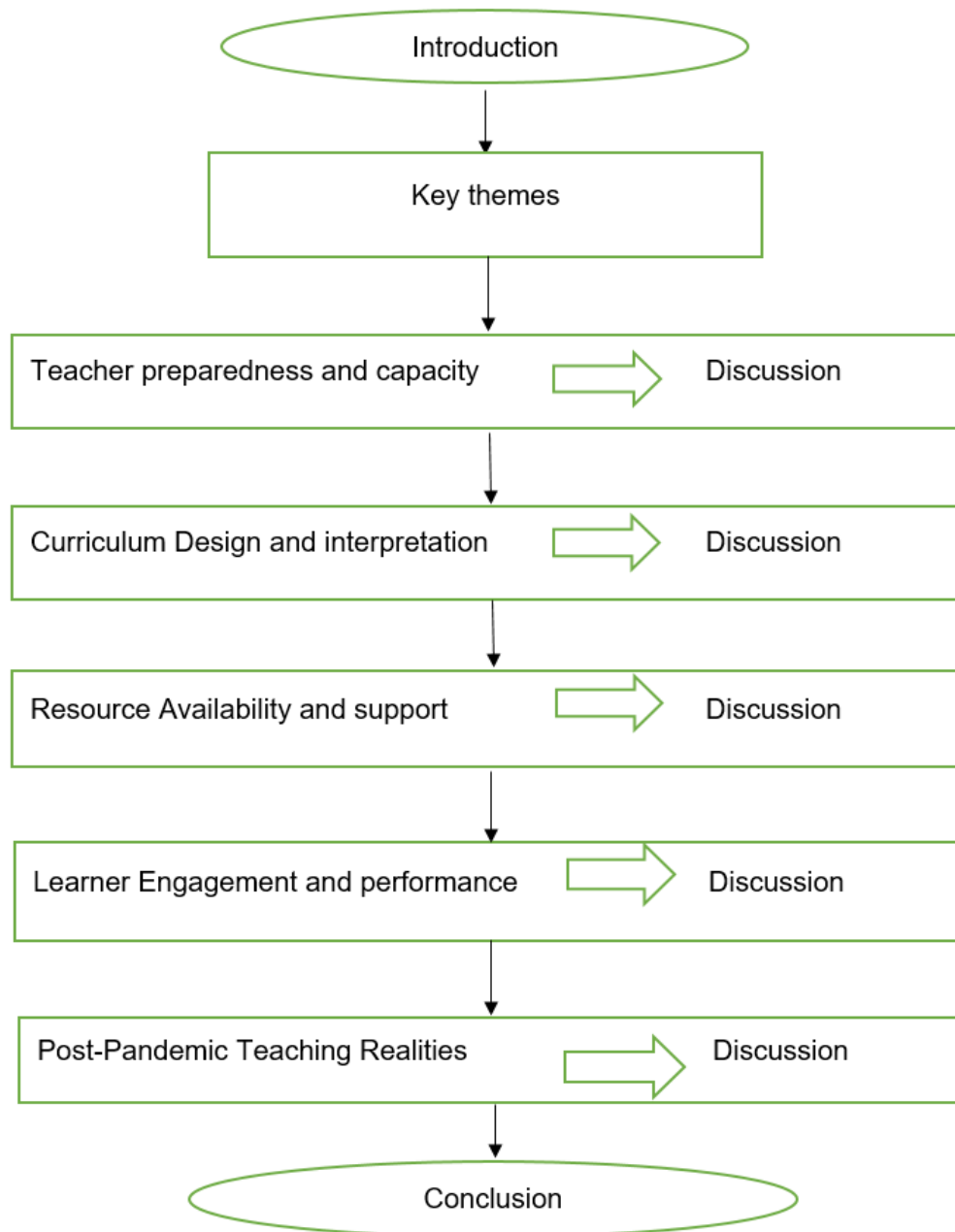


Figure 6: Chapter 5 (flow chat)

The above flow chat represents the structure that this Chapter 5 (data presentation and discussion) follows.

5.1. Introduction

The preceding chapter presented the methodological processes undertaken to achieve the study's objectives. These included the discussion of the research paradigm, approach, and design; as well as the sampling strategies; data generation and analysis methods; measures to ensure integrity and trustworthiness; ethical considerations; and the study's identified limitations. This chapter now turns to the presentation and discussion of the research findings derived from three key data sources: one-on-one interviews, non-participant observations, and document analysis. Thematic analysis was employed to analyse the data, incorporating both deductive and inductive reasoning approaches. Deductive reasoning informed the development of three initial, structured themes namely, Curriculum Design and Interpretation, Teacher Preparedness and Capacity, and Resource Availability and Support, all of which are aligned with the CHAT framework underpinning the study. In addition to these, further themes emerged through inductive reasoning based on insights from the data. As a result, the study ultimately identified five key themes: Curriculum Design and Interpretation, Teacher Preparedness and Capacity, Resource Availability and Support, Learner Engagement and Performance, and Post-Pandemic Teaching Realities. This chapter also seeks to address the study's core research questions: 1. What were teachers' experiences in implementing the abridged version of Section Four amendments to the Grade 12 curriculum? 2. How did these experiences influence the implementation process? 3. What factors informed teachers' experiences in implementing the abridged version of Section Four amendments?

5.2. Deductive and Inductive Analysis: Key Themes

This study employed thematic analysis using both deductive and inductive approaches. The deductive analysis was guided by the components of CHAT, which were used to develop initial themes. Concurrently, an inductive approach was employed to uncover new themes that emerged directly from the data. During this process, attention was given to responses that revealed meaningful patterns or insights beyond the pre-established categories. Data coding was then conducted to capture both predefined and newly emerging themes. As a result, five key themes were identified: Curriculum Design and Interpretation, Teacher Preparedness and Capacity, Resource Availability and Support, Learner Engagement and Performance, and Post-Pandemic Teaching Realities.

Table 5 Themes categorization

Deductive Themes (Pre-determined from Literature and CHAT Constructs).		
These themes align with established elements of the CHAT framework (e.g. tools, rules, community, division of labor, outcomes) and were identified prior to data collection.		
Theme	CHAT Component	Focus
1. Teacher Preparedness and Capacity	Subject/Division of Labor	Teachers as subjects; their knowledge, motivation, training, and capacity to implement changes.
2. Curriculum Design and Interpretation	Tool/Object	The abridged curriculum as a mediating tool; how teachers interpret and implement it.
3. Resource Availability and Support	Community/Tools	Institutional support, peer collaboration, and availability of resources.
Inductive Themes (Emergent from Data)		
These themes emerged from unexpected yet meaningful patterns in the interviews, grounded in participants' lived experiences and not predetermined.		
Theme	CHAT Component	Focus
4. Learner Engagement and Performance	Outcome	Impact of the abridged curriculum on student learning, motivation, and assessment.
5. Post-Pandemic Teaching Realities	Rules/Community/Tool	Adaptations due to COVID-19 disruptions; changing norms and expectations in the teaching environment.

Below there is data presentation and discussion present one-on-one semi-structured interview, Observation and Document analysis data, which was combined in the analysis process.

5.2.1. Theme 1: Teacher Preparedness and Capacity

Focus: Teacher training, motivation, philosophy, experience, professional development, capacity to implement changes.

5.2.1.1. Verbatim extracts

P1 said:

“I’ve been teaching Grade 12 English for over 15 years, both before and after COVID-19. Oh, during the pandemic, teaching became so difficult, with masks, sanitizers, and social distancing, but I still managed to keep my learners motivated. What really drives my teaching is the desire to see learners pass and, more importantly, improve their confidence in using English. You know, my teaching

philosophy is that every learner can succeed... if given the right support and encouragement. Implementing the abridged curriculum taught me to focus on essential skills and to be flexible in my lesson planning. I've learned that I am quite adaptable... and that I can still achieve good results even when time and resources are limited."

P2 stated:

"Well... I've been a Grade 12 Life Sciences teacher for about 10 years now. Teaching before COVID-19 was much easier, learners could work freely in groups and do experiments without any fear. But then... during COVID-19, everything changed. We had to wear masks, use sanitizers, and, honestly, that made communication and group work really hard. You know, I'm motivated by my love for science and by helping learners understand the world around them. My teaching philosophy is that learning should be practical... and connected to real life. The abridged curriculum made me realize how important it is to teach the main concepts clearly without rushing. I've learned that I can simplify content effectively... but, at the same time, I've also seen how cutting topics can leave gaps in learners' understanding."

P3 indicated:

"I've been teaching Grade 12 Mathematics for about 12 years now. Before the pandemic, I used to run extra classes after school... but that had to stop during the lockdowns. Honestly, what drives me to teach is seeing learners solve problems and gain confidence in Mathematics it's such a rewarding feeling. You know, my philosophy is that hard work and consistent practice... really do bring success. With the abridged curriculum, I learned that not all content needs to be taught in the same depth... but, at the same time, I felt that some important sections were removed. I discovered that I have to balance speed and understanding... and I've learned patience, especially when dealing with learners who lost focus during COVID-19."

P4 noted:

"Oh...I have been teaching Grade 12 Business Studies for eight years now. Teaching during COVID-19 was very stressful... because many learners were

absent and we had to sanitize everything all the time. Still that, I'm driven by the dream of producing responsible future entrepreneurs...that really keeps me going. You know my teaching philosophy is that learning should be interactive... and linked to real business examples that learners can relate to. Through implementing the abridged curriculum, I learned to use more online and visual materials... just to make up for the lost time. I realised that I'm actually quite creative and can teach effectively even under pressure... though I really missed the deep discussions we used to have before the curriculum was shortened".

P5 responded:

"I've been teaching Grade 12 Geography for about 20 years now. Before COVID-19, I really enjoyed taking learners outdoors for fieldwork... it was always exciting! But then... that changed completely with social distancing. My motivation comes from seeing rural learners achieve great things... despite the limited resources they have. You know, my philosophy is that teaching should build curiosity and encourage critical thinking. The abridged curriculum did help reduce some pressure... but I also felt it limited exploration and deeper understanding. I learned that I'm quite resilient... and that my learners can adapt too. Still, I realized that some of the fun in learning was lost when the content was reduced... and classes became a bit more rushed."

P6 outlined:

"I've been teaching Grade 12 Physical Sciences for about 11 years now. Before the pandemic, I relied a lot on practical experiments, that's really where the fun and learning happened. But during COVID-19... with masks and sanitizers everywhere, it became so difficult to do them safely. You know, I'm motivated by my passion for science and by helping learners pass a subject that many actually fear. My teaching philosophy is that learners learn best by doing... not just by listening. Implementing the abridged curriculum was quite challenging because we had to skip some experiments... and focus more on theory instead. I learned that I can be resourceful and find new ways to explain practical ideas... but honestly, I also felt frustrated, because the curriculum cut down a lot of that hands-on learning."

5.2.1.2. Discussions

To ensure methodological rigor, data from multiple sources were triangulated. In addition to interview excerpts, the findings were cross-referenced with classroom observation notes and relevant documents, such as lesson plans, assessment guides, and curriculum circulars. For instance, during the observation of a Grade 12 Physical Sciences lesson, learners were observed engaging with simplified experiments, confirming teachers' interview reports regarding adaptations under the abridged curriculum. Similarly, document analysis of the Section Four amendments and departmental memos highlighted the specific content reductions and timelines that influenced teachers' planning and instructional choices. This triangulated approach strengthens the credibility of the interpretations by demonstrating that multiple data sources converge on the identified themes.

Observation: "During a Geography lesson, learners worked in smaller groups with improvised maps and charts due to limited resources, confirming interview reports about adaptive teaching strategies." Document: "A departmental memo dated 10 May 2023 outlined reduced Section Four content and submission deadlines, supporting teachers' claims regarding time constraints. The findings reveal that participants demonstrated significant adaptability and creativity in instruction when implementing the abridged version of the Grade 12 curriculum during and after the pandemic. Despite the constraints of social distancing, mask-wearing, and limited access to practical resources, teachers showed the ability to modify their pedagogical strategies to maintain effective learning. For instance, one Physical Sciences teacher (P6) reflected, *"I learned that I can be resourceful and find new ways to explain practical ideas,"* highlighting a shift towards more innovative and improvisational teaching approaches. Similarly, the Life Sciences teacher (P2) explained that they had *"learned to simplify content effectively,"* demonstrating adaptive pedagogical competence under pressure. The Business Studies teacher (P4) also noted that *"through implementing the abridged curriculum, I learned to use more online and visual materials to make up for lost time."* Collectively, these responses indicate that, although teachers faced diminished resources and limited opportunities for hands-on instruction, they compensated through ingenuity, creativity, and the strategic use of available technologies. This aligns with literature emphasising that teacher adaptability and reflective practice are key components of professional capacity, especially in times of curricular and contextual change (Morsy, 2025; Vosges,

2025). For this reason, the findings underscore that teacher preparedness was not solely dependent on material resources, but also on teachers' intrinsic motivation and capacity for pedagogical innovation. This finding aligns with CAPS, which emphasises that teachers should demonstrate professional creativity, adaptability, and learner-centered teaching practices. CAPS encourages educators to employ a variety of instructional strategies and adapt to contextual challenges to ensure effective curriculum delivery and learning continuity.

