



Teachers Lived Experiences of Teaching and Learning in A Rural School in the Western Cape

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ABSTRACT

The complexity and *bifurcatedness* of teaching and learning in the South African education system have been well documented (Singh, 2020; Spaul et al., 2021). However, discussing the intersectionality between race, rurality and inequality as it relates to teaching and learning through a phenomenological lens remains a gap. This article discusses experiences of teaching and learning through the voices of teachers in a small rural town, situated in the Karoo. Using a qualitative approach of semi-structured interviews, the chapter presents insights into the lived experiences of two high school teachers. These responses, through the discussion of teaching and learning, school context, and professional development experiences, are reflected through Paul Ricoeur's variant of philosophical hermeneutics and justice. This chapter demonstrates that teaching and learning are more than a knowledge exchange in the classroom. It is also about affective support and an unspoken understanding of how the legacy of the past political era(s) is cemented into their daily interactions. The chapter contributes to the literature relating to rural schools as *banished spaces* in South Africa and positions phenomenological research as a conduit for social justice.

Keywords: teachers, rural schools, school context, professional development, inequality, phenomenology

1.INTRODUCTION

South Africa's education system is in crisis. Not only are learners grossly underperforming, particularly in literacy and numeracy, but teaching and learning contexts remain sub-optimal, with the least conducive school contexts being situated in rural areas. The latest National Education Infrastructure Management System reports that thousands of schools in South Africa still have pit latrines, unreliable water supply, unreliable electricity supply, limited access to ICTs and no or dysfunctional libraries (Department of Basic Education [DBE], 2020). Most of these poorly resourced schools are situated in rural settings. As Du Plessis and Mestry (2019) lament, rural schools "face severe

challenges that are unique to their environment" and are plagued by instances of poor parental involvement, a lack of funding and underqualified teachers, among other things (p. 1). Barber and Mourshed (2007) note that the quality of an education system cannot exceed the quality of its teachers, thus, understanding the lived experiences of teachers is crucial if (educational) interventions are to be successful. More specifically, gaining insight into teachers' teaching and learning experiences, the context in which they teach and their opportunities for professional development will illuminate the gaps that prevent quality teaching and learning exchanges because "a positive teaching approach can contribute to the well-being of learners despite the challenges they may

be facing” (Groenewald, Barnett, & De Klerk, 2021, Para. 2).

By presenting accounts of teachers’ lived experiences in a rural high school in the Western Cape Province of South Africa, this paper argues that the teaching and learning contexts of many rural schools in South Africa militate against social justice and the pursuit of quality education. In addition, through the intersecting of race, rurality and inequality using Ricoeur’s variant of philosophical hermeneutics and justice, the paper demonstrates that, firstly, previously marginalised rural communities have not fully benefitted from the effects of a truly democratic dispensation. Secondly, the experiences of teaching and learning in rural schools cannot be divorced from the community context in which the school is situated and, thirdly, teachers’ lack of professional development opportunities negatively impacts their ability to develop the skills that are required to teach in rural contexts. The paper begins with a look at education policy provisions that govern schools in South Africa and then reviews the literature on rurality and rural education in the country. This is followed by a discussion of the theoretical underpinnings that frame the discussion and the findings as well as a brief overview of the study methodology. The latter part of the paper presents and discusses the findings. The paper concludes with a synthesis of the key findings and the implications of these findings for social justice, addressing inequalities and the pursuit of quality education, with particular emphasis on how phenomenological research may address and mitigate some of the challenges presented here.

2 POLICIES IMPACTING THE DELIVERY OF BASIC EDUCATION IN SOUTH AFRICA

South Africa’s draconian history of separate development did not only regulate

people’s social lives, but it also impacted how they were educated, the careers they could pursue and whom they would serve with their skills. The process of becoming a teacher during apartheid was indicative of this. Teacher colleges trained teachers according to their respective races. The quality standards, resources and pedagogies all reflected the role of the specific races in society, and this was based on a stereotypical view of seemingly homogenous cohorts.

