

The exploration of the experiences of alienation in education for rural high school learners in the Eastern Cape province, South Africa



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This thesis is dedicated to my parents, Michael and Pearl Moleko, and grandmother, Princess Makhosazana Majeke; the most exceptional individuals I've met. Your presence in my life has been the greatest gift.

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Abstract

Rural high school learners - learners who attend schools in rural areas - face well-documented macro-level educational challenges: lack of access to social services, poor infrastructure and educational resources, pronounced disadvantage, and limited exposure to experienced teachers. Yet, very little is known about rural high school learners' experiences. Additionally, there is a dearth of information regarding rural high school learners' experiences from their perspectives. To remedy these knowledge gaps, the research was steered by the following questions, "How do rural high school learners in the Eastern Cape experience alienation in education?" "How is rurality framed in education policy, and how does this play a role in alienating rural learners in education?" This thesis used the theory of alienation in education as a guide to uncover the textured, in-depth, contextual experiences of rural learners in the Eastern Cape. More so, this thesis was conducted using qualitative research methodology. The study found that learners experienced varying, diverse, and opposing manifestations of powerlessness, estrangement, normlessness, and meaninglessness in education. However, significantly, it found that learners exercise multiple adaptive and adjustment strategies to actively confront and overcome the adverse structural forces and socio-economic conditions – assessed, conceptualised, and understood in this study through the prism of alienation in education.

Though theoretically, educational stakeholders' effectiveness is supported by legislation and policy, the study found that the universal approach to policymaking is a challenge and limitation to redressing the injustices of colonialism and apartheid. More so, the inadequacy or absence of policy implementation, the lack of knowledge about education policy, and possibly education policy being imperfect for the rural setting were found to be essential weaknesses in the policy landscape that adversely impact rural learners.

To diminish learner discontent, to safeguard learners from precarity, and to ensure that rural schools become fertile grounds for education and prosperity, the study recommended the following measures: the introduction of hostels, the implementation of the Language in Education Policy (1997) beyond Grades 1 to 3 to alleviate a significant component of learners' alienating experience in education, the establishment of rural specific provisions in existing policy documents and the restructuring of the current teacher allocation policy, and re-establishment of the rural incentive policy to support and incentivise teachers to teach in rural schools.

Keywords: Rural, high school, alienation in education, agency, policy, access to education, powerlessness, adaptive strategies.

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List of abbreviations

ANC	African National Congress
CAPS	National Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement
EC	Eastern Cape
ECDoE	Eastern Cape Department of Education
ESSS	Education Social Support Services
DBE	Department of Basic Education
DoE	Department of Education
GEAR	Growth Employment and Redistribution
FET	Further Education and Training
HEI	Higher Education Institutions
HSRC	Human Sciences Research Council
LTSM	Learning Teaching and Support Materials
MTBBE	Mother Tongue-Based Bilingual Education
NP	National Party
NEEDU	National Education Evaluation and Development Unit
NSNP	National School Nutrition Programme
OR Tambo	Oliver Reginald Tambo
PIRLS	Progress in International Reading Literacy Study
PPER	Postgraduate Education Research
PPN	Post-Provision Norms
SIAS	Policy on Screening, Identification, Assessment & Support
SA	South Africa
S&P	Standard and Poor Global Rating

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Style and format

Single quotation marks ‘ ’ – used to denote the writer’s emphasis.

Double quotation marks “ ” – signify direct quotes.

Indented text written in smaller font – used to signify direct quotes.

Square brackets within quotes [] – signify author’s own insertion in cited material.

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1. CHAPTER ONE – INTRODUCTION

1.1. Title

The exploration of the experiences of alienation in education for rural high school learners in the Eastern Cape.

1.2. Introduction and background

Despite policy implementors seeing education in South Africa as a tool in redressing the systematic and deliberate underdevelopment faced by the majority of Black South Africans under colonialism and apartheid, primary and high school education outcomes in the country remain inadequate and unsatisfactory, particularly in rural areas. This study explores the experiences of alienation in education for rural high school learners in the Eastern Cape, while situating their experiences within the broader educational and socio-economic context of South Africa. Rural high school learners are faced with challenging circumstances in an environment that is often neglected and, in some ways, forgotten. In addition, the study explores how policy frames rurality in education, and from this, the study attempts to formulate policy recommendations that may assist in improving the educational outcomes of rural high school learners.

This thesis utilises a definition which designates and describes “rural” as not only a geographic location or reality, but as depicting a particular vantage point that illustrates the contrasts (and similarities) between the urban and the rural in South Africa. Specifically related to education, this includes a focus on educational access, and matters of equity, equality, and justice. This study’s definition of rural is aligned to Halfacree (1993: 341), who argues that “the quest for any single, all-embracing definition of the rural is neither desirable nor feasible,” and by Pini, Moletsane & Mills (2014: 454), who write that “rurality is socially constructed, hybrid, imagined, relational, heterogeneous, dynamic and contested.”

Section 29 of the South African Constitution notes that “everyone has the right to a basic education, including adult basic education; and to further education, which the state, through reasonable measures, must make progressively available and accessible” (RSA, 1996a: 12). However, in their quest to receive education, rural learners in South Africa face challenges related to (rural) poverty and its associated deprivation and vulnerability. These challenges

impede their democratic right to education and hinder their opportunities for social and economic development later on in life (Hlalele, 2012b). The severity of poor education outcomes for South African learners is most acute in rural schools, with many rural families trapped in an unending cycle of poverty (National Planning Commission, 2012).

Exploring the experiences of alienation in education for rural high school learners in the Eastern Cape is warranted given the evidence of challenges and poor outcomes faced by learners in this region. The consequences for alienated learners include failure and/or dropping out, teenage pregnancy, teenage violence and crime, school absenteeism, and class disruptions (Martin, 2008; Schulz, 2011; Çağlar, 2013; Hascher & Hadjar, 2018). Many of these elements are perceptibly prevalent in rural high schools in the Eastern Cape.

I chose Mqanduli and its associated villages located in the Eastern Cape's O.R Tambo region as the site of this thesis as it is a rural area with numerous remote rural regions. Its demographic profile, topology, and socioeconomic make-up reflected many rural areas in the Eastern Cape, thus serving as the perfect microcosm of rural regions in the province.

1.3. Importance of study

Policy implementors see education in South Africa as a tool for redressing the systematic and deliberate underdevelopment forced on Africans under colonialism and apartheid. According to the National Planning Commission (2012), education is instrumental in achieving economic and social development. Despite this view, education outcomes in South Africa remain relatively inadequate and unsatisfactory (Gardiner, 2008). These inadequate and unsatisfactory results are demonstrated by four recent findings: firstly, half of every cohort of learners that enters the school system leave before the end of their twelve-year schooling period (Ilifa Labantwana et al., 2019). Secondly, the fact that in 2016, close to 80%¹ of Grade 4 learners in South Africa could not read for meaning in any language (Howie et al., 2016; Department of Basic Education, DBE, 2019b). Thirdly, of the 50 participating countries in the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS, 2016), South African learners in Grades 4 and 5 achieved the lowest reading literacy scores² – the worst-performing learners, termed “the most at-risk learners,” were boys in remote rural regions (Howie et al., 2016: 68). Lastly, the failure

¹ In 2021, the figure increased to 81% of Grade 4 learners in South Africa being unable to read for meaning in any language (DBE, 2023).

² In the PIRLS 2021 study, South Africa ranked last again. Moreso, it was the only country whose outcomes were worse than in 2016 (DBE, 2023).

to address inequality in education, where 3% of high schools produce more Mathematics or Physical Science distinctions than the remaining 97% (Spaull, 2019). Furthermore, over 90% of the 3% of top-performing high schools are former white-only schools (Spaull, 2019).

In 2005, the Department of Education (DoE) (2005a) conducted an evaluation of Grade 6 learners from urban, township, farm, rural, and remote rural areas, testing several subjects, including Language, Mathematics, and Natural Science. The study demonstrated that rural schools performed significantly lower than their urban counterparts in all tested subjects³. See Table 1 below:

Table 1. Pass rates from Grade 6 systemic evaluation (DoE, 2005a).

Type of School	Language	Mathematics	Natural Science
Pass rate (%)			
Urban	64	46	58
Township	40	26	42
Farm	34	24	37
Rural	29	22	35
Remote rural	23	19	30

Measuring the education outcomes of the South African schooling system, with a particular focus on rural schools, is important for four reasons: firstly, rural schools educate 40% of South African learners (Paxton, 2015; Hall & De Lannoy, 2018); secondly, the effects of poor rural education outcomes impact the larger society in various ways, including increased teenage pregnancy, teenage violence and crime, and high failure and dropout rates (Department of Basic Education, 2017; Human Sciences Research Council, 2005); thirdly, the continued

³ Language refers to the language of learning and teaching at the relevant schools (Department of Education, 2005a).

existence of high rates of rural-urban circular migration, “which spans a continuum from temporary work contracts in cities to an extended urban residence, followed by eventual retirement at home” (Njwambe, Cocks & Vetter, 2019: 414); and finally, focusing on rural schools brings to light the persistence of unequal resource allocation, during apartheid, that prioritised urban schools while neglecting rural schools, particularly schools in the former homelands (also known as Bantustans).

With the final point, homelands were desolate rural areas designated for Africans, with inadequate infrastructure and economic opportunities. These were derivative of the native reserves created under the Union of South Africa’s Land Act in 1913 (Cavanagh, 2016). The unequal resource allocation experienced in reserves under the Union of South Africa continued and intensified under apartheid, where Africans continued to be displaced from their land, under vicious coercion, and resettled in targeted regions to maintain racial segregation and oppression (Cavanagh, 2016; Westaway, 2012). Today, it is widely acknowledged that rural areas face particular challenges, particularly in former homelands, due to geographical segregation, social, economic, political government-sanctioned deprivation under colonialism, and apartheid (Maniar, 2021). Despite this acknowledgement, rural education is in dire straits. As such, this study has privileged the voices and experiences of rural learners, as it affirms that people living in rural areas are endowed with the capital to develop and employ strategies to uplift themselves. More so, the study confirms that rural high school learners exercise multiple adaptive and adjustment strategies to confront and overcome the adverse geographical, social, economic, and political structural forces they face.

Researchers have argued that the quantifiable indicators of supply, demand, and disabling environmental factors are the reasons why primary and high schools in South Africa, specifically rural schools, perform poorly (Chakaninka, Sichula, Sumbwa & Nduna, 2012; du Plessis & Mestry, 2019; Mulkeen & Chen, 2008; Macionis, 2012). Supply-side factors include the inability of rural schools to attract and retain teachers, the high learner-to-teacher ratio in rural schools, the lack of support and resources for rural teachers, and, finally, rural teachers’ inexperience (du Plessis & Mestry, 2019). Two critical inhibiting demand-side factors are firstly, the high opportunity costs associated with attending school, as many learners from rural areas are expected to participate daily in domestic and agricultural activities at home; and secondly, the often lack of encouragement they receive from parents and elders to go to school (Mulkeen & Chen, 2008; Macionis, 2012). Furthermore, disabling environmental elements

often include poor facilities and infrastructure, consisting of the absence of electricity, libraries, and access to clean water, and further exacerbated by poor roads and inefficient transport for the school and community at large (Chakaninka et al., 2012).

Studying alienation in education is vital as it is a qualitative dimension in education that is not easily quantifiable. In education research and analysis in South Africa, there is less focus on qualitative indicators, while quantitative indicators are often overemphasised (DoE, 2005b). However, qualitative aspects of education, including this study on alienation in education, may play an integral part in allowing learners to fully express their experiences and realities, at one level, and, at another, may assist in formulating education policies that look into but go beyond physical infrastructure, material conditions, and budgetary allocations.

In addition, studying alienation from a rural perspective is even more significant as minimal research focuses on rural education. A study by Nkambule, Balfour, Pillay & Moletsane (2011) titled *Discourses Underpinning Rurality and Rural Education Research in South African Postgraduate Education Research, 1994–2004* shockingly found that at 20 higher education institutions (HEIs) in South Africa, less than 2% of research was conducted in the areas of rurality and rural education. They found that:

Only 74 (out of a total of 3 776 theses and dissertations in the PPER [Postgraduate Education Research] database) focused on this area of research over a ten-year period. Of the 74, only 7 are doctorate theses, and 67 are masters... The small number of doctoral theses suggests a lack of interest in in-depth engagement with rurality and rural education research... Nevertheless, bearing in mind that this total represents a 10-year period from 20 HEIs in the country, it is of concern that rurality and rural education as an area of research still remains a marginalised area of research among scholars and postgraduate education students (Nkambule, Balfour, Pillay & Moletsane, 2011: 346).

Many stakeholders are instrumental in driving educational transformation and equality, including teachers, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), guardians, labour federations, school governing bodies, higher education institutions, the private sector, civil society, and communities. For example, guardians and communities not only provide homes and often advocate for learner equality, but they provide cultural knowledge, expertise, and adeptness that often go unacknowledged (Yosso, 2005). Furthermore, the extended family system in predominantly African communities usually works as a support structure for vulnerable

children (Matentjie, 2019). Thus, though integral to the education ecosystem, the analysis of the role played by these stakeholders provides a background against which the experiences of the learners can be explored. More so, teachers' experiences are well-documented, while research focusing on learners' is limited and on the periphery.

1.4. Objectives of study

The primary aim of this study was to determine how alienation features in education in the rural Eastern Cape, through exploring the experiences of rural high school learners. The secondary aim of this study was to explore how policy frames rurality in education in order to help devise policy recommendations that address potential gaps in policy.

The study was driven by the desire to be an active part in the improvement of educational outcomes in high schools, through investigating underexplored concerns and issues in education – including the experiences of rural high school learners – that go beyond demand, supply, and disabling environmental factors. In view of the fact that, even if all the demand, supply, and disabling environment constraints are resolved, learners still need to learn, be cooperative, and prepared to engage in school to achieve positive education outcomes (Livermore, 1994). Thus, a perspective that transcends quantitative elements of education will certainly contribute to scholarship in meaningful ways.

The study posits that to ensure rural learners stay in the education system and increase their prospects of human development, researchers need to examine their experiences from their perspective, in conjunction with investigating the historical drivers of poor outcomes in rural high school education. In this context, human development is defined as the heightening of an individual's choices and real freedoms that enable them to live a fulfilling and healthy life with an ability to pursue things they value. A diminishing of human development may result in an increased probability of poverty, deprivation, and ill-health (Alkire & Deneulin, 2009). This study argues that an unintended consequence of alienation may potentially be a reduction in human development for affected learners.

1.5. Research questions

The central research question that the study asked was: How do rural high school learners in the Eastern Cape experience alienation in education? To supplement inquiry into the main question, four related sub-questions were identified, namely:

1. How do rural high school learners (across gender, age, in and out of school) describe their experiences of alienation in education?
2. What are the central issues facing rural high school learners in the Eastern Cape socio-economic environment, and how do these play a role in the alienation of rural learners in education?
3. How is rurality framed in education policy, and how does this play a role in alienating rural learners in education?
4. In what ways do rural high school learners believe their school experience can be improved to counter their alienation?

1.6. Contribution of the thesis

The urgency for this research is founded on four realities: firstly, the dearth of literature on alienation in education in high schools in South Africa, particularly research concerning rural learners and their perspectives. Significantly, to the author's knowledge, this study is the first study on the alienation of education conducted in South Africa which empirically examines the experiences of high school learners. Secondly, the reality of the negative implications for alienated learners, including their high probability of dropping out of basic education (Department of Basic Education, 2017). Thirdly, there is a need to address the relative neglect of the study of alienation in the discourse of school failure. This study conceptualises school failure as the process of learners progressively disengaging from school, culminating in eventual exit from the school system (Hascher & Hadjar, 2018). Fourthly, there is scope to address the comparative inattention to qualitative indicators in education research and analysis in South Africa compared to quantitative indicators (DoE, 2005b). All these elements make necessary the exploration of the experiences of alienation in education of rural high school learners in the Eastern Cape. Undoubtedly, this study will contribute significantly to the existing body of knowledge of sociological studies on alienation in education, rural education, and education research, thus expanding the theoretical framework of alienation in education

and enhancing the provision of practical policy solutions to assist in the betterment of rural education outcomes.

The study notes that efforts to find a solution to the nexus of inequality, poverty, school failure and improve the outcomes of education are limited by the lack of rural learners' experiences more broadly, and, specifically, experiences of alienation. The study supports the assertion by Yosso (2005) that there is a need to amplify marginalised voices, which are often omitted in discourses on social justice.

The study aims to improve this knowledge deficit to help better the education outcomes of rural regions, which makes up approximately 35% of South Africa's population, and educate roughly 40% of the country's school-goers (Dube, 2020; World Bank, 2021).

1.7. The significance of the E.C. and high school and education policy.

The Eastern Cape is an important site of research on this topic because it is a rural province, with 65% of its population living in rural regions (Paxton, 2015). More so, the Eastern Cape is the poorest of the 9 South African provinces, with 72% of its population living below the poverty line (Kavese, 2017; S&P Global Market Intelligence, 2023). Furthermore, the majority of the 11,252 rural schools in the country are found in the Eastern Cape, KwaZulu Natal and Limpopo (Dube, 2020). Over 70% of rural children in South Africa live in these three provinces (Dube, 2020). In addition, the OR Tambo municipality – where this research took place – is one of the poorest municipalities in the country (Westaway, 2012). It is housed in the former homeland of the Transkei, which has an abundance of mud schools with poor infrastructure (Westaway, 2012). Former homeland residents are a “marginalised underclass,” with the average citizen leaving school with a poor Grade 10 qualification and, after that, becoming permanently unemployed (Westaway, 2012: 117).

Importantly, the study of alienation in the rural Eastern Cape can be used as a microcosm to investigate other rural regions in South Africa, particularly former homelands. While high school is an essential aspect of the education life cycle and an integral part of an individual's learning journey. In South Africa, typically, the minimum requirement to compete for post-high school education and training and employment opportunities is a matric⁴ certificate;

⁴ The National Senior Certificate, the school-leaving examination written at the end of Grade 12, is commonly known as Matric. Those who pass this examination are said to have matriculated (DBE, 2019).

obtained upon completion of national matric examinations (Department of Basic Education, 2019a). On the other hand, what makes policies important is their role in providing and setting an environment through their formulation and implementation; that allows stakeholders in the education eco-system to participate fully in improving education outcomes for rural learners. More so, the thesis' critical review of the universalisation of education policy in South Africa will highlight that in the rural context, policy does not ensure equity.

1.8. Historical overview of the Eastern Cape

1.8.1. Introduction

Whatever the adjustment of a young person may be, it is a product of forces beyond the individual. The whole system of interactions, the entire process of variables in context, produces categories, groups, boundaries and borders that adolescents somehow have to handle (Phelan, Davidson & Yu, 1998: x).

This extract from Phelan, Davidson, & Yu's (1998) seminal book *Adolescent World's Negotiating Family, Peers, and School* illuminates that learners' agency is located within the confines of various forces. These forces generate conditions, challenges, and opportunities that learners must navigate. It suggests that learners' agency operates within the bounds of their structural reality. Using secondary data, this section provides a historical overview of the Eastern Cape and uncovers the broader reality that learners encounter in the rural Eastern Cape before entering the classroom. The section highlights how schooling in the Eastern Cape (a largely rural province and former homeland), the OR Tambo region (one of the largest rural regions in the country), and Mqanduli (the closest town associated with the schools in the study) were all sculpted by and continue to be shaped by historical, socio-economic and geographical forces that learners "somehow have to handle" (Phelan, Davidson & Yu, 1998: x).

This section reveals the challenges prevalent in the broader learner environment that potentially cause, enable, expedite, and exacerbate the experiences of alienation in education in rural areas for high school learners. It suggests that structural, historical, and contemporary forces limit the agency of learners, and may initiate and accelerate alienation in education for rural learners.

1.8.2. Geographical setting

Mqanduli and its surrounding villages are located in the Eastern Cape's OR Tambo District Municipality, which falls within the former homeland region of Transkei. OR Tambo District Municipality "covers about 80% of what used to be the marginalised homeland of the Transkei" (Eastern Cape Provincial Government, 2022: 6).

Figure 1. Map of the OR Tambo District Municipality region [Enclosed in red]. Source: Google Maps.



Geographically, the Eastern Cape province is situated in the south-eastern part of the country, between Kwa-Zulu Natal and the Western Cape. It is shouldered by the Northern Cape and the Free-State on its western border and Lesotho to the north (Eastern Cape Socio Economic Consultative Council, ECSECC, 2022; Eastern Cape Provincial Government, 2022). In terms of size, the Eastern Cape ranks as the second largest province in the country. It is estimated to be roughly 170,000 square kilometres, equating to approximately 14% of South Africa's land mass (Eastern Cape Provincial Government, 2022; Ruiters, 2011).

Roughly 80% of the province's population are isiXhosa-speaking Africans. The population of Mqanduli is estimated to constitute 99% isiXhosa-speaking Africans (Eastern Cape Provincial Government, 2022). The OR Tambo region contains large populations residing in rural land, typified by mountainous and hilly geography, often with no tarred roads or infrastructure (Hadfield, 2021). This topography plays a role in rendering the daily school commute arduous for some learners. Later, the thesis proves how this challenging topography, coupled with the difficulties of commuting, contributes to alienating learners in education, due to the distance

of commutes, which lead to exhaustion for learners, which in turn affects their ability to participate and concentrate in class in varying degrees (Macupe, 2019; Khumalo, 2021; Sizani, 2022). These realities initiate and accelerate feelings of powerlessness among learners, as adverse weather conditions cause them to miss successive school days, restricting their autonomy in pursuing their educational aspirations.

Figure 2. Partial map of South Africa, showing the OR Tambo District Municipality [Enclosed in red]. Source: Google maps.



The three research sites chosen for the study were high schools situated in villages nearby and incorporated into the rural town of Mqanduli in the Eastern Cape. The two furthest schools are approximately 57 km away from each other. The central school is located about 15 km and 42 km from the two most outlying schools, respectively. The learners come from the various surrounding villages, with some residing near their schools; others must walk up to 6 hours a day to and from home to attend school.

1.8.3. Historical setting – The Transkei

As asserted in *The Making of a Racist State* by Bernard Magubane, sociologists study and explore “the past to see what light it throws on the present” (Magubane, 1996: x). In this light, it is therefore essential to understand the history of the Eastern Cape to fully comprehend its current circumstances, particularly the former Transkei region. That all three schools under study are located in the OR Tambo Municipality; that Mqanduli and surrounding villages are

all situated in a former homeland (Transkei) is not a background fact. In the 1800s, the Transkei was a term initially used to refer to the amalgamation of numerous territories of vast lands that stretched across the Kei River, north of the Cape Colony and South of Natal. The framing of these lands as the Transkei was a colonial conception, as these diverse and dynamic territories in the 1800s were inhabited by a varied mix of distinct, independent African communities and chiefs. Inhabitants included AmaBhaca, AmaThembu, AmaFengu, AmaPondo, AmaPondomisa, AmaHlubi, BaSotho, and AmaXhosa, whose customs and norms were wide-ranging and distinct, yet fluid and intersecting (Beinart & Bundy, 1987).

The colonial government of the Cape Colony began systematically encroaching on these independent people and lands around the 1750s, using direct and indirect methods to subjugate the region's inhabitants. These infiltration methods included establishing missionaries, instituting trade agreements and alliances with chiefs and headmen, and direct invasion and seizure of land for colonial use and ownership (Beinart & Bundy, 1987; Ngcukaitobi, 2021). From the 1800s, the Cape Colony government intensified its invasion and conquest of this region by annexing parts of the territory and imposing its rule by appointing magistrates and selecting its own headmen and chiefs around the 1850s (Beinart & Bundy, 1987; Ngcukaitobi, 2021; O'Malley, 2008). A concomitant of colonial rule was the imposition of colonial taxes and legislations such as the Glen Grey Act (1894), which enacted labour and land taxes payable by Africans to colonial administrators. The creation of some of the earlier colonial taxes and laws was intended to limit African land ownership and smallholder food production (Ntsebeza, 2011; Bouch, 1993).

There were ongoing battles between colonial governments and the inhabitants of this land before and during colonial expansion. The inhabitants led a series of resistance campaigns from the onset of colonial rule to the democratisation of South Africa in 1994 (Magubane, 1996). A series of intermittent Frontier Wars against colonialism occurred from 1779 through to 1878. These were led by African chiefs, such as Gcaleka and Mpondomse (Beinart & Bundy, 1987; Ngcukaitobi, 2021). The uprisings and battles against colonial imposition and rule in these lands failed to curb colonial incursion at the time. Subsequently, the colonial imposition and conception of these lands, as the "Transkei," solidified (Beinart & Bundy, 1987; Ngcukaitobi, 2021; Peires, 2011). By the end of the 1800s, colonial rule in the Transkei and surrounding regions had deepened. Colonial administration and dominion became increasingly intrusive, inflexible, and extensive. Thus, it diminished the power of African elites, progressives, chiefs,

and headmen who worked with or for colonial administrators. It also weakened autonomous African elites, progressives, and leaders who had maintained control over their land despite colonial conquest (Beinart & Bundy, 1987).