The findings are further interpreted through the lens of Cultural-Historical Activity Theory (CHAT). For example, the **tools** included CAPS policy documents, lesson plans, and assessment guidelines that mediated teacher practice; **rules** encompassed curriculum directives, deadlines, and instructional mandates; the **community** comprised teachers, learners, school leadership, and subject advisors; the **division of labour** reflected the allocation of teaching, assessment, and support responsibilities; the **object** was the successful implementation of the abridged Section Four curriculum; and the **outcome** was the learners' engagement and achievement under these constraints. Observations and documents were mapped onto these components to show how they shaped teacher decision-making and classroom adaptations. Several contradictions were identified within the activity system. For example, **rules** (curriculum expectations and timelines) often conflicted with available **tools** (limited laboratory facilities, textbooks, and digital resources), constraining instructional depth. Similarly, the **division of labour** placed high expectations on teachers to cover content rapidly while simultaneously attending to learner well-being, revealing tension between policy goals and practical classroom realities. These contradictions illuminate the systemic pressures that shaped teachers' experiences and pedagogical adaptations, particularly in a rural context with limited institutional support.

Furthermore, the participants expressed that their preparedness was hindered by structural and curricular constraints inherent in the abridged curriculum. Teachers reported that the reduction of content, time pressures, and restricted opportunities for practical engagement negatively affected their ability to maintain depth and continuity in teaching and learning. For example, the Physical Sciences teacher (P6) noted that *"implementing the abridged curriculum was challenging because we had to skip some experiments and focus more on theory,"* illustrating how practical components are essential for conceptual understanding were sacrificed due to time and resource

limitations. Similarly, the Mathematics teacher (P3) reflected that *“some important sections were removed,”* while the Geography teacher (P5) observed that the abridged format *“limited exploration and deeper understanding.”* The Life Sciences teacher (P2) further acknowledged that although they could *“simplify content effectively,”* this often resulted in *“gaps in learners’ understanding.”* These insights reveal that, while teachers were committed to curriculum delivery, their instructional capacity was constrained by the structural compromises of the abridged curriculum. While most teachers reported successful adaptations, some noted that time pressures and reduced practical engagement significantly hindered learning outcomes for certain learners. For example, a Mathematics teacher (P3) observed that accelerated content coverage led to gaps in conceptual understanding for learners who struggled with foundational topics. Including these divergent experiences enhances the credibility of the analysis by acknowledging variability in teacher responses.

This finding aligns with previous studies that highlight how curriculum compression during crises can weaken conceptual progression and undermine teachers’ sense of instructional adequacy (Buabeng & Amo-Darko, 2025; Amin & Mahabeer, 2021). Thus, the study suggests that teacher preparedness was challenged not only by contextual disruptions, but also by the pedagogical compromises embedded within the abridged curriculum itself. This finding partially diverges from CAPS, as the CAPS policy advocates for comprehensive content coverage, conceptual depth, and practical engagement as central to quality teaching and learning. The abridged curriculum, by reducing content and limiting practical components, conflicted with CAPS principles that promote holistic understanding and knowledge progression.

However, the finding also highlighted the participants’ development of internal capacity and confidence in their ability to manage teaching under constrained conditions. Despite the challenges imposed by the abridged curriculum and pandemic-related disruptions, teachers reported a strengthened sense of adaptability, persistence, and belief in their professional competence. The English teacher (P1) reflected, *“I’ve learned that I am quite adaptable... and that I can still achieve good results even when time and resources are limited,”* demonstrating confidence in her ability to maintain instructional quality despite external pressures. Similarly, the Geography teacher (P5) remarked, *“I learned that I’m*

quite resilient... and that my learners can adapt too,” indicating that resilience was not only personal but also modeled and transferred to learners. The Business Studies teacher (P4) added, *“I realised that I’m actually quite creative and can teach effectively even under pressure,”* reinforcing the link between professional self-belief and instructional innovation. These reflections suggest that teachers’ emotional and psychological readiness played a crucial role in sustaining effective teaching practices during uncertain times. This finding aligns with literature emphasising that teacher resilience and self-efficacy are central to navigating change and maintaining motivation in challenging contexts (Grambow, 2022; Nissim & Simon, 2024). Hence, the study illustrates that, beyond structural preparedness, teachers’ inner confidence and reflective adaptability formed a vital aspect of their overall capacity to implement the abridged curriculum effectively. This finding aligns with CAPS, as the policy upholds teacher professionalism, reflective practice, and ongoing professional growth. CAPS recognises teachers as key agents of change who must exercise autonomy, confidence, and resilience in implementing the curriculum effectively under diverse conditions.

Finally, while teachers exhibited resilience and self-efficacy, their preparedness was limited by insufficient systemic and institutional support. While teachers demonstrated commendable individual adaptability, their efforts were often undermined by insufficient resources, restricted infrastructure, and top-down policy decisions that constrained classroom practice. The Physical Sciences teacher (P6) highlighted that performing experiments *“became so difficult to do them safely”* due to health protocols, such as mask-wearing and sanitisation requirements, underscoring the material and logistical barriers to practical teaching. Similarly, the Business Studies teacher (P4) noted the need to rely more heavily on *“visual and online materials to make up for the lost time,”* reflecting gaps in digital readiness and time allocation. Moreover, the Mathematics and Geography teachers (P3 and P5) pointed out that the removal of certain curriculum sections limited their instructional scope, illustrating how top-down curricular revisions affected teaching depth. These findings reveal that teacher preparedness was constrained by external factors beyond individual control, such as inadequate training, insufficient digital infrastructure, and restrictive curriculum mandates. This observation echoes findings by McLure and Aldridge (2023), who argue that without systemic support, even skilled and motivated teachers struggle to maintain instructional quality during periods of rapid

educational change. Thus, the study highlights the need for sustained institutional investment and policy coherence so as to complement teachers' individual resilience and ensure comprehensive preparedness for future disruptions. This finding diverges from CAPS, since CAPS assumes that schools and the Department of Education will provide adequate resources, infrastructure, and professional support to enable teachers to deliver the curriculum effectively. The lack of systemic and institutional support described by participants contradicts the CAPS principle of equitable access to quality teaching and learning resources.

5.2.2. Theme 2: Curriculum Design and Interpretation

Focus: Understanding and applying the abridged curriculum, alignment with learner needs, philosophical and practical alignment.

5.2.2.1. Verbatim extracts

P1 said:

“Well... I am very familiar with the curriculum abridged version of Section Four amendments because I was part of the first group of teachers trained after COVID-19. I read the guidelines and attended workshops to understand how the reduced content would work. Implementing it in my Grade 12 class was not easy at first because, you know, we were still following COVID-19 precautions like wearing masks and sanitising hands, which made communication difficult. Some learners struggled to hear or express themselves clearly. To meet their different needs, I used printed notes and visual aids so that they could follow along even when speaking was hard. The abridged curriculum helped me focus on important topics, but I sometimes felt rushed... In the long run, I think the policy is good if it continues to be improved and supported with proper resources.”

P2 indicated:

“At the beginning, honestly, I was not very familiar with the abridged curriculum and only learned about it through circulars and a short training session from the district. My experience in implementing it was... quite stressful because we had to adjust quickly while still following strict COVID-19 rules like social distancing, which made group work difficult. Learners were afraid and distracted, and teaching with a mask on made lessons tiring. To help them, I used WhatsApp groups to send

notes and voice recordings, especially for those who missed lessons. My teaching style changed to be more direct and focused on summaries rather than detailed explanations. I believe that while the abridged curriculum reduced pressure, it also reduced depth in learning... which may affect learners in higher education later.”

P3 responded:

“I understood the abridged curriculum quite well because, well, I had already been teaching before COVID-19, so I could easily compare it to the full version. Implementing it after the pandemic was challenging because learners had different levels of understanding... some had really fallen behind during lockdowns. I adapted my lessons by using extra classes and short quizzes to help them catch up. I also used group discussions, though it was hard to manage while maintaining distance and wearing masks. The changes made me more flexible as a teacher, and I learned to focus on what really matters in the syllabus. I think in the future... this experience will help teachers handle unexpected changes more effectively.”

P4 stated:

“When the abridged curriculum was introduced, I was already familiar with the content, but... I found it difficult to adjust to the new pacing. We were teaching under very tough conditions like using masks, sanitisers, and smaller classes. The atmosphere in class felt strange because we could not move freely or work closely with learners. I used printed worksheets and short videos to make lessons interesting despite the restrictions. The curriculum changes forced me to rethink my teaching approach... I became more results-oriented and used continuous assessment more often. I believe the long-term effect of this system might be positive if learners continue to get strong support, but if not... some important knowledge might be lost.”

P5 outlined:

“I was quite familiar with the abridged version because our school held several meetings to prepare for it. My experience in implementing it was both rewarding and frustrating, you know. It helped reduce pressure on both teachers and learners, but the reduced content sometimes made it difficult to build a full understanding of some subjects. During the COVID-19 period, teaching while

wearing a mask and sanitising everything made lessons feel... mechanical. I had to adapt by giving more written instructions and using visual methods to communicate. My teaching became more focused and time-conscious. In the long term, I think the abridged curriculum might be good if it stays flexible and continues to prioritise essential learning skills.”

P6 asserted:

“I did not know much about the abridged curriculum when it was first introduced, but I learned by observing experienced colleagues and reading the new policy. Implementing it was difficult because learners were not used to shorter lessons and less content... The masks and sanitising also created a sense of fear and distance in the classroom, which affected participation. To support my learners, I gave extra lessons after school and used simple language to explain complex ideas. The implementation changed my teaching, I now plan lessons with more structure and focus. In my opinion... the long-term effect of the abridged curriculum could be mixed: it makes learning manageable, but it may also leave some gaps in learners’ knowledge if not properly balanced.”

5.2.2.2. Discussion

The understanding of the abridged Section Four curriculum was shaped by early exposure, training, and prior teaching experience. Triangulation across interviews, classroom observations, and document analysis confirms this variation. For instance, lesson plans and observation notes revealed that P1 used printed notes and visual aids to compensate for communication difficulties caused by COVID-19 restrictions, aligning with her interview reflections. School circulars and departmental memos confirmed the staggered rollout of curriculum guidelines, explaining why P2 initially relied solely on brief district training. This triangulated evidence demonstrates the systemic factors influencing teacher preparedness and sense-making. Observational notes confirmed that teachers frequently adjusted lesson pacing and content coverage. For example, in a Mathematics lesson, P3 focused on core examinable concepts while reducing time for practice problems, corroborating interview accounts of “some important sections were removed.” Document analysis of the abridged Section Four curriculum and departmental circulars verified these content reductions and deadlines.

The findings revealed that teachers' understanding and interpretation of the abridged curriculum under Section Four amendments varied significantly across participants, influencing their implementation experiences. Some teachers demonstrated a strong grasp of the revised framework, often due to early exposure and training. For instance, one participant (P1) reported being "*part of the first group of teachers trained after COVID-19,*" which enhanced her preparedness and confidence. Similarly, P3 and P5 expressed familiarity with the content due to prior experience and school-level preparations. This finding aligns with CAPS, which emphasises teacher competence, curricular knowledge, and preparedness as foundational for effective implementation. Teachers who received adequate training and support demonstrated the professional capacity expected by CAPS. In contrast, others such as P2 and P6 admitted limited initial understanding, with P2 stating, "*I was not very familiar with the abridged curriculum and only learned about it through circulars and a short training session.*" This uneven level of preparedness underscores what Msambwa and Daniel (2024) describe as a systemic issue in curriculum dissemination, where teachers' capacity to interpret reforms depends heavily on the quality and accessibility of professional development initiatives. This finding diverges from CAPS expectations, as the policy assumes equitable access to training and curriculum orientation for all educators. Limited exposure and inadequate dissemination of curriculum updates hinder the consistent and uniform implementation envisioned by CAPS.

Using CHAT, **tools** included policy documents, lesson plans, and assessment guidelines; **rules** were curriculum timelines and directives; **community** comprised teachers, learners, and school leadership; **division of labour** represented teachers' roles in instruction and assessment; **object** was effective implementation of Section Four; and **outcome** was learner understanding. Observed discrepancies in teacher knowledge reflected tensions between these elements for example, the object (curriculum delivery) was constrained by limited tools and uneven professional development. Teachers' experiences also highlighted challenges in aligning the curriculum design with classroom realities. Many participants found the abridged curriculum to be both helpful and restrictive, helpful in that it "*reduced pressure on both teachers and learners*" (P5), yet restrictive because it "*reduced depth in learning*" (P2) and "*made it difficult to build a full understanding of some subjects*" (P5). The perceived tension between manageability and

conceptual depth aligns with Skhosana's (2024) argument that abridged curricula often prioritise coverage over mastery, leading to potential knowledge gaps. This finding partially aligns with CAPS. While CAPS promotes manageable pacing and accessibility, it also stresses conceptual depth, critical thinking, and mastery of knowledge. The abridged curriculum's focus on coverage over depth challenges CAPS's goal of developing higher-order cognitive skills. Participants noted that time constraints and reduced content sometimes forced them to focus narrowly on examinable topics rather than fostering deeper learning. P4's reflection that the curriculum "*forced me to rethink my teaching approach... I became more results-oriented*" illustrates this shift towards efficiency-driven pedagogy, which, while practical in constrained conditions, risks marginalising critical thinking and holistic understanding, a concern also raised by Khan (2021) in their discussion of post-pandemic curriculum reforms. This finding diverges from CAPS, which encourages a balanced approach that integrates assessment readiness with holistic learner development. The shift toward exam-focused teaching conflicts with CAPS's intention to promote critical thinking, creativity, and comprehensive learning outcomes.

