

TEACHERS' PERCEPTIONS OF LEARNER SUPPORT IN SOUTH AFRICAN RURAL SECONDARY EDUCATION

Newlin Marongwe

School of Psychosocial Education, North-West University (South Africa)

Abstract

This study investigates how teachers in South African rural secondary schools understand and enact learner support in contexts characterised by poverty, geographic isolation, and limited services, with a focus on the psychosocial and academic dimensions, and on the potential of inclusive and decolonial practices to improve outcomes. Two quintile 1–2 public secondary schools in one district were conveniently selected for their high socio-economic disadvantage and documented learner vulnerability, and six teachers were purposively sampled to represent varied subjects, experience, and roles within learner support structures. Using a qualitative participatory action research design grounded in a constructivist paradigm and informed by Community of Practice theory, the study positioned teachers as co-researchers. Data were generated through collaborative group discussions and reflective diaries, capturing teachers' everyday practices and emerging understandings of decolonial psychosocial care, and were analysed thematically with collaborative validation and verbatim quotations. Teachers reported pervasive barriers to effective learner support, including overcrowded classes, limited access to specialist psychosocial services, food insecurity, and the emotional strain of working in high-poverty, high-trauma environments. Concurrently, they identified key local assets, such as strong family–school relationships, learner peer solidarity, and supportive faith and community networks that they mobilised as community-linked support. Teachers described using a range of inclusive pedagogical strategies, particularly differentiated instruction and cooperative learning, and associated decolonial psychosocial support with valuing learners' cultural identities, using home languages, and integrating indigenous and communal practices of care. The study concludes that teachers' contextually grounded practices, decolonial orientations, and community partnerships provide a vital foundation for stronger learner support, but that systemic constraints limit their impact. It recommends that policy commitments to inclusion and decoloniality be supported by targeted investments in teacher professional development, strengthened school-based support teams, formalised partnerships with local services and communities, and improved resourcing for rural schools. These measures are essential to move towards a more equitable and responsive system of learner support in South African rural secondary education.

Keywords: *Inclusive pedagogy, psychosocial support, learner support, teacher perceptions, South Africa.*

1. Introduction

Rural education in South Africa is marked by intersecting structural inequalities that shape how learner support is conceptualised and enacted. Legacies of apartheid spatial planning, persistent poverty, and under-resourcing have produced rural schooling contexts characterised by multigrade classes, limited specialist services, and high levels of psychosocial need (du Plessis & Mestry, 2019). At the same time, national policy frameworks such as Education White Paper 6 and the Care and Support for Teaching and Learning (CSTL) programme mandate inclusive, holistic support for all learners (DoE, 2001; DBE, 2025).

Despite these commitments, most empirical work on learner support and inclusive education in South Africa has focused on urban or peri-urban contexts (Makoelle, 2022), with comparatively little attention to how rural teachers understand and implement psychosocial and academic support in everyday practice. Moreover, decolonial scholarship argues that support systems often reproduce Eurocentric norms and disregard local knowledges, languages, and community-based forms of care (Boughey & McKenna, 2021; Omodan, 2024). This study addresses these gaps by examining teachers' perceptions of learner support in rural secondary schools, foregrounding psychosocial dimensions, and exploring how inclusive and decolonial practices are negotiated under severely constrained conditions.

The study focuses specifically on rural, quintile 1–2 secondary schools, which remain under-represented in the learner support literature. It employs participatory action research (PAR) and Community of Practice (CoP) as a combined lens, positioning teachers as co-researchers rather than subjects of investigation. The study also explicitly examines teachers' emerging understandings of a decolonial approach to psychosocial support, an area in which empirical studies remain scarce (Sayed & Ahmed, 2023).

2. Objectives

The study was guided by the following objectives:

- To explore how teachers in rural secondary schools conceptualise learner support, with particular attention to psychosocial and academic dimensions.
- To examine how teachers perceive a decolonial approach to psychosocial support in their schools.
- To generate collaboratively grounded recommendations for strengthening learner support in rural secondary education.

3. Literature review

3.1. Learner support, inclusion and rurality

Learner support is understood as the set of academic, psychosocial, and material interventions that enable learners to participate and succeed in schooling (Pillay et al., 2023). Inclusive education scholarship has shifted the focus from “fixing” individual learners to transforming school cultures, policies, and practices to accommodate diversity (Ainscow, 2020; Walton, 2018). In South Africa, however, implementation of inclusive learner support remains uneven, particularly in rural and under-resourced schools where large classes, negative attitudes, and limited specialist services persist (Donohue & Bornman, 2014; Engelbrecht & Savolainen, 2018).