Concurrently from about 1890, colonial rule in the Transkei was “increasingly structured to increase and regulate the supply of migrant workers to the mines” (Beinart & Bundy, 1987: 30). More so, the colonial government initiated a deliberate involution of agricultural trade outside the territory, limiting the expansion of African business and the ability of local populations to produce adequate food for subsistence. Yet, some African families and communities were able to retain wealth through internal trade in the region, primarily focused on cattle and wool farming (Beinart & Bundy, 1987; Peires, 2011). By the 1880s, racism and the “use of racism as colonial policy” had been ongoing in South Africa since the arrival of the Dutch Settlers in 1652 at the Cape of Good Hope (Magubane, 1996: 3). Under the auspices of the Dutch East Indian Company (VOC), Dutch settlers introduced slavery at the Cape to aid agricultural production and other commercial activity (Guelke, 1989; Magubane, 1996).

However, the strengthening of state control by the Cape Colony colonial government to constrain the everyday activities of Africans, through legislation such as the Glen Grey Act of 1894, was instrumental in creating the Transkei as one of the key reservoirs of migrant labour needed to serve colonial commercial, industrial, domestic, and agricultural interests (Ntsebeza, 2011; Peires, 2011). In 1894, under the stewardship of Cecil John Rhodes (the then Prime Minister of the Cape Colony), the Cape Colony enacted the Glen Grey Act (1894), eight years after the discovery of gold in 1886. It sought to “deny Africans possession of land, ensuring the bulk of males would find employment in the colony” (Bouch, 1993: 2).

Although the systematic brutalisation of Africans by white settler communities had occurred since the 1650s, the thesis argues that the entrenchment and deepening of the migrant labour system and subsequent deliberate reduction of Africans’ ability to produce adequate food for subsistence during the 1890s combined to produce one of the most significant and enduring colonial legacies in the Cape Colony. This was further entrenched during apartheid rule from 1948, under which the region became the Transkei homeland. The reduction of subsistence farming forced families to rely increasingly on labour migration and migrant wages, leaving a permanent mark on the OR Tambo region and Mqanduli that is still prevalent today (Hajdu, Neves & Granlund, 2020). This is evidenced by, firstly, the contemporary patterns of rural-

urban migration that mirror the colonial and apartheid eras, with high rates of rural-urban circular migration (Njwambe, Cocks & Vetter, 2019); and secondly, the vast rural populations in the OR Tambo region which today remain unengaged in substantial agricultural production (Hajdu, Neves & Granlund, 2020).

Progressively, the region's economic structure was shaped by the mass labour demands for mining and mining-related industrial activity, including railway, construction, and ports. According to Harrington, "the former Transkei homeland has always made up a dominant proportion of the [mining] industry's labour force" (Harrington, 2004 in Harrington, McGlashan & Chelkowska, 2004: 5). The thesis thus argues that it is the legislations enacted during both the colonial and apartheid periods that largely forced African families in the Eastern Cape to rely on labour migration. Migrant labour played a significant role in distorting family configuration in the contemporary Eastern Cape, directly or indirectly resulting in parent-less households, female-only households, child-headed households, and the absence of role models in rural areas (Hajdu, Neves & Granlund, 2020). Today, these historic issues play a significant role in alienating learners in education, as will be detailed in chapters 5 to 11 of this thesis.

The creation of the Union of South Africa in 1910 intensified already extreme, existing systems of subjugation and exploitation Africans faced. The Union government instituted the Land Act in 1913. In *Native Life in South Africa*, Plaatje ([1916] 1991) detailed what this meant for Africans:

Awakening on Friday morning, June 20, 1913, the South African Native found himself, not actually a slave but a pariah in the land of his birth. The Natives' Land Act of 1913 decreed, in the name of his Majesty the King. It shall be unlawful for Natives to buy or lease land, except in the scheduled Native areas. And under severe pain and penalties they are deprived of the bare human rights of living on the land, except as servants in the employ of whites (Plaatje, [1916] 1991: 1).

The Act (1913) confined African land ownership to 7% (later to 13%) of the total area of the Union, effectively allowing the white minority of settlers to own and accumulate wealth from 90% of the land (Ntsebeza, 2011; South African Government, 2013). It effectively consolidated the annexing and seizing of land by the colonial government in the Transkei and other regions.

The National Party's (NP) ascent into power in 1948 further subordinated Africans. It deepened existing structural methods of oppression and exploitation. Instrumental to the Afrikaner-led NP's segregationist plan to further entrench white minority rule (and perpetuate African enslavement) was a policy of dividing and isolating different ethnicities into autonomous self-governing states, using the Promotion of Bantu Self-Government Act of 1959 (Ntsebeza, 2011; Hadfield, 2021). This was a continuation of the Glen Grey Act of 1894 and the Native Land Act of 1913. The states created by the apartheid government were the Ciskei, Transkei, KwaZulu, QwaQwa, Bophuthatswana, KwaNdebele, KaNgwane, Lebowa, Gazankulu, and Venda. The foundations for these independent states (and institutionalised racism that underpinned their administration) were established approximately 250 years before the NP came into power, by the Dutch settlers under the auspices of the VOC and British imperialists, including Cecil John Rhodes (O'Malley, 2008). During apartheid, these newly created states were referred to as homelands. While homelands were created using the same law [Promotion of Bantu Self-Government Act of 1959], each had unique dynamics and happenings. Despite the suppression of homelands, they became pivotal in the struggle and resistance against British and Dutch colonialism and apartheid (Njwambe, Cocks & Vetter, 2019). Reportedly, over a third of political prisoners in South Africa came from the Eastern Cape region, predominately from the former Ciskei and Transkei homelands (Hoeane, 2011; Ruiters, 2011).

1.8.4. Bantu education

A cornerstone of the NP's policy to subordinate Africans and establish a legacy of even more unequal and differentiated outcomes in South Africa was the enactment of the Bantu Education Act in 1953. The Bantu Education Act introduced Bantu Education, a narrow, diminished education system exclusively for Africans, which still has strong residual effects today. It presented a disadvantaged curriculum and education system that re-established and further bolstered the pre-apartheid and colonial objective of "Native Education." The Bantu Education Act nefariously restricted education opportunities for Africans, guaranteeing that the African population remained as cheap, low-skilled, disposable labourers (Harvey, 1980; Anderson, 2020; Nkomo, 2021).

Central to Bantu Education was its enactment in the independent homelands, referred to by Hendrik Verwoerd, then Minister of Native Affairs as the Bantu's "own community," saying:

There is no place for him [the Bantu] in the European community above the level of certain forms of labour, for that reason it is of no avail for him to receive a training which has as its main aim absorption in the European community. Until now, he has been subject to a school system which drew him away from his own community and misled him by showing him the green pastures of European society in which he is not allowed to graze (Tabata, 1980: 6).

With the enacting of Bantu Education, African education was now centrally controlled by Verwoerd. Verwoerd purposefully designed conditions that were averse to nurturing learners, ensuring that African schools remained under-resourced and overcrowded. In addition, he ensured that Africans were taught an inferior curriculum that underdeveloped and neglected their cognitive abilities to guarantee their servitude in a system benefiting the accumulation of wealth – in all its manifestations – for the minority white populations in the country (Ndlovu, 2017; Nkomo, 2021).

Bantu Education was met with resistance and fury by Africans, most notably in the 1976 Soweto Uprisings, where learners in high schools refused to be taught and damaged what they deemed as instruments of indoctrination and oppression (Ndlovu, 2017). These student-led protests resisted and repudiated schools that were teaching in Afrikaans, schools teaching an inferior curriculum, beerhalls in the townships, Bantu Administration buildings, and other government buildings, through protests and confrontation with those working at those sites (Nkomo, 2021; Ndlovu, 2017).

The introduction of Bantu Education conveys that African education was seriously undermined by the colonial and Apartheid governments. What is of importance here is how, in the new democratic South Africa, the Eastern Cape, particularly the OR Tambo region, continues to suffer the dire impacts of historical policies. More so, the thesis posits that the cumulative outcomes of various racist legislation, including the Bantu Education Act (1953), the Promotion of Bantu Self-Government Act (1959), the Glen Grey Act (1894), the Native Land Act (1913), and years of systematically obstructing African learners from learning linger and endure today. This reality plays an inordinate role in the alienation in education of learners in the rural Eastern Cape. This is exemplified by rural areas and villages in the former homelands, including the OR Tambo region, continuously obtaining poor educational outcomes in contemporary times.

1.8.5. Inherited and contemporary socio-economic burdens of the Eastern Cape

The creation and demarcation of South Africa's new provincial borders in 1993 were contested and contentious (Ruiters, 2011; van Niekerk, 2012). What emerged was the creation of 9 provinces: Eastern Cape, Free State, Gauteng, Kwa-Zulu Natal, Limpopo, Mpumalanga, Northern Cape, North-West, and Western Cape. These were a product of amalgamating the four provinces of the Union and apartheid South Africa: the Cape, Orange Free State, Natal, and Transvaal, with the former Bantustan independent states, namely Ciskei, Transkei, KwaZulu, QwaQwa, Bophuthatswana, KwaNdebele, KaNgwane, Lebowa, Gazankulu, and Venda (Ruiters, 2011; van Niekerk, 2012). According to Picard (2005: 28), the newly created province of the Eastern Cape "inherited the poorest populations, the most burdens, and the worst structural problems of the country." Picard's (2005) sentiments are further affirmed by Ramadiro & Porteus (2011: 450) who claim that "poor and rural communities in South Africa are bedevilled by a slate of historical and contextual realities, in which the characteristics of the rurality constructed by apartheid's political and social neglect are pre-eminent."

Historically, the Transkei primarily served as a reservoir and supplier of cheap labour to mining, agricultural, manufacturing, and domestic production. By the 1930s, nearly 50% of black miners came from regions in the Eastern Cape, particularly the Transkei (Peires, 2011). However, the contribution of the mining industry to the economy started to decline from the 1980s, and South Africa started to deindustrialise, gradually shifting away from primary sectors (such as mining, agriculture, and manufacturing) into secondary and tertiary sectors (Moleko & Swilling, 2020; van Niekerk, 2012). This resulted in the Eastern Cape increasingly losing already-insecure and low-paying jobs. This further destabilised an already-troubled region. It now had to grapple with a loss of income and remittances traditionally sourced from the mining and manufacturing industries (van Niekerk, 2012). More so, even before 1994, certain areas in the Eastern Cape which were subsidised by the apartheid government (including Butterworth in the Transkei and Dimbaza in the Ciskei) had begun to collapse due to the withdrawing of apartheid government incentives and support. These areas were funded as part of the apartheid's government industrial policy to bolster the falsehood that independent homelands were legitimate, self-sustaining, autonomous governments (Mills, 2011).

This thesis concurs with the proposition put forward by Picard (2005: 28) who argues that the Eastern Cape “inherited the poorest populations, the most burdens and the worst structural problems of the country.” This thesis purports that these structural problems facing the rural Eastern Cape, including the OR Tambo region, include but are not limited to high unemployment, high populations living with poverty, youth dependency, low household income, child deprivation, and hunger were inherited from colonialism and apartheid. The thesis will highlight how these factors play a significant role in the alienation of learners in education, as detailed in chapters 5 to 11. In the post-apartheid period, the democratic government of South Africa outwardly promoted socially inclusive human rights for all, yet in reality, it enacted neo-liberal, market-driven policies in education and other sectors (Lemon, 2004). These policies limit the choices of the predominately African poor post-1994, and compels rural Africans in the Eastern Cape to attend government fee-free schools (Lemon, 2004).

The Eastern Cape is South Africa’s poorest province and has more unemployed than employed people (ECSECC, 2022; Statistics South Africa, 2022b). Using the expanded definition of unemployment⁵, 52% of the working-age population in the Eastern Cape is unemployed, while 44% of the total working-age population is unemployed (Statistics South Africa, 2022b). Worryingly, the cohort most vulnerable to unemployment is the youth. The cohorts aged between 25 and 34 years and 15 and 24 years documented 59% and 77% unemployment rates, respectively (ECSECC, 2022; Statistics South Africa, 2022b). Over 50% of household income in the Eastern Cape comes from grants (38%) and remittances (13%) (Maluleke, 2020). Only 39% comes from salaries or wages, and roughly 10% comes from either pensions (4%) or other sources (6%) (Maluleke, 2020).

In 2022, the total population of the Eastern Cape was recorded at 6,676,691. It accounts for 11% of the total population of South Africa (Statistics South Africa, 2022a). The OR Tambo District Municipality is the most populated region of the Eastern Cape, with a population of 1,547,308 (Kavese & Mbali, 2022). It ranks within the 5 most populated districts in the country (Kavese & Mbali, 2022). 99% of OR Tambo inhabitants are black (Kavese & Mbali, 2022). 53% are female, and 47% are male (Kavese & Mbali, 2022). Despite the large population, it

⁵ “Unemployed persons, according to the expanded definition are those aged between 15 and 64 years who: a) were not employed in the reference week; and b) were available to work but did not look for work either because they are discouraged from looking for work... or did not look for work for other reasons other than discouragement” (Statistics South Africa, 2022b: 8).

ranked 44 out of 44 districts in terms of poverty. Its population has the greatest amount of persons “living below the minimum subsistence level” (Kavese & Mbali, 2022: 6).

With these unacceptable levels of poverty and unemployment, it is not surprising that the Eastern Cape has the highest net migration of people in South Africa. More people are leaving the Eastern Cape than those coming into the province (Edwards, 2011; Statistics South Africa, 2022a). Motivating factors for those who choose to migrate away from the area include high rates of unemployment and the distinctly rural nature of the province and region (Edwards, 2011; Kavese, 2017; Statistics South Africa, 2022a). This is another example of how contemporary rural-urban migration patterns mirror the colonial and apartheid-era patterns.

The OR Tambo region has a young population, with children from 0 to 14 years accounting for 38% of the population, while youth from 15 to 34 years account for roughly 34% of the population (Kavese & Mbali, 2022). Thus, the youth and child population comprise 72% of the OR Tambo population (Kavese & Mbali, 2022). Those aged 35 to 64 years account for 28% of the population (Statistics South Africa, 2022a). This imbalance of age, coupled with high children: adult ratios and elevated rates of youth unemployment, result in high levels of youth dependency and the decreasing availability of resources for children due to fewer employed people in homes. Subsequently, this reduces the income tax base and increases the need for state assistance (Kavese & Mbali, 2022).

According to Maluleke (2020), the Eastern Cape province ranks as one of the two most deprived provinces in relation to child deprivation and poverty. Barnes et al. (2009: 191) remark that “within the Eastern Cape, the worst regions for children to live in, are former homelands regions.” Approximately 80% of children in the Eastern Cape are defined as being multidimensionally poor (Maluleke, 2020). Multidimensional poverty means that children are deprived and have poor access across a wide array of human rights and wellbeing, including “nutrition, health, child development, education, child protection, water, sanitation and hygiene, housing, and information. A child is considered multidimensionally poor if they are deprived in at least three dimensions out of the seven analysed” (Maluleke, 2020: 4). 88% of children residing in rural areas are defined as multidimensionally poor compared to 41.3% of the children living in urban areas. More than 80% of households where no adult is employed suffer from the crippling scourge of multidimensional poverty compared to the rate of 57% when one adult is employed (Maluleke, 2020).

According to Maluleke (2020), low levels of education are associated with high levels of poverty. Therefore, the educational levels of the OR Tambo region are an indication of poverty and deprivation. The OR Tambo region has dreadfully low levels of education. Dishearteningly, more than 50% of the population are reported to have no formal education or only limited primary education (Kavese & Mbali, 2022). Of this 50%, approximately 11% have no education and 40% have little primary education (Kavese & Mbali, 2022). Of the remaining 49%, 6% have completed primary education and 30% have secondary education. Only 9% have reportedly matriculated (Kavese & Mbali, 2022). This thesis posits that these high rates of youth unemployment and low levels of education are social and economic crises which produce social harms. Unemployed and out-of-school youth are susceptible to various social ills, which they would typically be safeguarded from at school or work.

Furthermore, there is a high school-dropout rate in these rural communities in which learners reside in. According to Isaacs (2021: 1):

School dropout is not a once-off event marked by a child leaving school. It is a gradual process of becoming vulnerable that takes many forms, including not learning, not performing academically, being disengaged, being depressed, being hungry, falling pregnant and eventually leaving the school altogether.

In the Eastern Cape, roughly 45% of the learners who enrolled for Grade 1 in 2008 dropped out between Grade 10 and matric – before writing their matric examination in 2019 (Ilifa Labantwana et al., 2019; National Treasury, 2020). Compared to the Western Cape, a predominately urban province, only 16.4% of learners dropped out between Grade 10 and the writing of the matric examination in the same period (National Treasury, 2020). Nationally, less than half of the learners who start Grade 1 go on to pass their matric examinations (Ilifa Labantwana et al., 2019; National Treasury, 2020). This high dropout rate often causes learners who do remain in school to feel estranged from their dropout peers. This study's findings shall highlight that rural high school learners who remain in school develop feelings of isolation from not only these peers who are out of school, but from the community at large, which already has a low educational rate.

In the Eastern Cape, older women overwhelmingly shoulder the burden of childcare (Ngumbela, 2021). There is a high prevalence of female-only, typically grandmother-only, headed households (Ngumbela, 2021). According to Njwambe, Cocks & Vetter (2019: 423):

Parents' absenteeism due to labour migration has had a detrimental effect on children, as their parents were unable to play an active role in their lives. The era of democracy has seen an increase in migration, particularly in female migrants. This has contributed even further to the breakdown of family structures as many young children are now being placed under the care of extended family members.

According to Hall (2022), little research has been done specifically on child-only households in South Africa. Nevertheless, analysis by the University of Cape Town (UCT) Children's Institute notes that more than "70% of all children in child-only households live in three provinces: the Eastern Cape, Limpopo, and Kwa-Zulu Natal" (Hall, 2022: 3).

Children typically reside in child-only family configurations due to guardians either working as migrant labourers or looking for employment in more affluent regions; the need for children to obtain easier access to schooling during school terms; and the death of a primary caregiver (Hill, Hosegood & Newell, 2008; Hall, 2022). Dishearteningly, children living in child-only households frequently face hunger and poor nutrition (Thobejane & Lorraine, 2022). In the research sites, learners frequently noted that they resided alone or in child-headed households in rental properties, primarily to access schooling during the school term. The learners referred to this configuration as *ukugxamisa* which loosely translates to "renting."

A recent study conducted on the stunting of children in the Mqanduli, where the learners go to school, found that 25% of children in the area under the age of 5 years suffered from child stunting (Mabaso, Menyatsoe, Manda, Müller & Gresse, 2022). Victora et al. (2008) and Black et al. (2013) documented the following as causes of child stunting: long-lasting nutritional deficiency, frequent illness or infections, the absence of adequate psychosocial engagement and stimulation, inadequate water supply and poor sanitation, deficient or absent healthcare facilities, and poverty. Ominously, the impact of stunting follows children into schooling, adolescence, and adulthood, as it is linked to enduring cognitive shortcomings, learning difficulties, and employment challenges (Victora et al., 2008; Black et al., 2013).

In addition to child stunting, in 2021, it was reported that close to 500,000 children in South Africa suffered from daily hunger (van der Berg, Patel & Bridgman, 2022). At the same time, 40% of households stated they had run out of money for food (van der Berg, Patel & Bridgman, 2022). Government attempts to alleviate this painful reality through the National School Nutrition Programme (NSNP), which provides one meal a day to learners during school periods

(Mulaudzi, 2023). The Eastern Cape is troubled by a lack of access to clean water, specifically in rural areas. In the *Nutritional Status of Children* study conducted in Mqanduli, researchers found that:

55% [of caregivers] collected water from a dam, river, or spring. Of the remainder, 38% accessed communal water and 7% rainwater. None of the study participants had piped water in their home (Mabaso et al., 2022: 22).

This occurs despite Section 27(1) of the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa (1996) proclaiming that, “everyone has the right to have access to healthcare services and sufficient food and water” and Section 27(2) of the Constitution (1996) proclaiming “the state must take reasonable legislative and other measures, within its available resources to ensure the realisation of the right to adequate food and water” (Constitution of South Africa, 1996).

The study argues that substance abuse among school-going children, including of alcohol or other illicit drugs, is a form of alienation, noted as *normlessness in education*. More so, the thesis argues that substance abuse among school-going children may lead to further estrangement from education as these learners may become less inspired or involved at school. They may be at a greater risk of absenteeism and poor performance, which may lead to the eventual, premature exiting from the school system (Isaacs, 2021). Rural areas are endowed with taverns, *shebeens*, and liquor outlets that are near to schools; these often do not prohibit minors from purchasing alcohol (Maserumule, Skaal, & Sithole, 2019). The Eastern Cape has over 7,000 licensed trading facilities, yet only 18 inspectors to examine the compliance of these establishments (Jubase & Sgqolana, 2022). This easy access, relative cheapness of alcohol, peer pressure, and the increasing absence of caregivers make alcohol a desirable substance for many teenagers in rural areas (Seggie, 2012). According to Makhubule (2012), in rural regions, the prevalence of dimensions of social exclusion including poverty, high unemployment, high dropout rates, and the absence of sufficient social support networks contributes to the use and production of homemade alcohol. In addition, Mokwena & Setshego (2021) and Makhubele (2012) highlight that the weakening of family configurations and societal relationships within a community also push rural populations to indulge in alcohol and other illicit substances to escape the pressures of social exclusion.

On 26 June 2022, tragically, 21 children under 18 years old died in a tavern in the Eastern Cape. The youngest victim was reportedly 13 years old. Though the cause of the deaths remain unknown, these minors were all drinking at a tavern (Jubase & Sgqolana, 2022). Ms Nozipho Xulu, the former Director of Safety, Enrichment and Sport for the DBE, once said in Parliament:

The use of alcohol is topping the charts of abuses in schools, with 34.9% of learners using alcohol. This abuse affects the mental and physical health and academic performance of learners, often leading to accidents, injuries, crime and violence (Parliament Monitoring Group, 2014).

This correlates with a research finding by the South African Community Epidemiology Network on Drug Use, which that noted that alcohol remains the dominant substance abused in the Eastern Cape (Dada, et al., 2018).

1.8. Outline of thesis

This chapter, **Chapter one**, introduced the topic and provided background to the study. **Chapter one** also gave a brief synopsis of the study's primary positions, that rural high school learners experience a state of disaffection and discontentedness, which in this study has been assessed, conceptualised, and understood through alienation in education. It gave an overview of the instrumental aspects of the study, including the aims, objectives, key research questions, and the contribution of this thesis to existing knowledge. In addition, **Chapter One** provided the historical overview of the study and gave a detailed historical and contemporary account of the rural Eastern Cape. It documented that it is a space produced by historical forces, including (colonialism and apartheid) and reproduced by recent history (the democratic dispensation from 1994 onwards) in South Africa, through its concomitant laws and contemporary economic, social, and cultural influences. The chapter underlined how it is a space produced by geographic and spatial realities. Revealing that before learners enter schooling, they are faced with structural and subjective circumstances they must deal with, which alienate them directly or leads to alienation; circumstances whose outcomes spill over into their schooling.

Chapter two then goes on to review key literature on schooling in South African high schools, emphasising schooling in rural regions. More so, the first part of the chapter explores literature

on the phenomenon of alienation in education, while also looking at instrumental educational legislations and policy documents focused on basic education that impact rural learners. The second part of **Chapter two** delivers the framework used in the thesis, alienation, as conceptualised by Karl Marx and Melvin Seeman, while also providing its application to education. The chapter further provides the critical conceptual frameworks used in the study while also highlighting how the theoretical framework of alienation employed is not neutral but a response to exploitation and structural injustices faced by the oppressed. Structural injustices are defined as “situations of injustices which perpetually produce and reproduce wrongs” (Young, 2006: 709). Importantly, this chapter notes that alienation is a framework to understand social phenomenon that has been used by various members of society who have felt disregarded and estranged “as a political, sociological, or psychological concept to indicate their perceived separation from the mainstream of society” (Gereluk, 1974: 1), thus making it a relevant instrument to study the experiences of learners attending school in rural areas.

Chapter three thoroughly examines the methodologies and research strategies used in the data gathering, analysis, and interpretation. It explains why I chose to conduct a sociological study using qualitative research methodology. I highlight that the use of qualitative research was appropriate because my aim was to understand and describe the experiences of rural learners and the meanings they ascribe to their experiences (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). In addition, the chapter highlights the revisions made to the methodological approach, particularly the change from deductive coding to inductive coding. **Chapter three** also outlines the ethical considerations brought on by the study and the ethical processes employed in the thesis. Also outlined are the limitations, challenges, and experiences that occurred during the study due to employing qualitative research strategies and techniques.

Chapter four delves into the lives of learners currently schooling in rural areas. It specifically provides learners’ accounts of their experiences of discontent and marginalisation assessed through the concept of alienation in education. In addition, the chapter describes learners’ accounts of the strategies they use to uplift themselves from the ubiquitous structural violence they face. These accounts are based on primary data collected from learners and former learners who dropped out the system without completing high school. In addition, policy administrators were interviewed. These groups provided varying experiences of both alienation and agency in education, which traverse the boundaries of family configuration, grade, gender, age, place of origin, or dwelling.