Despite these challenges, the data suggest that teachers exercised professional agency in interpreting and adapting the curriculum to meet learners' diverse needs. Several participants used creative strategies to bridge gaps left by the abridged content, including the use of printed notes, WhatsApp communication, and visual materials (P1, P2, P4). This finding aligns with CAPS, which advocates for learner-centered teaching and flexibility in instructional approaches to accommodate diverse learner needs. Teachers' adaptive practices reflect CAPS's emphasis on inclusivity and differentiated instruction. These adaptive practices show how teachers mediated between policy and practice, reflecting what Shilon (2024) terms "curriculum sense-making", the process through which teachers reconstruct policy directives in contextually meaningful ways. Moreover, participants' recognition that the abridged curriculum could be beneficial "*if it continues to be improved and supported with proper resources*" (P1) signals a collective call for ongoing revision and institutional backing. This finding aligns with CAPS principles, which recognise curriculum as a dynamic framework that requires continuous review, resource support, and contextual adaptation. Teachers' feedback and sense-making processes embody the reflective practice encouraged by CAPS. This finding resonates with the view

of Dumbuya (2024) that curriculum reform must be iterative and responsive to classroom feedback to achieve sustainable improvement.

Overall, while the abridged curriculum offered structure and flexibility, its success largely depended on teachers' interpretive capacity and the systemic support provided to sustain effective implementation. This conclusion is consistent with CAPS, which places teachers at the center of curriculum enactment and stresses the importance of professional development, institutional support, and contextual responsiveness for successful implementation. The rural setting intensified these challenges. Teachers reported delayed circulation of official guidelines and limited access to professional development workshops due to travel distances, which affected initial curriculum comprehension and planning. The rural setting intensified these challenges. Teachers reported delayed circulation of official guidelines and limited access to professional development workshops due to travel distances, which affected initial curriculum comprehension and planning.

5.2.3. Theme 3: Resource Availability and Support

Focus: Resources, collaboration, institutional/peer support, resource gaps.

5.2.3.1. Verbatim extracts

P1 said:

“Well... I did receive some support from the Department of Education through workshops and online meetings about the abridged curriculum. We were given printed guides and subject frameworks to help us focus on the key topics, you know... the most important parts learners had to master. I used those materials to plan my lessons and to shorten the content so that learners could still meet the assessment goals. I also worked closely with other teachers in my subject area, we shared ideas, planned lessons together, and tried to make things easier for one another. Our school principal really encouraged us through staff meetings and even checked on our progress now and then. But... honestly, I still feel we need more digital resources and teaching aids, especially for rural schools where technology is so limited. One big challenge I faced was that many learners were still behind after COVID-19... it was really tough to cover all the important topics in

such a short time. I managed by giving extra lessons and focusing only on the essential content, just to make sure they were ready for exams.”

P2 affirmed:

“Yeah... we got some support in the form of training workshops where officials explained how to use the abridged curriculum. We also received circulars and online materials through WhatsApp groups which helped, actually. I used those to adjust my lesson plans and, well, to cut out the parts that were no longer necessary. For me, collaboration was key... I met regularly with other Grade 12 teachers to share strategies and discuss how to handle the shortened syllabus. The school management was also supportive, they even allowed us to use the computer lab for online lessons, which made a big difference. Still... we really need more updated textbooks and teaching materials that match the abridged version. The hardest part, though, was balancing teaching with the learners’ emotional recovery after COVID-19. Many of them struggled to concentrate... I mean, after such a long break, plus learning with masks and sanitisers... it wasn’t easy. I tried to deal with that by giving them short, engaging activities and just... keeping them motivated all the time.”

P3 stated:

“Honestly... I didn’t get much support from the District, except for one short workshop. Most of the time, I had to rely on my own experience and, well, just talk things through with other teachers to figure out how to apply the new curriculum. We even formed a small group... yeah, just a few of us... where we shared lesson plans and assessments to help each other out. Our school principal was quite supportive, he made photocopies of the revised guidelines and allowed us to meet after school hours to plan. But... I really think more training workshops and digital learning devices would help a lot, especially now that teaching relies so much on technology. The biggest challenge for me was time and the pressure, you know, to finish the syllabus while learners were still trying to adjust after COVID-19. Teaching with masks was so difficult... learners couldn’t hear properly, and communication just wasn’t the same. I had to keep repeating instructions and ended up giving them printed notes so they wouldn’t miss important points.”

P4 asserted:

“Well... the Department did give us the abridged policy documents and teacher guides, which, I must say, were quite helpful. I used them to pick out the key concepts and plan more focused lessons. My colleagues and I worked closely together... we even divided the topics among ourselves to make preparation a bit easier. The principal and HOD really encouraged teamwork and made sure we followed all the safety rules like masks, sanitisers, you name it. Still... I think we really need more internet access and projectors, you know, just to make lessons more engaging and interactive. One of the hardest parts was that some learners completely lost interest in school after the lockdowns. Attendance was poor... sometimes I'd look around the class and just sigh. So, I started visiting parents and encouraging learners to come back to class. Slowly, things got better, and... honestly, I was happy in the end, their final results really showed improvement.”

P5 responded:

“Hmm... honestly, there was very limited support in my subject. I only received an abridged outline and, well... I was kind of expected to figure out the rest on my own. So, I had to rely a lot on my past experience to make the lessons shorter but still meaningful for the learners. I worked closely with my colleagues, we shared worksheets, lesson summaries, and sometimes even swapped ideas when things got tough. The school leadership was supportive in terms of encouragement, but... we really didn't have enough learning resources like charts or updated textbooks. That made things a bit harder. I really believe that more workshops and visits from subject advisors would make a big difference. The main challenge, though, was teaching under those strict COVID-19 rules like wearing masks, keeping distance, using sanitisers... it just made interaction so difficult. I tried to cope by doing some lessons outdoors and grouping learners carefully, while still following all the rules. It wasn't easy, but we made it work.”

P6 maintained:

“Well... I actually received good support from both the Department and the school. We had online meetings and shared files on Teams that explained the abridged sections, those really helped me simplify my teaching and focus on what was examinable. My colleagues and I met every week to plan lessons, discuss our

progress, and just support one another. The school management also made sure we were safe as they gave us sanitisers, masks, and thermometers for daily screening. But still... I think we need more time allocation and printed learner support materials. That would really help us manage better. The biggest challenge I faced was that many learners had forgotten basic concepts after staying home for so long during COVID-19... it was like starting from scratch for some of them. So, I decided to offer weekend lessons and extra revision sessions to help them catch up. It was tiring, but... seeing them improve made it worth it.”

5.2.3.2. Discussion

The following discussion is informed by triangulation of multiple data sources, including classroom observations, lesson artefacts, curriculum documents, and school circulars, alongside teacher interviews, ensuring a comprehensive understanding of resource availability and support. The findings reveal that, while participants acknowledged receiving some level of support from the Department of Education, the adequacy and consistency of such support varied significantly across schools or subjects’ teachers. For example, P1 and P2 noted that “workshops and online meetings” and “printed guides and subject frameworks” were provided to assist teachers in focusing on key content areas. This aligns with the findings of Ajani (2024) and Pritchett (2025), who emphasise that departmental interventions during the post-pandemic curriculum recovery phase were instrumental in guiding teachers through the abridged curriculum. This finding aligns with CAPS, which emphasises ongoing professional support and capacity-building for teachers to ensure effective curriculum delivery. The provision of training materials and workshops is consistent with CAPS’s goal of equipping educators with the knowledge and resources required for sound pedagogical practice. However, as reflected in P3’s comment that “I didn’t get much support from the district, except for one short workshop,” it is evident that access to professional development opportunities was not uniformly distributed. This inconsistency mirrors the broader challenge identified by Mncube and Ngema (2023), who argue that systemic inequalities in resource allocation continue to disadvantage rural and under-resourced schools in South Africa. This finding diverges from CAPS’s intent, as the policy assumes equitable access to teacher support and professional development across all schools. Uneven access to departmental guidance

undermines the consistent implementation of CAPS objectives and perpetuates educational inequality.

Collaboration among teachers and internal school support emerged as compensatory mechanisms in response to limited external resources. Participants such as P1 and P4 highlighted that teamwork “we shared ideas, planned lessons together” and “divided the topics among ourselves” was essential for coping with curriculum demands. This finding echoes Luvalo. (2024); Young (2024) and Lam (2025), who stress the importance of collegial collaboration and professional learning communities in enhancing teacher resilience during times of educational disruption. This finding is strongly aligned with CAPS, which promotes collaboration, peer support, and shared professional learning as part of effective curriculum management and teacher development. The teachers’ teamwork demonstrates practical enactment of CAPS’s cooperative and reflective teaching principles. Furthermore, school leadership played a vital role in providing moral and logistical support. Several participants mentioned that principals and Heads of Departments facilitated lesson planning sessions and ensured compliance with COVID-19 protocols. According to Bush and Glover (2021), effective school leadership during crisis periods fosters a culture of collective problem-solving and motivates teachers to adapt effectively to curriculum changes. This finding aligns with CAPS guidelines that place school management and instructional leadership at the center of curriculum implementation. Effective leadership and departmental coordination are integral to realizing the CAPS vision of structured, well-supported teaching and learning. The teachers, school leadership, and learners form the community, while their roles in planning, teaching, and assessment reflect the division of labour within the activity system.

Despite these efforts, all participants identified persistent shortages of digital and instructional resources, especially in rural contexts. Teachers such as P2 and P4 emphasised the need for “updated textbooks,” “internet access,” and “projectors” to make lessons more engaging and aligned with the abridged content. This concern reflects broader systemic issues discussed by Mpungose (2020) and Mseleku (2020), who note that the digital divide severely constrained equitable access to quality education during and after the COVID-19 pandemic. This finding diverges from CAPS expectations, as the

policy presumes that schools have access to adequate learning and teaching support materials (LTSMs) to enable equitable and effective curriculum delivery. The shortage of resources compromises CAPS's commitment to inclusivity and equality in education. These challenges were exacerbated by the rural context of the schools, including large class sizes, limited laboratory facilities, unreliable internet connectivity, delayed circulation of official guidelines, and restricted access to professional development opportunities. Participants' reliance on personal initiative such as P6's use of "weekend lessons and extra revision sessions" underscores teachers' commitment but also highlights the unsustainable burden placed on them due to insufficient institutional support. This finding partially aligns with CAPS. While CAPS encourages teacher initiative, dedication, and learner support beyond the classroom, it also assumes that such efforts are supported by adequate institutional frameworks. The teachers' independent efforts reveal dedication aligned with CAPS values but highlight gaps in systemic support.

Overall, the findings suggest that, while the Department and schools provided foundational guidance, the long-term success of curriculum recovery depends on sustained investment in digital infrastructure, continuous professional development, and context-sensitive resource allocation. This conclusion aligns with CAPS's overarching aims of quality education and equity, which depend on continuous teacher development and fair resource distribution. Strengthening these areas would bring practical implementation closer to the CAPS vision for effective teaching and learning. While many teachers reported inadequate resources, P6 noted receiving strong support from both the Department and the school, demonstrating that experiences varied across rural schools. The abridged curriculum's focus on essential content represents the object, with the intended outcome being learner preparedness despite COVID-19 disruptions.

5.2.4. Theme 4: Learner Engagement and Performance

Focus: Student involvement, motivation, learning outcomes, assessment practices.

5.2.4.1. Verbatim extracts

P1 said:

"Well... to engage my students with the abridged curriculum, I used a mix of group discussions, short videos, and question-and-answer activities. But, you know, because of the COVID-19 rules, I had to keep the groups really small and make

sure everyone wore masks and sanitised all the time. It wasn't easy, but... those strategies actually helped most learners stay active and focused, even though we couldn't always move around freely in class. For assessment, I used short tests, oral questions, and class exercises to check if they really understood the key topics. I also gave more informal tasks since, honestly, time was so limited. I believe the abridged curriculum did help learners focus on the most important areas...in fact, some even performed better than before. But... the weaker learners really struggled to keep up because, uh, we had to move through the content quite quickly."

P2 maintained:

"Yeah... I tried to make my lessons more interactive by using real-life examples and giving learners small projects to work on. Since we couldn't really do group work because of the masks and distancing, I encouraged more individual participation instead...you know, letting each learner have their turn to speak or share ideas. For assessment, I gave weekly quizzes and practical tasks that were aligned with the abridged syllabus. Those really helped me see where they needed extra support. I think, overall, the abridged curriculum made learning a bit more manageable for most learners, especially after all that confusion during COVID-19. Still... I feel like some topics were just too rushed, and the learners didn't fully master them it definitely affected their confidence during the final exams."

P3 stated:

"Well... my main strategy was really to focus on revision and repetition. I used a lot of past exam papers and short summaries just to keep learners engaged and focused. Because of all the safety measures... you know, masks, sanitisers, social distancing we couldn't do normal group work, so I had to change my approach. I used question drills and oral participation instead to keep the lessons active and interactive. For assessment, I mostly relied on short written tests and continuous class monitoring. I found that they really helped me to identify struggling learners quickly, you could see right away who needed more support. The abridged curriculum, I'd say, made it easier to manage the workload, but... I also noticed that some learners missed out on deeper understanding because we had to skip

a few topics. So, while it did save time, it also, um... kind of limited their critical thinking skills.”

P4 asserted:

“Hmm... I used a lot of visual aids and PowerPoint slides to make my lessons more interesting just to keep learners’ attention, you know. During COVID-19, I also shared notes on WhatsApp for those who couldn’t come to school, maybe because they were sick or had transport problems. For assessment, I used both class tests and oral questions to check if they really understood the work. Those methods worked quite well for the motivated learners... but honestly, not so much for those with poor internet access. The abridged curriculum had its positives and negatives, it helped us cover the key topics faster, yes, but I really feel the learners didn’t get enough time to practice those higher-order thinking questions. Their final results were okay... average, I’d say, compared to before the pandemic.”