The post-apartheid dispensation sought to overhaul this discriminative provision of education by promoting democracy, citizenship, social cohesion, equity and equality through its newly developed policy provisions and legal mandates. A brief policy sociology of post-apartheid education policies demonstrates a sophisticated policy environment that seeks to address many of the social, economic and political inefficiencies instituted by previous political eras. Using a hermeneutical approach (Vieira & De Queiroz, 2017) to interpret the embedded values of selected education policies in South Africa, reveals several things. First, foundational policies, such as the National Education Policy Act (DOE, 1996) and the South African Schools Act (DOE, 1996), make evident the state’s commitment to equity, equality, respect, dignity and access to quality education. Second, the Minimum Requirements for Teacher Education Qualification (MRTEQ) (DHET, 2018) and the Integrated Strategic Planning Framework for Teacher Education and Development in SA (ISPFTED) (DBE & DHET, 2011) suggest that there is a commitment to ensure that teachers are sufficiently equipped with the necessary skills, knowledge and dispositions to create meaningful teaching and learning experiences in the classroom. Third, policies, such as the National School Safety Framework (Centre for Justice and Crime Prevention [CJCP], 2015), the Policy Framework for the Management of Drug

Abuse by Learners in Schools (DOE, 2002), the National Strategy on Screening, Identification, Assessment, and Support (SIAS) (DOE, 2008) demonstrate the state's commitment to ensuring learners are well supported and protected. And fourth, policies, such as the Minimum Norms and Standards for Public School Infrastructure (DBE, 2013), reveal the state's awareness of how context impacts teaching and learning and therefore require specific attention.

Whilst the policies discussed here are certainly not an exhaustive list of policies that impact the delivery of basic education in South Africa, these policies are sufficient to illuminate the suggested and, to some extent, assumed, lived experiences and working context of teachers in the country. It suggests that teachers should feel safe, should be consistently professionally developed through CPD, that teachers themselves should be lifelong learners and should be respected members of the community in which the school resides. Teachers, in the way they impart knowledge, should be inclusive in their approaches, should enact the values of citizenship, democracy and social cohesion and should be provided with the resources to support their core function of teaching. However, several recent studies in South Africa suggest that there is a disjuncture between what is articulated in policy and teachers' lived experiences within their school contexts (McDonald, 2021; Nakidien, Singh, & Sayed 2021; Singh, 2020). The lived experiences of teachers, as articulated in these studies, suggest that teachers' experiences of teaching and learning are suboptimal, disabling, humiliating and frustrating, particularly in rural contexts. Whilst recent policy developments, such as the draft Rural Education Policy (DBE, 2017), are currently being debated at national level (PMG, 2022), it may take years before finalisation and implementation, and for

teachers and learners to experience the benefits thereof, delaying social justice yet again.

3 DEFINING RURALITY AND RURAL SCHOOLS

Rurality could be defined in many ways, but the most helpful definition, and the one which underscores this paper, understands rural to be either a regional or a remote setting (RRR) as articulated by Ledger, Masinire, Diaz, and Burgess (2021). Some regions are characterised as rural through the dominant activities in the area, for example, agricultural pursuits such as farming. Other areas are characterised as rural based on their proximity to the main urban centres. Rural areas are usually characterised by high levels of poverty and inequality, and rural populations also have "... less access to education, health and other services" (United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs [UNDESA], 2021, p. 18). In South Africa in 2020, between 20% and 39% of South Africans lived in rural areas.

There is also a lack of consensus about what constitutes a rural school with a recent South African authority suggesting that rural schools can be "characterised by various forms of distance", "uniquely characterised by challenges" and "as hubs of learning and development for rural communities" (National Education Collaboration Trust, 2017, p. 186).