Chapter five is the first of two discussion chapters. In many ways, this is the central chapter of the study, arguing that rural high school learners experience a state of disaffection and discontentedness, which, in this study, has been assessed, conceptualised, and understood through alienation in education. This study used five manifestations of alienation in education, namely estrangement or isolation, meaningless, normlessness, and powerlessness, which all indicate various forms of discontentedness. Approaching learner experiences from the lens of alienation in education is a useful analytical tool for uncovering and understanding the inextricably linked relationships between individuals (learners) and society, encompassing the family, school and schooling, peers, the community and the overall socio-economic environment that the learners inhabit. Furthermore, **Chapter five** highlights how learners' experiences of alienation in education typically manifest as, firstly, isolation or estrangement from their classmates, teachers, and community and secondly, a sense of powerlessness in directing their academic path. The thesis argues that rural high schools face a dimension of powerlessness in education induced by social injustice, which permeates into other aspects of alienation in education, indicating that the categories of alienation in education are not discrete or disconnected but are inextricably associated. This chapter also discusses that rural high school learners do not typically suffer from meaningfulness. Nevertheless, it highlights how rural high school learners have an understanding of the structural landscape beyond high school horizons, which causes them to question the utility of exiting the school system equipped only with a matric certificate or, even worse, dropping out before matric. The chapter also contends that learners have varied experiences of normlessness in education, from non-existence to explicit representations of dysfunctional behaviour that is antithetical to school and societal conduct. It further identifies a new dimension of normlessness – teacher and school dysfunction – displayed in rural schools, as perceived by the learners.

Chapter five simultaneously illustrates that learners exercise multiple adaptive and adjustment strategies to confront and overcome the adverse structural forces and socio-economic conditions characteristic of the rural Eastern Cape that hinder and restrain their autonomy. The chapter highlights that some of the adaptive and adjustment strategies employed by learners to uplift themselves include resiliency and agency; hustling and navigation to succeed; self-sufficiency; personal and psychological motivation to push through challenges; principles anchored on future aspirations to uplift their families out of poverty; and, finally, understanding the structural landscape beyond high the high school horizon. These strategies prove that although external structures constrain learners, no learner is truly powerless.

Chapter six delivers the findings from in-depth interviews conducted with five key policymakers and administrators from the district and regional municipal offices. It conveys the sentiments of policymakers on the framing of ‘rural’ in education, the role of policy in education in rural areas, and how this may play a role in alienating learners.

Chapter seven, the second discussion chapter, argues that alienation in education can be partly attributed to the framing of “rural” in education policy. The chapter highlights that the policy approach applied in South African education policy, typified by a universal approach to policymaking with no concern for regional and local nuances, habitually fails to mention “rural” or “urban” in policy documents. By ignoring rurality as a perspective, rural learners are disadvantaged. In addition, this chapter describes the various ways in which learners are alienated from education because of direct policy shortcomings, including a lack of or inadequate policy implementation, a lack of knowledge about educational policy, and the possibility that education policy is imperfect for the rural setting.

1.9. Conclusion

Chapter one chronicled the fundamental elements of the study, notably the introduction and background, the importance of the study, objectives, key research questions, gaps in the literature, and potential contributions and significance of the dissertation study. In addition, it outlined the structure of the thesis and provided a crucial and detailed historical context of the Eastern Cape. **Chapter two** will now provide a rigorous review of the theoretical and empirical literature on topics relevant to the thesis, such as alienation and rural education.

2. CHAPTER TWO – LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Introduction

Since it is these [rural teachers, parents and learners] who tend to bear the brunt of marginalisation and the negative impact of social crises, turning their gaze on the challenges affecting them and working with them to address these is likely to yield more positive fruit than doing research [about and] on them (Moletsane, 2012: 6).

This extract from Moletsane succinctly documents the need to focus on and work jointly with pivotal actors in education operating in rural areas (including learners) to foster social change. She argues that social change in rural areas remains elusive in part because research on rural participants tends to ignore their voices. She expressed these sentiments in a paper titled *Repositioning educational research on rurality and rural education in South Africa: Beyond deficit paradigms* (2012), which looks into matters impacting education in rural areas in South Africa.

Across the world, education has been heralded as the great equaliser of society; an instrument to cultivate children's abilities, enhance their prospects of happiness, facilitate their integration into society, and ensure their fulfilment and attainment later in life (Peruzzi, 2015; Hascher & Hadjar, 2018; Duncan, 2021). In South Africa, education is seen as a tool to redress the unjust policies and practices of colonialism and apartheid that systematically marginalised Africans (Hlalele, 2012b). Internationally, education occupies a central focus in the development of society, as other dimensions of welfare, including health, self-esteem, happiness, political, social, and civil participation are impacted by and dependent on education (Dieltiens & Meny-Gibert, 2012; Peruzzi, 2015; Mayombe, 2016). The social significance of education is universally preserved, demonstrated by its recognition by Article 26 of the United Nations and Section 29 of the South African Constitution as a universal human right (Government of South Africa, 1996a; van Breda & Dickens, 2015; United Nations, 2021).

This chapter reviews the relevant literature on rural education in South Africa, how it impacts rural learners and the phenomenon of alienation in education. This literature review, firstly, highlights some of the critical discussions historically engaged by scholars exploring education in rural areas; secondly, it identifies gaps not sufficiently addressed by the literature on rural

education and alienation in education; and, lastly, it notes the significant thematic areas in literature on high school education. The chapter is divided into the following major subsections, namely: the “rural” in rural education, rural education in South Africa; the experiences of learners schooling and teachers teaching in rural areas; contemporary governance challenges in the Eastern Cape which impact the provision of education; an overview of select government policy that affects schooling in rural regions; universalism and particularism in policymaking; the divergent outcomes of public education; free and fee-charging schools; and an overview of the literature on alienation in education.

2.1.2. The “rural” in rural education

Nkambule, Balfour, Pillay & Moletsane (2011) recognise that scholarship on rural learners and rural school environments should focus on their unique challenges and specific contexts. However, they further postulate that there is limited research on rurality and rural education in South Africa, noting that “historically, rurality and rural education have been marginalised bodies of knowledge in South Africa” (Nkambule, Balfour, Pillay & Moletsane, 2011: 341). It is interesting that the authors use the terms rural and rurality interchangeably (Goldsmith, Puskin & Stiles, 1993; Cromartie & Bucholtz, 2008; López-i-Gelats, Tàbara & Bartolomé, 2009; Morton et al., 2014; Nelson & Nguyen, 2023). This suggests that rurality and rural in the literature are often indistinguishable and are typically operationalised as synonyms.

Smith, Lynn & Zopf (1970) and Smith (1984) document that historically, rural communities are connected by several characteristics relative to urban areas that include having limited occupations, having sparsely populated communities, possessing lower populations, possessing more vast unaltered physical landscape, exhibiting simpler social differentiation and social stratification, and being endowed with fewer prospects for social mobility although exhibiting deeper social solidarity. According to Nash (2011), when juxtaposing the rural with the urban, these characteristics align with the concepts proposed by Emile Durkheim (1972), mechanical solidarity and organic solidarity. Rural communities are seen to possess the latter. Durkheim (1972) defines organic solidarity as societal ties held together by the majority of people participating in homogeneous tasks, possessing shared standards of behaviours, societal norms, language, social markers, and shared spiritual or religious systems, bounded by a common collective consciousness. He notes that these societies punitively disincentivise non-

conforming behaviour. This is contrasted against mechanical solidarity, where solidarity and cohesion are defined by the division of labour (Durkheim, 1972; Vyain et al., 2012). However, Pahl (1967) highlights the limitations of this dichotomy, noting that while differences exist between the two, rural and urban are not mutually exclusive but often overlap and exist in a continuum rather than a dichotomy. Similarly, Smith (1984: 74) notes that “few communities will present a totally rural or totally urban picture.”

In contemporary society, the term “rural” generally refers to regions with vast open land, which are typically geographically isolated from cities, with relatively small populations (Goldsmith, Puskin & Stiles, 1993; Cromartie & Bucholtz, 2008; Morton et al., 2014). Yet, a clear definition of rural is still missing in studies. Despite an imprecise definition, there is an acknowledgement that there is no clear demarcation of where the rural begins or ends. Writing from North American and European contexts, authors note that this lack of clarity in the definition of rural often means that within this nebulous definition, small towns, large villages, and peri-urban areas are all at times referred to as rural (Goldsmith, Puskin & Stiles, 1993; Cromartie & Bucholtz, 2008; Morton et al., 2014). Definitions of rural can be applied administratively (which jurisdiction is the area housed in?), economically (how economically active is the area?), or in terms of land use (what is the level of population density in the area?). This means that rural areas and rural people display a wide array of traits, depending on the definition used (Cromartie & Bucholtz, 2008). Nelson & Nguyen (2023) highlight the various issues under consideration in “the rural” from different academic viewpoints. They note social sustainability, welfare, equity, and access to resources are emphasised in policy. On another level, economic development, the expertise of the labour force, and diversification take predominance from an economic standpoint. The exploitation of resources and environmental degradation are the focus from the ecological sustainability vantage point. While in education, they note that rural, in most cases, is usually associated with issues regarding “access to education, the recruitment and retention of teachers, and financial support of schools”(Nelson & Nguyen, 2023: 323).

Official documents by the South African define “rural” as regions consisting of farmland and “traditional areas characterised by low population densities, low levels of economic activity and basic, low levels of infrastructure” (Maluleke, 2020; Statistics South Africa, 2022a; 2022b). At the same time, the government defines urban areas as cities and towns typified by much denser populations, with higher levels of economic activity, and, on aggregate,

possessing higher levels of infrastructure and development (Maluleke, 2020; Statistics South Africa, 2022a; 2022b). Furthermore, spatially, in South Africa, rural areas encompass two broad categories, which are the product of both colonial and apartheid-led land resettlement policies. Firstly, community-owned land situated in the former homelands, and secondly, commercial and private farms in the former White areas of South Africa (DoE, 2005b). Yet, Ntsebeza (2003: 196) distinguishes between these two categories, often referring to the rural as exclusively “the former bantustans falling under the jurisdiction of chiefs and headmen, as distinct from commercial farms.”

In *The more things change, the more they remain the same: rural and tenure and democracy in former Bantustans*, Ntsebeza (2011: 76) comments on this distinction, saying:

There are two distinct features of these areas. First in terms of land tenure, most land in the rural areas of former Bantustans is legally owned by the state and the land rights of rural residents are restricted to rights of occupation, which are not comparable with the rights of freehold land rights held by their white counterparts in commercial farming areas.

Though definitions of rural areas are varied, contested, and remain unresolved (Goldsmith, Puskin & Stiles, 1993; Morton et al., 2014), this study defines “rural” as areas that have a combination of the following characteristics: vast open land, geographical remoteness relative to urban areas, low population densities, few buildings and houses, and a frequency of livestock ownership and farming. In addition, rural inhabitants regularly work in agriculture-related sectors and rural areas often have low levels of economic activity (Department of Basic Education, 2017; Morton et al., 2014; National Geographic Society, 2011).

In addition to these characteristics, this thesis utilises a definition which designates and describes “rural” as not only a geographic location or reality but as depicting a particular vantage point that illustrates the contrasts (and similarities) between the urban and the rural in South Africa. Specifically related to education, this includes a focus on educational access, equity, equality, and justice. Put differently, the definition of rural put forward by this thesis serves as a particular vantage point. Nonetheless, it is essential to note that this study’s definition of rural is aligned with two existing arguments. The first is by Halfacree (1993: 34), in *Locality and Social Representation: Space, Discourse and Alternative*, where he argues that “the quest for any single, all-embracing definition of the rural is neither desirable nor feasible.”

Halfacree (1993: 34) adds that “there is a call for the definition [of rural] to be used for [a particular] task at hand.” Secondly, the thesis draws on Pini, Moletsane & Mills (2014: 454), who write that “rurality is socially constructed, hybrid, imagined, relational, heterogeneous, dynamic, and contested.”

It is important to note that in South Africa, rural areas are not a monolith, with the various rural regions in different provinces possessing diverse demographics, topographies, economies, cultural practices, and norms (DoE, 2005b). Writing from an Indian perspective, Jodhka (2014) articulates that the cultural distinctions between rural and urban are fluid. They are becoming increasingly blurred, with social transformation evident in both areas partly as a result of urban-rural migration, technological advancement, and social mobility (Jodhka, 2014). Similarly, writing from a South African perspective, Mamdani (1996: 219) notes that the fluidity between rural and urban is partially a product of the historical oscillation of migrant labourers from their rural homes and their “bed space” in urban area hostels. This is corroborated by Bank, Posel & Wilson (2020), who state that substantial portions of the urban population in contemporary South Africa uphold strong ties to rural areas.

2.1.3. Rural space

Moletsane (2012: 3) notes that studies on rural education typically focus on the space and not on the people “and tend to treat the space as homogenous, ignoring and simplifying the variations and complexities in identity, behaviour, and nuance.” This observation by Moletsane (2012) further enhances my view that the perspectives, voices, and experiences of rural learners are neglected and not explored in studies, as the studies are typically directed toward the rural space and not the people. Space is a continually questioned concept that appears along a continuum from the abstract – which can be viewed as the theoretical or epistemological – to the physical – which can be viewed from ontological perspectives. Among others, space has been theorised and assessed from philosophical to mathematical schools of science.

According to Lefebvre (1991), there is an indeterminate excess of different categories of space including but not limited to “geographical, economic, demographic, sociological, ecological, political, commercial, national, continental, global ... nature’s (physical) space, the space of (energy) flows” (Lefebvre, 1991: 8). In this contested terrain, this thesis adopts the position that space is socially constructed (Lefebvre, 1991). It further supports the view that space,

particularly the rural space in historical and contemporary South African, serves an instrumental role “in the existing mode of production” in the Marxian and Hegelian sense of production, notably the mode of extracting labour for the production of products (Lefebvre, 1991: 11).

Space is critical to this thesis, as the rural space is where the primary research participants (the learners) reside and attend school. More so, this distinct rural space is where the educational policies drawn up at a national level are implemented. In addition to subordinating rural people to their space, studies usually frame rurality pejoratively. The research on rural people frequently studies the negative tropes associated with rurality, also known as “deficit approaches,” such as backwardness, tribalism, exclusion, poverty, and other societal matters (DoE, 2005b: 3; also see Nkambule et al., 2011; Moletsane, 2012b; DBE, 2017: 11). This positions rural people as having no agency, emphasising their powerlessness, deprivation, oppression and disadvantage. Mokoena & Hlalele (2022) note that the features often associated with rural people and contexts include inadequate transport, economic disadvantage, and insubstantial access to a variety of social services. However, writing on rural development in Sub-Saharan Africa, Chigbu (2013) asserts that it is critical to view rurality from a positive perspective as a plausible choice for the rural populace, who may even choose to maintain a rural identity in contemporary times. Chigbu (2013) notes that the rural identity is erroneously equated with poverty and is thus viewed in a pejorative sense. This narrow view occludes other, more positive, attributes of rural areas including being spaces of wealth that are home to people with culturally defined identities, who place importance on heritage and spiritual values, and whose livelihoods centre on the cultivation of land and related activities.

Similar to Chigbu’s (2013) position, this thesis engages with rural inhabitants in line with Yosso’s (2005) point of view, which approaches and recognises marginalised groups as heterogeneous, dynamic, and endowed with often undervalued and unrecognised capital (wealth and knowledge). Yosso (2005) provides a framework, known as community cultural wealth, to capture the capital and agency possessed by the marginalised in navigating structural inequalities. Community cultural wealth is separated into six categories, notably aspirational capital, linguistic capital, familial capital, social capital, navigational capital, and resistant capital (Yosso, 2005).

2.2. Challenges in rural education

A seminal study on rural education conducted by the HSRC (2005) noted that teenage violence and crime, school absenteeism, learners dropping out, and high failure rates disproportionately impact rural and township schools. Nevertheless, Amnesty International (2020), Burton & Leoschut (2012), Mahabeer (2020), and Rosenberg et al. (2015) found that these issues are broadly endemic in South African high schools more broadly. The HSRC (2005) study explored various stakeholder perspectives concerning rural education issues and while insightful, the study did not explore the first-hand experiences of rural high school learners. In addition to these challenges mentioned above, that impact schooling in South Africa more generally, but disproportionately impact rural and township schools. Rural schools suffer from crippling resource constraints, including but not limited to inadequate infrastructure, lack of electricity, an absence of libraries, inadequate sanitation facilities, and limited access to clean water (Chakaninka et al., 2012; Amnesty International, 2020; Dube, 2020). More so, rural schools are often located far distances from health facilities. Poor roads and inefficient transport compound the resource constraint challenges faced by learners, teachers, and the community (Chakaninka et al., 2012; Amnesty International, 2020; Dube, 2020).

This thesis aligns with Balfour et al. (2008: 98), who posit that:

The urban (township) context is not free of the challenges or dynamics found in rural environments, but we can suggest that one of the defining characteristics of rurality is its intensity. For example, even though there is poverty in urban (townships) context, the fact that there is better support and infrastructure and a better chance of obtaining assistance (in the form of social services), such support often is either absent or inaccessible in rural areas, owing to distance, poor transportation, and neglect.

According to Dube (2020) and Mokoena & Hlalele (2022), the plight of rural learners has significantly worsened due to the increase of online teaching during the Coronavirus pandemic (COVID-19). They note that the shift to online learning and teaching further excluded rural learners who faced new resource constraints over and above the traditional limitations that crippled them. These new constraints include the unavailability of mobile network or coverage, expensive and inaccessible data costs, lack of electronic gadgets, and sparse support for teachers, meaning they could not or cannot effectively access and apply online learning (Dube, 2020; Mokoena & Hlalele, 2022).

On the other hand, the experiences of rural teachers justifiably occupy a significant portion of existing research concerning rural education. For example, du Plessis & Mestry (2019) studied the experiences of teachers in rural schools located in White River, Mpumalanga. They uncovered that rural schools face challenges and resource constraints unique to their environment, including the lack of support and resources for rural teachers, rural teachers' inexperience, and the remoteness and underdevelopment of rural schools. Masinire (2015), du Plessis & Mestry (2019), and Muremela, Kutame, Kapueja & Lawrence (2020) note that resource constraints, including poor infrastructure and lack of roads, not only limit the ability of teachers to teach but also dissuades teachers from staying in rural schools long term. Regarding multi-grade teaching, du Plessis & Mestry (2019) and Taole (2020) highlight how teachers believe that teaching multi-grade classes and multiple subjects limits their ability to be effective teachers because of the lack of teaching support (teaching personnel and teaching resources).

There has also been a focus on the challenges faced by the DoE regarding teachers. Reflections on the Department highlight a shortage of qualified teachers in rural areas, specifically in Mathematics and Science (Wright, 2012; Muremela et al., 2020). This corresponds with Chakaninka et al. (2012) who point to a narrative that the absence or limited number of qualified educators is the most significant impediment to rural education. According to Kota, Hendricks, Matambo & Naidoo (2017), the challenge of teacher shortages in the Eastern Cape does not necessarily relate to complete scarcity. Instead, they argue, there is a conditional shortage where some subjects and regions are impacted more than others and for varying reasons. However, they highlight that overall, rural areas' sparsity results in low teacher allocation to learners.

Comparably, Wright (2012: 1) alerts us that the most crucial reason for the failure of the South African education system is the failure to care for teachers. Though this insight offers a view of all teachers, it is relevant to teachers applying their trade in rural provinces and areas:

[The] appalling neglect of the teachers. The failure to place teacher development at the centre of South Africa's process of educational transformation and renewal. In practical terms, we have not sufficiently considered our teachers' professional needs or nurtured the quality of their personal education. To be frank, only educated people can educate others, and if we fail systematically to provide enriching opportunities for teachers themselves to become well-educated human beings, and ensure that as many as possible

take advantage of these opportunities, how can we be surprised that the education system isn't working? (Wright, 2012: 1).

Wright (2012) and Ruiters (2011) draw attention to how governance issues at provincial departments present a challenge to education by adversely impacting policy implementation. For instance, Wright (2012) reports that policy and curriculum are designed and developed at the national DoE. Yet, the delivery of curriculum and the implementation of policies falls to provincial education departments. While in relation, Ruiters (2011: 3) remarks that “national policies often get radically distorted in the process of being carried out by the provincial government.”

According to Kota et al. (2017), in the Eastern Cape, the delivery and implementation of policy, the distribution and supply of fundamental services, and the provision of education, have been hampered by governance failures characterised by:

A failure to inculcate a rule-compliant, insulated and performance-driven bureaucracy. Due to the blurred lines and collusive relationship that have developed between factionalised party politics, the senior ranks of the administration, and influential stakeholder groups. The fragmentation which has ensued has been especially acute in the province's education sector, overseen by the Eastern Cape Department of Education (ECDoE) (Kota et al., 2017: 3).

Comparably, almost a decade earlier, Hoeane (2011) suggested that governance failures in Eastern Cape governance structures – intensified by factional disputes and contests among ruling elites of political parties vying for power at the district and provincial levels – enable administrative failures in the provision of services. This thesis posits that the failures of governance and provision of services are felt acutely in rural education in many spheres, including infrastructure. As an example, the *Discussion Paper on Infrastructure* published by the ECDoE (2009) noted that roughly 50% of the 5,788 schools in the province (2,650) were in a weak or a fragile condition, compared to only 16% of schools that were noted to be either in a good or new condition. At the same time, approximately 30% of the school buildings were in need of repairs (ECDoE, 2009). The governance issues of the ECDoE and its failures in providing services led to civil society, the general public, guardians, learners, and unions protesting and dissenting against the ECDoE in January 2011 (Wright, 2012; Borman & Coombes, 2020). As a result, the Minister of Education invoked Section 100(1) of the

Constitution on 16 March 2011. This section permits national administrative control when an unfit provincial department is unable to meet its obligations to the national government. The intervention lapsed after three years (Wright, 2012; Borman & Coombes, 2020).

Hendricks (2009) paints a vivid picture of a typical day of a rural learner. Given how only a quarter of rural learners who enrol for Grade 1 advance to the matric level in the Eastern Cape, the picture painted by Hendricks (2009) offers interesting clues about this statistical trajectory. Though she utilises the Eastern Cape as an example, this portrait of rural school goers could be applied to other rural provinces, including Kwa-Zulu Natal and Limpopo. She begins with learners at home. She conveys the high opportunity cost associated with attending school, noting that many learners from rural areas are expected to participate daily in domestic and agricultural activities (Hendricks, 2009). Her sentiments are validated by research by the HSRC (2005), which found that in rural regions, “household chores create tension between school schedules, family responsibilities, social roles, and the desire for education” (HSRC, 2005: 46). The findings by Hendricks (2009) are corroborated by those of Mulkeen & Chen (2008) and Macionis (2012), who further highlight that learners from rural areas often receive little encouragement from parents, guardians, and elders to go to school.

Hendricks (2009) asserts that once learners have negotiated their domestic responsibilities, they often have to walk a great distance between home and school, more often than not at the risk of being a victim of crime. She highlights that once the first half of the commute has been completed, learners are met by the inadequacies of the school itself. For example, Amnesty International (2020), Chakaninka et al. (2012), and Porter, Hampshire, Mashiri, Dube & Maponya (2010) note that the resource inadequacies of rural school schools include mud schools, debilitated buildings, limited teachers and an absence of water. Hendricks (2009) uses the specific example of Bungeni High School in Lusikisiki, a small rural town in the Eastern Cape, to vividly portray the inadequacies of rural schools. In 2007, Bungeni High School had nearly 800 hundred learners but only 17 teachers (Hendricks, 2009). At the time, the school had no staff rooms or offices and only had four brick and mortar classes, and within the school premises, there was a corrugated iron construct that could house two classes. The nearby village supplied rondavels that served as *de facto* classrooms.

According to Al Jazeera (2023), Hazvineyi (2019) and Etheridge (2018), in the Eastern Cape and other rural provinces, resource constraints have tragically resulted in learner fatalities,

exemplified by learners dying after falling into pit toilets or having walls collapse on them. This thesis posits that pit latrines present perhaps the most unequivocal depiction of the resource scarcity associated with rural schools. They represent the dehumanisation and neglect of rural people under colonial and apartheid governments. It is also worth highlighting the failure of the democratic government to overcome these inherited challenges, almost thirty years after democratisation. Thus, this complex set of historical and contemporary dynamics are responsible for the perpetual resource inadequacies which persist in rural schools and continue to dehumanise rural populations. In closing this portrayal of a day in the life of a rural learner, Hendricks (2009) adds that in the Eastern Cape, the functional support of parents and guardians as aids in homework (after school) is inhibited by the troublingly low literacy levels of rural women, who often serve as the primary (and often only) caregivers of rural learners (Hendricks, 2009). Second, Hendricks (2009) articulates that the role of parents and guardians as members of the school governing body, including the appointment of teachers, school policy, finance, and other school matters, are also constrained by these low literacy levels.