P5 responded:

“Well... to keep my learners engaged, I used short, interactive lessons, things like question games and giving regular feedback. The masks made it really hard to hear each other, so I started encouraging learners to write their answers on the board instead of speaking. It actually helped a bit, though it took more time. For assessment, I gave more written classwork and short tests just to keep track of their progress. Those methods worked fairly well, I’d say, but... the class didn’t feel as connected as it used to before COVID-19. The abridged curriculum did help reduce some of the pressure, but honestly, I think it also lowered the quality of learning a bit. Learners passed, yes, but their understanding felt more on the surface not as deep as it should be.”

P6 maintained:

“Yeah... I encouraged learners to participate through debates, practical demonstrations, and problem-solving activities that matched the abridged content. Even though masks and social distancing made everything a bit difficult, I tried my best to create a fun and safe learning environment...you know, where they still felt free to learn. For assessment, I relied mostly on continuous assessment like assignments, oral tests, term projects just to get a clear picture of each learner’s

progress. I honestly believe the abridged curriculum helped learners regain confidence after all the disruptions caused by COVID-19. Many of them actually improved their marks because, well... the workload was lighter and lessons were more focused. Overall, I'd say it had a really positive effect on both teaching and learning."

5.2.4.2. Discussion

The discussion below is informed by triangulation of multiple data sources, including classroom observations, lesson artefacts, curriculum documents, and school circulars, in addition to teacher interviews. This approach ensures a comprehensive understanding of learner engagement and performance under the abridged curriculum. The narratives shared by participants P1 through P6 provide valuable insights into the multifaceted impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on learner engagement and performance within the context of an abridged curriculum. Despite the constraints imposed by health protocols, educators employed a variety of strategies to maintain student engagement. P1, for instance, utilised group discussions, multimedia resources, and Q&A sessions to foster interaction, albeit within the limitations of small groups and safety measures. Similarly, P2 emphasised the use of real-life examples and individual projects to encourage participation, compensating for the lack of group work due to distancing requirements. These findings are consistent with the results of a systematic review conducted by Roque-Hernández et al. (2023) and Akpen et al. (2024), which emphasised that incorporating interactive elements and fostering instructor–student interaction are essential for enhancing learner engagement in online learning environments. These findings align with the principles of CAPS, which emphasise active learner participation, collaborative learning, and the use of diverse teaching strategies to promote understanding. By adapting instructional methods to maintain engagement, educators upheld CAPS's learner-centered approach even under restrictive conditions.

In terms of assessment, educators adapted by incorporating a mix of formal and informal methods. P1 and P2 employed quizzes, oral questions, and class exercises to gauge understanding, while P3 relied on past exam papers and continuous monitoring to identify struggling learners. Alejo et al. (2024) emphasised that the assessment strategies align with the recommendations of UNICEF (2023), which advocate for the use of continuous diagnostic and formative assessments to guide instructional practices and facilitate

learning recovery. This practice is in alignment with CAPS, which promotes continuous assessment (CASS) as a tool for monitoring learner progress and informing instruction. The use of both formal and informal assessments reflects adherence to CAPS guidelines that emphasise assessment for learning rather than assessment of learning only. However, challenges persisted, particularly for learners with limited access to digital resources. P4 noted that, while visual aids and shared notes via WhatsApp were beneficial for some, they were less effective for students lacking internet access, underscoring the digital divide's impact on equitable learning opportunities. These challenges were amplified by the rural context, including large class sizes, limited laboratory facilities, poor internet connectivity, delayed circulation of official guidelines, restricted access to professional development, and socio-economic difficulties affecting learners' attendance and engagement. This finding partly diverges from CAPS expectations, which assume equitable access to learning and assessment resources. The digital divide highlighted by participants indicates a contextual limitation that prevented full realisation of CAPS's principle of equal learning opportunities for all learners.

Applying the Cultural-Historical Activity Theory (CHAT) **lens** provided a deeper understanding of the systemic factors shaping learner engagement and performance under the abridged curriculum. Within this framework, the **tools** that mediated teaching and learning included policy documents, assessment guidelines, past exam papers, WhatsApp notes, and multimedia resources, which supported teachers in structuring lessons and sustaining learner participation. The **rules** comprised curriculum deadlines, abridged content requirements, and COVID-19 safety protocols, which governed how teaching and assessment activities could be conducted. The **community** encompassed teachers, learners, and school leadership, all interacting collaboratively to achieve the shared object of ensuring learner understanding, engagement, and performance. The **division of labour** was evident in teachers' roles in facilitating activities, monitoring assessments, providing additional support, and collaborating with colleagues to manage curriculum demands. The **object** of these activities focused on enabling learners to acquire key knowledge, maintain engagement, and achieve satisfactory learning outcomes despite the constraints imposed by content compression and health-related measures. Finally, the **outcomes** were reflected in learners' regained confidence, improved assessment results, and enhanced participation, although some students,

particularly those who had struggled during COVID-19, continued to face challenges. Mapping the findings onto CHAT thus illuminates how the interactions among tools, rules, community, division of labour, and object shape the teaching–learning process and highlight systemic tensions, such as the balance between curriculum coverage and depth of understanding.

Regarding learner performance, the abridged curriculum facilitated a more focused approach to essential content, potentially improving outcomes for many students. P6 observed that some learners demonstrated improved marks due to the reduced workload and concentrated instruction. This observation aligns with findings by Calaycay (2023) and UNICEF (2023), who respectively reported that the implementation of the abridged curriculum contributed to bridging learning gaps and facilitated more manageable and focused content delivery. While most teachers noted challenges in learner engagement and critical thinking due to curriculum compression, P6 reported that their learners actually regained confidence and improved marks, indicating that outcomes varied across classrooms depending on the strategies employed and the level of support available. This outcome aligns with CAPS’s intention to ensure mastery of core concepts and learning outcomes. By focusing on essential content, teachers supported the policy’s aim of developing foundational knowledge and skills in each subject area.

Conversely, P3 and P5 expressed concerns that the accelerated pace and omission of certain topics may have hindered deeper understanding and critical thinking, particularly for weaker learners. These concerns resonate with studies indicating that while abridged curricula can address immediate learning losses, they may compromise comprehensive learning if not carefully implemented. This finding reveals partial misalignment with CAPS, which emphasises comprehensive content coverage and the development of higher-order cognitive skills such as analysis and evaluation. The omission of key topics and limited time for reflection contradict CAPS’s goal of holistic learner development. The experiences shared by these educators highlight the complexities of balancing engagement, assessment, and performance within the constraints of an abridged curriculum during a global health crisis. In summary, while many of the teachers’ adaptive strategies were consistent with CAPS’s learner-centered and assessment-driven

philosophy, contextual challenges particularly resource inequality and curriculum compression limited full policy implementation.

5.2.5. Theme 5: Post-Pandemic Teaching Realities

Focus: Adjustments due to pandemic-related disruptions, lasting changes, reflections on shifts in teaching and learning.

5.2.5.1. Verbatim extracts

P1 said:

“Well... one of the main challenges I faced when implementing the abridged curriculum was really the lack of time to cover all the key topics properly. After COVID-19, many learners had these learning gaps, they struggled to adjust to the fast pace of the shortened syllabus. And, of course, teaching with masks and social distancing just made communication so difficult... sometimes I had to repeat myself several times before everyone understood. I tried to deal with that by focusing on the core concepts and giving extra classes after school. It wasn't easy, but it helped a bit. I'd really recommend that policymakers give teachers more training and better materials that actually match the abridged content. In the long term, I think the abridged curriculum could work if it's reviewed regularly and kept balanced... but if not, it might lower the depth of learning among learners.”

P2 maintained:

“Hmm... my biggest challenge was definitely the limited resources and the stress that learners went through during and after the pandemic. Many of them lost focus and motivation... I had to push hard just to get them to catch up for my subject. The school tried to help, you know, by providing sanitisers and allowing smaller class sizes, but it was still so hard to maintain proper social distance. I handled it by using short, focused lessons and giving learners printed notes so they could revise at home. I really think the Department of Education should provide more emotional and academic support, not just for learners, but for teachers too. Looking ahead... I do think the abridged curriculum might help improve efficiency, but, honestly, I'm worried that learners could miss out on important content that prepares them for university.”

P3 stated:

“Well... implementing the abridged curriculum was quite challenging because, at first, there was a lot of confusion. Not all teachers were clear on which parts were removed or reduced... it just wasn't communicated properly. We didn't get enough workshops, and that made planning really difficult. To manage, I worked closely with my colleagues we shared lesson plans, discussed what to keep and what to skip... it was teamwork that got us through. I'd recommend that policymakers communicate better with schools and provide clear, updated guidelines early in the year, not halfway through. In the long run, I think the abridged curriculum *can* make teaching more focused if it's properly supported... but I don't think it should become permanent, because it limits learners' full understanding of their subjects.”

P4 asserted:

“Well... the challenge I faced was that many learners were still affected emotionally by the pandemic. Some had lost family members, and others were going through financial problems that made it really hard for them to attend school regularly. Masks and sanitisers were still required, and that... that created a kind of distance between teachers and learners, both physically and emotionally. I tried to support them by being patient, offering a bit of counseling time here and there, and just creating a safe environment where they could feel comfortable. I would really recommend that, in the future, any curricular changes take into account the mental health of learners and allow for more flexible teaching methods. In the long term, I believe the abridged curriculum could be useful if it's combined with strong support systems... however, on its own, I don't think it can build the deeper skills learners need for further studies.”

P5 responded:

“Hmm... time pressure and learner absenteeism were the biggest problems I faced during implementation. After COVID-19, many learners still had to stay home whenever they were sick, and that just created more learning gaps. It was frustrating at times, because you'd make progress one week and then have to start over the next. I managed this by recording lesson summaries and sharing them through WhatsApp, that helped a lot for those who missed class. I really think the education system should invest more in technology and in teacher digital training

so that learning can continue even when there are disruptions. Looking ahead, I'd say if the abridged curriculum stays, it could make education more flexible and adaptable... but there's also a real risk that it could reduce the overall quality of learning if it's not updated properly."

P6 maintained:

"Well... one challenge was that some of us... even myself included, were not fully prepared for the new structure of the abridged curriculum. I had to adjust very quickly while still following all the COVID-19 safety rules. The masks and social distancing slowed down interaction and made it hard to read learners' facial expressions...you couldn't always tell if they were confused or not. I dealt with that by using more written exercises and giving individual feedback instead of whole-class discussions. I'd recommend continuous teacher development and regular monitoring from subject advisors to keep everyone on track. In the long term, I think the abridged curriculum could have positive results if it helps teachers focus on the essential content... but if it's applied for too long, it may cause learners to miss out on those critical building blocks of knowledge they need for future learning."

5.2.5.2. Discussion

The post-pandemic educational landscape in South Africa has presented multifaceted challenges for educators, as highlighted by the experiences of participants P1 through P6. The implementation of the abridged curriculum, while aimed at addressing learning gaps, introduced significant obstacles. P1 noted the difficulty in covering all key topics adequately due to time constraints, emphasising the need for more teacher training and appropriate materials. This finding partially diverges from CAPS, which expects full curriculum coverage supported by adequate teacher preparation and resources. While CAPS promotes comprehensive content delivery and professional competence, the lack of sufficient time and training limited teachers' ability to fully meet these policy expectations. Similarly, P2 highlighted the stress and disengagement among learners, exacerbated by limited resources and the emotional toll of the pandemic. This observation is not fully aligned with CAPS, which advocates for inclusive and supportive learning environments where learner well-being is prioritised. The emotional strain and lack of

resources described by P2 reveal gaps between CAPS ideals and the realities experienced in classrooms during the post-pandemic period. Observations of classroom sessions confirmed that teachers were focusing only on core concepts, with limited opportunities for group work or extended practice, consistent with the teachers' reflections. Similarly, analysis of lesson plans and abridged curriculum guides revealed that certain topics were compressed or omitted, reflecting teachers' reports of accelerated pacing. These sentiments align with findings by Dlamini and Zulu (2024), who reported that curriculum implementation challenges were intensified by pre-existing issues such as lack of infrastructure and learner-teacher support materials in rural schools. Such challenges contrast with CAPS principles, as the policy assumes the availability of adequate infrastructure and teaching materials to ensure equal access to quality education across all contexts. The persistent inequities highlight systemic barriers to achieving CAPS's vision of educational equity.

Furthermore, the emotional and psychological impacts of the pandemic on both learners and educators prove to have been profound. P4 shared concerns about learners affected by grief and financial hardships, which hindered regular school attendance and participation. The physical distancing measures, including mask-wearing, also created a barrier to effective communication and emotional connection in the classroom. These findings diverge from the holistic learner support envisioned by CAPS, which promotes emotional, social, and cognitive development as integral to effective teaching and learning. The absence of structured psychosocial support mechanisms in schools limited the practical realisation of these CAPS objectives. These challenges underscore the importance of integrating mental health support into educational strategies. Kayode et al. (2025) emphasise that the transition to remote learning in South Africa has been hampered by educational inequality and insufficient digital literacy among instructors, further highlighting the need for comprehensive support systems. This situation reveals a gap between CAPS intentions and practice. Although CAPS encourages the integration of technology and teacher competency in diverse instructional methods, the lack of digital literacy and unequal access to resources prevented full adherence to these policy aims. These challenges were particularly pronounced in rural schools, where large class sizes, limited laboratory facilities, unreliable internet connectivity, and delayed dissemination of official circulars constrained curriculum delivery. Teachers also noted restricted access

to professional development opportunities and the broader socio-economic hardships of learners, which influenced attendance and engagement.