Rural schooling is often framed through deficit narratives that emphasise failure and scarcity, yet research also highlights significant local assets, including strong social cohesion, local knowledge systems, and community-school partnerships (Nyathi, 2025; Ebersöhn, 2019). Place-conscious and decolonial perspectives argue that rural education must be understood on its own terms, rather than judged against urban norms (Corbett, 2015; Moletsane, 2012).

3.2. Psychosocial support and decolonial perspectives

High levels of poverty, violence, and family disruption contribute to elevated psychosocial risk among South African learners (Cluver et al., 2015; Sherr et al., 2014). Policy frameworks such as Care and Support for Teaching and Learning CSTL position schools as hubs of psychosocial support, but in practice, rural schools face acute shortages of school psychologists, social workers, and school-based support teams (DBE, 2018; Pillay et al., 2023). Teachers are often de facto frontline providers but feel under-prepared and overburdened (Mampane, 2020).

Decolonial scholars argue that psychosocial support must move beyond imported, individualised models and engage with indigenous knowledge systems, collective forms of care, and local idioms of distress (Seedat et al., 2009; Zembylas & Chubbuck, 2020). They caution that ignoring learners' contexts constitutes a denial of reality, undermining motivation and well-being (Boughey & McKenna, 2021). Empirical work on how such decolonial approaches are understood and enacted by rural teachers remains limited (Sayed & Ahmed, 2023), underscoring the need for studies like the present one.

4. Community of practice theory

Community of Practice (CoP) theory conceptualises learning as a social process that occurs through participation in shared practices, rather than as the transmission of information to isolated individuals (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998). A CoP is characterised by a shared domain of interest, a community that interacts regularly, and a repertoire of shared practices and resources (Marongwe & Chisango, 2022). In this study, CoP provides a lens for understanding how rural teachers collectively negotiate the meanings of “learner support” and how they develop, share, and refine practices of psychosocial and academic support under challenging conditions. Viewing teachers as members of an evolving CoP aligns with the participatory action research design and supports the goal of co-creating contextually grounded strategies rather than imposing external solutions.

5. Methods and design

A qualitative Participatory Action Research (PAR) design, rooted in a constructivist paradigm, was used. PAR emphasises collaboration between researchers and co-researchers to critically examine and transform a shared concern (Reason & Bradbury, 2008; Burns, 2007). The constructivist stance assumes that knowledge is co-constructed through social interaction and that multiple realities exist (Creswell & Poth, 2016). This made PAR appropriate for exploring teachers' lived experiences and meanings of learner support, while also opening possibilities for change. Two rural, quintile 1–2 public secondary schools were conveniently selected from a single education district. Selection criteria included high levels of socio-economic disadvantage, geographic isolation from urban centres, and evidence from district reports of high learner vulnerability (e.g., orphanhood, household food insecurity). Within these schools, six teachers were purposively sampled to ensure diversity in subject specialisation (e.g., languages, sciences, life orientation), years of teaching experience, and Involvement in learner support structures (school-based support teams, class teachers, life skills teachers). These teachers were invited to act as co-researchers in line with the PAR ethos.

Two main methods were used to generate data: collaborative group discussions and reflective diaries. For collaborative group discussions, three rounds (approximately 90 minutes each) were conducted with the six co-researchers over a two-month period. Discussion prompts focused on understanding learner support, everyday practices, challenges, and strengths, and perceptions of inclusive and decolonial approaches to psychosocial support. Sessions were audio-recorded (consent to record was given) and transcribed verbatim. Also, the co-researchers kept reflective diaries for three months, documenting critical incidents, dilemmas, and innovations related to learner support. Diaries encouraged reflection on how context, culture, language, and power shaped psychosocial and academic support.

Data were analysed thematically using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework (familiarisation, coding, theme development, review, definition, and reporting). Initial coding was conducted by the lead researcher, followed by collaborative analysis sessions with the co-researchers to refine and name themes, enhancing credibility and ownership.

5.1. Ethical considerations

Ethical clearance was obtained from North-West University, ethics number NWU-01185-25-A 2. Further permissions were sought and granted by various gatekeepers, including the Department of Education, School Management Teams, and School Governing Bodies. Participants provided informed consent, pseudonyms were used, and attention was paid to emotional well-being during discussions of traumatic experiences.

6. Findings

Three major themes are highlighted here. (Names used below are not the real names of the co-researchers).