The way rural schools and rural education are defined in policies in South Africa incorporates a deficit approach. Rural schools are defined in opposition to urban schools. Thus, rural is described as that which is *not urban* (Rusznyak & Masinire, 2018). Ledger et al. (2021) note that "the foundation of deficit thinking about African education and rural education, in particular, was constructed and consolidated during the colonial/apartheid period prior to 1994 ...

[when] rural education was characterized by a rapid structural deterioration of predominantly Black schools and a segregated curriculum” (p. 12). Thus, current understandings and prevailing definitions of rural schools and rural education are still heavily influenced by the country’s political past. This is particularly evident in the fact that the previously categorised “homelands” or Bantustans remain classified as rural and remain some of the poorest and underdeveloped regions in the country. Thus, there remains a strong correlation between race and rurality in South Africa. The deficit approach to understanding rural schools perpetuates because, in reality, there are vast disparities between rural and urban schools in South Africa. For example, rural learners often have low school attendance as many of them are forced to work on farms, the curriculum is not relevant to their lives, they have to travel long distances to get to school, sometimes they have to live away from their families in boarding homes to attend school and teacher development in these contexts is often severely neglected (Du Plessis & Mestry, 2019).

4 TEACHING AND LEARNING IN RURAL CONTEXTS IN SOUTH AFRICA

Teaching has both cognitive and affective dimensions. Teachers, when in the classroom, do more than just deliver content. They impart values, develop relationships, and they mould future citizens. As such, teaching is a values-driven profession using content knowledge as its conduit.

In rural contexts, teachers must contend with insurmountable challenges as noted in a recent news headline about a high school in the Eastern Cape Province that listed overcrowded classrooms and a lack of ablution facilities as critical challenges as learners often relieve themselves in open

fields (Sizani, 2022). Further to this, a teacher at the school noted that

“... The lack of fences is another problem ... We don’t have air conditioners. All our electricity cables were stolen during December holidays. We don’t have toilets. The Department of Education only provided us with six toilets during the outbreak of the Covid-19. But, at the end of 2020, the toilets were removed because the service provider had not been paid ... Teachers, especially in grade 10, are always drained. We have 199 grade 10s, 70 grade 11s, and 65 grade 12s. We have a grade 10 class with 68 learners instead of 35 learners.”

The acting chairperson of the high school explained:

“We have a drugs and alcohol problem in this community. Most of the parents survive on social grants and some are seasonal workers at citrus farms. These appalling learning conditions make education look meaningless to our children. The department is dragging its feet in addressing this problem” (Sizani, 2022).

The case of Newton High School is not an isolated incident and is a case in point for most rural public schools. Thus, the experiences reported by the teacher in the quote above represent the lived experiences of many teachers who teach in rural contexts in South Africa (Du Plessis & Mestry, 2019). Whilst learners in rural areas are negatively impacted by their learning context, teachers equally shoulder some of these challenges. A study conducted by Du Plessis and Mestry (2019)

that investigated teachers' experiences of working in rural contexts reveals that teachers complained about curriculum challenges, poor facilities, and infrastructure, system and administrative problems. Due to the added challenges teachers in rural school contexts face, hiring and retaining suitably qualified teachers is very difficult because there are fewer financial resources available and often the teacher "at a basic level must be prepared to teach multiple grades or subjects, organise extra-curricular activities and adjust well to the environment and the community" (Du Plessis, 2014, p. 1111). Ledger et al. (2021) echo this sentiment and note that education in rural areas has low levels of accountability and that teachers, as well as school leadership, such as principals, receive very little support. Schools often hire unqualified or underqualified teachers to fill the shortage with disastrous consequences for learner performance and to address inequalities within rural contexts. However, whilst several studies illuminate the struggles of teachers, school management and learners in rural areas, very few discuss and suggest how a deep understanding of teachers' lived experiences can inform policies and interventions that seek to alleviate these well-documented tribulations (Du Plessis & Mestry, 2019; Khumalo & Mji, 2014; Masinire, 2015).