In response to these challenges, educators have adopted various strategies to maintain engagement and facilitate learning. See P3 who emphasised the importance of clear communication and collaboration among teachers to navigate the uncertainties of the abridged curriculum. This finding aligns closely with CAPS, which encourages teacher collaboration and professional dialogue to enhance curriculum delivery and learner outcomes. Furthermore, P5 utilised digital platforms to share lesson summaries, aiding learners who missed classes. Document analysis of shared lesson summaries and WhatsApp notes further corroborates that teachers employed supplementary materials to support learners who missed classes. This approach is in partial alignment with CAPS's emphasis on differentiated instruction and inclusive access to learning materials, though it also exposes inequities for learners lacking digital access. P6 focused on individualised feedback and written exercises to compensate for the lack of face-to-face interaction. This practice aligns strongly with CAPS, which emphasises continuous assessment, individualised support, and feedback as central components of effective teaching. These adaptive approaches are consistent with recommendations for blended teaching methods and continuous professional development to enhance resilience in post-pandemic education (Riouch & Benamar, 2025).

Applying the Cultural-Historical Activity Theory (CHAT) lens, the post-pandemic teaching system can be mapped to show systemic interactions shaping learner engagement and performance. The **tools** included policy documents, assessment guidelines, past exam papers, WhatsApp notes, and lesson summaries, which mediated teacher practices and supported learning. **Rules** were constituted by abridged curriculum directives, curriculum deadlines, and COVID-19 protocols, which constrained how teaching and assessment were conducted. The **community** encompassed teachers, learners, and school leadership, collaboratively working to achieve the objective of sustained learner engagement and understanding. The **division of labour** involved teachers' roles in planning, facilitating lessons, monitoring assessments, and providing extra support, illustrating shared responsibilities within the school. The **object** focused on ensuring learner understanding, motivation, and performance despite compressed content and

pandemic-related restrictions. The **outcomes** were evident in improved learner confidence and marks, though some students, particularly weaker ones, continued to face challenges. This CHAT mapping highlights systemic tensions, such as the mismatch between curriculum expectations and available resources, and between compressed timelines and desired learning outcomes. Similarly, CAPS supports continuous professional growth and reflective practice to strengthen curriculum implementation and improve learner achievement.

The post-pandemic teaching realities in South Africa have necessitated significant adaptations in curriculum delivery and educator practices. While the abridged curriculum aims to address immediate learning losses, it also highlights underlying systemic issues, such as resource limitations and the need for emotional support. This conclusion underscores a partial misalignment with CAPS: while the curriculum's intent to ensure equitable learning aligns with CAPS principles, the systemic barriers such as insufficient support and infrastructure undermine its practical implementation. The experiences of educators underscore the importance of a holistic approach that combines curriculum adjustments with adequate training, resources, and support systems to foster an equitable and effective learning environment. This recommendation is consistent with CAPS's overarching goal of promoting equity, inclusivity, and quality education through comprehensive teacher support and learner-centered pedagogy.

5.3. Chapter Summary

This chapter outlined and interpreted the research findings obtained from interviews, classroom observations, and document reviews. Data were analysed using a thematic approach, which incorporated both deductive and inductive reasoning. The deductive themes were aligned with the principles of the CHAT framework, while the inductive themes emerged from unanticipated yet significant patterns rooted in the participants' lived experiences. Altogether, five key themes were identified to address the research questions and fulfill the study's objectives. The following chapter offers a summary of the research, draws conclusions based on the findings, and presents recommendations to mitigate the limitations and challenges identified in this study.

CHAPTER 6

SUMMARY, RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

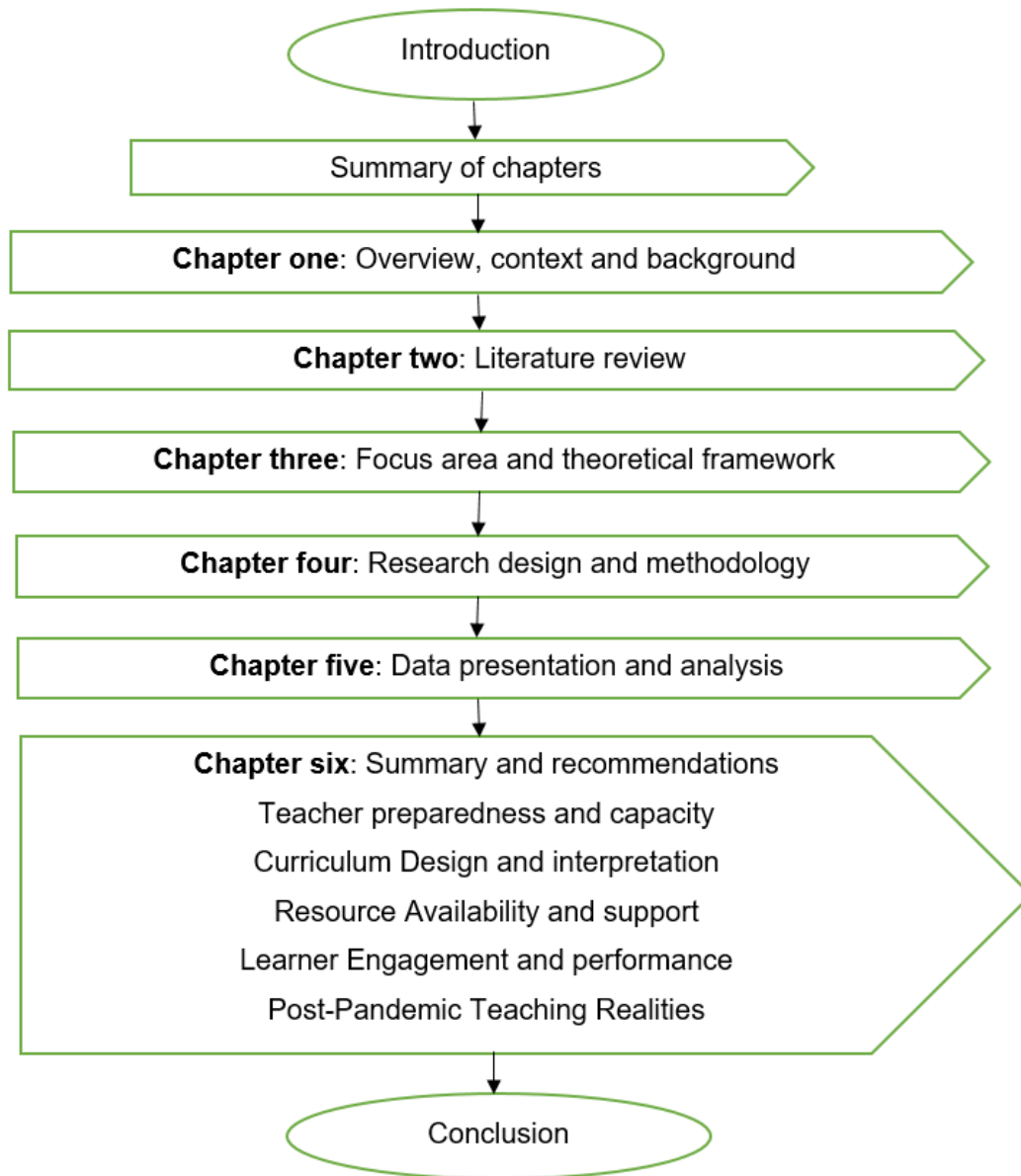


Figure 7: Chapter six (flow chat)

The diagramme above illustrates the organisational structure adopted in Chapter 6, encompassing the summary, conclusions, and recommendations.

6.1. Introduction

The earlier chapter provided an analysis of findings generated from interviews, classroom observations, and document reviews. It also detailed the thematic analysis process, highlighting themes that were aligned with the CHAT framework as well as those that emerged directly from the data. The final chapter presents findings under Curriculum Design and Interpretation, Teacher Preparedness and Capacity, Resource Availability and Support, Learner Engagement and Performance, and Post-Pandemic Teaching Realities as central themes that collectively aim to address the key research questions, namely: 1. What are teachers' experiences of implementing the curriculum abridged version of section four amendments in grade 12? 2. How do teachers' experiences influence the implementation of curriculum Abridged version of section 4 amendments in grade 12? 3. What informs teachers' experiences of implementing the curriculum abridged version of section four amendments in grade 12? In addition, this chapter presents a summary of the six chapters that comprise this research study and highlights the key findings along with recommendations aimed at addressing the identified limitations and challenges. It wraps up by reflecting on the study's overall conclusions and its educational implications.

6.2. Summary of Chapters

6.2.1. Chapter 1: Overview, Context and Background

The Chapter served as the introductory section of the study, providing a synopsis of the research on the implementation of the abridged version of Section Four amendments in the Grade 12 curriculum during and after the Coronavirus pandemic, focusing on teachers' experiences. The chapter began with an overview of the study's background and context, followed by a comprehensive outline of the research title, purpose, setting, problem statement, rationale, and significance, along with a brief review of relevant literature. It also introduced the theoretical lens underpinning the study and clearly articulated the primary objectives and research questions. In addition, the chapter provided a succinct summary of the research methodology, encompassing the research paradigm, approach, and design, as well as the sampling strategies, data collection techniques, data analysis procedures, and considerations related to trustworthiness, ethical principles, and study limitations. Finally, Chapter 1 concluded with an outline summarising the structure and content of the subsequent chapters of the dissertation.

6.2.2. Chapter 2: Literature Review

The second chapter presented the literature applicable to the study, focusing on two key areas: the phenomenon of teachers' experiences and the curriculum as a discipline. The discussion of the phenomenon explored its definition, various levels or types (structured, semi-structured, and self-structured experiences), key characteristics, and its significance within the educational context. The chapter also engaged with contemporary debates surrounding teachers' levels of experience. In addition, the curriculum was examined as a disciplinary field, addressing its definition, underlying concepts, levels, major approaches, core activities, and different representations namely the intended, implemented, and attained curriculum along with a brief historical overview. The literature review continues in the following chapter, which focuses on the concept of the abridged curriculum.

6.2.3. Chapter 3: Focus area and Theoretical Framework

Chapter 3 focused on the main area of interest, which is the abridged curriculum and the theoretical framework underpinning the study, namely the CHAT. The discussion of the abridged curriculum included its definition, underlying rationale and key changes, various implementation approaches, as well as the strengths and limitations associated with these approaches. The chapter further explored perspectives on the abridged curriculum from both South African and global contexts. In addition, it provided a detailed explanation of CHAT as the guiding theoretical framework, outlining its core components: subject, tools, rules, object, division of labor, community, and outcome.

6.2.4. Chapter 4: Research Design and Methodology

The fourth chapter outlined the research methodology employed to fulfil the study's objectives of the study. It outlined the research paradigm (interpretivism), approach, and design, followed by the sampling strategies (convenience and purposive sampling) used for participant selection. The chapter also described the data-generation techniques, as well as semi-structured interviews, non-participant observations, and document analysis. Additionally, it explained the data analysis process, which incorporated both deductive and inductive reasoning. Finally, the chapter addressed measures implemented to ensure the trustworthiness and ethical integrity of the study, as well as the limitations encountered and how they were managed.

6.2.5. Chapter 5: Data Presentation and Analysis

Chapter 5 presented the data and provided a critical review and discussion of the research findings obtained from interviews, classroom observations, and document analysis. Thematic analysis was utilised to interpret the data, incorporating both deductive and inductive approaches. Deductive reasoning enabled the alignment of themes with the principles of the CHAT framework, while inductive reasoning facilitated the discovery of new concepts that developed into distinct themes. As a result, five overarching themes emerged as follows: Curriculum Design and Interpretation, Teacher Preparedness and Capacity, Resource Availability and Support, Learner Engagement and Performance, and Post-Pandemic Teaching Realities. These themes were organised so as to directly address the central research questions and achieve the study's stated objectives.

6.3. Summary and Recommendations

The primary purpose of this study was to explore teachers' experiences of implementing the curriculum abridged version, as specified in Section Four Amendments for Grade 12. To achieve this aim, the study pursued two key objectives: firstly, to find ways in which teachers experience the influence of implementing curriculum abridged version of section four amendments; and secondly, to identify the reasons that inform teachers' experiences when implementing the curriculum abridged version of section four amendments. In alignment with these objectives, the study aimed to address three central research questions: What are teachers' experiences of implementing the curriculum abridged version of section four amendments in Grade 12? How do teachers' experiences influence the implementation of curriculum Abridged version of section four amendments? And What informs the teachers' experience of implementing the curriculum amendments of section four? The findings of the study are organized and presented thematically, with each theme providing insights that directly address these research questions.