6.1. Structural constraints and emotional labour

Teachers emphasised systemic barriers to effective learner support: overcrowded classes, lack of specialist services, food insecurity, and chronic trauma exposure. One teacher thus noted, *"You are not only a teacher; you are a social worker, a parent, a psychologist, but without the training or time. Some days it feels like you are putting a small plaster on a very big wound."* (Ms. Thandi). The emotional toll of working in high-poverty, high-trauma environments was also evident. *"When a learner tells you they slept without food, you cannot just continue with your science as if everything is normal."* (Mr. Dlamini)

6.2. Local assets and community-linked support

Despite these constraints, teachers identified critical local assets, including strong relationships with families, peer solidarity, and faith-based and community networks. *"The church leaders, the 'makhulus' (grannies), they know these children. When we involve them, it's easier to follow up when a learner is struggling."* (Naledi). Peer support was also considered powerful, as indicated by one teacher. *"Sometimes another learner can reach them better than we can. We use group work so they can encourage each other, in their academic work and in social life."* (Ms. Fefe)

6.3. Inclusive and decolonial pedagogical strategies

Teachers reported drawing on a range of inclusive strategies, such as differentiated instruction, flexible grouping, scaffolded tasks, and cooperative learning, to address diverse cognitive and psychosocial needs. They actively integrated learners' languages and community knowledge, as thus indicated, *"When I*

explain in Sesotho and use examples from the village, they open up. They feel this subject is also theirs, not only for town children.” (Ms. Mpho). Perceptions of a decolonial approach to psychosocial support were emergent but salient. Teachers associated it with valuing local culture, languages, and collective forms of care. “For me, decolonial support means we don’t treat our culture as a problem. We use our traditions of sitting together, listening to elders, praying, to support the child.” (Ms. Mamzo). “Most programmes come from outside and expect us to do counselling like in the movies. Decolonial means starting with what our community already uses to heal.” (Mr Rara). Teachers also linked decoloniality to power and voice: “The learners must see themselves in the stories, in the examples. If they are always hearing other people’s lives, they think their own problems are not important.” (Lebo)

7. Discussion

The findings confirm earlier work on the severe constraints facing rural schools (du Plessis & Mestry, 2019; Pillay et al., 2023), but also extend the literature by showing how teachers actively negotiate these constraints through contextually grounded practices and community-linked initiatives. Consistent with CoP theory, teachers are not isolated individuals but members of an emergent practice community that collectively constructs meanings and strategies for learner support (Wenger, 1998; Marongwe & Chisango, 2022). The study also revealed that the emotional labour described by teachers highlights the risk of over-reliance on under-supported teachers, echoing concerns in the wider literature (Mampane, 2020). Without structural investment in professional development, school-based support teams, and intersectoral collaboration, teachers’ efforts remain fragile. The findings indicate that teachers’ emphasis on community rituals, elders, and faith-based networks challenges purely individualised, therapeutic models and suggests pathways for a more culturally resonant support system. This aligns with scholarly calls to centre indigenous knowledge, local languages, and collective care (Seedat et al., 2009; Zembylas & Chubbuck, 2020), which shows teachers’ lay understandings of decolonial psychosocial support in the current study.

8. Conclusions

Learner support in rural South African secondary schools is shaped by deep structural inequalities but is also animated by rich local resources and teacher agency. Teachers in this study conceptualised learner support as both academic and psychosocial, enacted through inclusive classroom strategies and community-linked practices. Their emerging understandings of decolonial psychosocial support emphasise recognising learners’ cultural identities, drawing on local forms of healing, and resisting deficit views of rural communities. The study demonstrates that effective learner support in rural contexts requires policy implementation on inclusion and context-sensitive support for teachers and schools.

9. Recommendations and future research

Based on the study’s findings, schools should develop ongoing, school-embedded PD programmes that build teachers’ psychosocial competencies, grounded in decolonial and inclusive frameworks, using reflective, participatory methods rather than one-off workshops. Schools should also establish or reinforce School-Based Support Teams (SBSTs) in rural schools, with clear mandates and linkages to district-based support and local social services. Create formal partnerships between schools and various community stakeholders to co-design psychosocial support initiatives that respect learners’ cultural contexts. The study further recommends that provincial and district resourcing align with policy commitments to inclusion, prioritising rural schools for access to specialist services, nutrition programmes, and psychosocial interventions.

Future studies should extend the PAR approach to include learners and parents as co-researchers to understand psychosocial support from multiple perspectives. Focus can also be on exploring the role of digital and low-tech tools in supporting decolonial psychosocial support in rural settings.

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