5 THEORETICAL FRAMING

Hermeneutics is the study of how we interpret and make sense of the world around us. Phenomenology, on the other hand, is the study of the lived experience. What makes hermeneutic phenomenology a rich discourse is that it is not just a research methodology, but "both a theoretical perspective and a methodology, a strategy or plan that lies behind the methods employed in a particular study" (Crotty, 1998 cited in Tan, Wilson, & Olver, 2009, p. 2). Thus, its uses are multiple and

enriching. The theoretical underpinning of this paper is based on Paul Ricoeur's variant of philosophical hermeneutics and (social) justice, situated within a phenomenological paradigm. Ricoeur argues that, for most of the twentieth century, justice has been neglected and, in the best interest of society, it should be aggressively pursued (Ricoeur, 2000). His work is driven by the desire to celebrate the narrative of the individual, not as a selfish and narcissistic endeavour, but to better understand what makes us human and to promote the power of selfhood. For Ricoeur, the lived experience is the most formidable form of knowledge. This study gives voice and power to the lived experience of teachers teaching in a marginalised rural school in the Western Cape Province of South Africa. Through the personal accounts of teachers' experiences of teaching and learning, the paper reveals how, despite policy changes and political reforms, the legacy of apartheid is cemented into the daily realities of teachers' work.

6 METHODOLOGY

The data discussed in this paper were drawn from a larger interpretivist project that investigated teachers' and learners' lived experiences of their teaching and learning environment at selected schools in the Western Cape Province with each school representing one case study (see Singh, 2020). Shellington High, the school discussed in this paper, was one of the case studies.

Shellington High, a quintile one, no-fee school, is the only high school situated in a small town located in the Karoo. Situated in the Cape Winelands district, it has been classified as rural due to its distance from the city and the fact that it is surrounded by farmlands. There are approximately 579 learners and 17 teachers at the school (Education Management

Information System [EMIS], 2020). The majority of learners and teachers self-identify as Coloured, with about 5% self-identifying as Black African. Afrikaans is the dominant home language of teachers and learners, and it is also the Language of Learning and Teaching (LOLT) at the school.

Purposive sampling was used in this study as the larger project had sampling parameters and needed to represent high schools that varied by quintile and location. For this reason, Shellington High fulfilled the requirement of a rural based, quintile one high school. These characteristics were based on the Western Cape Education Department’s EMIS data categories and were not based solely on the researcher’s judgement. Two teachers at the school were interviewed using semi-structured interviews. Teacher A (Bianca) is a female teacher who teaches Afrikaans and Life Orientation at the school and Teacher B (Brian) is a male science teacher who is also the school principal. The larger study, on which this paper is based, sampled eleven teachers, thus satisfying the requirements

for a phenomenological study as noted by Creswell (1998) and Morse (1994).

The data were analysed using thematic analysis underpinned by a phenomenological approach that ascertained teachers’ lived experiences as they relate to teaching and learning, the school context and teachers’ experiences of professional development opportunities. Interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA) is a “qualitative approach which aims to provide detailed examinations of personal lived experience” (Smith & Osborn, 2015, p. 41). Further to this, these authors argue that IPA “produces an account of lived experience in its own terms rather than one prescribed by pre-existing theoretical preconceptions and it recognises that this is an interpretative endeavour as humans are sense-making organisms” (Smith & Osborn, 2015, p. 41). To establish validity and credibility in the analysis, Nizza, Farr and Smith’s (2021) four markers to ensure high-quality IPA were incorporated as depicted in Table 1 below:

Quality indicator	Brief description
Constructing a compelling, unfolding narrative	The analysis tells a persuasive and coherent story. The narrative is built cumulatively through an unfolding analytic dialogue between carefully selected and interpreted extracts from participants.
Developing a vigorous experiential and/or existential account	Focus on the important experiential and/or existential meaning of participants’ accounts gives depth to the analysis.
Close analytic reading of participants’ words	Thorough analysis and interpretation of quoted material within the narrative helps give meaning to the data and the experience it describes.
Attending to convergence and divergence	Idiographic depth and systematic comparison between participants creates a dynamic interweaving of patterns of similarity and individual idiosyncrasy.