To conclude this subsection, this study has recognised important and insightful research on matters regarding rural education. Nevertheless, it is apparent that the perspectives and experiences of rural learners are at the margins of these existing narratives and accounts.

2.3. From perceptions to reality: An overview of selected policy on education

2.3.1. General criticism

The general criticism of official South African government policy typically notes that the country is “overflowing with well-written but poorly implemented policies” (Botha, 2022: 1; also see Jansen, 1998; Spreen & Vally, 2006). There is also criticism specific to education policy in South Africa and policy looking into rural areas (Gardiner, 2008; Bryant, 2010; Hlalele, 2012b). Regarding social and education policy overlooking rural matters, there is a general perception that a limited number of policies focus on rural people despite a sizeable rural population in South Africa (Gardiner, 2008; Bryant, 2010; Hlalele, 2012b). In addition, the lack of success in South African education policy is most acute in rural regions (Chisholm, 2004; Balfour, Mitchell & Moletsane, 2008). Scholars state that education policy has failed in essential areas (Bryant, 2010; Hlalele, 2012b; Sayed & Kanjee, 2013). Furthermore, Hlalele

(2012b) declares that policies have failed to safeguard and provide quality and universal education for the bulk of South Africans, including for those in rural regions.

2.3.2. Universalism vs particularism in applying education policy

Government policy documents articulate a lack of focus on rural but instead apply a homogenous approach to policymaking. For example, the Ministry of Education acknowledged that the formulation and implementation of education policies and management of schools after democratisation in 1994 were based on “treating everyone in the same way, no matter what their differences,” including in curriculum and the development of teaching methods (DoE, 2005b: 2).

Hlalele (2012a: 271) argues that one of the fundamental challenges facing the education system is the “wilful ignorance” by the government of the actual conditions in rural areas and rural schools, and a lack of acknowledgement of the true environment that policies are implemented in. This position is reinforced by Wright (2012) and Hlalela (2012) in separate papers, positing that implementation measures and processes are coordinated and approached as though they will be carried out in a highly functional, grossly competent, well-ordered system while disregarding the actual environments, thereby pursuing impractical implementation measures, despite the existence of well-conceived policies. This is also observed by scholars such as Maserow (2015) and Sayed & Kanjee (2013), who note that the policy and legislative frameworks applied post-1994 did not prudently reflect on the different actual social environments where policies would be put into practice. Botha (2022) notes that the absence of distinction and nuance in policy formulation is indicative of the South African Government’s “one size fits all” approach. This approach to policymaking is underpinned by generic, centrally formulated policies at a national level which often ignore the specificity and uniqueness of different regions where policy will be applied.

Interestingly, the South African Schools Act (1996), which sought to, amongst others, revise and annul specific (oppressive) laws and offer an innovative system for education post-apartheid (South African Schools Act, 1996), fails to mention rural areas or rural learners. Gardiner (2008: 14) argues the South African government is potentially reluctant to acknowledge “rural education” as a distinct category. Weighing in on this discourse, Sayed &

Kanjee (2013) posit that the spatial and discriminatory undertones may inform the potential reluctance of the government to acknowledge rural education as a distinct category. Given that, the apartheid administration deliberately distorted the idea of rural-specific education in South Africa by legislating Bantu Education, a narrow, diminished education system for Africans, which has strong residual effects today.

This thesis posits that the policy approach of the South African government on primary education can be defined as a universal approach to applying human rights. This approach is informed by the belief in a common standard of treatment of all individuals (United Nations, 2021). Instrumental in the pursuit of justice in this universal approach is redistribution which emphasise “egalitarian redistribution” which can subordinate matters of difference (Fraser & Honneth, 2003: 3). This notion of redistribution is based on the view that the most pressing injustices relate to economic marginalisation and exploitation, and can be solved through distributive justice (Fraser & Honneth, 2003; Singh & Parihar, 2021). Nevertheless, according to Singh & Parihar (2021), some proponents of human rights pursue a particularist approach, highlighting that within the framework of human rights, space must be made for differences and the particular. Walker (2013: 39) postulates that this must be done “in a manner that qualifies or even challenges the underlying universalism.” A key tenet in fighting injustice when using this perspective is overcoming issues of recognition, through the politics of recognition which emphasises matters of representation and identity (Fraser & Honneth, 2003). An example is the recognition by notable organisations of women’s rights as a discrete grouping within human rights (McLaren, 2019).

In line with Fraser & Honneth (2003), this thesis believes that recognition and redistribution are equally important, and neither can be ignored in attempts to quell injustice as they are “co-fundamental and mutually irreducible dimensions of justice” (Fraser & Honneth, 2003: 3). In addition, efforts to overcome social injustice must fully consider these separate viewpoints to ensure that questions concerning economic inequality and identity inequity are resolved (Walker, 2013).

2.3.3. Teacher allocation and provision

Mulkeen & Chen (2008) indicate that inefficient methods of delivering and retaining teachers in rural regions continue to be a policy concern across the Southern African Development Community (SADC). They note that government policy on teacher deployment has not quelled unequal teacher distribution, where there is an oversupply of teachers in urban areas and an undersupply of teachers in rural regions (Mulkeen & Chen, 2008). This is corroborated by the DBE (2019) which highlights that experienced and more qualified educators primarily apply their trade in more affluent schools in urban areas where they receive better pay.

In South Africa, the Employment of Educators Act (76 of 1998) provided post-provision norms (PPN), a government mechanism to distribute teachers to public schools based on the number of learners in a school. However, despite this distribution of posts, teachers have the right to choose the schools they apply to work in (Employment of Educators Act, 1998). More so, PPNs do not offer incentives to qualified and experienced teachers to teach in rural schools (Salmon & Sayed, 2016). Despite the introduction of the PPN by the South African government, the National Education Evaluation and Development Unit (NEEDU) (2013) found that not all provinces followed it. The findings of NEEDU also revealed that across all nine provinces, the PPN model was applied differently and to varying degrees. Further, it was apparent that the DBE itself was inconsistent with the details of the model it instructed provincial departments to use (NEEDU, 2013).

2.3.4. Curriculum failure

The literature on government policy in education points to moments of curriculum failure highlighted by, among others, the curriculum policy known as Curriculum 2005. Curriculum 2005 is synonymous with the outcomes-based education (OBE). According to Chisholm (2004), Jansen (1998), Maserow (2015) and Wright (2012), Curriculum 2005 failed as the DoE did not prudently reflect on the social contexts in which OBE would be implemented. In addition, these authors note it was unsuccessful due to ineffective, ill-conceived, impractical implementation procedures. As a result, rural, more impoverished, and previously-disadvantaged schools were increasingly inundated with the complexities (such as specific

resources and particular skills) needed to successfully implement OBE that they largely did not possess (Jansen, 1998; Chisholm, 2004; Wright, 2012; Maserow, 2015).

2.3.5. Language of instruction as a challenge

Learners in South Africa have the right to access education in any of the 11 official languages in public schools when it is plausible and practical (Government of South Africa, 1996a). However, school governing bodies have the autonomy to determine the language of instruction at schools (South African Schools Act, 1996). In a report by the DBE (2010), although English was reported as a home language for only 7% of learners, it was the medium of instruction for 65% of learners from Grade 4. Setati, Adler, Reed & Bapoo (2002) note that English is often not the first language of the vast majority of educators in South African schools. This indicates that English is the most widely used language in teaching, despite it not being the home language for the majority of teachers or learners.

According to Amnesty International (2020) and Maniar (2021), learning in their mother tongue would benefit African learners, who often have to switch to English as a medium of instruction from grade 4 and often never fully grasp meaning and content in English. More so, a study conducted in rural communities in the Eastern Cape, South Africa and India notes that the change from home language to English has a profound psychological effect on learners, as they are often incapable of negotiating this change, creating learners who “can listen but cannot speak,” as termed by a teacher in the rural Eastern Cape (Maniar, 2021: 14).

2.3.6. Code-switching

The mismatch concerning the overwhelming use of English as the language of instruction in most schools and a lack of meaningful opportunities for learners to engage with it beyond school typically result in low proficiency in English and an inability to engage adequately with the curriculum (Probyn, 2009). More so, the context for rural learners rarely offers prospects for receptive English skills (Probyn, 2009). However, many teachers in rural schools code-switch in an attempt to ensure that learners grasp the concepts, are not left behind, and to “appropriate the terminology and reduce the alienation of the subject matter” (Probyn, 2009:

133). According to Setati et al. (2002), code-switching is possible in rural and township schools, as teachers in these environments often share a common home language with learners.

2.3.7. Government response to rural education shortfalls

Some of the reported shortcomings related to rural education led the DoE to advocate for special policy attention for rural education that takes seriously the particularity of rural areas (DoE, 2005). As a result, in 2017, the DBE gazetted the Rural Education Draft Policy (DBE, 2017). This policy seeks to address the unique challenges facing rural schools using “socio-cultural, agricultural and natural resources, as well as indigenous knowledge systems” (DBE, 2017: 13) to enhance the self-esteem and social connections of rural learners, improve functional services, and deliver a higher standard of education (DBE, 2017; Scharf, Hadjar & Grecu, 2019: 860).

2.4. The divergent outcomes of public education: free vs fee-charging schools

There is vast inequality in the South African education system, with broadly two types of schools existing in parallel under a single public education system: free schools serving poor communities and fee-charging schools. The latter makes up the minority of schools primarily serving the middle and elite economic classes (Hendricks, 2009; Spaul, 2019). Over 60% of South African public schools do not charge school fees (van Wyk, 2015; DBE, 2019a). The free schools, Quintiles⁶ 1 through 3, have limited resources, higher learner-to-teacher ratios, and less qualified or inexperienced teachers (van Breda & Dickens, 2015; DBE, 2019a; Amnesty International, 2020). In 2017, the ECDoE noted that over 90% of learners in the Eastern Cape attended no-fee schools (ECDoE, 2017). In contrast to schools in Quintiles 1 through 3, the fee-charging schools (Quintiles 4 and 5)⁷, particularly Quintile 5 schools, are well-resourced, with smaller learner-to-teacher ratios, and more experienced and qualified teachers (van Breda & Dickens, 2015; DBE, 2019a; Amnesty International, 2020).

⁶ The Education Law Amendment Act (2006) segmented schools into five nationally divided poverty quintiles as indicators of poverty or socio-economic status and made the poorest 40% of schools “no-fee schools” (Quintiles 1 and 2 schools). “No-fee schools” were expanded to include Quintile 3 schools. However, Quintiles 4 and 5 schools (fee-charging schools) serve mainly the middle-class population.

In South Africa, educational prospects are principally a function of racial categories and the economic status of parents and guardians, with African children predominately attending poor schools with even poorer education outcomes (Spaull, 2019). In contrast, mostly all White children attend highly resourced schools with excellent educational outcomes (Soudien, 2016; Spaull, 2019). However, over the years, there has been a “deracialisation” of schools based on class, with middle-class and wealthy African parents and guardians increasingly enrolling their children in Quintile 5 fee-charging schools (Soudien, 2016; Spaull, 2019).

Lemon (2004) articulates that this is a consequence of the post-apartheid policies implemented in key areas of education that cede to a neo-liberal, market-driven approach propagated by the introduction of the Growth, Employment, and Redistribution (GEAR) economic policy framework in 1996. GEAR repressed the policies of social redress and redistribution purported by the government. For example, the proliferation of the powers of school governing bodies in formerly White schools resulted in a superficial transformation where an insignificant number of African learners were admitted to formerly White schools. However, fees at such schools were and remain affordable only to the middle and upper classes (Lemon, 2004). Even though, according to the South African Constitution (1996), no learner ought to be disqualified from accessing education because of an inability to pay school fees. Lemon (2004: 270) notes that “nothing was done at that stage [1996] to address either the accumulated inequality of generations of unequal funding or the demand from black groups [political and civil] for a unitary education system for all South Africans.”

Similarly, Mamdani (1996) and Ntsebeza (2011) argue that the democratically elected government of South Africa has merely deracialised the previously oppressive, undemocratic state of the past, as opposed to truly democratising the new South Africa. Schools in rural Eastern Cape, particularly the OR Tambo region, fall in the no-fee school category and are characterised by poor outcomes (DBE, 2019). According to Maniar (2021: 150) “in 2011–12, in Eastern Cape, Grade 1 had about 187,575 learners. The enrolment remained broadly at this level through Grade 10 (151,448 learners). By Grade 12 (matric), the enrolment numbers dwindled to 103,951. The matric pass rates of about 65% in Eastern Cape implied less than half of the students enrolled in Grade 1 passed matric exams.”

2.5. Alienation in education

Writing from North American and European perspectives, scholars (Martin, 2008; Schulz, 2011; Çağlar, 2013; Hascher & Hadjar, 2018) define alienation in education as the estrangement of students from content and learning methods, reduced responsiveness to teaching and content, and a decline of the learning process into a dull, tedious, and potentially hostile exercise. The consequences for alienated learners include failure and dropout, teenage pregnancy, teenage violence and crime, school absenteeism, and class disruptions (Martin, 2008; Schulz, 2011; Çağlar, 2013; Hascher & Hadjar, 2018). Central to definitions of alienation in education is the concept of learning, which in this context, is viewed as an activity of production by the students, as per Marx's analysis of alienation (Elster, 1986; Marx, Mandel & Fowkes, [1867] 1992; Engels & Marx, [1848] 2004). In this study, alienation in education refers to a phenomenon that can develop at the individual level as well as at the structural level, notably as a consequence of the school context and government policy under a state that pursues market driven economic and social policies (Martin, 2008; Hascher & Hadjar, 2018).

Alienation in education has different manifestations and meanings but it typically indicates a distance between two entities, often accompanied with feelings of suffering, powerlessness, or loss that may lead to learners perceiving school as unessential, unviable, or deficient of something (Dean, 1961; Elster, 1986; Brown, Higgins & Paulsen, 2003). According to Hascher & Hadjar (2018) and Morinaj, Scharf, Grecu, Hadjar, Hascher & Marcin (2017), there is limited research regarding the understanding of alienation in the school environment. However, there is a recognition amongst educators that alienation in education is a phenomenon that transcends race, gender, and class boundaries, affecting predominately high school learners (Hascher & Hadjar, 2018; Morinaj et al, 2017). Martin (2008) indicates both boys and children from poorer households may experience alienation more acutely than girls and more affluent learners, emphasising that alienation seems to impinge more acutely on boys and learners from oppressed and exploited groups in society. Schulz & Rubel (2011: 286) highlight that alienated learners may “come from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds and non-traditional family circumstances [divorce/separation/neglect].”

Also writing from North America, Brown, Higgins & Paulsen (2003: 4) suggest that alienation in schools is widespread and known to educators and policymakers. From the perspective of teachers, they highlight how different manifestations of alienation in education include learners

who “stare at us [teachers], as if staring right through us. Others climb the wall (literally and figuratively), verbally abuse us [teachers], disrupt class, and when it gets to be too much, they drop out. Some leave for a little while; others leave forever.” Sidorkin (2004), from the California State University, suggests that alienation in education is not a brief, passing moment that is easily remedied; instead, it is an intrinsic element of the compulsory primary and high school education system. Sidorkin (2004) further argues that this is the case as learning in primary and high school is concerned with an essentially unproductive activity (which is not used in or useful to adult life and the world of work). He states that work done at school is merely for practice and cannot be exchanged since it has no real value; as a result, it introduces a distinctive form of alienation.

Writing from a South African perspective, Hlalele (2012b) notes that the non-payment of school fees or lacking the requisite school uniform marginalises rural school goers and impedes their psychosocial well-being, as the household economic security drastically shapes children’s emotional welfare. Morinaj et al. (2017) highlight that high school learners whose homes and community conditions do not meet their expectations, desires, or needs have a higher probability of becoming psychologically and physically disengaged and ultimately alienated from the school system. Similarly, South, Baumer & Lutz (2003) note that the socio-economic conditions of a learners’ community are a potentially more suitable predictor of a learner’s educational outcomes than a learner’s school conduct. They highlight that learners from socio-economically distressed areas are at higher risk of poor performance, exiting the schooling system prematurely, and of repeating grades than their counterparts from wealthier communities (South, Baumer & Lutz, 2003). Furthermore, the authors postulate that these learners are commonly exposed to others who are experiencing or have experienced those poor outcomes. This enforces upon socio-economically disadvantaged learners the idea that completing high school provides limited opportunities for enhancing their communities or their upward mobility (South, Baumer & Lutz, 2003).

Writing from North American and European contexts, Farrow (1993), Livermore (1994), Peters & Besley (2013), South, Baumer & Lutz (2003), and Pohlen (2019) note that a rise in unemployment and the powerlessness of youth to find meaning in society may contribute to or lead to alienation. In addition, these authors contend that alienation in youth becomes more pronounced in adulthood, as opportunities for independence are reduced. They argue that learners from families in poverty and unemployment may be pessimistic about their future and

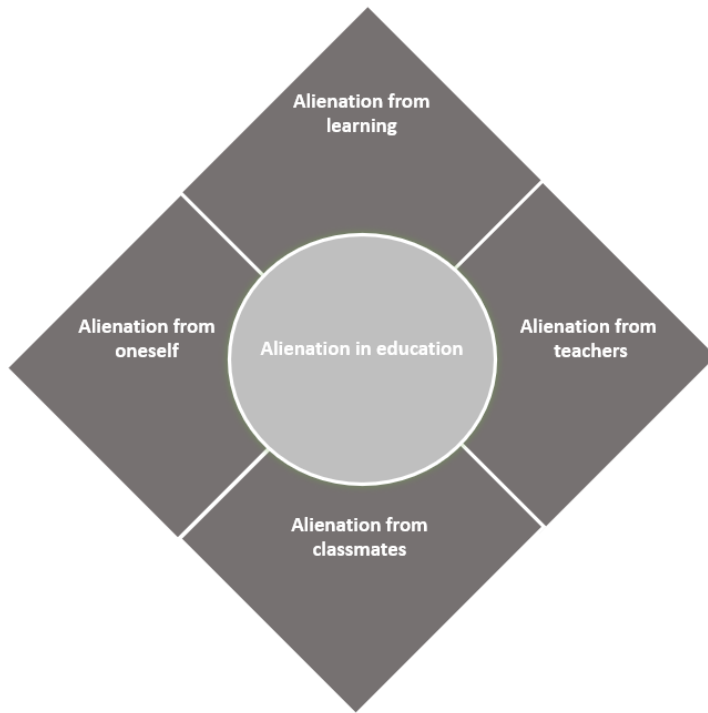
may respond to their perceived (real or imagined), limited prospects by disconnecting themselves from education, which may lead to disillusionment and alienation in school and the real diminishing of prospects (Farrow, 1993; Livermore, 1994; South, Baumer & Lutz, 2003; Peters & Besley, 2013; Pohlan, 2019). A study by Brown, Higgins & Paulsen (2003) found that disparities between learners' culture and the educational institutions' culture play a part in adolescent alienation. The study indicated that adolescents are sensitive to the differences between their culture and school culture. This tension could result in discord between the learners and the school. It further noted that educational institutions that are products of hegemonic groups, for example, predominantly White institutions, may alienate learners from oppressed ethnic and racial groups (Brown, Higgins & Paulsen, 2003). This results from other ethnic and racial groups being taken into institutions that are moulded on "pre-existing norms of supremacy and privileges – norms, which do not necessarily shift just because of expanded student numbers" (Davids, 2019: 4).

Although these perspectives offer a valuable appraisal of alienation in education, they provided limited insights specific to alienation in South Africa, and specifically to alienation in rural education.

2.5.1. The categories of alienation in education

The literature notes that learner alienation can be categorised into specific groupings: alienation from learning, alienation from teachers, alienation from classmates, and alienation from oneself (Schulz & Rubel, 2011; Hascher & Hadjar, 2018).

Figure 3. Categories of alienation in education (Hascher & Hadjar, 2018).



Firstly, students perceiving the curricula as irrelevant and unrelated to their social realities have adverse views regarding the need and purpose of education. The negative experiences they associate with the school may lead to perceiving school life as worthless and unnecessary (Çağlar, 2013; Morinaj et al., 2017; Hascher & Hadjar, 2018). This is demonstrated by the experience of rural learners in Tibet, where there is a detachment between the studied curriculum and their lived experiences. According to Cao (2016), the curricula wholistically found in textbooks is adapted from Chinese textbooks, the state curriculum. The state curricula contain sparse content about Tibetan culture. The majority of what learners are taught is determined by the state textbooks, limiting teachers' autonomy in the classroom to divert from the content (Cao, 2016). Phelan & Yu (1994) support this perspective, asserting that learners' academic challenges are made worse by curricula they deem to be uninteresting.

Secondly, the perception or the use of unjustly differentiated treatment of learners in the same classroom by teachers may lead to learners exhibiting disobedience and becoming more difficult to engage with. For example, if learners believe that high achievers are treated fairly while more challenged learners are treated punitively, challenged learners may become defiant, leading to added alienation and estrangement from teachers (Çağlar, 2013; Morinaj et al., 2017;

Hascher & Hadjar, 2018). This engagement between learners and teachers, whereby learners view teachers as apathetic, unhelpful, and impolite, can be viewed as alienating or an enabler of alienation (Çağlar, 2013; Morinaj et al., 2017; Hascher & Hadjar, 2018). Conversely, in a study focusing on the externalities that learners face that influence their academic achievement, Phelan & Yu (2021) remark that learners assert that educators who are understanding, caring, and prepared to listen can alleviate their feelings of marginalisation.

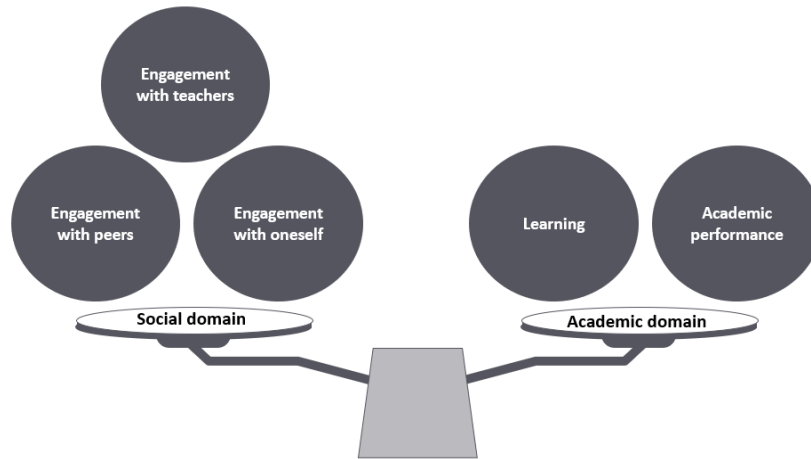
Thirdly, peer rejection – real or perceived – may lead to unmet social and physiological needs, which could result in withdrawal from the school system and a lack of identification with teachers, peers, and learning. More so, these learners with diminished relationships may suffer from learning hardships and an absence of identification with the school environment (Martin, 2008). Furthermore, peer rejection demonstrated by physical and verbal bullying, or the social exclusion of a learner by peers, can lead to learners facing higher degrees of depression, mental and psychological degradation, low self-esteem, continued exclusion, and social marginalisation (Mlisa, Ward, Flisher & Lombard, 2008; Ndebele & Msiza, 2014). According to Brown (2010), learners can socially exclude or even be hostile to their peers who are over or under age for the grade, low or high achievers, and those who have dropped or have repeated a grade. Nonetheless, according to Phelan & Yu (1994: 427), despite the happenings at school, school lessons that are engineered in a manner to foster and stimulate learner to learner engagement can facilitate their “ability to connect with their peers, thus promoting their chances of feeling personally valued.”

Fourthly, alienation from learning, teachers, or classmates may lead to learners ultimately losing their sense of self-respect and self-esteem. Conversely, their lack of self-esteem and self-respect may lead to a learner’s alienation from learning, teachers, and classmates (Schulz & Rubel, 2011). Aptly put, these categories state that alienated learners may pull back or disengage from themselves, their cohort, educators, studying, and ultimately, the school system altogether (Hascher & Hadjar, 2018).

These dimensions of alienation can be separated into two categories: the academic domain and the social domain. The former speaks to learning and academic performance while the latter speaks to engagement with oneself, peers, and teachers (Morinaj et al., 2017). Both academic and social needs must be met for a learner to be safeguarded from alienation. A learner can be

connected to and a part of the academic or social sphere of education but still disconnected and apart from the other (Morinaj et al., 2017).

Figure 4. The academic and social domains of alienation in education (Morinaj et al., 2017).



The first section of **Chapter Two** reviewed the relevant literature on education in South Africa impacting learners' schooling in rural areas and the phenomenon of alienation in education. The review of this literature highlighted some of the key discussions historically engaged by scholars exploring rural education, identified gaps not yet addressed by the literature on rural education and alienation in education, and noted significant thematic areas in education impacting schooling in rural, township, and peri-urban areas. The following section will assess the study's theoretical framework, alienation.