6.3.1. Teacher Preparedness and Capacity

The findings revealed that teacher preparedness and capacity during the implementation of the abridged curriculum in Grade 12 were multifaceted, encompassing both structured and self-initiated dimensions. Despite the restrictive teaching conditions imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic, teachers demonstrated adaptability, creativity, and professional dedication. Through the use of online and visual resources like videos, infographics, interactive slides, and virtual simulations, simplified content, and learner-centered

pedagogies, they sustained learning continuity and aligned their practices with the principles of the Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS). However, institutional constraints such as limited instructional time, reduced curriculum content, and systemic demands hindered deeper conceptual engagement, particularly in subjects like Physical Sciences and Geography. These challenges highlighted the shortcomings of top-down policy approaches, contrasting with the CAPS emphasis on conceptual and experiential learning (Amin & Mahabeer, 2021; Buabeng & Amo-Darko, 2025). Teachers' self-reflective practices revealed strong resilience, intrinsic motivation, and growing confidence in adapting to challenging conditions, aligning with the views of Grambow (2022) as well as Nissim and Simon (2024) on the importance of teacher adaptability in curricular transitions. Nonetheless, inadequate digital infrastructure, limited professional development, and resource shortages constrained overall readiness. Observations and document analyses confirmed that insufficient institutional and technological support affected instructional quality, supporting McLure and Aldridge's (2023) argument that consistent institutional backing is essential. Overall, teacher preparedness reflected the dynamic interplay between individual innovation and systemic barriers, emphasising the need for policies that balance institutional support with teacher autonomy.

The study therefore recommends that the Department of Basic Education enhance teacher professional development through structured programmes emphasising adaptive pedagogy, digital literacy, and crisis-responsive curriculum planning. Regular workshops and mentorship opportunities should support teachers in adopting innovative instructional strategies (Morsy, 2025; Vosges, 2025). Strengthening institutional capacity is also essential, particularly through improved resource provision, ICT infrastructure, and teaching materials that align with CAPS standards. Continued investment in digital technologies, laboratory resources, and teacher support systems proves vital to minimising disparities in teaching quality (McLure & Aldridge, 2023). Additionally, teacher training and evaluation processes should foster reflective, resilient, and self-efficacious teaching practices. Establishing collaborative professional learning communities can further encourage peer mentoring and sustained professional growth (Nissim & Simon, 2024). The study also suggests revisiting curriculum design to ensure that content reduction in abridged or emergency versions maintains conceptual depth and practical

engagement. Policymakers should actively involve teachers in review processes to safeguard learning continuity and conceptual progression (Amin & Mahabeer, 2021).

Finally, coherent policies and greater school autonomy in curriculum interpretation are recommended to enable context-based implementation within CAPS guidelines. Monitoring and evaluation systems should focus on developmental feedback rather than compliance, acknowledging teachers' contextual constraints and innovative practices while promoting ongoing improvement and stronger alignment between curriculum policy and classroom application. The theme of Teacher Preparedness and Capacity highlights that teachers showed considerable resilience and adaptability, yet their performance was constrained by broader systemic and institutional limitations. The findings emphasise the need to align teacher initiative with adequate institutional support to ensure effective curriculum implementation in challenging contexts. Considering teachers' structured, semi-structured, and self-directed experiences provides a comprehensive view of preparedness, underscoring the importance of robust policy and pedagogical support in future curriculum adaptations.

6.3.2. Curriculum Design and Interpretation

The findings indicate that teachers' experiences of implementing the abridged curriculum in Grade 12 under Section Four amendments varied according to their levels of understanding and access to professional development. Teachers who received early and structured training demonstrated stronger curriculum interpretation and confidence supporting CAPS's emphasis on teacher preparedness as essential for effective implementation (DBE, 2011). However, others faced limited understanding due to reliance on brief training or circulars, reflecting uneven dissemination of curriculum support. This disparity, as noted by Msambwa and Daniel (2024), highlights the systemic inconsistencies in professional development access. Teachers' semi-structured and self-structured learning experiences through collaboration, independent preparation, and digital engagement illustrated their agency in contextualising curriculum content, aligning with Shilon's (2024) idea of "curriculum sense-making."

The abridged curriculum was perceived as both beneficial and restrictive. While content reduction reduced pressure on teachers and learners, it also narrowed conceptual understanding, leading to a focus on examinable content. This finding supports

Skhosana's (2024) argument that abridged curricula often prioritise coverage over depth and critical thinking, diverging from CAPS's aim for balanced and holistic learning. Despite challenges like insufficient professional development, limited instructional time, resource shortages, and inconsistent curriculum communication, teachers demonstrated resilience and adaptability through resource creation, reflective practice, and advocacy for better support echoing the CAPS principles of learner-centered teaching and continuous professional development (DBE, 2011; Dumbuya, 2024). Ultimately, these experiences illustrate a continuum of structured, semi-structured, and self-structured learning processes. Within this continuum, structured training served as a basis for developing curriculum comprehension and instructional confidence; semi-structured collaboration facilitated collective problem-solving and adaptive practices within professional communities; and self-structured initiatives enabled teachers to exercise autonomy in interpreting, modifying, and maintaining curriculum implementation, particularly when institutional support was limited or inconsistent.

To strengthen curriculum implementation and teacher preparedness, several strategies ought to be considered. Firstly, the Department of Basic Education should enhance structural support and professional development by ensuring equitable access to comprehensive training programs for all teachers involved in curriculum reforms. Structured workshops and follow-up sessions can improve teachers' capacity to interpret and apply curriculum changes effectively (Msambwa & Daniel, 2024). In addition, schools should promote collaborative and semi-structured experiences, such as planning sessions, peer mentoring, and departmental workshops, enabling teachers to share strategies and co-construct approaches for addressing curriculum gaps, which has been shown to enhance adaptability and contextual understanding (Shilon, 2024). Teacher-initiated, self-structured practices, including the creation of supplementary notes and the use of digital communication, should also be formally recognised and supported through the provision of resources and institutional backing, as these practices foster professional agency and strengthen curriculum sense-making (Dumbuya, 2024).

Furthermore, the abridged curriculum should be reviewed to balance content coverage with conceptual depth, integrating critical thinking and problem-solving exercises alongside examinable content to maintain alignment with CAPS objectives (Skhosana, 2024; Khan, 2021). Finally, the Department ought to establish iterative feedback

mechanisms that allow teachers to continuously report on curriculum implementation, ensuring reforms remain responsive to classroom realities and enhancing both content delivery and learner outcomes (Dumbuya, 2024). The study underscores that successful implementation of abridged curricula depends not only on structural provisions but also on teachers' semi-structured and self-structured experiences. Professional support, collaborative engagement, and teacher agency are pivotal in bridging policy expectations with classroom realities, ensuring learners receive both accessible and conceptually rigorous education.

6.3.3. Resource Availability and Support

The findings indicate that teachers' experiences of implementing the abridged curriculum in Grade 12 were influenced by an interplay of structured, semi-structured, and self-structured experiences. Structured experiences manifested through departmental workshops, printed guides, and subject frameworks, which provided formal, institutionally organized support intended to guide curriculum implementation. Nonetheless, the uneven provision of these resources exposed disparities in professional development opportunities, revealing a disconnect between the policy expectations outlined in CAPS (DBE, 2011) and the practical realities faced by teachers, particularly in rural or under-resourced settings, as highlighted by Ajani (2024), Pritchett (2025), and Mncube and Ngema (2023). To address these gaps, teachers engaged in semi-structured experiences, including collaborative planning, peer mentoring, and collective lesson preparation, which operated within loosely defined institutional frameworks and drew on professional networks to enhance instructional capacity, consistent with the findings of Luvalo (2024), Young (2024), and Lam (2025). Furthermore, self-structured experiences were evident in teachers' self-initiated weekend and additional lessons, reflecting their dedication and professional agency in sustaining curriculum delivery amid limited systemic support, as observed by Mpungose (2020) and Mseleku (2020). Strong school leadership further enabled teacher adaptation, supporting Bush and Glover's (2021) assertion that effective leadership strengthens instructional resilience during periods of crisis. Overall, the findings suggest that teachers navigated curriculum implementation along a continuum of structured, semi-structured, and self-structured experiences, with systemic inequities and resource limitations often necessitating reliance on individual initiative, particularly in under-resourced contexts.

To improve resource availability and support for the implementation of the abridged Grade 12 curriculum, it is essential that the Department of Education enhances structural support through equitable resource allocation. This includes ensuring that all schools, particularly those in rural and under-resourced areas, have access to updated textbooks, digital infrastructure, and subject-specific guides. Such sustained support is critical for effective curriculum delivery and aligns with CAPS expectations (DBE, 2011; Mncube & Ngema, 2023). Alongside structural support, semi-structured collaborative mechanisms should be strengthened within schools. Institutionalising practices such as departmental workshops, peer mentoring, and professional learning communities allows teachers to share strategies, co-plan lessons, and support one another in implementing curriculum changes. Research by Luvalo (2024) and Lam (2025) emphasises that collegial collaboration enhances teacher resilience and instructional capacity, reflecting CAPS's promotion of cooperative and reflective teaching practices. Self-structured teacher experiences, such as extra revision sessions or weekend lessons, are valuable expressions of teacher dedication; however, they should be supported within formal institutional frameworks to prevent burnout. Formalising these activities within school schedules and providing adequate resources ensures a sustainable balance between professional agency and systemic support, in line with CAPS principles (DBE, 2011; Mpungose, 2020).

Furthermore, investment in leadership development and instructional guidance is critical, as school leaders play a central role in facilitating both structural and semi-structured experiences. Continuous training for principals and Heads of Departments in instructional leadership, crisis management, and curriculum facilitation can enhance teacher support and ensure alignment with CAPS guidelines (Bush & Glover, 2021). Finally, addressing persistent shortages of digital and instructional resources is vital for equitable curriculum implementation. Prioritising investment in internet connectivity, projectors, and digital teaching platforms will help narrow the discrepancy between policy expectations and classroom practice, particularly in the post-pandemic educational context (Mseleku, 2020). Collectively, these measures can strengthen structural, semi-structured, and self-structured experiences, thereby promoting effective and equitable implementation of the abridged curriculum. By integrating these recommendations, schools and the Department of Education can strengthen structural, semi-structured, and self-structured experiences,

fostering a more equitable and the effective enactment of the abridged Grade 12 curriculum in line with CAPS objectives.

6.3.4. Learner Engagement and Performance

The findings showed that teachers' experiences in promoting learner engagement and monitoring performance under the abridged Grade 12 curriculum were shaped by structural, semi-structured, and self-structured factors. Structural experiences, such as CAPS assessment frameworks and curriculum guidelines, provided a formal foundation for planning and evaluating learning. Teachers used continuous assessment methods like quizzes, oral questioning, and class exercises in line with CAPS's Continuous Assessment (CASS) approach (DBE, 2011). Semi-structured experiences included group discussions, multimedia tools, and individual projects to sustain engagement within COVID-19 restrictions, consistent with Roque-Hernández et al. (2023) and Akpen et al. (2024), who emphasise learner-centered methods in constrained settings. These strategies reflected alignment with CAPS's emphasis on diverse and participatory teaching practices (DBE, 2011).

Self-structured experiences, such as extra lessons, WhatsApp note sharing, and exam practice, demonstrated teachers' professional dedication, but also highlighted inequalities caused by limited digital access and resources. This supports UNICEF (2023), who stress the need for targeted support to address learning gaps in post-pandemic contexts. While the abridged curriculum helped some learners improve performance by focusing on essential content (Calaycay, 2023; UNICEF, 2023), concerns arose about reduced depth and critical thinking among weaker learners, reflecting findings by Alejo et al. (2024). Overall, teachers balanced structured policy expectations with contextual adaptations, but persistent resource disparities and curriculum compression limited full alignment with CAPS's goal of holistic learner development (DBE, 2011).

To enhance learner engagement and performance in the implementation of the abridged Grade 12 curriculum, it is essential to strengthen structural, semi-structured, and self-structured experiences simultaneously. Strengthening structural experiences involves ensuring that teachers have access to comprehensive CAPS-aligned instructional and assessment guidelines, standardised teaching resources, and assessment tools to facilitate continuous monitoring of learner progress, thereby reinforcing learner-centered

strategies and assessment fidelity (DBE, 2011; UNICEF, 2023). Schools should also promote semi-structured, collaborative teaching strategies, such as guided group discussions, project-based learning, and departmental lesson planning, which allow teachers to adaptively innovate while remaining aligned with policy frameworks; peer collaboration further enables the sharing of best practices and effective engagement techniques (Roque-Hernández et al., 2023; Akpen et al., 2024). Self-structured teachers' experiences, including extra revision sessions, digital communication of resources, and targeted support for struggling learners, should be formalised within school schedules and supported by adequate infrastructure such as internet access and multimedia tools, balancing teacher dedication with systemic backing (Mpungose, 2020; UNICEF, 2023).

Investment in digital infrastructure and equitable provision of resources is critical to bridging the digital divide and facilitating diverse engagement strategies in line with CAPS's commitment to equal learning opportunities (Mseleku, 2020). Finally, careful management of curriculum pacing and content coverage is necessary to ensure that abridged content supports mastery of essential topics while scaffolding higher-order cognitive development, including critical thinking and problem-solving, with targeted interventions for weaker learners to promote comprehensive learning outcomes (Calaycay, 2023; Alejo et al., 2024). By addressing these areas, schools can strengthen structural, semi-structured, and self-structured experiences, thereby promoting effective learner engagement and performance within the constraints of an abridged curriculum while remaining aligned with CAPS objectives.