Table 1: The four quality indicators of good IPA (Nizza et al., 2021)

The data were translated from Afrikaans to English using the researcher’s own knowledge of the language and verified through a bilingual Professional Learning Community (PLC). Ethical clearances for this study were obtained from the Western Cape Education

Department, institutionally, as well as the respondents themselves. Informed consent, the freedom to withdraw from the study at any time without prejudice, anonymity and the rights of respondents were discussed with all participants who participated in the study.

7 FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The interviews with Bianca and Brian revealed three dominant themes. The first relates to teachers' lived experiences of teaching and learning at a rural high school, the second relates to teachers' lived experiences of the school context and the third theme relates to teachers' lived experiences of teacher professional development opportunities.

7.1 Teacher's Lived Experiences of Teaching and Learning At A Rural High School

Teaching and learning, in this context, refer to how teachers engage with their learners and the process of how they deliver the curriculum. Bianca noted that she was not able to cover the full curriculum as many learners struggle to read and write. She separates learners into ability groups, as noted below:

"I don't get to everything because there are some of them [learners] that are behind and I don't want to go on because of the slow learners ... but what I do many times is to separate the stronger learners and those who are slow and who really can't read. Those learners I just put one side" (Bianca, Female High School Teacher).

Bianca also noted that Fetal Alcohol Syndrome (FAS) heavily impacts on teaching and learning at the school and noted that teachers are not trained sufficiently to help affected learners:

"Many of these children, as I saw later when they came from the primary school to Grade 8, there are many FAS cases, Fetal Alcohol Syndrome cases, ... So let me

say Grade 9. There are about 10 to 12 cases in a class ... a person tries to, but we really [are] not trained and we really do not know how to help these children ... so I try to adjust and help where I can" (Bianca, Teacher).

The historical legacy of payment with alcohol continues to plague South Africa, particularly in the Western Cape Province where this practice was most rife (May, Marais, & De Vries et al., 2019). Larkin (2014) notes that the effects of the *dop* system (tot system), continue to have adverse health and developmental effects, particularly among rural farming communities. Despite the practice of *alcohol for services* being abolished, "current prevalence of the *dop* system range from 2% to 20% of labour payments in the Western Cape" (Larkin, 2014, Para. 1). Further to this, South Africa also has the highest reported levels of Fetal Alcohol Syndrome in the world: between 29 and 290 per 1000 live births (Olivier, Curfs, & Viljoen, 2016). Bianca's experiences of teaching and learning in her class demonstrate that many learners in her class are not at the requisite level for their age due to their inability to read as well as other developmental challenges. Due to her lack of training to deal with these learners, they are "put one side" as she focuses on learners who can complete the tasks thus putting these already vulnerable and challenged learners at a double disadvantage. Bianca's experiences strongly suggest that the effects of apartheid and its accompanying social practices are still evident in the teaching and learning experiences of teachers and learners and that there seems to be very little evidence that these effects will soon dissipate.

Further to this, limited resources, such as a lack of textbooks and a functional library, and limited access to ICTs also

impact on teaching and learning:

“In Afrikaans [language class] there are only two classes that have textbooks ... we can’t give them homework most times or give them copies ... because many times we don’t have ink or paper at the school, so that has a negative impact on learners ... we can’t give homework or give the child a book to learn for the exams; everything must now take place in the classroom” (Bianca, Teacher).

With regards to access to ICTs, she adds,

“We don’t have a [working] computer room, so I can’t send my kids to the lab. There is a lab, but I don’t know what is wrong with it. No one uses it” (Bianca, Teacher).