2.6. Theoretical framework – Alienation

This section of **Chapter Two** will introduce the theoretical framework used in the thesis, alienation, as conceptualised by Karl Marx and Melvin Seeman. This section highlights how this theoretical framework employed is not neutral but a response to exploitation and structural injustice faced by the oppressed. Structural injustices are defined as “situations of injustices which perpetually produce and reproduce wrongs.” (Young, 2006: 709). This section also features how the theory of alienation is applied in the field of education and conveys the significant limitations of the theory as conceptualised by Marx and Seeman and the limitations of the application of the theory of alienation in education, as these related to the thesis.

2.6.1. Origin of alienation

According to Watt (2000: 6), the term alienation is derived from the Latin word *alienatus*, which translates to “estranged.” Estranged is said to have come from the term *alius*, which means “other” or “another.” The concept of alienation has its roots from Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, whose understanding of alienation was used and advanced further by Karl Marx (Löwith, 2022; Macionis, 2012), and thereafter further developed and operationalised by Melvin Seeman (1959; 1975). In Hegel’s utilisation, the term represented what he perceived as typical of a person in modernity, “his sense of inward estrangements, of more or less conscious awareness that the inner being, the real ‘I,’ was alienated from the ‘me,’ the person as an object in society” (Watt, 2000: 6). Dean (1961) and Macionis (2012) express that alienation involves an undesired estrangement of a subject and object, which ought to be one.

According to Gereluk (1974: 35), alienation as a framework to understand social phenomenon has been used by various members of society who have felt disregarded and estranged “as a political, sociological, or psychological concept to indicate their perceived separation from the mainstream of society.” Similarly, Mackey (1970) asserts that alienation is a concept that is ubiquitously used as it lends itself to a multiplicity of disciplines. According to Affinnih (1997), Buzzai, Sorrenti, Tripiciano, Orecchio & Filippello (2021), and Leopold (2018), alienation can be conceptualised and assessed from sociological, psychological, philosophical, and historical perspectives, to name a few. Affinnih (1997), Buzzai, Sorrenti, Tripiciano, Orecchio & Filippello (2021), and Leopold (2018) maintain that alienation can be applied in education, healthcare, religion, economics, organisationally, and in family and community settings. However, there are scholars who dismiss the use of alienation and its application in different settings. For example, Johnson (1974) objects to the use of alienation more broadly, arguing that it is all encompassing and not definitive, while Israel (1979) opposes its use and proposes the use of more circumscribed concepts such as powerlessness and normlessness, for example. Similarly, Wrong (1985) cited in Affinnih (1997, 384) remarked that, “the concept had become less salient in discourse in the field than it had been, largely as a result of its excessive use... The term became vague and amorphous, coming to serve as a sort of verbal talisman connoting just about any psychological discomfort or malaise.” However, this study supports the argument by Mackey (1970) who persuades us that all the separate elements of alienation – powerlessness, normlessness, estrangement, isolation – are related and not divorced from each

other. He suggests that if these subcategories are observed individually in the absence of the others, they cannot be understood fully.

2.6.2. Alienation as conceptualised by Karl Marx and Melvin Seeman

Karl Marx further advanced the concept in his analysis of the distorted association between labourers and their production. Marx suggested that alienation is a fundamental element in the unequal power relation of class interactions, as demonstrated by the subjugated classes being forced into orientations and paradigms determined by and in the interests of the dominant class (Marx, Mandel & Fowkes, [1867] 1992; Marx & Engels, [1848] 2004; Seeman, 1975). Within this broad theory of alienation, the analysis of the relationship between the individual (the labourer), class interactions, and organisations is comparable to the commitment of qualitative research to the interpretive understanding of the individual and society. Marx conceptualised four different forms of a labourer's alienation, namely alienation from the product, alienation from the work process, alienation from the species-being, and alienation from other workers (Marx, [1867] 1974). As such, Marx ([1867] 1974) suggested that alienation is a combination of structural and subjective elements that occur in duality (Elster, 1986; Long et al., 1980; Seeman, 1975).

The dualism of the concept of alienation (the structural and subjective elements) make it ideally poised to be utilised as a tool of analysis for this study. First, as indicated above, the subjective factors at the individual level are consistent with the aims of the qualitative research methodology of the study, which seeks to understand and describe the meaning that rural learners ascribe to their experiences (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). Second, the structural elements of alienation correspond directly to a key tenet of critical social science, notably the bounded autonomy approach (Neuman, 2014). This approach recognises how structural conditions shape subjectivity (Neuman, 2014).

Marx ([1867] 1974) asserts that under capitalism, the fruit of a worker's toil is transformed into an alien object and commodity independent of the worker who produced it. The product is owned not by the worker, but by someone else, the capitalist, who derives all the value and profit from it, while the labourer accrues only dismal wages. Therefore, in the commodification of the product, the labourer, him/herself, is also produced as an object (Elster, 1986; Marx, [1867] 1974; Marx, Mandel & Fowkes, [1867] 1992; Marx & Engels, [1848] 2004). It is

suggested that putting more of themselves (including time, effort and creativity) into work for the labourer results in the labourer losing more of themselves (Macionis, 2012). Marx ([1867] 1974) argues that if the product produced by the labourer worker results in alienation from the product, the production process therefore represents “active alienation” (Elster, 1986: 39; also see Marx, Mandel & Fowkes, [1867] 1992). Work and the process of work then become external acts estranged from the labourer. More so, it becomes apparent that the labourer is forced into labour and is not working by an act of free will. The labourer then “feels at home when he is not working, and when he is working, he does not feel at home” (Elster, 1986: 39; also see Marx, [1867] 1974; Marx, Mandel & Fowkes, [1867] 1992).

Marx ([1867] 1974) contends that the human being is a species-being intrinsically connected to the natural world. Integral to the species-being is the freedom to express oneself creatively, spiritually, intellectually, and physically in various activities and labour that are useful to them (Harley, 2017). As such, the commodification of the product of labour, the labourer’s commodification, and the labourer’s active suffering in the process of work converge to result in the degradation of his/her species-being, as his/her labour is the active estrangement from his/her creative, spiritual, intellectual, and physical aspects; as the labourer produces products for exchange and not for their personal development (Elster, 1986; Marx, [1867] 1974, Marx, Mandel & Fowkes, [1867] 1992). This denotes that working, an exercise meant to demonstrate the most remarkable characteristics of humans as a species, is turned “into a dull and dehumanising process” (Macionis, 2012: 88). As a result of the alienation of the labourer from the product of his/her toiling, estrangement from the act of production and alienation from his/her species-being, the labourer is separated from other human beings. The individual starts to view other humans in a manner consistent with the political economy, as competitors and no longer as fellow human beings (Elster, 1986; Marx, [1867] 1974; Marx, Mandel & Fowkes, [1867] 1992).

Seeman (1959; 1975) further developed and advanced the theory of alienation by introducing a fivefold categorisation of alienation, namely powerlessness, meaninglessness, normlessness, isolation, and self-estrangement. First, powerlessness refers to powerlessness against the capitalist class, as workers are incorporated into a labour process over which they have no authority (Marx & Engels, [1848] 2004; Seeman, 1959; Seeman, 1975). In modernity, this powerlessness transcends the type of work one does, and alienated professionals include scientists, government officials, and academics (Dean, 1961). Powerlessness is also central to

a Marxist conceptualisation of alienation. Marx noted that alienation is “the experience of isolation resulting from powerlessness” (Macionis, 2012: 88).

Second, according to Seeman (1959; 1975), meaninglessness refers to a feeling of the impenetrability of societal matters that arise from ambiguity concerning standards and customs in society, whereby a person is uncertain of what they should believe or choose amid different choices. Third, normlessness refers to a state in which recognised standards and customs that ordinarily govern individual behaviour collapse or cease to be relevant (Dean, 1961; Macionis, 2012; Seeman, 1959; Seeman, 1975), leading to a rise in the belief that societally forbidden or unethical conduct may now be needed to attain a desired result (Seeman, 1959; Seeman, 1975).

Under modernity, technological advancements and personal freedoms increase the risk of separation of the individuals from community and group goals, which lead to, fourthly, social isolation (Dean, 1961). Thus, isolated individuals are those who “assign low reward value to goals or beliefs that are typically highly valued in the given society” (Seeman, 1959: 789; also see Dean, 1961). Finally, self-estrangement has been defined as a situation in which individuals are disconnected from themselves and experience themselves as foreign, unable to find or partake in personally satisfying activities, compounded by the fact that the individual as a worker is compelled to pursue activities in the interest of someone else (Seeman, 1959; Seeman, 1975).

Seeman and Marx’s conceptualisations of alienation are unapologetic critiques of the injustice, disempowerment, and oppression of the masses by capitalism. Their critiques mirror the objectives of qualitative research within the paradigm of critical social science. The critical social science paradigm necessitates the objective of the research to engage with the struggle for equity and justice for the marginalised. Further, studies desiring to be classified as critical must be unashamed in being labelled political (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Denzin & Lincoln, 2018), further highlighting the connection between the theoretical framework and the methods utilised in this study.

2.6.3. Application of alienation in the field of education

These elements of alienation developed by Melvin Seeman (1959; 1975) are applicable in education. Gereluk (1974) notes that these related concepts all highlight a perceived

disconnection between learners in school and a variety of spheres that are ordinarily meant to fulfil formal and latent educational functions within the school and community. According to Schulz & Rubel (2011), alienated learners often self-identify as social and academic outcasts, which can manifest in active disengagement from learning and building relationships.

First, powerlessness in education is the perceived absence of control in directing one's path or meeting one's academic aspirations. Learners are regarded as suffering from powerlessness in education if they believe there is not much they can directly do to steer their future in the schooling system. This may lead to them remaining in school but disengaging from the school system (Mau, 1992; Mau & Yuanshan, 2001; Brown, Higgins & Paulsen, 2003).

Second, meaninglessness in education suggests an inability of learners to find meaning in their actions and the perception that learning at school is immaterial to their future (Brown, Higgins & Paulsen, 2003). Moreover, learners may experience meaninglessness if they perceive school as being inconsequential to their lived realities at home or in their broader communities (Brown, Higgins & Paulsen, 2003). Meaninglessness often manifests in the learner's concern about obtaining gainful employment in the future. Demonstrated in education, meaninglessness may lead learners into thinking that "there is a limited relationship between academic performance in school and a rewarding job in the future" (Mau, 1992: 2; also see Mau & Yuanshan, 2001). For this reason, within these elements of alienation in education a common motif can be found: learners' consideration of their future (Mau, 1992). The rumination of learners on their future is equally demonstrated in powerlessness, demonstrating the connection between meaninglessness and powerlessness.

Third, normlessness in education refers to the disapproval or the non-observance of widely accepted rules in classrooms and schools that guide and enforce conduct. Alienated learners are viewed as those who reject codes of conduct enforced in the education system, notably by teachers, principals, and guardians (Çağlar, 2013; Hascher & Hadjar, 2018). According to Mackey (1970) and Mau (1992), learners who face powerlessness may consequently refuse to comply with prescribed school rules, thus exhibiting normlessness. They argue that the learners' normless conduct in turn often results in the school enforcing more coercive measures against those students, which in turn aggravates their powerlessness relative to other learners. This further accentuates the inextricable link between the elements of alienation in education. Not only is normlessness associated with powerlessness but it also has a link with meaninglessness.

that can be constructed without difficulty. Theoretically, when a learner perceives the education system as immaterial to their success in the future, the learner is more likely to reject or challenge the values and norms of that system.

Fourthly, isolation in education denotes the nonexistence of relationships in the school environment with teachers and peers (Dean, 1961; Brown, Higgins & Paulsen, 2003; Çağlar, 2013; Morinaj et al., 2017). Isolation is closely associated with estrangement, as isolated learners are not fully integrated into the school system and have feelings of estrangement. It is argued that isolated learners with feelings of estrangement do not embrace school goals and are often at risk of underachieving or exiting the school system (Dean, 1961; Brown, Higgins & Paulsen, 2003; Çağlar, 2013; Morinaj et al., 2017). According to Mau (1992), learners who exhibit normlessness are gradually separated from established school customs and systems, and become increasingly estranged and isolated from the school and their peers. This further demonstrates that the elements of alienation are associated and interconnected.

To eradicate alienation, Türk (2014: 56) proposes a fundamental shift in how education is approached. Türk (2014) advocates for the integration of learners into decision-making processes in schools, to transform them from objects of education to active contributors to education. Equally important, Brown, Higgins & Paulsen (2003) postulate that a school environment free from alienation would encompass the active participation of learners in school work and a commitment by learners to the subjects taught at school. In addition, Brown, Higgins & Paulsen (2003) argue that learners would perceive their schoolwork as integral to their lived experiences and future opportunities. More so, they argue that learners who are not alienated develop meaningful and courteous relationships with their peers and teachers (Brown, Higgins & Paulsen, 2003).

2.6.4. Alienation in education's potential application in the rural Eastern Cape

Less than half of the learners who start Grade 1 in South Africa pass their matric examinations (Ilifa Labantwana et al., 2019). Based on pass rate data from the 2018 matriculations, 36,76% of learners who start Grade 1 in the Eastern Cape pass their matric examination (Dayimani, 2023). The national and provincial figures highlighted here demonstrate the potential powerlessness of learners in controlling and directing their paths and achieving their academic

ambitions. This suggests the presence of structural limitations in obstructing the educational pursuits of South African learners in general and those of Eastern Cape learners more specifically.

Meaninglessness can also be interpreted as the inability to comprehend a link between the present moment and the future. The near 60% unemployment rate in the Eastern Cape as well as the over-70% unemployment rate for youth aged 17 to 24 years (Statistics South Africa, 2022b) may cause learners to question the role of education in their lives. Learners may find it difficult to integrate into the school system when they can easily observe that the purported education-to-employment pathway is a fallacy, as well as the effects of unemployment in their day to day lives, a reality they are told schooling is meant to curb. Among others, normlessness may be partly demonstrated by rural learners smoking cigarettes at school, using marijuana, partaking in drinking, and being disrespectful to teachers. The occurrences are generally antithetical to the widely accepted norms of education (Dean, 1961; Brown, Higgins & Paulsen, 2003; Çağlar, 2013; Morinaj et al., 2017).

A study on youth mobility notes that the populations in rural areas are sparsely distributed, denoting that people are physically far from each other (Porter et al., 2010). This thesis proposes that physical isolation may result in isolation among peers, whereby learners cannot cultivate or nurture relationships with their contemporaries outside the classroom. Isolation from teachers may occur due to the inadequate provision of teachers to students and the limited number of qualified and experienced teachers teaching in rural areas, which limit the chances for rural learners to forge meaningful relationships with teachers. As a result, learners are at risk of non-achievement and estrangement from schooling. They are potentially never fully integrated into the school system, which can lead them to possibly exit the school system prematurely (Porter et al., 2010).

2.6.5. *Limitations*

South Africa, particularly rural South Africa, is spatially, culturally, geographically, and socio-economically unique compared to the regions where Karl Marx ([1867] 1974) and Melvin Seeman (1959; 1975) conducted their research, Europe and North America, respectively. As a result, I found that the conceptualisation of alienation offered by Marx ([1867] 1974) and

further developed by Seeman (1959; 1975) offers little room for the South African rural context in some instances. For example, their conceptualisations do not make room for the diverse family configurations in (South) Africa more generally but particularly in the rural and township contexts. Unlike the nuclear family of the Western world, in Africa, family configurations include but are not limited to extended and multigenerational families, polygamous families, and child-headed households (Hall, 2022). To avert these shortcomings, this study is guided by Magubane (1971) in its use of theories of alienation. Magubane (1971) alerts scholars utilising sociological concepts developed in Europe to not divorce the theories from the historical and cultural contexts of the societies they seek to understand.

Furthermore, the conceptualisations of alienation by Marx ([1867] 1974) and Seeman (1959; 1975) are gender-neutral and do not differentiate between men and women. The theory of alienation as conceptualised by Marx ([1867] 1974) plays a significant role in his critique of capitalist oppression of workers in modern societies, where, at the outset of the alienation literature, a distinction was rarely made between men and women workers. Because of the form of patriarchy under capitalism, which subordinates women to men, alienation in education follows this gender-neutral pattern established by Marx and fails to articulate how issues of gender play a role in alienation in education.

Closely related, though rooted in class analysis, Marx ([1867] 1974) and Seeman (1959; 1975) do not make room for race-based analyses and observations (Magubane, 1971). Arguably, this limitation is founded on the Eurocentric foundations of this framework. The demographic profile and history of South Africa are complex and unique. More often than not, race cannot be ignored when exploring societal matters of injustice and inequality (Magubane, 1971). Nonetheless, despite these limitations borne out of alienation's Eurocentric origins, it would be remiss not to mention the contributions of Paulo Freire (1970) who looked at the structural issues impinging on education from a Brazilian context.

A significant limitation I observed regarding the theory of alienation in education is its complexity or, more aptly put, its inaccessibility to research participants. By that, I mean the complexity regarding operationalising the term "alienation in education." To assess whether learners experienced alienation, I had to evaluate from their responses whether they experienced any of the five manifestations of alienation as conceptualised by Seeman (1959;1975) instead of directly asking them, "Have you experienced alienation in education?"

Similarly, to elicit responses from policymakers and administrators concerning alienation in education, I had to ask questions concerning its five manifestations as opposed to directly asking them, “What are your thoughts on alienation in education?”

The definitions of the concepts of estrangement and isolation in education as two mutually exclusive concepts are misleading. Splitting these terms into two categories falsely implies there is a clear differentiation of these concepts; this thesis argues there is no distinction. Estrangement can be subsumed into isolation, as estrangement is an epiphenomenon of isolation, not a separate category of alienation in education. This is clear in the literature (Dean, 1961; Brown, Higgins & Paulsen, 2003; Çağlar, 2013; Morinaj et al., 2017; Seeman, 1959; Seeman, 1975), as I have found that estrangement in education is rarely defined without the conceptual use of isolation in education. This denotes that isolation is the central, overarching principle in these concepts. As such, I have reduced and subsumed estrangement in education into isolation in education in the findings and analysis chapters. Throughout the thesis, estrangement in education and isolation in education are used interchangeably.

2.7. Conclusion

This chapter introduced the theoretical frameworks of alienation as conceptualised by Marx ([1874] 1974) and Seeman (1959; 1975). It also discussed how the theory of alienation can be applied in the field of Education, and conveyed the significant limitations of Marx and Seeman. In addition, the chapter highlighted the limitations of applying the theory of alienation in education, and showed how theories of alienation speak to the nature of relationships that individuals cultivate with themselves and the various structures enveloping them. It highlighted how these five qualities of alienation are consistent with the aims of qualitative research methodology, which seeks to understand and describe the meaning that rural learners ascribe to their experiences (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018).

Despite the utility of alienation in explaining the experiences of rural learners in rural schools, the theory is constrained by several limitations, as the chapter highlighted. This section showed that theories of alienation neglect essential aspects of the South African learner which impact their experiences, including race, gender, the society, and socio-economic context the learners live in, which encompasses the school, the home, and the community. It also highlighted the

complexity of the terms used in the theory. In addition, the methodology section will further highlight how this specific challenge was overcome and will capture the comprehensive list of methodological frameworks and procedures used in the thesis.

3. CHAPTER THREE – METHODOLOGY

3.1. Introduction

In this chapter, I detail the overall methodological approach (qualitative research), the data collection strategies and methodologies (questionnaires, in depth interviews and secondary data), and the analysis and interpretation of data techniques (deductive and inductive coding and systematic analysis and interpretation of policy documents) employed in this thesis. In this chapter, I also outline the ethical considerations reflected on (consent, harm, and justice) and the ethical processes (UCT Department of Sociology ethical clearance and UCT Department of Education permission to conduct research) used in the thesis. Lastly, I reflect on the limitations and challenges (generalisation, power differential, code-switching, and insider-outsider positionality) that occurred during this study that came with employing the chosen strategies and techniques.

3.2. Approach – qualitative research

Education is a component of the social world, with both learners and the school system lending themselves to sociological examination, as both cannot be understood outside of the historical, social, economic, cultural, and political environments that shape them (Halasz & Kaufman, 2008; Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). I chose to conduct this sociological study using qualitative research methodology. The use of qualitative research is appropriate for this study as it seeks to understand and describe the experiences of rural learners and the meanings they ascribe to their experiences (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). I pursued a rigorous understanding of qualitative research to ensure that I employed concomitant data collection and analysis processes and techniques that would enhance my findings, analysis, and interpretation.

Qualitative research is an umbrella term highlighting an application of social science research that focuses on gathering illustrative data in natural settings, using inductive thinking, and stressing an understanding of participants' perspectives (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Young & Babchuk, 2019). According to Denzin & Lincoln (2018), qualitative research is a set of complex interpretive methods; however, I found a commonality across qualitative approaches: they are typically dedicated to a naturalistic outlook as well as an interpretive understanding of individuals and society (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). In striving towards a thorough

comprehension of qualitative research, I began to understand that the researcher is the primary instrument for data collection and analysis (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). As the researcher, I was able to analyse data using nonverbal and verbal communication, instantly process data from research participants, ask clarifying questions during the interviews, use cues as a guide, synthesise interviews, summarise literature, confirm the validity and reliability of the findings using verification strategies (such as methodological coherence, appropriate sampling, and saturation), and investigate further infrequent, widespread, and surprising findings that emerged from the interviews and literature review (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). In line with Merriam & Tisdell (2016), my aspiration is that centring the study around the ideas, perspectives, and knowledge of the participants (learners) will increase the potential of making a difference in the circumstances of participants through this research.

I employed qualitative research within the critical social science paradigm. The critical social science approach to research “emphasises combating surface-level distortions, multiple levels of reality, and value-based activism for human empowerment” (Neuman, 2014: 110–111). Denzin & Lincoln (2018) note that the critical social science paradigm necessitates that the research objectives engage with and contribute to the struggle for equity and justice for the marginalised. At the same time, Merriam & Tisdell (2016) argue that for studies to be classified as critical, they must be unashamed of being labelled political. Critical perspectives include feminism, critical race theory, poststructuralist work, queer theories, and postcolonial critique. The common thread across the varying critical perspectives is the shared understanding that certain groups of people have historically been deprived of access to locations of power and are systematically excluded (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). My choice in the critical social science approach is most appropriate for this thesis, as the study posits that rural education outcomes in South Africa are structural injustices that produce and reproduce injustice, inequality, and poverty amongst the most marginalised. Young (2006: 709) termed structural injustices as “situations of injustices which perpetually produce and reproduce wrongs.”

The critical social science paradigm criticises elements of the positivist social science paradigm by noting how positivists neglect the meanings that people ascribe to their contexts (Neuman, 2014). However, it shares with positivism the belief in an empirical reality independent of our perspectives. It shares with interpretivism the notion that we form what we take to be social reality from our subjective experiences, cultural beliefs, and social interactions (Neuman, 2014). Critical social science utilises the bounded autonomy approach. Bounded autonomy is:

An approach to human agency and causality used in critical social science that assumes human action is based on subjective choices and reasons but only within identifiable limits (Neuman, 2014: 113).

This approach is significant for this study, as the learners are individuals with innate autonomy and agency; however, their actions and choices are exercised within the socio-economic, rural context in which they exist. It is important to note that among the different paradigms, there are contestations and challenges by followers of contending paradigms. More so, according to Denzin & Lincoln (2018: 196), in recent times, research genres are blurred and interwoven. For example, Denzin & Lincoln (2018) hold that theorists traditionally seen to occupy opposing and unreconcilable positions can today emerge under a different theoretical rubric, informing each other's claims as boundaries between paradigms continue to shift.

3.3. Data collection strategy and methods

3.3.1. Finding a key informant and receiving permission to conduct research in the EC

Following a presentation of my PhD proposal in July 2021, a lecturer connected me to an employee of the ECDoE. In September 2021, in Mthatha, I attempted to meet relevant people in the ECDoE who could help me obtain permission to conduct interviews and offer me guidance on educational matters in the rural Eastern Cape. I soon learnt that power for granting permission for interviewing learners and teachers lay in the provincial office in Zwelitsha, near Bhisho, approximately 250 km from Mthatha. At that point, in October 2021, I reached out to the contact provided by the lecturer. Unbeknown to me, that contact became my key informant. Phatiswa Nika⁸ [not her real name] was based in Mthatha and despite the COVID-19 pandemic, Phatiswa was willing to meet me in person. She shared with me the personal contact details of individuals in the permissions office. I reached out to those contacts. The contacts were helpful and one of them shared the permissions form with me the next day.

Phatiswa Nika facilitated my formal access to the ECDoE at both the provincial and district levels, and to high schools, parents, and learners in the community. I was forced to confront my own perceptions of administrators in the ECDoE as being lethargic, disengaged, and

⁸ In line with the ethics of social science research (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018), this study uses pseudonyms to protect the identities of participants. See further ethical considerations on page 81.

unhelpful, as this was immediately put into question by Phatiswa. I started to notice that many practitioners working in the rural Eastern Cape would find my research meaningful and engaging. Then, on 2 November 2021, I received my permission to interview learners and administrators in the Eastern Cape.