6.3.5. Post-Pandemic Teaching Realities

The findings revealed that post-pandemic teaching realities in South Africa deeply influenced teachers' experiences in implementing the abridged Grade 12 curriculum through structural, semi-structured, and self-structured dimensions. Structural experiences such as CAPS frameworks, professional development programs, and prescribed materials provided a foundational guide but proved inadequate in addressing post-pandemic challenges. Participants reported time constraints, limited training, and persistent resource shortages, especially in rural schools. These issues created disparities and misalignment with CAPS expectations of equitable implementation and teacher preparedness, echoing findings by Dlamini and Zulu (2024) on systemic inequities that hinder curriculum execution. In response, teachers engaged in semi-

structured and self-structured experiences to mitigate these challenges. Collaborative practices such as departmental planning, sharing of materials, and digital lesson dissemination helped sustain learning continuity, aligning with CAPS principles of collaboration and differentiated instruction (DBE, 2011). However, unequal digital access limited these efforts (Kayode et al., 2025). Teachers also demonstrated individual agency, as seen in personalized feedback and continuous assessment practices, reflecting CAPS's learner-centered philosophy but underscoring the strain of inadequate institutional support (Riouch & Benamar, 2025). Overall, despite teachers' adaptability and commitment, insufficient training, resource constraints, and emotional stress restricted full alignment with CAPS objectives, reinforcing the need for integrated professional and psychosocial support systems.

To address the challenges of post-pandemic teaching and strengthen the implementation of the abridged Grade 12 curriculum, several measures are recommended. First, structural support should be enhanced through comprehensive teacher training, provision of CAPS-aligned instructional materials, and sufficient time allocation to cover essential curriculum content. Strengthening these formal structures ensures that teachers are better equipped to meet policy expectations and deliver content effectively (DBE, 2011; Dlamini & Zulu, 2024). Second, semi-structured collaborative mechanisms within schools should be reinforced. Encouragement of teacher coordination, departmental planning, and professional dialogue allows educators to share strategies, adapt instruction to learner needs, and foster collective problem-solving, therein aligning with CAPS principles of collaboration and differentiated instruction (Riouch & Benamar, 2025). Third, self-structured teacher initiatives should be formalized and supported to mitigate unsustainable workloads. Individualised learner support, feedback, and innovative engagement strategies should be complemented by institutional backing, including access to digital platforms, multimedia tools, and flexible scheduling. This approach balances teacher agency with systemic support, reflecting CAPS's dual emphasis on professional autonomy and structured guidance (Kayode et al., 2025).

Fourth, emotional and psychosocial support systems must be integrated into school practice. Providing resources for mental health support, counselling services, and social-emotional learning interventions proves essential to addressing the well-being of both learners and educators, consistent with CAPS's holistic approach to learner development

(DBE, 2011). Finally, investment in digital infrastructure and equitable resource provision is critical to bridging access gaps and enabling inclusive learning environments. Ensuring reliable internet connectivity, digital devices, and teaching aids will enhance the effectiveness of both semi-structured and self-structured strategies, promoting equity and alignment with CAPS objectives (Mseleku, 2020). These recommendations aim to strengthen structural, semi-structured, and self-structured experiences, thereby supporting effective curriculum delivery, teacher resilience, and equitable learner outcomes in the post-pandemic educational landscape.

Unpacking research questions: the aims and objectives of this study were effectively addressed through the five overarching themes, which collectively responded to the three research questions. The first research question “*What are teachers’ experiences of implementing the curriculum abridged version of Section 4 Amendments in Grade 12?*” was primarily explored through the themes: Teacher Preparedness and Capacity, and Post-Pandemic Teaching Realities. Evidence from these themes reveals that teachers’ experiences were complex and multifaceted, unfolding through structured, semi-structured, and self-structured experiences that combined institutional direction with individual initiative. Despite the systemic constraints and challenges associated with the post-pandemic context, teachers exhibited adaptability, creativity, and professional resilience by integrating online and visual resources, employing learner-centered pedagogies, and engaging in reflective practices to ensure learning continuity (Grambow, 2022; Nissim & Simon, 2024; Mpungose, 2020). These findings reveal that teachers’ experiences were dynamic rather than uniform, reflecting the interaction between policy expectations and classroom realities in alignment with CAPS’s emphasis on teacher agency and responsive pedagogy (DBE, 2011). Nonetheless, ongoing challenges such as limited digital infrastructure, insufficient professional development, and post-pandemic emotional strain hindered the full realisation of curriculum goals (Dlamini & Zulu, 2024; Riouch & Benamar, 2025). Collectively, these findings suggest that teachers’ experiences of implementing the abridged curriculum were shaped by a balance of innovation and constraint, underscoring the necessity of aligning professional initiative with institutional and systemic support mechanisms.

The second and third research questions “*How do teachers’ experiences influence the implementation of curriculum abridged version of section 4 amendments?*” and “*What factors inform teachers’ experiences in implementing Section Four curriculum amendments?*” were chiefly unpacked through the themes: Curriculum Design and Interpretation, Resource Availability and Support, and Learner Engagement and Performance. Findings under Curriculum Design and Interpretation revealed that structured professional training enhanced teachers’ comprehension and implementation of the abridged curriculum, while semi-structured collaboration and self-directed practices encouraged contextual adaptation and professional sense-making (Shilon, 2024; Msambwa & Daniel, 2024). The Resource Availability and Support theme emphasised that disparities in resource allocation and access to departmental materials compelled teachers to depend on collegial collaboration and self-initiated strategies, highlighting the compensatory role of professional networks in addressing institutional deficiencies (Bush & Glover, 2021; Mpungose, 2020). Similarly, the Learner Engagement and Performance theme demonstrated that teachers’ adaptive approaches such as integrating multimedia resources, promoting cooperative learning, and organising extra lessons supported learner engagement and performance despite curriculum compression, consistent with CAPS’s learner-centered approach (Roque-Hernández et al., 2023; UNICEF, 2023). Collectively, these findings illustrate that teachers’ experiences both shaped and were shaped by systemic inequities, institutional expectations, and contextual realities. Overall, the five themes substantiate that the study’s aims and objectives were realised by illustrating how structured, semi-structured, and self-structured experiences influenced teachers’ capacity, adaptability, and instructional practices, while reaffirming the need for equitable professional development, adequate resource provision, and policy responsiveness to strengthen effective curriculum implementation.

6.4. Thematic Synthesis Section

Across the findings presented, several overarching insights emerge. First, teachers consistently demonstrated adaptability, employing creative strategies to manage the compressed curriculum while maintaining learner engagement and performance. Second, curriculum compression introduced trade-offs, often requiring prioritisation of essential content at the expense of deeper learning and critical thinking, with these effects varying across learners. Third, contextual constraints such as resource limitations, rural

schooling challenges, and post-pandemic disruptions shaped how teachers interpreted and implemented Section Four policies. Finally, while systemic support from the Department and school leadership was evident in some cases, teachers frequently relied on collaboration and personal initiative to bridge gaps, underscoring the interplay between structured guidance and autonomous professional decision-making. These cross-cutting patterns provide a comprehensive understanding of curriculum implementation realities and highlight areas for targeted policy support and professional development.

6.5. Conclusion

In conclusion, the study revealed that teachers' experiences of implementing the abridged curriculum in Grade 12 under the Section Four Amendments were influenced by a dynamic interaction of structured, semi-structured, and self-structured factors. Echoing the findings of Msambwa and Daniel (2024), it became evident that insufficient professional development opportunities and inconsistent institutional support hindered teachers' readiness and their ability to interpret the revised curriculum effectively. This observation is further supported by UNESCO (2023) and Ajani (2024), who highlight the importance of aligning systemic structures with teacher agency to promote curriculum coherence and meaningful learner engagement in post-pandemic educational reforms. Additionally, the adaptability and collaborative efforts demonstrated by teachers in this study corroborate arguments advanced by Ndou (2024), Modisane (2025), and Mncube et al. (2025), who advocate for peer learning and context-responsive pedagogy as vital strategies for addressing learning gaps and reform-related challenges. Drawing from these insights, the study recommends strengthening targeted professional development programmes, cultivating collaborative learning communities, improving resource allocation, and ensuring that educational policy frameworks are better aligned with classroom realities to promote effective curriculum implementation and enhance learner outcomes in the post-pandemic South African context. The synthesis also demonstrates how teachers navigated varying levels of structured guidance, from departmental directives to self-structured strategies, highlighting the dynamic interaction between policy expectations and professional discretion in curriculum implementation.

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Annexures

Annexure A: Consent letter

REQUEST FOR PARTICIPATION IN A RESEARCH STUDY AND CONSENT FORM



PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET

Title: **Teachers' experiences of implementing the curriculum abridged version of section four amendments in grade 12**

RESEARCH ETHICS APPLICATION

Approved by College of Education_ERC Curriculum and Instructional Studies, UNISA.
Certificate Ref #:7329

NAMES OF RESEARCHER: JULIET BODIBADI MASHABA

DEAR PROSPECTIVE PARTICIPANT

I am Juliet Bodibadi Mashaba, doing research under supervision of Prof. C.B. Mpungose, a Professor in the Department of curriculum and instructional studies towards a MEd at the University of South Africa.

We are inviting you to participate in a study entitled: Teachers' experiences of implementing the curriculum abridged version of section four amendments in grade 12

WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF THE STUDY?

This study is expected to collect important information that could help in getting insight into the implementation of curriculum abridged version of section four amendments. The benefits of this study are to conduct interviews which will focus on exploring teachers' experiences on the implementation of curriculum abridged version of section 4 amendments which will be useful to curriculum developers, teachers and learners to achieve a global standard of better education.

WHY AM I BEING INVITED TO PARTICIPATE?

You are invited because you are one of the grade 12 teachers offering curriculum abridged version of section 4 amendments at Lehlaba Secondary School in 2025. I obtained your contact details (e-mail address) from the principal of Lehlaba Secondary school. You are one of the grade 12 teachers who taught before Covid-19 pandemic and after the pandemic that are invited to participate in this study.

WHAT IS THE NATURE OF MY PARTICIPATION IN THIS STUDY?

(Describe the participant's actual role in the study).

The study involves semi-structured interviews, document analysis and observations. The questions will be based on the experiences of implementing curriculum abridged version of section four amendments in grade 12. The research study will be conducted over a period of a month, but I will need only forty-five minutes of your time to answer the interview questions. There might be one or two follow-up interviews which shall not exceed thirty minutes each.

CAN I WITHDRAW FROM THIS STUDY EVEN AFTER HAVING AGREED TO PARTICIPATE?

Participating in this study is voluntary and you are under no obligation to consent to participation. If you do decide to take part, you will be given this information sheet to keep and be asked to sign a written consent. You are free to withdraw at any time and without giving a reason.

WHAT ARE THE POTENTIAL BENEFITS OF TAKING PART IN THIS STUDY?

The benefits of this study are to conduct interviews which will focus on exploring teachers' experiences on the implementation of curriculum abridged version of section 4 amendments which will be useful to curriculum developers, teachers and learners to achieve a global standard of better education.

ARE THERE ANY NEGATIVE CONSEQUENCES FOR ME IF I PARTICIPATE IN THE RESEARCH PROJECT?

There are no potential risks that are involved in participating in this study.

WILL THE INFORMATION THAT I CONVEY TO THE RESEARCHER AND MY IDENTITY BE KEPT CONFIDENTIAL?

You have the right to insist that your name will not be recorded anywhere and that no one, apart from the researcher and the supervisor, will know about your involvement in this research. Your name will not be recorded anywhere, and no one will be able to connect you to the answers you give. Your answers will be given a code number, or a pseudonym and you will be referred to in this way in the data, any publications, or other research reporting methods such as conference proceedings.

A report of the study may be submitted for publication in an article, but individual participants will not be identifiable in such a report.

HOW WILL THE RESEARCHER(S) PROTECT THE SECURITY OF DATA?

Recordings of your answers will be stored by the researcher for a period of five years in a locked cupboard in my office for future research or academic purposes; electronic information will be stored on a password protected computer. Future use of the stored data will be subject to further Research Ethics Review and approval if applicable. Hard copies will be shredded, and electronic copies will be permanently deleted from the hard drive of the computer using the Bleach Bit when the information is not needed anymore.

WILL I RECEIVE PAYMENT OR ANY INCENTIVES FOR PARTICIPATING IN THIS STUDY?

There will be no reimbursement or any incentives for participation in the research.

HAS THE STUDY RECEIVED ETHICS APPROVAL?

This study received approval certificate with Ref #: 7829 from the College of Education Ethics Review Committee(ERC), Curriculum and Instructional Studies, Unisa.

HOW WILL I BE INFORMED OF THE FINDINGS/RESULTS OF THE RESEARCH?

If you would like to be informed of the final research findings, please contact Juliet Bodibadi Mashaba on 072 452 8386 or email at 42780055@mylife.unisa.ac.za. The findings are accessible for a month before an article is submitted for publication.

Should you have concerns about the way in which the research has been conducted, you may contact Prof.C.B. Mpungose on 079 385 0351 or email mpungcb@unisa.ac.za.

Thank you for taking time to read this information sheet and for participating in this study.

Thank you.

CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN THIS STUDY (Return slip)

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 have received a signed copy of the informed consent agreement.

_____	_____	_____
(Full name of Participant)	(Participant-Signature)	(Date)
<u>JULIET BODIBADI MASHABA</u>	_____	_____
(Full name of Researcher)	(Researcher-Signature)	(Date)

CONSENT FOR AUDIO RECORDING

I Willingly agree to take part in the research study titled "Teachers' experiences of implementing the curriculum abridged version of section four amendments in grade 12." I also agree to and consent to the audio recording of the semi-structured interview.

I give permission for my participation in the study to be recorded using audio equipment, should this be necessary. I acknowledge that my participation is entirely voluntary, and I am under no obligation or pressure to take part.

I also understand that I am free to withdraw from the study at any time without facing any negative consequences.