Bianca notes that even the library is not optimal:

“The library is now open, so they can read during breaks ... but they can’t take the books home” (Bianca, Teacher).

Bianca is also concerned about the lack of resources to ensure adequate, quality teaching and learning. School libraries and learning support tools, such as access to ICTs, enhance learners’ ability to search and gather information related to their schoolwork and their daily lives. In South Africa, very few schools have functional libraries, most of which are situated in historically white, coloured and Indian communities and, in cases where they do exist in poor communities, they are dysfunctional (Mojapelo & Fourie, 2014; DBE, 2020). In rural areas, even fewer of

these libraries exist (Dube, 2020). The lack of resources, as Bianca illuminates, limits the teaching strategies she can use in her lessons.

Brian noted that the relationships between teachers and learners are poor and that this affects teaching and learning at the school, as noted below:

“At this stage, [the relationship] is not ideal ... there was an incident in the past where things happened and the relationships with teachers caused many problems. Parents still come to me and say because of this teacher or that teacher, our children left the school ... because of the comments and negative attitudes by teachers, the learners left the school. [It could be because] many of our teachers in our time were trained by an institution that was based on a certain race ... by the colleges or at the Tech” (Brian, School Principal).

Positive teacher-learner relationships ensure optimal learner performance and foster a healthy school environment. As Martin and Collie (2019) note in their empirical study of high school learners, positive teacher-learner relationships predict greater schooling engagement and subsequently learner performance. Brian’s experiences suggest that one of the reasons learners disengage from teachers and subsequently learning is due to their poor relationships with teachers to the extent where learners drop out of school. Further to this, Brian also noted that the teachers’ behaviours may be attributed to the way they had been trained. Teachers trained before 1994 may still be using pedagogies inconsistent with a democratic dispensation that reflect the apartheid

ideologies of separate development and differential treatment of learners by race. Gardiner (2008) notes that teacher training colleges during apartheid were of a poor quality and were underpinned by fundamental pedagogics, which promoted authoritative teaching and learning and discouraged the development of critical thinking.

The experiences of Bianca and Brian show that teaching and learning at the school are not optimal and that this negatively affects both learners and teachers. They also suggest that the historical legacy of apartheid still impacts teaching and learning within schools in rural contexts making it challenging to realise social justice.

7.2 Teacher's Lived Experiences of Their School Context

School context here refers to the school environment which is multidimensional in character. Cohen et al. (2009) note that school culture or climate refers to the "quality and character of school life ... patterns of people's experiences ... [including] goals, norms, values, interpersonal relationships" (p. 1). In South Africa, principals are charged with creating a conducive teaching and learning environment (Van Jaarsveld & Mentz, 2021). When Brian was asked to describe his experiences of the school context, he immediately began describing the community in which the school is situated, noting the challenge with drugs, violence, crime and gang activity::

"This is a very poor community ... people from outside come to sell drugs in the area and it causes a surge in crime. It has a negative impact on the discipline of learners and the safety of our school. We have had many break-ins at school and last quarter they

stole the computer's hard drive through the window. They broke into the classes ... then, also because we have no fencing, it allows free access for the gangsters. So, they can come to the school at any time and move around. Two or three times they came to school and smoked dagga [cannabis]... there are also some learners that are involved with the gangs" (Brian, School Principal).

Bianca's lived experiences of the school context echo those of Brian as she also notes that the community in which the school is situated has high levels of poverty, unemployment and regular drug activity and that teachers and learners do not feel safe at school:

"The unemployment rate is very high, about 80% I can say. So what happens, the people who are unemployed begin to steal and break in, just to put something on the table ... this has a negative impact on learners because they come to school hungry ... and you never know these things until you talk to them ... I can tell you they don't feel safe ... we don't have a fence, so what happens every day, you see strange faces, people that don't belong here ... drug dealers come to school dressed like school kids" (Bianca, Teacher).