3.3.2. Gaining access to sites through the district director, cluster, and circuit manager

Once the ECDoE permitted me to interview administrators and learners, I sat in a Departmental marking workshop. At the workshop, I formally met teachers working in the different districts and got a sense of their perspectives and challenges. This pre-interview work was a form of immersing myself into the workings of the ECDoE and, importantly, for gaining a deeper contextual understanding of the learning environment, albeit from teachers rather than learners. At this workshop, my key informant introduced me to the attendees as a PhD candidate researching the experiences of learners in rural areas. I engaged informally with teachers, heads of departments, and subject advisors. I documented some of their experiences of working in rural areas.

Departmental guidelines dictated that I share copies of my permission letter with the District Director, Cluster Manager, and Circuit Manager of the relevant schools; I did so. When I met the Circuit Manager, I asked them to share the contacts of three schools under their circuit. They asked me which schools I was interested in and why I had chosen the specific circuit. I told the circuit manager that I chose this region as it is a rural area with numerous remote rural regions. Its demographic profile, topology, and socioeconomic make-up reflected many rural areas in the Eastern Cape, thus serving as the perfect microcosm of rural regions in the province. I explained that choosing schools located significant distances from each other – as is the case in this circuit – would enable me to gain a broad and insightful understanding of alienation in education for learners, the rural school experience faced by learners, and commonalities and divergences in the lived experience of learners in different communities.

3.3.3. Sampling methods and population size

Participants were chosen through purposeful and maximal variation sampling. This enabled the selection of individuals who could aptly assist in developing a deep comprehension of the phenomenon of alienation in education. Purposeful sampling is the deliberate selection of individuals to enlighten the researcher about the explored phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Maximal variation sampling is a sampling method that selects dissimilar participants within a phenomenon in order to broaden our understanding of it by highlighting different perspectives of the phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2018). As previously stated, I identified three public high schools in the Mqanduli circuit from the 152 secondary schools in the OR Tambo District Municipality (Department of Cooperative Governance & Traditional Affairs, 2020) using a combination of purposeful and maximal variation sampling.

I chose the OR Tambo District Municipality because it is a rural region located in the Eastern Cape. The Eastern Cape is worthy of focus because it is a rural province, with 65% of the province living in rural regions (Paxton, 2015). More so, the Eastern Cape is the poorest of the 9 South African provinces, with 72% of its population living below the poverty line (Kavese, 2017; S&P Global Market Intelligence, 2023). Furthermore, the majority of the 11,252 rural schools in the country are found in three provinces, the Eastern Cape, Kwa-Zulu Natal, and Limpopo (Dube, 2020) and over 70% of rural children in South Africa live in these three provinces (Dube, 2020). In addition, the OR Tambo municipality is one of the poorest municipalities in the country, housed in the former homeland of Transkei. It is home to an abundance of mud schools and schools with poor and often non-existent infrastructure to support learners in their education. Former homeland residents are a disenfranchised community, with the average citizen leaving school with a poor Grade 10 qualification. Disturbingly, after the average former homeland resident leaves school, they often become permanently unemployed (Westaway, 2012).

I conducted the data collection for learners in a three-phased approach. In the first phase, I administered a questionnaire with 20 learners from each school (total of 60 learners) as a tool for choosing participants to be interviewed, participants who I believed would best assist in gathering information on alienation in education. The first phase also served as a pilot study. According to Sampson (2004), a pilot study aids the researcher in revising and enhancing research instruments and procedures, identifying and rectifying potential challenges in the

field, and ascertaining the limitations of study. In this initial phase, I introduced the concept of alienation in education and its fivefold categorisation into the field. The objective of the pilot was to determine if rural high school learners experienced disaffection and disconnectedness that could be assessed, analysed, and interpreted through the lens of alienation in education. The preliminary responses from the questionnaires suggested that alienation was observable. Nevertheless, the following chapters highlight how the inductive approach of this study allowed for the disclosure of participant responses that sometimes deviated from and did not fit the experiences of disaffection initially being assessed.

Based on the questionnaire responses, in the second phase, sixteen participants who self-identified as alienated, or related to having experienced one or more of the five manifestations of alienation in education, were chosen for in-depth interviews. Due to the emergence of dropping out as significant occurrence in the participants' communities, I interviewed in the second phase a separate set of five former high school learners who had dropped out of school without matriculating. Interviewing this group served as the third phase. More so, this cohort of former learners was vitally important as it enabled me to gain what Spindler & Spindler (1998) term temporal triangulation. According to Phelan, Davidson & Yu (1998: 6) temporal triangulation is critical as "people are frequently able to describe the process of events more cogently after they have occurred."

The study included a mix of men and women, between 14 and 30 years old. The study's maximal variation sampling method selected dissimilar participants within a phenomenon to broaden our understanding of alienation in education. The median age in South Africa for Grade 8 learners in high school is 14 years old. However, in rural areas, it is common for learners to still be attending Grade 8 at 19 years old. Therefore, the broad age range of the selected participants was intended to cover all high school learners.

In addition, I identified five key policymakers and administrators from the district and regional municipal offices. Among other issues, they also responded to the framing of "the rural" in education and the role of policy in rural education. Some of the questions posed to them were based on an analysis of government policy documents and associated reports that I conducted before entering the field. Finally, these policymakers and administrators were also asked questions about their knowledge of issues of learner alienation, education in rural areas, and issues facing learners in rural regions.

3.4. Data collection methods

The first phase of the data collection used questionnaires. As previously mentioned, I administered questionnaires to 20 learners per school from each of the three respective schools. The questionnaire was composed of both closed and open-ended questions. According to Denzin & Lincoln (2018), this is a uniform manner of gathering information that enables comparison and the discovery of the broader pertinence of the issue being investigated. Before I embarked on the first phase, within a two-week window, I visited the schools twice to speak to teachers and learners about my study and share informed consent forms with learners. I returned a week after my second visit to collect the informed consent forms, which I had asked to be submitted to one teacher per school. I did this as many learners noted that they live alone or without adult supervision, while others noted that they only go home over some weekends. I selected learners who fit the age profile of the sample, and I returned to the schools with the questionnaires.

I administered the questionnaires at the three respective schools. At each school, I asked for a classroom secluded from others. At each of the three schools, I administered the questionnaires in groups. I handed the learners printed questionnaires and they completed them. I had earlier translated the questions from English to isiXhosa, but I noticed that learners responded in both isiXhosa and English. In response to the question “What are the big issues or challenges that undermine your school experience?” all learners mentioned “school fees” (despite all of them attending no-fee schools), the long distance to school, dropouts in their villages, the lack of support outside the classroom, and the shortage of textbooks. This led me to revise my questions for the in-depth interviews. In addition to the questions I planned to ask, I included specific questions on “school fees,” commuting to school, support outside of the classroom, and textbook shortages. As previously mentioned, the preliminary findings from the pilot study required that I interview an additional cohort of learners, high school dropouts.

The second phase of the data collection used in-depth interviews. I designed and conducted interviews to explore the experiences of rural high school learners. The interviews were in-depth, semi-structured interviews with open-ended questions to enable the collection of a substantial quantity of comparable information (Giddens & Sutton, 2009; Smith, 2011; Creswell & Poth, 2018). The literature review chapter served as a guide in formulating and

enhancing the questionnaires and the in-depth interviews later administered to learners, dropouts, and policymakers. The interview questions about alienation were drawn from the conceptualisation of alienation by Seeman (1959; 1975), the literature review, observations made during the initial school visits, and a modification of the questions following the questionnaire responses. The questions that were partly drawn from Seeman (1959; 1975), were moderately edited to ensure suitability and accessibility for learners and the rural context. More so, a substantial number of the questions in the interviews concerned the school, home, and community environment of learners, the connections between the three, and how each enhanced, eradicated, diminished, or caused feelings of alienation in education for learners.

As mentioned, the participants in the in-depth interviews were chosen based on the responses from the questionnaires. All participants who self-identified as alienated or reported one or more manifestation of alienation in education were chosen for the in-depth interviews. I interviewed the learners one-on-one over three successive weekends. It is important to note that I interviewed learners on weekends because it was more convenient for them. They said scheduling interviews on weekends was best for them as they had fewer classes and activities. More so, I inferred that this availability would reduce their stress and likely improve the quality of their responses. Also, schools are quieter on weekends, giving students more privacy and peace of mind. At the first school, for the in-depth interviews, I interviewed learners outdoors because when I asked them where they felt most comfortable, they directed me to the “playing area” that some of the matric students utilised during break during the school day. The school had given me access to two classrooms; however, the learners were most comfortable and indeed enthused to be outside in the shaded area. I was given access to classrooms and staff offices in the remaining two schools. I asked all the learners where they preferred to be interviewed, and they unanimously chose the classrooms. At the two remaining schools, the interviews were conducted in the classrooms. My research assistant and I arranged the chairs in a semi-circle to avoid appearing like teachers and to foster a collaborative environment. More so, we deliberately did not use a desk to cultivate an atmosphere distinct from the hierarchical nature of the teacher-learner relationship.

Whilst conducting the interviews, I observed that, for the most part, the girl participants were incredibly responsive, and I perceived them to be unguarded. Some boy participants were cautious and initially were not entirely forthcoming (I highlight an example of this in the **Chapter Four**). A strategy used by boys was to generalise their inputs and not be specific

about personal details. Only when asked follow-up questions did these learners give answers specific to their particular circumstances. Though some of the boys were guarded, in line with Phelan, Davidson & Yu (1998), I observed that most of the high school learners were opinionated, equipped with depths of knowledge, and appreciated being listened to. However, they often had no outlet for some of their ideas about their school and broader communities. This is exemplified by Modise, a 19-year-old Grade 12 learner, who, when asked “what can help you achieve your dreams?” responded, “We need people to help us, people to come and listen to our problems. Maybe people like you.” Another pertinent observation was the hopefulness expressed by learners, despite exhibiting disconnection, disaffection, and disappointment. They remained hopeful and actively confronted some of the challenges they faced. This contradiction will be explored further in the discussion chapters.

The in-depth interviews took from 20 to 45 minutes. As previously noted, they were audio-recorded. To avoid the reproduction of archetypical tropes about teachers and learners, I took notes not during the interviews, but afterwards in the evenings.

The principal at the first school connected me with five high school dropouts who still lived in the village near the school. Initially, I met these former learners at the school. When I asked them where to meet them for the interviews, they recommended an open area near a local internet café frequented by community members in need of printing and access to computers. They notified me that this is where they typically hang out. I also interviewed the principal, who shared thoughts about learners and educators at the school.

The systematic analysis and interpretation of policy documents were used as a data collection source. I reviewed and evaluated key policy documents as part of the literature review. Notable sources for the policy review included public records on the region obtained from governmental departments (including the Department of Basic Education, Department of Employment & Labour, Statistics South Africa, and National Treasury), newspapers, journals, dissertations, speeches, and research reports. Throughout the research process, these documents helped to gain a contextual basis and understanding for the study. The systematic investigation of these sources provided relevant information on the historical, socio-economic, cultural, and political environments that shape the experiences of learners (Bowen, 2009). In addition, the review of key policy documents assisted in, firstly, assessing how policies frame rurality in education and secondly, in examining government policy documents including national legislation such

as the South African Schools Act (1996), the South African Constitution (1996a), and the Rural Education Draft Policy (2017). These were supplemented with additional government case studies, policy statements, and ministerial speeches.

3.4.1. Interpretation and analysis of the data

Figure 5. Interpretation and evaluation of the data process.



Once I collected the completed questionnaires from the learners, I transcribed the responses verbatim. I studied the answers to the questionnaires. I also recorded the interviews with the consent of the participants and transcribed them verbatim in isiXhosa. I conducted all interviews with learners in isiXhosa, the home language of all the learners. This was easy because isiXhosa is my home language. After the initial transcribing in isiXhosa, I translated the interviews into English. My research assistant and an English teacher who taught English at an isiXhosa medium school aided me in ensuring that meaning was not lost in the process of translation. Both the research assistant and the English teacher are native isiXhosa speakers.

Thereafter, I began the data analysis by carefully reading and re-reading the primary set of in-depth interviews several times to develop a deeper understanding of the participants and their perspectives (Creswell & Guetterman, 2018).

In the proposal stage of my PhD programme, I indicated that I would use NVivo computer software programme to assist me in storing and sorting the data. However, I changed to a manual analysis that I ran on Microsoft Excel because of its technical functionality for coding. Having previously worked as a development management consultant, I am skilled at navigating Microsoft Excel, therefore using it as a tool to store and analyse data and to create categories, subcategories, and themes was relatively simple. After exporting the transcribed interviews into Microsoft Excel, I began the process of coding. “Coding is the process of segmenting and labelling text to form descriptions and broad themes in the data” (Creswell & Guetterman, 2018: 243).

Following this, I wrote a composite description of the participants’ sentences, phrases, paragraphs, and essential comments using structural and textual descriptions (see details below). These short phrases encapsulated the essence of the experience, highlighting what participants experienced and how they experienced it (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The coding process in the study involved creating codes, categories, subcategories, and themes. A crucial part of the coding process is synthesising (Saldaña, 2013). Synthesising is used to transition from codes to categories and from categories to themes (Saldaña, 2013). According to Saldaña (2013: 15):

A quantitative parallel [of coding] is determining the mean or average of a set of numbers. There is no qualitative algorithm or formula that adds up the codes and calculates their mean. But there are methods for synthesising the collective, not to arrive at a reduced answer but to move forward toward consolidated meaning. That meaning may take the form of a category, theme, assertion or proposition.

In my PhD research proposal, I focused solely on the experiences of alienation in education, conceptualised as powerlessness, estrangement, isolation, normlessness, and meaninglessness (Seeman, 1959; Seeman, 1975). By initially using the deductive approach to coding, I unintentionally and “uncritically” (Nyoka, 2013: 19) superimposed the theoretical framework onto my findings and discussion chapters. The deductive approach to coding recommends and privileges creating codes before analysing interview data. This deductive approach draws codes

from the theoretical framework and research questions. Afterwards, deductive coding entails grouping and organising the collected data into pre-determined codes (Saldaña, 2013).

After careful consideration, I became aware that this process unlocked important insights. Still, it also constrained other glaringly obvious insights in the data that did not fit the preconceived themes tied to the theoretical framework. The over-reliance on pre-determined codes seemed to stifle the rich data on the experiences relayed by learners. Paradoxically, this limited interpretation of participant experiences in some ways alienated the voices of participants by ignoring the dynamism and intricacies of the phenomenon being explored. Subsequently, I re-read my interviews and re-coded the data using inductive coding. Inductive approaches to coding are driven not by theory but by empirical data and thus dismiss the use of pre-determined codes or existing theory to nudge the analysis (Smith & Osborn, 2007; Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). It was important to re-code because I aspired to shift the mantle of authority from me to the participants, in line with the characteristics of qualitative research (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The learners are the experts on their lived experiences, and therefore, their views should inform a significant portion of this research (Babchuk, 2019). As a result of re-coding, the complexity of learners and the dualism of their experiences became apparent. Notably, these included not only manifestations of alienation, but the profound and vivid agency and resilience exercised day-to-day from home to school and to the community environment. This data analysis process of inductive coding was repeated for the interviews with dropouts and policymakers.

The study confirmed the validity and reliability of the findings by using verification strategies, notably methodological coherence, appropriate sampling, and saturation. Validity and reliability are defined as the techniques to establish the credibility and accuracy findings (Creswell & Miller, 2000; Young & Babchuk, 2019). “In qualitative research, verification refers to the mechanisms used during the process of research to incrementally contribute to ensuring reliability and validity and, thus, the rigour of a study” (Morse, Barrett, Mayan, Olson & Spiers, 2002: 18). Methodological coherence guarantees “congruence between the research question and the components of the method” (Morse et al., 2002: 18). The chosen sampling strategy, purposeful and maximal variation sampling, enabled the study to select individuals who can aptly assist in developing a deep comprehension of the research area (Morse et al., 2002). More so, saturation of the questionnaires, the in-depth interviews, and key documentary

data highlighted the links between related concepts in different examples, settings, and incidences bolster confidence in the accuracy and rigour of the study (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018).

Lastly, the use of Microsoft Excel, was helpful as a tool in the verification process. It enabled me to conduct textual analysis and ensure systematic analysis by supplying electronic instruments for storing, arranging, recovering, and verifying collected data (Creswell & Guetterman, 2018; De Wet & Erasmus, 2005).

3.5. Ethical considerations

3.5.1. Consent, harm, and justice

I ensured that the participants consented to be interviewed and recorded, and their data to be used in the study. I confirmed they were aware of their right to withdraw from the study at any time. I communicated these ethical issues both in writing and verbally, and asked participants to sign an informed consent form (Creswell & Poth, 2018) (see Annexures 3 and 4). It is worth noting that all guardians and/or parents of participants also signed the informed consent form. The consent form noted the protection of confidentiality and anonymity, and I emphasised that the personal details of participants would be anonymised in the research report and given pseudonyms to protect their identity and privacy (Neuman, 2014). All names utilised in this study are pseudonyms. More so, I ensured that the quotes used and the narrative emerging from those quotes do not reveal the identities of the research participants.

I was and continue to be aware that this is a vulnerable group, as the sample consisted primarily of minors under 18 years of age. More so, some of these minors live alone in child-headed households. This is why I required the informed consent form to be signed by a parent, caregiver, or guardian. In addition, I was prepared to facilitate access to wellness and counselling services for any learner who felt they required these after the interviews. I spoke to the respective principals and deputy principals regarding this. I also employed a woman research assistant to accompany me during all my interviews. Before each interview, participants were told that participation in the research was voluntary. I ensured that the participants were not subjected to psychological or physical harm derived from their participation in the study. I believe the study had a low-risk probability of harm. Despite this,

I notified all participants of the free mental health services available to them in clinics and through South African Childcare Association (SACA) if they had previous or ongoing mental health challenges.

Interviews were conducted during January and February of 2022, and all necessary COVID-19 protocols were observed to safeguard the participants from contracting the virus, including wearing masks, sanitising, and social distancing. I treated all participants equally and fairly. To ensure the equal and fair treatment of participants (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018), I was transparent about my intentions, the objectives of the study, the roles of the participants, why they were chosen, and why the specific sites were selected. The ethics of critical social science research require that I actively challenge the inherent power that researchers have over their participants, and that I open myself to learning from participants instead of speaking for them (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018).

3.6. Positionality

There is no clear window into the inner life of an individual. Any gaze is always filtered through the lenses of language, gender, social class, race, and ethnicity. There are no objective observations, only observations socially situated in the worlds of—and between—the observer and the observed (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018: 53).

This quotation conveys the importance of reflexivity in research, which occurs when “the writer engages in self-understanding about the biases, values, and experiences that he or she brings to a qualitative research study” (Creswell & Poth, 2018: 303). My rural upbringing, exposure to different schooling systems, work experience as a development management consultant, characteristics of my educational opportunities, and interests in social justice fed my desire and curiosity to pursue this study. I resided with my grandmother in the village of eMahlungulu in the rural Eastern Cape until I was eight years old. My grandmother was a teacher and she taught me how to read before I attended formal schooling. In hindsight, living with my grandmother eMahlungulu and attending pre-school and Grade 1 in the rural areas were experiences that proved essential for this study, as these gave me special insight into general knowledge about rural schools, rural life, and norms and customs practised in rural areas of the Eastern Cape. In Grade 3, I transferred to an all-boys school in East London and

for high school, attended an all-boys school in Cape Town. These all-boys schools exposed me to multicultural environments. However, in these multicultural environments, African learners, including me, typically ranked at the bottom end of the academic scores of the grade – not by any fault of our own but because of alienation from the dominant, White, English culture. As African learners, we spoke about how we felt marginalised and oppressed during our schooling. This experience planted in my young mind the idea that Africans faced injustice and latent discrimination in the schooling system despite the Rainbow Nation discourse about equality and democracy.

These early experiences were vital for me on two fronts. First, they highlighted the deep chasm between schooling in Quintiles 1 to 3 and Quintile 5 public schools. The rural and multicultural schools I attended were all government-run schools, but the differences in the quality and provision of education is still glaring. Second, after noticing how African learners constantly scored lower academic scores, I considered that other, structural issues were at play. These forces privileged some (White, affluent, English-speaking) learners while others were disadvantaged because of their race or class – in one classroom! I put forward my positionality here because I agree that:

Research is not apolitical, it does not emanate from a vacuum. The kinds of questions that we ask are often shaped by a particular personal history, which leads us to connect our own experience, those of our participants, with broader national and global structural processes” (Magadla, 2017: 136).

3.7. Limitations of the study

3.7.1. Generalisation

The study developed an in-depth exploration of the phenomenon of alienation in education, but typically, qualitative research studies are not able to generalise their findings to the general population (Creswell & Guetterman, 2018). It is often cited that the sample sizes of qualitative studies do not represent the ethnic, socioeconomic, and cultural diversity of whole populations (Creswell & Guetterman, 2018). However, this study departs from the idea that qualitative research is suited to make claims about select individuals in specific groups. Although no two rural regions are identical, the theories and insights generated from and uncovered in this thesis

can be generalised and adapted to all rural areas in South Africa due to the common uniqueness rural areas share, particularly former homelands. This study focused on the former homeland of Transkei, now in the Eastern Cape. However, this area shares attributes with the former homelands of Ciskei (now in the Eastern Cape), Bophuthatswana (now in the North West), Venda and Lebowa (now in Limpopo), Gazankulu, KaNgwane, and KwaNdebele (now in Mpumalanga), KwaZulu (now in Kwa-Zulu Natal), and QwaQwa (now in the Free-State) (Westaway, 2012). The typical features of these regions, such as historical barriers to accessing education and sparsely populated populations (Ntsebeza, 2011), allow the study to be applied to a broader context.

3.7.2. Power differential

Although interviews provided detailed information, there was a possibility that participants provided the information they thought I wanted to hear (Creswell & Guetterman, 2018). This sometimes happens because of the asymmetrical power relations between me, a researcher and a man with relative economic privilege studying at a prestigious university, and the participants, children, minors attending no-fee high schools.

3.7.3. Code-switching

All interviews were facilitated in a language preferred by the research participants, namely isiXhosa. The interview guide and questionnaire for learners were prepared in both English and isiXhosa. All learners chose to have the interviews in isiXhosa but at times, responded in English. Code-switching took place frequently and as needed, as I am fluent in both isiXhosa and English. All data collected in isiXhosa were translated and transcribed verbatim by me. Then, I proceeded with the data analysis in English (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Although a research assistant and a retired teacher fluent in both languages were hired to assist with quality checking the translated transcriptions to avoid the loss of meaning and depth in the translation process, translating from isiXhosa into English may result in the loss of texture of the original meaning. However, we did our best to retain the essence of all learners' responses.

3.7.4. Insider-outsider positionality

While I am from rural Eastern Cape, I am not from the communities where I conducted interviews. Because of this, I suspect that participants sometimes viewed me as an outsider. Being viewed as an outsider without direct connections to those communities may have created a gap between participants, especially the learners and me. Conversely, my outsider positionality created an enabling environment for those willing to share issues they had never discussed with teachers or other community members. This outsider positionality was thus advantageous to the research, as participants shared personal narratives that they knew would not be heard by teachers or other community members.

Despite the potential limitations of possibly being an outsider, I could draw on my knowledge of the Eastern Cape and isiXhosa culture to gain the trust of participants. Not only am I an African man, but I am a native isiXhosa speaker who is from the broader area, the OR Tambo District Municipality in the Eastern Cape. I also grew up with my grandmother in a remote rural village in the province, and I am acutely aware of the cultural customs and norms practised in rural Eastern Cape. When I felt distance or awkwardness between the research participants and me, I actively attempted to bridge the gap by discarding my interview questions and instead drew on my knowledge of the area and culture to ask questions about topical issues that I knew would elicit responses and engagement. For example, I would ask how COVID-19 impacted traditional Xhosa celebrations and practices such as *ulwaluko* (going to initiation school) and *imigidi* (the traditional celebration following the conclusion of the *ulwaluko* rite of passage). More so, my research assistant was not only a native Xhosa speaker, but she went to a no-fee school in a nearby region. She was therefore able to draw on her own experience to foster trust and participation during the interviews.

3.8. Conclusion

This chapter detailed the overall research methodological approach (qualitative research), the data collection strategies and methodologies (questionnaires, in depth interviews and secondary data), and the analysis and interpretation of data techniques (deductive and inductive coding, and systematic analysis of policy documents) employed in the study. This chapter outlined the ethical considerations considered and managed (consent, harm, and justice) during

the research process. Lastly, the chapter considered the possible limitations, challenges, and experiences (generalisation, power differential, code-switching, and insider-outsider positionality) that occurred during the research because of the strategies and techniques mentioned above. **Chapter Four** reveals the key findings from the interviews with learners.

CHAPTER FOUR – FINDINGS

4.1. Introduction

This chapter presents the findings from 15 in-depth interviews about experiences of alienation in education conducted with high school learners from the rural Eastern Cape. This chapter also presents findings from the 5 supplementary interviews conducted with former rural high school learners who dropped out of the school system before completing matric. The chapter also provides findings from the interviews with 5 policymakers and administrators on the phenomenon of learner alienation in education.