_____	_____	_____
(Full name of Participant)	(Participant-Signature)	(Date)
<u>JULIET BODIBADI MASHABA</u>	_____	_____
(Full name of Researcher)	(Researcher-Signature)	(Date)

Annexure B: One-on-One Semi structured interview

SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW QUESTIONS



TITLE: Teachers' experiences of implementing the curriculum abridged version of section four amendments in grade 12

Section 1: Teacher Preparedness and Capacity

- 1.1. Can you tell me about your teaching experience and background in grade 12?
- 1.2. What drives your teaching and motivates you to teach?
- 1.3. Can you describe your teaching philosophy?
- 1.4. What have you learned about yourself and your teaching practices through implementing the abridged curriculum?

Section 2: Curriculum Design and Interpretation

- 2.1. How familiar are you with the curriculum abridged version of section four amendments, and how have you prepared to implement it?
- 2.2. What has been your experience with implementing the curriculum abridged version of section four amendments in your grade 12 classroom?
- 2.3. How have you adapted the abridged curriculum to meet the diverse needs of your students?
- 2.4. How has the implementation of the abridged curriculum impacted your teaching practices and approaches?
- 2.5. What are your thoughts on the potential long-term implications of implementing the abridged curriculum in grade 12?

Section 3: Resource Availability and Support

- 3.1. What support and resources have you received to implement the abridged curriculum, and how have you utilized them?
- 3.2. How have you collaborated with colleagues and school administrators to implement the abridged curriculum?

- 3.3. What additional support or resources do you think would be helpful in implementing the abridged curriculum?
- 3.4. What challenges have you faced in implementing the abridged curriculum, and how have you addressed them?

Section 4: Learner Engagement and Performance

- 4.1. What strategies have you used to engage students with the abridged curriculum, and how effective have they been?
- 4.2. How have you assessed student learning and understanding of the abridged curriculum?
- 4.3. How do you think the abridged curriculum has impacted student learning and outcomes in grade 12?

Section 5: Post-Pandemic Teaching Realities

- 5.1. What challenges have you faced in implementing the abridged curriculum, and how have you addressed them?
- 5.2. What recommendations would you make to educators and policymakers for improving the implementation of the abridged curriculum?
- 5.3. What are your thoughts on the potential long-term implications of implementing the abridged curriculum in grade 12?

Annexure C: None Participants Observations

OBSERVATION CHECKLIST



Title: Teachers' experiences of implementing the curriculum abridged version of section four amendments in grade 12

	IMPLEMENTATION OF CURRICULUM ABRIDGED VERSION OF SECTION FOUR AMENDMENTS IN GRADE 12 OBSERVATIONS	YES	NO	Comments
1.	Classroom Setup/Teaching environment - Arrangements promote student interaction - Resources, materials, and technology are accessible - Display of relevant instructional materials (posters, charts, etc.)			
2.	Learner Activities - Learners appear engaged and attentive - Evidence of diverse learning activities (group work, discussions) - Learners are encouraged to ask questions or express opinions			
3.	Lesson Planning/Goals(aims/objectives/LOs) - Clear learning objectives are stated - Lesson reflects the key components of the abridged curriculum - Use of a variety of instructional strategies to address different learning styles			
4.	Implementation of curriculum/Content - Teacher articulates the rationale behind curriculum changes - Key concepts from Section Four are clearly integrated - Adaptations made to meet student needs and			

	context			
5.	Pedagogical Strategies/Teaching methods - Incorporation of collaborative learning activities - Use of technology or multimedia to enhance understanding - Differentiated instruction observed for various student abilities			
6.	Teaching resources - Do formats, fonts, and layouts stay uniform across materials? - Resources clearly state the goals or standards they aim to address - Resources include rubrics, checklists or formative assessment prompts - Each activity or task connects directly to one or more objectives			
7.	Feedback and Assessment - Teacher provides timely feedback on student work - Observations of formative assessments in practice - Opportunities for students to self-assess or reflect on learning			

Name: _____

Date: _____

Signature: _____

Annexure D: Document Analysis

DOCUMENT ANALYSIS PLAN



Title: Teachers' experiences of implementing the curriculum abridged version of section four amendments in grade 12

A **document analysis of abridged curriculum implementation** involves a systematic review and evaluation of official documents (e.g., curriculum guides, policy briefs, teaching plans, reports) related to how an abridged or condensed version of a curriculum is being introduced, adapted, and executed in educational settings. Here's a detailed framework for conducting such an analysis:

DOCUMENT ANALYSIS OF ABRIDGED CURRICULUM IMPLEMENTATION PLAN

1. Introduction

- **Purpose of the analysis:** To examine how the abridged curriculum is being implemented, identify successes and challenges, and determine alignment with intended goals.
- **Context:** Brief background on why the abridged curriculum was introduced (e.g., postCOVID-19 recovery, time constraints, emergencies).
- **Scope:** Focus on primary/secondary/tertiary education, public or private institutions, specific regions, or subjects.

2. Data Sources

List and describe the documents reviewed. Examples include:

- Ministry of Education circulars
- Curriculum frameworks
- Teacher guides or lesson plans
- Training manuals
- Assessment guidelines
- Monitoring & evaluation reports

3. Analytical Framework

Use a framework to guide your analysis. You might examine:

- **Curriculum Design:** Scope and sequence, learning outcomes, and structure.
- **Implementation Strategy:** Rollout plan, stakeholder involvement, timelines.
- **Teacher Support:** Professional development, instructional materials, mentorship.
- **Assessment and Evaluation:** Changes in assessment strategy, learner evaluation.
- **Equity and Inclusion:** Consideration of learners with disabilities, rural/urban gaps.
- **Outcomes:** Early results, student engagement, teacher feedback.

4. Key Findings

Organize analysis under these thematic areas:

A. Curriculum Content

- What content was prioritized or removed?
- Is the remaining content aligned with core learning outcomes?

B. Teaching and Learning Methods

- How have pedagogical strategies changed?
- Is there a shift toward learner-centered approaches?

C. Teacher Preparedness

- Were teachers trained in the new curriculum?
- Is there evidence of teacher confidence and competence?

D. Assessment Adjustments

- What type of assessment is mentioned in the document? Is it formative, summative, diagnostic, or benchmark assessment?
- What are the intended outcomes of assessment? Is it for measuring knowledge, skills, competencies, or attitudes?
- How have exams or continuous assessments been modified?
- Are they valid and reliable given the new curriculum?

E. Implementation

- Time
- Resource
- Teaching environment

5. Conclusion

Summarize the overall effectiveness of implementation:

- To what extent has the abridged curriculum achieved its goals?
- Are there gaps between policy and practice?

6. Recommendations

Provide actionable suggestions, such as:

- Further teacher training or refresher workshops
- Curriculum refinement based on feedback
- Strengthening monitoring and evaluation frameworks
- Better resource allocation and support systems

7. References

List all documents reviewed using appropriate referencing style.

Annexure E: Ethical Clearance



College of Education _ERC

Date: 26/08/2025

Dear: Mrs Juliet Bodibadi Mashaba

**Decision: Ethics Approval from
26/08/2025 to 26/08/2028**

NHREC Registration # : (if applicable)
Ref #: 7829
Name: Mrs Juliet Bodibadi Mashaba
Student #: 42780055
Staff #:

Researcher: Mrs Juliet Bodibadi Mashaba
Mogolo Secondary School
BURGERSFORT

42780055@mylife.unisa.ac.za 0724528386

Supervisor: Prof Cedric Bheki Mpungose mpungcb@unisa.ac.za

Co-Supervisor:

Co-Researcher(s):

Email address:

Teachers' experiences of implementing the curriculum abridged version of section four amendments in grade 12

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 **low 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.
3. The researcher(s) will conduct the study according to the methods and procedures set out in the approved application.
4. Any changes that may affect study-related risks to research participants, juristic or third persons, must be reported in writing to the College of Education _ERC, accompanied by a progress report.

5. The researcher will ensure that the research study complies with all applicable national legislation, professional codes of conduct, institutional guidelines, and scientific standards relevant to the specific field of study. Where applicable, adherence to the following South African legislation is essential: the Protection of Personal Information Act (No. 4 of 2013), the Children's Act (No. 38 of 2005), and the National Health Act (No. 61 of 2003)
6. Future use of this research data is permitted only in de-identified form and only for secondary research with objectives similar to those of the original study. Any secondary use involving identifiable human data will require additional ethics clearance.
7. No fieldwork activities may continue beyond the stated expiry date (26/08/2028). A completed Research Ethics Progress Report must be submitted as an application for renewal and is subject to approval by the Research Ethics Committee. A Close-Out Report must be submitted upon completion of the research study.
8. The College of Education _ERC may require the submission of regular progress reports on an **annual** basis, in alignment with Section 7.2 of the Unisa Policy on Research Ethics (2024).

Additional Conditions

1. Disclosure of data to third parties is prohibited without explicit consent from the research participants and Unisa.
2. Research data must be stored in compliance with the university's research data management policy for a period of up to 15 years.
3. When publishing the results, the researcher must take appropriate precautions to safeguard the confidentiality and privacy of the research participants, juristic persons, third parties, and the university, in accordance with institutional policies and ethical standards.
4. Adherence to the National Statement on Ethical Research and Publication Practices, specifically Principle 7 on Social Awareness, must be ensured. This principle states: 'Researchers and institutions must be sensitive to the potential impact of their research on society, marginal groups, or individuals, and must consider these when weighing the benefits of the research against any harmful effects, with a view to minimising or avoiding the latter where possible.' The University of South Africa (Unisa) accepts no liability for any failure to comply with this principle.

Note

The reference number 7829 should be clearly indicated on all forms of communication with the intended research participants, as well as with the Committee.

Kind regards,



Prof Justin Oswin August
Chair of College of Education _ERC
E-mail: augusjo@unisa.ac.za



Prof Mpine Makoe
Executive Dean College of Education
E-mail: qakisme@unisa.ac.za, magolmc@unisa.ac.za

Annexure F: Gatekeepers letters

LEHLABA SECONDARY SCHOOL		
PHYSICAL ADDRESS RIBA CROSS VILLAGE BAKONE-PHUTI TRIBAL DRIEKOP	POSTAL ADDRESS P.O BOX 114 DRIEKOP 1129	 LEHLABA SEC. SCHOOL
ENQ: PRINCIPAL CELL: 072 207 4548	FAX: 086 298 2939 EMAIL: lehlaba123@gmail.com EMIS NO: 925620268 MOTTO: "OUR DEEDS SHALL SPEAK"	

08 September 2025

The researcher: Juliet Bodibadi Mashaba
University of South Africa (UNISA): 0724528386

Dear Juliet Bodibadi Mashaba

RE: PERMISSION TO CONDUCT RESEARCH AT LEHLABA SECONDARY SCHOOL

We are pleased to inform you that permission has been granted for you to conduct your research at Lehlaba Secondary School. Your study, titled *"Teachers' experiences of implementing the curriculum abridged version of Section Four amendments in Grade 12,"* is aligned with our school's goals of effectively implementing the abridged curriculum and improving academic performance.

We understand that your data collection will take place from 15 September to 26 September 2025. We confirm that the school is willing to participate and will provide the necessary support throughout this period. We further acknowledge and appreciate your commitment, as stated in your formal request, not to disrupt the normal school programme during the research process.

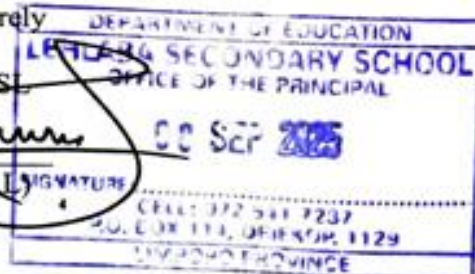
Please ensure that all activities are conducted in accordance with the school's policies and procedures.

We look forward to working with you and wish you success in carrying out your research.

Yours sincerely

MAGANE S.

(PRINCIPAL)



CONFIDENTIAL



LIMPOPO
PROVINCIAL GOVERNMENT
REPUBLIC OF SOUTH AFRICA

OFFICE OF THE PREMIER

TO: DR MC MAKOLA

FROM: DR MM MAEBANE

**ACTING CHAIRPERSON: LIMPOPO PROVINCIAL RESEARCH ETHICS COMMITTEE
(LPREC)**

REVIEW DATE: 02 SEPTEMBER 2025

**SUBJECT: TEACHERS' EXPERIENCES OF IMPLEMENTING THE CURRICULUM
ABRIDGED VERSION OF SECTION FOUR AMENDMENTS IN GRADE 12**

RESEARCHER: JB MASHABA

Dear Colleague

The above researcher's research proposal served at the Limpopo Provincial Research Ethics Committee (LPREC). The committee is satisfied with the methodological and ethical soundness of the proposed study.

Decision: The proposal is granted full approval.

Regards

Acting Chairperson: Dr MM Maebane

Secretariat: Dr. MJ Mokgokong

Date: 18/09/2025

Annexure G: Turnitin (Similarity) report

Similarity Report

PAPER NAME

FINAL THESIS.docx

AUTHOR

JULIET BODIBADI MASHABA

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Annexure H: Letter of Edit

PRO EDIT PTY LTD

PO BOX 23081, CLAREMONT CAPE TOWN 7735

EDITING CERTIFICATE

Date: 2025/12/2

This serves to confirm that the document entitled:

**TITLE: TEACHERS' EXPERIENCES OF IMPLEMENTING THE CURRICULUM ABRIDGED
VERSION OF SECTION FOUR AMENDMENTS IN GRADE 12**

by

Juliet Bodibadi Mashaba

Student Number:

42780055

has been language edited on behalf of its author.

Genevieve Wood

Pro Edit Pty Ltd