The experiences of Brian and Bianca suggest that, to understand the school context, it is important to understand the community in which the school is situated and that the two are not mutually exclusive. Gardiner (2008) argues that if we are to have meaningful interactions with

rural communities, their concerns need to be addressed because they are preoccupied with trying to tend to their basic needs.

Rural neighbourhoods are plagued by poverty, inequality and unemployment which are persistently high, and limit their ability to thrive (Mbanda & Ncube, 2021). Instances of violence, drug abuse, hunger and safety remain pressing concerns for teachers at this school, particularly as it seems some learners may be participating in illegal activities.

7.3 Teacher's Lived Experience Of Professional Development Opportunities

The effects of teacher professional development on learner performance, teacher content, pedagogical content knowledge, and teacher confidence and competence to teach has been well documented (Singh, 2020; Sayed et al., 2018). Thus, consistent and regular professional development opportunities are essential to ameliorate some of the challenges experienced by teachers who teach in challenging rural contexts. Bianca's views are indicative of the experiences of teachers at the school. The feedback from Bianca suggests that teachers are not continuously and consistently provided with professional development opportunities and that development is sporadic as noted in the quote below:

"[This year] absolutely nothing ... [but] last year we had this training from WCED ... about wellness and it was here at school. They came to give us training about how to work with children who were abused. It was from the social worker ... It helped a little bit because the minute a child comes to you and tells you that he has been abused and you, as a teacher does not report it, you

are also considered guilty. So with every incident, we inform the social workers, who then come to the school ... but they don't come regularly ... I feel that here at the school, it shouldn't be necessary for us to keep calling them; there should come a time when they know they need to come. They know there are many learners with these types of problems, and they do have the case files. So, come to school, come find out how the learners are doing ... so we have to call them before they come and then it can take a day or two before they actually come to see you and [I would also like to receive training on] ... how to work with children who are slower ... because we didn't get training on how to teach these learners and it pains me to think that you can't do much about this because your time is so limited ..." (Bianca, Teacher).

Teachers in rural areas need access to context specific professional development that allows them to address the unique challenges they face, improve learner performance, teacher confidence and motivation and, more importantly, to elevate the quality of the education system (Ullman, 2010; Singh, 2020).

8 CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Using a phenomenological approach, specifically Ricoeur's variant of philosophical hermeneutics and (social) justice, to understanding teachers' lived experiences of teaching and learning in a rural school in the Western Cape Province of South Africa, this paper argues that the South African government struggles to

provide good quality education to learners in poor rural schools and that teachers are not sufficiently supported. Through the voices of the teachers represented in this paper, we begin to understand, that the legacy of apartheid is so deeply woven into teachers' daily realities that the undoing of this legacy is seemingly impossible. More than 25 years after ushering in a new democratic dispensation and after the development of numerous policies that promote the values of democracy in and through education, teachers' and learners' lived experiences in rural areas demonstrate how fundamental human rights are violated every day and social justice is eluded. The goal of social justice is to ensure "full and equitable participation from all social identity groups in society that is mutually shaped to meet their needs" (Bell, 2016, p. 26). Thus, a recommendation to address the specific challenges faced by rural schools is to gain further insight into their lived experiences, to better inform interventions. Phenomenological research is well placed to provide this platform as the conduit to understanding the intersection between race, rurality and inequality in education so that future policy provisions aimed at improvement could be more effective and sustainable. Phenomenological research and hermeneutical endeavours allow for research respondents to become co-constructors of knowledge and this allows these respondents to inform the policies that aim to regulate their lives. This emancipatory approach gives voice to previously silenced cohorts and empowers the disempowered through active participation. Although phenomenological research is often critiqued for being self-indulgent, this is certainly not the case. Instead, by understanding the lived experiences of a few, it can provide social justice and quality education to the many.

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