Before revealing the key findings that emerged, it is worth restating the research questions that steered the thesis. The central question was “How do rural high school learners in the Eastern Cape experience alienation in education?” Four sub-questions further stimulated inquiry into the main question. These were: “How do rural high school learners describe their experiences of alienation in education?” “What are the central issues facing rural high school learners in the Eastern Cape socio-economic environment, and how do these play a role in the alienation of learners in education?” “How is rurality framed in education policy, and how does this play a role in alienating rural learners in education?” and “In what ways do rural learners believe their school experience can be improved to counter their alienation?”

This chapter primarily responds directly to the research question: “How do rural high school learners describe their experiences of alienation in education?” It explores this question under four dimensions of alienation in education: isolation (estrangement), powerlessness, meaningless, and normlessness. More so, the chapter responds in part to the sub-question, “What are the central issues facing rural high school learners in the Eastern Cape socio-economic environment, and how do these play a role in the alienation of learners in education?” In addition, the interviews with policymakers and administrators are presented, specifically their reflections on student experiences of discontent and alienation. In this findings chapter, foregrounding the voices of participants with limited interpretation provides the most precise image of their lived experiences. Therefore, this chapter makes extensive use of quotations extracted verbatim from the transcripts. I also rely on slightly edited excerpts to “heighten the realism of the presentation and maintain the participant’s ‘voiceprint,’” with the overarching objective of composing “a self-standing representative slice of the data that presents a participant-character ‘portrait in miniature’” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018: 667).

4.2. Isolation

4.2.1. *Isolation from peers*

Though the theories and concepts around isolation are vast, with alienation in education, isolation denotes the absence of relationships between individual learners, their teachers, and peers in the school environment. Isolation is closely associated with estrangement as isolated learners are not fully integrated into the school system and often experience feelings of estrangement (Dean, 1961; Brown, Higgins & Paulsen, 2003; Çağlar, 2013; Morinaj et al., 2017). A series of questions asked learners about their experiences of isolation in education. In addition, learners were asked if they experienced estrangement from peers, and questioning revealed a recurring theme that I have termed “future aspirations to uplift themselves and others.” In response to the question, “How is your relationship with other learners?” the following notable responses of isolation were recorded:

Thembekazi⁹, a 18-year-old girl in Grade 12, staying with both her parents, responded:

Weird! Other learners say that I am stuck up because I do my homework. It would be easier if I did not do it. Or if I did it, I kept quiet. I do not have friends here. If I could call anyone a friend, maybe it is the one in my class who I ask questions about school. At break times, I sit alone. I do not know why I do not have friends, and I do not even care!

Karabo, a 17-year-old girl in Grade 11, residing alone with her Grade 9 sister, said:

I am friends with my little sister. I do not have friends at school. Even in my community, it is just the two of us. That is how I am able to avoid all the trouble and issues other learners face. I do not know how to make friends. Even in my previous school, I was lonely. My sister did not go to that school. I am always very quiet and very shy.

Thato, a 19-year-old woman in Grade 11, staying with her grandmother, revealed:

Kids at this school have their own cliques. If you are not part of those cliques, they do not pay attention to you. But there is one learner I am friends with.

⁹ It is important to reassert that none of the real names of participants are used in this thesis. All names herein are pseudonyms.

Bongani, an older 20-year-old man in Grade 11, staying alone, proclaimed:

I do not really have a relationship with other learners. We do not help each other as learners. It is every man for himself.

These responses show that learners are often isolated from their peer groups for many reasons. Thembekazi insisted that she does not know why she has no friends but suspects that it may be because she always does her homework and she is vocal about her diligence, which she believes poses a likely challenge to making friends. Yet, she is firm about her commitment to her education. Contrastingly, Karabo suggested that her shy nature and inability to make friends may be the reason she is isolated from her peers. Nonetheless, she expressed that her solitude keeps her out of trouble. On the other hand, Bongani proclaims that the isolation he feels is a function of the individualistic culture among learners of “every man for himself.”

Learner isolation was also revealed in instances where this was not directly asked about. For example, responding to the question “What are the problems or challenges in your community?” Lerato, a 16-year-old girl in Grade 12, staying alone, responded:

All the children in my community get intoxicated. I am the only child in my community doing Grade 12. Every weekend, everyone says “let us go to the tavern.” When you do not go, you get insulted and called “stuck up” or “serious.” I am the only one that does not go. Many learners from this school stay alone in these rentals, and on weekends they end up going to taverns close by. It is unsafe to stay close to the school in a rental, but I do not have a choice.

Daniel, one of the former learners who dropped out of the school system before matriculating, described the isolation that he experienced during his schooling days. He said that he was forced to leave school early every day, so that he could tend to his family’s livestock. As such, his brain “was always in two places” and he could never concentrate on school because “my brain and focus was not on school but my home.” Daniel is a 32-year-old man. He dropped out of school when he was in Grade 8. At the time, he says he was about 17 or 18 years old; he does not remember exactly. Unlike Daniel, Tshepo, a 18-year-old man in Grade 11 highlighted how he chose to isolate himself from boys in his peer group. He said:

No, most of the time I sit with girls. There is nothing to worry about when you sit with girls. You are safe. The guys are sometimes smoking cigarettes and marijuana at school.

At times, the teacher will enter the classroom and say it smells of cigarettes. Even after school, the guys drink at taverns. Anything can happen when people drink. I feel safe when I am with girls.

These responses highlighted not only experiences of estrangement from peers, but also the related issues of drug and alcohol abuse in the community, child headed households, no familial support or guidance, existing in two worlds (home and school), gender, friendships, and how to navigate challenges using principles (such as fortitude, hard work, discipline and determination) anchored on future aspirations to uplift themselves and others. These themes will be further explored in detail in Chapter Five.

4.2.2. Isolation from teachers

Learners highlighted a few examples of isolation from teachers. One of the most significant reflections came from Azola, a 22-year-old man in Grade 12, who stays alone. In response to the question, “How is your relationship with teachers?” he said:

I talk to my teachers regarding school stuff. But I am always worried about telling them what is in my heart. Our teachers are not approachable. I keep all the matters from home close to me.

In addition, a comment by Sipehelele, a 17-year-old boy in Grade 11, staying with his parents and grandmother, further highlights experiences of isolation from teachers. Sipehelele said:

The teachers sometimes have special people (favourites). We might all do something wrong, but special people will not get punished. I do not like this. These special people may be, in the tests, get the highest results. It’s sad, and it makes me unhappy. You will never be happy if you all did something, but you are the only one that gets punished.

Ntombi, a 23-year-old women who dropped out of high school after failing Grade 11, described the isolation from teachers from a different perspective. In response to the question, “Have you had any problems at school?” Ntombi replied:

I do not know why but at our schools, our teachers go with the pace of the smart learners and not the hard workers. They go at a very fast pace. The teachers never waited for everyone else.

4.2.3. Isolation from community

Participants also mentioned experiences of isolation from their families and communities. For example, when asked the question, “Are there people who advise you about school matters, or people who offer you career guidance?” the following response came from Lerato, a 16-year-old girl in Grade 12, staying alone:

No one at home is educated. My father is late [passed away], and my mother stopped school in Grade 11. My older brother ended school in Grade 10. My older sister stopped school in Grade 9. There is no older person who can help me at home.

In response to the follow-up question, “What do you mean no one is educated?” Lerato elaborated:

No one at home has matriculated. No one has finished school. I have gone the furthest in school. They cannot help me because they have not walked this road.

In response to the question, “What are the problems in your community?” Modise, a 19-year-old Grade 12 pupil, who stays with his parents, said:

For example, in my community, in my clique, there are five of us. I am still studying, but the rest of my friends have given up. Their parents look at me suspiciously. Because I am studying, it might appear that I am making myself better. And their parents will start paying negative attention to me. I even started to feel bad energy. They may even want to bewitch me.

The above experiences of learners of isolation from their communities speak to the reemerging themes of low levels of education in families, the lack of academic support at home, the lack of cultural capital, and high dropout rates. **Chapter Five** discusses in detail the interconnectedness and relationships of these themes to each other.

4.3. Powerlessness

This section looks at how rural high school learners exercise their agency, in an attempt to control the direction and outcomes of their schooling. Furthermore, it looks at the perceptions that learners' schooling in rural high schools have of their power, or the absence thereof, to achieve their academic aspirations. A series of questions were asked concerning community and personal autonomy to establish whether learners experienced or perceived powerlessness in their education.

4.3.1. Powerlessness and material deprivation of the learner

Azola, a 22-year-old man in Grade 12, staying alone, described how he is constantly on the verge of exiting the school system because of economic constraints. When asked “What do you think could hinder you from achieving your aspirations?” Azola, who aspires to be an actor and teacher, said:

Firstly, it is about whether you get support at home. You might want to study, but the situation at home does not allow you to study. I am not supported properly. I do not have the things required for school. I do not have all the uniform. I sometimes do not have money for rent, and I sometimes do not have money for food. And then you sometimes want to drop out. I have had that issue. When you face these challenges, you sometimes tell yourself you cannot face them anymore. All the challenges for me are at home because here at school; we get meals... Then, there is something that tells you to drop out, but I also know that dropping out will not help me, because even my mother is not working.

In response to the question, “Are there times when you think you are wasting your time at school?” Bongani, a 20-year-old man currently in Grade 11, staying alone, proclaimed:

I have thought about dropping out, as there are some things I cannot get at home. Sometimes, we are unable to get clothes. I often think about going to work so I can meet these needs. It is a challenge not having the basics for school.

I asked Bongani the follow up question, “Will school help you in the future?” He said, “School will help me reach the heights I need to reach.”

In response to the question, “What do you think about the school fees?” Thatho detailed a terrible and unjust ordeal that she had suffered at the school, saying:

The school fees¹⁰ are very little at this school. I wish they would listen to you when you tell them you cannot pay the R300. I did not get my report, but I heard I had passed. I thought I would go to the class that I thought I was now in. The teachers told me that I could not attend the next class unless I paid my fees of R300. I wish that when I told them why I could not pay, they would understand and leave me. I had to repeat Grade 11 because of my outstanding fees. There was a teacher who kept trying to get hold of my mother. My mother’s phone did not ring. The teacher then tried my grandmother, who I stay with. However, my grandmother did not have the money.

I also asked Thatho to respond to the question: “Are there times when you think you are wasting your time at school?” to which she said:

Yes, there are times, especially when I got held back because I did could not afford to pay my outstanding fees. My mother would swear at me and say she does not understand why I walk such a long distance, yet I still fail. I also saw myself as useless. And I thought that what I was doing was pointless. Last year, I actually stayed at home for two weeks and I did not go to school, because I did not know what I was doing. But I realised at the end that I need an education.

In response to the question “What hindered you from attaining your educational aspirations?” Daniel, a 32-year-old man who dropped out of school in Grade 8 and dreamed of “finishing high school and helping his family,” said:

As you age, and you see your other classmates. And the school starts asking for school fees. And when you go home, you tell them the situation, and you get shouted at. And you are always getting things last. These situations made me realise that I cannot continue school. For example, every day after wearing my grey pants, I had to sew them because they were in tatters. You could see my toes through my shoes. You realise when other learners are playing, “I am not happy. I am anxious and not able to play.”

¹⁰ All learners interviewed attended free, no-fee schools, Quintile 5 schools. However, each learner noted they are expected to contribute no more than R300 annually. However, this a source of great economic burden and personal anxiety for learners, as many simply did not have the money.

Responding to the question “What hindered you from attaining your educational aspirations?” Qama, a 27-year-old man who dropped out of school in Grade 8, chronicles a dispiriting account of part of his school experience:

What was hardest was that I was trying, but it was not enough. It was my grandmother who tried to help us. Our mother was not working. I have a younger sister. I was unable to get uniform at the end. Even the things that are needed, I did not have them. And my grandmother also has to feed us. My sister was lucky because one of our relatives in Durban, an older sister, was able to take her in and help her. So, she was lucky. However, she also struggled after matriculating and she stayed at home [unemployed].

Charmaine, who failed Grade 11 and dropped out of school, describes how financial hardships are holding her back from attempting to complete high school. She notes:

I am 24 years old. After I failed, I decided to look for work because my mother is a single parent. I thought that because I did not do well at school, I must go work and give her a breather. I got a job at the school. I am a cleaner and I sanitise people at the entrance. Currently, it is finances that are preventing me from going back to school. I work but there is nothing really left at the end of the month. I can't attend my village school now because I am too old. I have to go to a school in town.

4.3.2. Powerlessness and material deprivation of the schools

In response to the question, “How can other problems be solved in the community?” Charmaine said:

A proper school needs to be built. There are not enough classrooms. When you attended a lesson, others had to wait outside, and when another lesson was taking place, you had to wait outside. This was very disruptive. You can also see these classes are made from cardboard [and] not cement, and they are small and were always full. Perhaps that is why teachers moved so quickly through the content, they could not notice learners who needed help. There is no school here. There are no classes, the school needs to build, a lot of building is still required.

In response to the follow-up question “How did this impact your learning?” Charmaine noted that she is a high school dropout who failed Grade 11 twice:

I am a high school dropout. I failed Grade 11 in 2016. I repeated [it] in 2017, and I failed it again. I gave up. I lost hope.

Similarly, when Abongile, a 24-year-old woman who dropped out after failing Grade 11 in 2019, was asked “What lowers the standard of schooling or the experience of schooling?” she responded:

The classes were always full. On a desk, there could be 3 or 4 of us. You can’t even write; you are sitting on your side [of the desk]. The classes were too small, and there was no space; sometimes the teacher would teach outside if it was too big a class.

4.3.3. Powerlessness and the provision of textbooks

Most participants said they lacked material resources needed for school, including school uniforms, textbooks, exercise books, and sometimes food. As mentioned in **Chapters One, Two and Three** of this thesis, poverty and the lack of material resources are significant problems facing rural areas and learners living there (Maluleke, 2020). When I asked about textbooks and learning material, many learners reflected anecdotally on their experiences, expressing challenges and frustration. As the learners shared their responses to the prompt “Please tell us about the textbook and exercise books situation at the school,” there was a unanimous experience, although varied, of their learning being negatively impacted as a result of not having textbooks and other learning materials.

Lerato, a 16-year-old girl in Grade 12, staying alone, shared a vivid portrayal of the lack of autonomy in determining her academic path, by noting that when learners do not do well academically, the school is often culpable because of its material inadequacies. In response to the question “What circumstances can help you achieve your dreams?” she pronounced:

It would be helpful if there were textbooks and exercise books. So that if you do not do well, you know that you are at fault. So that you do not blame the school, now you blame the school because there is a shortage of books, or we did not get taught something, or there is a shortage of teachers.

Responding to the question “What do you think about the rules for textbooks?” Lerato said:

There are no textbooks here at school. For example, for Life Sciences, there are five learners per textbook; for Agriculture, there are six learners per textbook; and for Life Orientation, there are five learners per textbook. In one class, there are 51 learners and only five available textbooks. When you want to study during the weekends, you are unable to. We are now forced to take notes from the teacher. You have to understand the teacher's textbook summaries and the teacher's English. The teacher will write the notes in English. Maybe there are 16 functions in the textbooks; the teacher will only summarise three. You have to now master these three. We also do not have exercise books, we have to hustle for ourselves. I am using a book from last year that still has pages left. The school tells us that they are waiting for government.

The challenge of accessing textbooks revealed another layer of learner experience: technological solutions that could serve as a possible panacea for some issues are not applicable to the rural context in some instances. For example, Karabo, a 17-year-old girl in Grade 11, who lives alone with her Grade 9 sister, noted:

There are too few textbooks. We have to share textbooks, 1 textbook for three learners. Sometimes, we get a textbook sent via WhatsApp groups. But this does not help us; I do not have a phone. And other children also do not have phones.

The topic of the long distances that learners must traverse to get to and from school was also highlighted in relation to textbooks. For instance, some of the learners explained that the burden of not having textbooks was aggravated by living far distances from their peers. For example, Thato, a 19-year-old woman, who stays with her grandmother, said:

There a very few of us in class. Yet, we still have to share one textbook amongst three people. One of us stays close to the school at a rental, one stays at home further away. And I stay very far. I am unable to meet up with them. They live closer to each other. I wish the school could buy more textbooks so that each learner could have their own textbook.

4.3.4. Powerlessness and distance from school

I explored the issue of living far distances from school directly. The time it took learners to cover the long distances to and from school emerged as a standalone theme. The responses

took me aback, and I had to ask the learners if they correctly understood my question – and they did. In fact, many learners shared similar experiences. Even those who did not share the experience expressed frustration with the time it took their classmates to arrive at school. The following responses were captured in response to the question “How long does it take you to get school?” Sindo, a 16-year-old girl in Grade 11, noted that it took her three hours to get to school and another three to walk home:

I walk to school. It takes me three hours to get to school. I leave [home] at 4:00 AM and I arrive [at school] at 7:00 AM. I have to brave the weather when it is raining. I carry an umbrella. There are many of us who walk together, but others walk at their own times.

Thato, a 19-year-old woman in Grade 11, highlighted the academic cost of staying far from school. Her response conveyed her inability to attend the early morning and evening classes. These additional classes serve as an auxiliary mechanism for preparing Grade 12 learners for the national matric examinations. Thatho noted, “I have a problem with arriving at school on time. I never get to attend the late or early classes because it takes me two hours to walk to [and from] school.”

4.3.5. Powerlessness and age

A few learners spoke about their feelings of powerlessness about their young age or their positions as high school learners. The notion of being “umntwana wes’kolo” (directly translated to “school child”) was a recurring theme in the interviews. In response to the question “How can you help with some of the challenges you have noticed at school?” the following responses were recorded. Thembekazi, an 18-year-old woman in Grade 12, living with both her parents, responded, “I am just a learner. There is nothing I can do currently. I have to follow the rules of the school or leave.”

Tshepo, an 18-year-old man in Grade 11 who lives alone, remarked:

I am just a normal person. What can I do? I am a child at school. I cannot do anything about the things that are happening in my community or here at school. No one will listen to a school child.

However, later in the interview, when asked the question, “Do you partake in any extra-curricular activities after school?” Tshepo responded:

I have created a Mathematics and Science study group, since other learners say that these subjects are difficult. I assist them where I know things. Later on in my life, I would like to sponsor exercise books and textbooks to the school.

4.3.6. Powerlessness and unmet promises

For some learners, powerlessness and a lack of control in directing their paths at school are exacerbated by empty promises made to learners by the school, government administrators, and officials. Although there was no direct question about their thoughts or experiences on empty promises, the theme emerged from several conversations, including on transportation and school uniforms. In response to the question, “What do you think of the rules pertaining to uniform?” Xolani, a 20-year-old man in Grade 10, noted:

We were told to compile a list of what uniform we need as learners. We wrote our needs, whether it is shoes in 2019. It is 2021 and things have not arrived. We were told that the government was going to provide us with items we do not have.

Towards the end of the interview, when Bongani, a 20-year-old man in Grade 11, was asked: “How can other problems at the school be solved?” he proclaimed, “School transport would be beneficial. We were promised last year that transport would be organised. It has not happened.”

4.3.7. Powerlessness and agency

Despite these challenges, learners exercised their autonomy in various ways to combat them. In particular, the following five themes emerged: hustling and navigating limitations; self-sufficiency in combating structural issues; personal and psychological motivation to push against challenges; principles anchored on future aspirations to uplift their family out of poverty; and being relentless and resilient with their schoolwork in spite of the resource and infrastructure barriers to learning. Azola, a 22-year-old man in Grade 12, who lives alone, said:

Unfortunately, I am not from here. I am renting. If this was home, I would try to get a piece-job during the weekend. This would help me regarding my school situation, meaning that when I am in school, I can then think just about school. I do not know anyone who could assist me in getting employment.

Similarly, Ntombi, a 23-year-old woman who dropped out of school after she failed Grade 11, also noted her willingness to work, but expressed the absence of opportunities to improve her condition. She said:

There are no opportunities for us here in the community, even those with a matric [certificate]. There are no opportunities even for piece-jobs. We are unable to get any employment because you have to have relatives that can connect you to opportunities.

When asked “How can you help these situations [challenges earlier mentioned]?” Modise, a 19-year-old man in Grade 12, who aspires to be a teacher, spoke about the need to persevere with schooling and education, saying, “I must focus on my dreams. I must focus on what I want to achieve. I must put important things first. I must put dating and going out aside.” These sentiments were shared by Thatho, a 19-year-old woman in Grade 11, who aspires to be a brain surgeon, who said: “I must continue working hard. That is how I can help the situation.” Similarly, Zethu, a 19-year-old woman in Grade 12, who dreams of becoming an engineer, said, “I can help by focusing on my studies and ensuring that I know what I want with my life. I must always remember where I come from, but I must know where I am going.”

4.4. Meaninglessness

This section documents how learners find meaning in their actions. Furthermore, it explores learners’ questions and perceptions of what school means to them. These explorations disclose the broader landscape of their perceptions about the value of schooling in their lives now and in the future. In response to questions posed in the interviews, participants shared some of their hopes and possibilities that aligned with completing schooling. Most learners articulated largely positive sentiments toward schooling.

4.4.1. Positive perceptions of schooling

When asked the question, “What does school mean to you?” Zenande, a 20-year-old woman in Grade 11, said:

School is very important to me. Every child must go to school so that they can obtain things that they could never obtain. So that they are able to help at home. Many homes have people who have not gone to school. It is important for learners to go to school to change the circumstances of their families’ lives.

When I asked Zenande “Do you have any educational aspirations? If yes, what are those?” she noted her dream to study further and eventually qualify as a nurse. She added that her dream is to be successful and alleviate the hardships her family faces.

In response to the question “What does school mean to you?” Siphon, a 14-year-old boy in Grade 8, who aspires to be a medical doctor, said, “School is very important because it is school that brings prosperity.” I asked Azola, a 22-year-old man in Grade 12, who aspires to become an actor and teacher, “What does school mean to you?” He responded:

If I do not pass Grade 12, I will not amount to anything. With school, I can reach my dreams. I need to study and do what is required of me.

Replying to the same question, Modise, a 19-year-old man in Grade 12, with dreams of one day being a teacher, explained the importance of schooling in his life. His response was concise but clear and unequivocal. He said, “Your life is determined by school. Without school, you are nothing!” In response to the question “Has schooled helped people in your community?” Modise replied:

Yes, school has helped people in my community tremendously. There is a clear difference in conditions in homes where there is someone with an education and in homes where there is no one with an education. The homes where people do not have an education, people work as domestic workers, or they go and work as labourers in apple farms in Cape Town. And money in those jobs is not helpful. But you can see it [money and success] when people have studied.

Daniel, a 32-year-old former high school learner who dropped out of school in Grade 9 and currently unable to find gainful employment, also expressed positive sentiments regarding school, despite not completing high school:

School has helped people my age extensively. Most of my peers [who finished school] are working and have their own things. They do not have to wait to be security guards. They are respected and greeted by people. Jobs are scarce and I do not even know where to start because I did not finish high school.

In addition to the material and socio-economic benefits that learners believed schooling would bring them, learners also noted how school aids people in various and intangible ways. Learners recognised that knowledge and wisdom on how to treat themselves and others could be gained in school.

Responding to the question “What does school mean to you?” Zethu, a 19-year-old woman in Grade 11, who aspires to become an engineer, said:

School is where we get knowledge about success. It is also where we learn about how to treat ourselves and how to treat others. It is where we get wisdom about how to live together.

Similarly, Sindo said the following: “School means a lot to me. We learn about life and how to deal with the challenges that we will face in life.” The responses about what school means to learners revealed the following themes: principles anchored on future aspirations to uplift their family out of poverty, optimism, understandings of the structural landscape beyond high school horizons, unemployment, poverty, and the low literacy rates in rural communities.

4.4.2. Conditionality of the positive outcomes of schooling

The findings also illuminated limited but significant and nuanced perceptions of schooling that are worthy of focus. Importantly, these perceptions recognise that school provides a better future for learners, but not always. Participants reflected on the reality they witnessed in their villages, including the high number of learners who drop out the schooling system before

completing matric or others who matriculated but are not currently employed or studying. These observations also indicated how learners understand the structural landscape beyond high school, and how doing well at school is an avenue for escaping poverty. Sipehelele, a 17-year-old boy in Grade 11, wants to become a teacher to adults seeking basic education in order to aid those who are “suffering to get an education.” In responding to the question “Has school helped people in your community?” Sipehelele said:

School does help people. But it does not help all of them. Some are in university, and some are working. But there are many who are not doing anything but they were at [high] school.

Meanwhile, Abongile, a 24-year-old woman, who dropped out after failing Grade 11 in 2019, answered:

School has not helped people. There are many learners who have passed Grade 12, but they are sitting [unemployed and not in school]. Many are sitting because they did not pass well.

Learners were acutely aware of the complexities and challenges impacting other learners who are currently not employed or in some form of post-high school education. More so, some learners were acutely aware of the realities of the South African labour market, where employment opportunities are getting more scarce (Moleko & Swilling, 2020). For example, when Xolani, a 20-year-old man in Grade 10, who aspires to be a mechanic, was asked “Are there times when you think you are wasting your time at school?” he responded:

There are many times [when] I want to drop out, but I know that jobs are scarce for people with no education. I realise that I have to persevere at school so I can get a job, and then I can contribute at home. It is demotivating to see people who have matriculated not doing anything with their lives. But I tell myself that this person perhaps had their own challenges. Let me try and persevere, and endure the hardship.

As highlighted earlier in the chapter, Thatho reflected similar sentiments to those of Xolani regarding possibly dropping out. However, she reminded herself that ultimately, it would not be in her interest to do so.

4.5. Normlessness

On questions concerning normlessness in education, the interviews generated a mix of responses from learners, indicating both their approval and disapproval of the school rules. Learners also pointed to non-adherence to rules by the school itself. Originally, I intended to ask only general questions about the school rules. However, after studying the responses to the questionnaires, I revised the interview questions on school rules to include issues raised by several learners in the questionnaires. These specific issues related to school uniforms, the school gate being closed for late learners, hairstyles, and monetary contributions to the schools. Learners ostensibly indicated adherence to the rules, which guide and enforce school conduct, but expressed difficulty in honouring rules about arriving on time and making monetary contributions to the school.

4.5.1. An understanding of school norms

When asked, “Have you ever had moments when you do not understand the rules at the school?” Bongani, a 20-year-old man in Grade 11, who frequently arrives late because of the long distance from his home, said, “I understand why the rules are in place.” When probed further he said, “I follow the rules at school.” In response to the question “Do you understand the rules at school?” Azola, a 22-year-old man in Grade 12, who said he has never broken any school rules, noted:

The rules are here. If you want to understand them, you can. If you do not, you do not. I understood all the rules, and I follow them.

4.5.2. School uniforms

When probed to reflect on the rules for school uniforms, Azola further said:

I support the uniform rules, including the haircut rule. You cannot come to school with fancy haircuts. We must all look like students.

Similarly, when Lerato, a 16-year-old girl in Grade 12, who said she had not broken any rules at her school, was asked, “What do you think of the rules on school uniform?” she responded:

I like wearing school uniform. As teenagers, we would not come to school because of [our] clothes. I would not be able to get nice clothes to wear to school every day.

4.5.3. The inability to honour rules

I asked Sindo, a 16-year old girl in Grade 11, “Have you had moments when you did not understand the rules at school?” She responded, “I do not understand why we are told we must not carry phones at school. Phones can help us with research and other study material.” I then ask her if she has broken any of the school rules. She responded:

I was caught using my phone in class, when the teacher was teaching. It was taken by the teacher for a day. But she gave it back to me. I was warned not to use it in class again.

I asked Thatho, a 19-year-old woman in Grade 11, “Have you had moments when you did not understand the rules at school? Thatho said, “I understand all the rules. And I respect them, but I am sometimes not able to get to school at 7:00 AM.” Earlier in our interview, I had asked Thatho, “How do you get to school?” She responded:

I walk for two hours to get to school. Today, I had a morning class for Physics at 7:00 AM. I left home at 04:45 AM. I always miss the evening classes. In winter, I walk this distance with my cousin, who is also a girl. It is not safe.

I asked Thatho to elaborate and she said, “I have a problem with arriving at school on time. I never get to attend the late classes because it takes me two hours to walk home.”

There was also an ambivalence regarding the school rules. For example, when Zethu, a 19-year-old woman in Grade 11, who stated that she had not broken any of the school rules, was asked about her thoughts on the school rules about arriving on time, she responded positively in general but negatively to the rule that latecomers will be locked out of the school. She noted that:

The rules are as they should be, so there is order at the school. At the same time, it is not right because those who stay far [away] are negatively impacted. They often arrive late, and the [school] gate is closed. And they are told to turn back [home].

I asked Zenande how she could help with some of the normless behaviour exhibited at her school. Her response portrayed the importance of parental advise to learners. She said:

I would try to speak to the parents of the learners to talk to their children. I would try to tell the parents of the importance of school. They could then plead with them not to disrupt the school. Many learners do not listen to the teachers and consistently cause disruptions.

4.5.4. Incomprehensible school contributions

When asked a question directly related to monetary contributions to the school, Bongani, who stated previously that he understood why the school rules are in place, said:

School fees are a challenge, but no one says you have to pay them all at once. You put one [payment] when you can. But I do not understand why we pay school fees at a public school.

I asked the follow up question, “How does paying school fees or contributing to a government school make you feel?” Bongani responded:

Having to pay school fees at a government school makes me feel helpless. Even though we get the whole year to pay them, I go to this school because I cannot afford to pay school fees. I do not know what we are meant to do as learners.

Zenande, a 20-year-old woman in Grade 11, who said she had not broken any of the school rules, had a strong response to the question “Have you ever had moments when you did not understand the rules at school?” She said:

I did not have anything for school. And my parent had to go and beg for this money. This made me [feel like] a burden to her and others. I do not even know how we will pay back the money we have borrowed. She did this for me, so I could get all that is needed for

school. I think the rules at school are nonsensical. People must be able to study even if they do not have some things for school. People can try get these things during the year.

When probed further, Zenande highlighted that she was referring to the need for the correct uniform, school contributions, and contributions for printing.

4.5.5. Misunderstandings of school norms

There was further disapproval of school rules expressed by Sipehelele, a 17-year-old boy in Grade 11, explicitly about the regulations for school uniforms. Sipehelele is another learner who stated that he had not broken any school rules. He said:

As people, we have different cultures. The rules that say we must not wear bracelets are wrong. What if there is a traditional bracelet you have to wear? And maybe you end up not wearing it because of the rules.

I asked Sipehelele “Has this rule impacted you directly?” He said, “Yes, the teachers always remind us that we cannot wear traditional bracelets to school. I hide mine under my shirt.”

I asked Nthandokazi, a 14-year-old girl in Grade 8, who stated that she has not broken any school rules, her thoughts on the general rules at the school. She said:

I do not understand the rules at this school. Where I was before, the rules were different. Here, we are forced to grow our hair and twist our hair and told not to cut our hair as girls.

4.5.6. School and teachers’ adherence to rules

Interestingly and perhaps unexpectedly, several responses from learners were directed at the school and how teachers often flouted the rules. When I asked Thembekazi, an 18-year-old woman in Grade 12, who said she has not broken any school rules, if she had moments when the rules were unclear to her, she said:

I do not even know the rules of this place. In fact, there is lawlessness here. Everything is acceptable here. The learners do as they please. The problem is with the school. Why does no one get into trouble?

I probed her further about what she meant and she said:

There is a drug problem at the school, many learners smoke marijuana next to or inside the toilets [on the school premises]. They behave terribly towards the teachers. And these learners are never focused. Other learners sell cigarettes and marijuana. They get this marijuana from the community. And they are asked by community members to sell the drugs at school.

These comments from Thembekazi were corroborated by Lerato, a 16-year-old girl in Grade 12, who also expressed that she had not broken any school rules. When asked “Have you had moments when you did not understand the rules at school?” she responded:

Teachers are not strict. People do as they please, they get up to mischief and are not punished by the teachers. For example, there is a place to exit when the gate is closed. Therefore, when learners want to leave school, they just leave.

In response to the same question, Nthandokazi stated, “This school is not strict. You can even get into the exam room with your cell phone.”

4.6. Alienation in education: Policymaker and administrator perspectives

4.6.1. Isolation from education: Language policy

Issues of isolation or estrangement from the education system were raised by Mr Madikiza¹¹, a senior manager in the ECDoE. Responding to the question “What could block rural learners from achieving their educational aspirations?” he said:

With LTSM [learning, teaching and support materials], the learning and teaching must talk to learners. They are not looking forward to hearing from anybody. There is also the issue of language and content. These children do not have televisions at home, and the

¹¹ To ensure confidentiality, all names of the policymakers and administrators, I have anonymised them and provided them with pseudonyms to safeguard their identity (Neuman, 2014).

content they receive is in English. Then, everything to them becomes foreign. When they get into school, it is like they are getting into another place. When a learner enters school, the learner shrinks because, here, they are going to be spoken to in English, and they are going to talk about a different life.

In the extract above, Mr Madikiza articulates that the learning, teaching, and support materials provided to learners are incongruent with the needs of learners and are not reflective of their lived experiences. He postulates that the divergence between content, learning materials, and learners isolates learners from learning. In turn, they “shrink” and become unresponsive. Moreover, Mr Madikiza highlights the issue of language policy and how it contributes to alienating learners from learning by noting that the content and language of instruction is foreign to the learners. On language policy and the estrangement of rural learners from education, Mr Madikiza articulated that language policy needs to be implemented to enable learners to be taught in their mother tongue, which he believed would enable learners to express themselves freely and connect their school and home worlds. He said:

The language policy must assist learners, even if they are learning Mathematics, [this] must be in the learners’ home language. MTBBE [Mother Tongue-based Bilingual Education] is a new thing and it is still being resisted by parents and communities. It is a pilot and it has not yet been implemented. It needs to be fully implemented so learners can learn in a language close to them. So [that] they can take school as home. They will know [that] they can come to school, and express themselves freely. These learners feel like foreigners at school, and this blocks their learning. Even me, when I go to a new environment, my thinking is slowed. How much more to these learners? On top of the challenges they are facing, they [are] now facing an LTSM [learning, teaching and support materials] environment that is also not conducive for them.

4.6.2. Isolation from parents and family

In response to the question “What do you feel would support learners in achieving their aspirations?” Mrs Xaba, a senior education specialist in the DoE, said that when distributing homework, she has “to make sure that whatever I give to that learner, she understands it well.” She notes that she needs to ensure this happens as:

In urban areas, if there is homework, there is support for homework. However, think of a child from [a] rural area, where there is no support. The mother is not educated. No one is educated. She is the first one to be in Grade 12.

Correspondingly, Mr Nyathi, a Deputy Director at the DBE noted the same problem. “In response to the question “What could block rural learners from achieving their educational aspirations?” he said:

In most rural areas, you do not have parents who are well-educated or know how to support learners or know what to do with homework. Because of their limited education, they are not helpful in supporting or encouraging learners. They do not even know what learners are doing. The learner could arrive and read comic books, and parents would not know the difference.

This response highlights the low levels of education in rural areas and the lack of academic support from parents and guardians for rural learners.

When asked “What could block rural learners from achieving their educational aspirations?” Mr Jolobe said:

In rural schools, learners go to school as children [while] their mothers and fathers reside in urban areas. They are under the care of their grandmothers. You are lucky to find retired nurses or police in rural areas. The child is cared for by grandmothers and grandfathers who are illiterate. A child gets an education at school, but when you get out of school, it is “goodbye, education.” That alone is a factor.

The above reflection by Mr Jolobe suggests that formal education for many learners is confined to the boundaries of school because of the limited exposure to formal education that many rural families have. The reflection further indicates the absence of parents in rural homes, the illiteracy of grandparents, the generally low levels of education, and the lack of role models in education in rural areas.

In response to “What are some of the resources in rural communities that can help in addressing these challenges?” Mrs Xaba said:

Firstly, the community are the parents to the learners. The parents need to know they are part of the school. And that the school is theirs [and that] the teachers are there to support

them. They are the owners. The community must be fully part of the education of the learner [and be] fully engaged. You must not only find out about your child's progress in December. You need to know how the child is doing throughout the year, from the tests. This is the community's role. We can help during school hours, but a learner goes home after 3:00 PM. And it is up to the parents and community to help them at that point.

This reflection from Mrs Xaba addresses a variety of issues and further conveys how parents are an integral component of the learning journey and are required to help learners. She highlights the need for community and parental support in education, indicating that support need not be focused only on content.

4.6.3. A sense of powerlessness

4.6.3.1. A sense of powerlessness caused by material deprivation of learners

In response to “Are the problems at school sometimes too big for learners?” Mrs Xaba, a senior education specialist in the DoE, responded:

Some of the problems are above them [learners], especially the psycho-social issues. I am happy we are introducing social workers because many learners are suicidal. We must not abandon learners. We must help them so they can heal.

I asked a follow-up question, “What might cause learners to be suicidal?” She responded that it was “psycho-social issues:”

Poverty and the things that happen with poverty. You will find that what causes this suicidal ideation is what is happening at home, because of poverty. That is why we need the Education Social Support Services. There is a unit called School Health, it looks at the psycho-social ills that impact teaching and learning negatively at school. It is dominated by poverty in rural schools.

When asked the question “What could block rural learners from achieving their educational aspirations?” Mr Madikizai said:

Government must also bring social workers to rural schools to help these learners deal with problems that are huge, problems that are too big for a child. Some children are

heading families. These children need professionals who can sit with them, so these kids can get the courage to continue.

This response touches on issues of powerlessness. When asked a follow-up question, “Why are some learners heading families?” he said:

There are many issues, but the parents are not present. It could be that many [parents] are working elsewhere, in Cape Town or in the mines, for example. The reality of the rural area is that parents have to migrate to find jobs. And a lot of the time, the grandparents are not around. In some instances, children just come to an area for school and therefore are staying alone. These schools do not offer boarding services.

Similarly, Mr Jolobe also mentioned powerlessness and estrangement that may be a result of child-headed households, saying:

I want to make you alive to the idea that these are better conditions when there is a grandmother. The worst conditions are when the older sister is parenting the home, or the older brother is parenting the home whether through attrition, death, or the contract labour system. Child-headed homes are a big factor.

Similarly, Ms Rhalarhala noted the issue of child-headed households. When asked about potential problems that could block rural learners from achieving their educational aspirations, Ms Rhalarhala said, “They come from broken home structures, child-headed households, or [are] left with their grandmothers.”

In response to the question “What could block rural learners from achieving their educational aspirations?” Mrs Xaba said:

Poverty! Our areas are poverty-stricken. A lot of homesteads are child-headed. Those are the things that hinder education. Hunger. There is also a high rate of drug abuse. Of course, in urban areas [too].

When asked on potential blockages for learners in attaining their educational aspirations. Mr Madikiza further noted that:

In rural areas, we are still having homes living below the poverty line. We have learners who come to school having not eaten, who will then go home and not have anything to eat at home. They depend on the nutrition served at school.

Ms Rhalarhala shared these sentiments on hunger when she said, “Some kids only have one meal a day.”

In response to “What do you feel would support them in achieving their aspirations?” Mrs Xaba said, “The only resources they have are the teacher and the textbook, which means you have to go beyond your scope of work. You need to go beyond the school hours.”

Mr Madikiza was asked “What could block rural learners from achieving their educational aspirations?” His responses shed light on a number of pertinent issues, including the absence of parents and the need for parental figures:

I think the DoE has a lot to do in terms of training teachers who are teaching rural learners to be able to motivate these learners. These teachers need to look at being parents and motivational speakers. They have to sell to these kids, something these kids have never seen before. Teachers must be trained so they become parents, so they adapt to the situation, so [that] they understand the environment these learners are coming from. They themselves understand the situation learners are living in. They would then have the power to convince and own these children and show them love. These learners would have a reason to come to school for more than learning. Some would come to school to meet parental figures.

4.6.3.2. Powerlessness caused by material deprivation of the school

In response to the question “Do you believe rural learners think school will help their future?” Mr Jolobe said:

We [the Eastern Cape] are famous for being last in the results. If you take a subject advisor from another province and you ask them to take our conditions, they would suffer too, and they would not move an inch. These learners are brilliant.

I asked him to elaborate on these conditions and he mentioned that the schools in the Eastern Cape are characterised by a “lack of access to resources.”

4.6.4. Meaninglessness

Mr Madikiza highlighted that learners do find meaning in school. However, he noted how their circumstances restrict them from academic success. In response to the question “Do you believe rural learners think school will help their future?” he said:

Yes, they do. I work with schools, and I talk to learners and motivate them. They see clearly that their future depends on education. However, on their way between where they are and their hope, the road becomes very narrow. Not because they do not see it, but because of the circumstances. On average, they are disadvantaged. They see the need, but they do not reach the final line. Very few pass matric, less than 50%. Most of those will not go to university. For the most part, most rural learners are roaming around at home. They are dropouts.

Mr Nyathi, a Deputy Director of the DBE, claimed that the lack of meaning around education trickles down from parents or the broader community to learners. Replying to the question, “What could block rural learners from achieving their educational aspirations?” he emphatically stated that learners do not have the right support:

There is no inspiration for learners. There is no one in [their] society that can inspire them to look up to something. You do not have teachers or relatives who are learned in the community. You do not see any need for engaging in education. In rural areas, the people who are seen to be learned are teachers. There is an occasional nurse. In some areas, you do not even have a clinic, so you do not even have a nurse as a role model. Outside teachers, there are no role models. There is no inspiration. There is no one you would like to look like.

Mr Nyathi added that teachers who have the potential to be role models to learners are often suffering from powerlessness themselves:

Most of the teachers in the rural areas, because of the experiences we have cited, are a bit under the weather and are not an inspiration themselves. You know, then you end up with learners [who] say, “I do not want to be a teacher because the teachers are struggling. Teachers are overwhelmed.” There is nothing that triggers your excitement for education. The people who embody that are not seen to be doing this because of overload and multiple responsibilities and [their] own professional challenges.”

Mr Madikiza brought up the issue of school activities or the lack thereof. The links between extra curriculum activities and meaninglessness will be explored further in the discussion. When Mr Madikiza was asked “Do learners have any after-school activities, for example, sport, choir, debating or community work?” he said:

Schools do have budgets for this. Some would be challenged by not having grounds. But we do have singing competitions. But the challenge is [that there are] no teachers. For example, in urban areas, there is a music teacher training them in music, there is a sports coach teaching them sport. Here, in the rural areas, the same three teachers who have to teach from Grade 1 to Grade 7 or teach all the subjects, now also help them with these outside activities. No. We are not giving the children equal opportunity.

In response to the question, “Do learners have any after-school activities, for example, sport, choir, debating, or community work?” Mrs Xaba, a senior education specialist for the DoE, said:

They have activities from junior secondary schools. However, it declines in high school because we have to concentrate on teaching. We have to let go of extra murals because there is this focus on results.

When asked about what he believes could support rural learners in achieving their aspirations, Mr Madikiza touched on a critical issue of meaninglessness, saying:

In the rural areas, there is a shortage of role models, [where] learners cannot see that “let me go to school and be like Mr X.” This is because once we get educated in our communities, we leave our areas and we go stay in the cities. This movement is leaving people in the rural areas with no role models. There is no one who is educated, who has money, who wants to stay in the rural areas. Our communities are affected by having no role models... You find that there is nothing encouraging the learners at home or in the communities to go to school.

4.6.5. Normlessness

4.6.5.1. Normlessness as a function of dysfunctional teachers and schools

Mr Jolobe was asked “Do you think rural learners follow the rules at school?” He responded:

They follow the rules as much as they can, to their ability. But this also speaks to [the] management practices of various schools. That is, if the school is functional and has proper management in place, everything will sort itself out. So, we can say, “yes, they follow [the] rules if the school is functional.” And we can say, “no, they do not follow [the] rules if the school is dysfunctional.” The functionality of the school and the delivery of the curriculum go hand in hand. You can have the best curriculum in the world, but if you throw it into a dysfunctional school, you are gone. A failing organisation will not have structures in place to adequately run the school. A winning organisation will have all the structures in place to successfully run the school. Rules followed depend on the nature of the school. Learners are the same everywhere. However, the only difference between a learner in Soweto, Port Elizabeth, and the rural area are the person[s] servicing that child, [who are] the teacher, parents, and thirdly, the government.

4.6.5.2. Normlessness as a function of normlessness by parents

In response to the question “What are some of the resources in the rural communities that can help in addressing these challenges?” Mr Madikiza touched on the potentially broader normlessness in education exhibited by rural parents. He said:

Parents do not engage with the schools. The only time they engage with the school is if they want employment, maybe for the nutrition program [to become cooks at the schools]. The parents are not doing what they have to do to support learners... In terms of SGB [the school governing body], they understand they have to play a role. However, they need training, they are inactive, or need guidance, and do not know what their roles are, often interfering with governance. Parents do not attend parent meetings.

4.6.5.3. Normlessness as a function of rural settings

Mr Madikiza touched on normlessness in education from a different vantage point when asked “Do you think rural learners follow the rules at school?” He focused on the conditions that may impact the ability of learners to follow the rules:

Rural learners have the most challenges that lead them to lose concentration, confidence, and to lose motivation to follow [the] rules. Here, in the rural areas, there are drugs. Rural learners

are affected by this moral decay, which is also happening in the urban areas, too. Rural learners are being impacted worst by these issues because they do not even have parents who value education. I take my child to school and I drop them off and I fetch them. A rural learner on the other hand travels 15 km to get to school. So, we will say, “the learner is not respecting school rules,” yet the learner is tired because they stay 15 km away, that is why they are late. The learner is unable to concentrate because the learner is hungry. The learner might not come to school because of the exhaustion from walking every day. I do not want to say [that] they do not follow [the] rules, but the circumstances are not conducive to following rules. That is why the blame cannot be put on them.

When asked the question “What could block rural learners from achieving their educational aspirations?” Ms Rhalarhala noted how cultural practices in rural areas potentially limit learning time and contribute to normlessness by learners at school. She said:

Learners come from backgrounds where they perform cultural rituals, and every family member is required to drink alcohol, even during exams. For the families, missing school is not always taken seriously. Substance abuse is a problem and sometimes it is starting at home.

Responding to the question, “What could block rural learners from achieving their educational aspirations?” Mr Jolobe said:

Things that used to [only] happen in the urban areas are now happening in the rural areas. Drugs. Children are now meandering. Schoolchildren are using drugs. These drug lords are known in the villages, but the village people cannot stand up and say, “Mr X is a drug lord” because they know the consequences. We are infested with all the negativity. Every malice and everything that is not right, you [can] find it in rural schools.

4.6.5.4. Teacher normlessness

Learners reported on teacher absenteeism and the prevalence of teachers not enforcing school rules. One learner said:

I think I am wasting my time [at school] because sometimes, there are no teachers here at school. Sometimes, the teachers leave early. When they get paid, we will not see them.

This is when I ask myself, “what am I doing at school if I am not going to get taught?”
This type of thing upsets me.

Another said:

There is one teacher who is very strict. This teacher wants us to be taught every day.
However, others are often absent. Sometimes, the principal is not here.

4.7. Conclusion

This chapter presented the research findings as they relate to the research question “How do rural high school learners describe their experiences of alienation in education?” In addition, it also presented findings that satisfy the research question “What are the central socio-economic issues facing rural high school learners in the Eastern Cape, and how do these play a role in the alienation of learners in education?” The data presented in this section were drawn from interviews with 26 participants, notably 16 learners, 5 dropouts, and 5 policymakers and administrators. It is worth mentioning that the various categories of alienation in education are not discrete categories. As a result, many of the findings could have been presented in more than one subsection due to their associations and convergences.

For the most part, this study arranged the findings under the four different manifestations of alienation in education, notably estrangement and isolation, powerlessness, normlessness, and meaninglessness. However, it was unfeasible to split the findings definitively, as the concepts are interconnected. For example, issues and responses around transport and commuting lend themselves to concerns about estrangement or isolation, powerlessness, and normlessness. Similarly, the theme of school fee contributions speaks to estrangement and isolation, powerlessness, and normlessness. However, to avoid repetition, quotes were used only once, even though they may apply to multiple categorisations of alienation. This is discussed further in **Chapter Five**.

The study found that learners were alienated in education in various ways including through isolation from peers, teachers, the community, and education more broadly. Alienation in education was also expressed by learners as powerlessness caused by their material deprivation and that of the schools’ material deprivation. Learner powerlessness arose from factors such as the inefficient provision of textbooks, limited agency learners have as young people, and living

far from school. Positive meanings of education depended on learners receiving particular education outcomes, for example, obtaining a matric certificate and pursuing post-high school qualifications. While meaningless emerged when learners did not meet these conditions. Lastly, normlessness was evident in the inability of learners to honour time regulations, incomprehensible school contributions expected from learners by the school, the misunderstanding of school norms, and the perceived lack of adherence to rules by the school and teachers. The following chapter will discuss the research findings and will further the main arguments of the study.

5. CHAPTER FIVE – DISCUSSION AND ANALYSIS

5.1. Introduction

In this chapter, the findings presented in the previous chapter, and the significant categories and sub-categories that emerged from these, are further examined and interpreted. In addition, the findings are juxtaposed with relevant literature on alienation. This chapter highlights that rural high school learners experience disaffection and discontentedness, assessed, conceptualised, and understood (in this study) through the prism of alienation in education. It construes that alienation in education typically manifests for rural high school learners in a variety of ways including, firstly, as isolation from their classmates, teachers, and community; and secondly, as a sense of powerlessness in directing their academic paths, often the consequence of social injustices. I term this extension of the theory, which draws attention to the structural violence that limits the autonomy of learners, as *a sense of powerlessness induced by social injustice*, which permeates into other aspects of alienation in education, such as isolation, normlessness, and meaninglessness. This indicates that the categories of alienation in education are not discrete or disconnected but are inextricably associated – and in the rural South African context, are often a product of structural forces and injustices.

This chapter conveys that learners have predominately hopeful perceptions of schooling primarily rooted in what school could do for them and their families economically. The discussion will indicate how they find meaning in education and avoid suffering from meaninglessness. Nevertheless, the chapter highlights how rural high school learners understand the South African structural landscape beyond high school. This bleak economic landscape makes them question the utility of the school system, especially if one leaves school without obtaining a matric certificate or a post-high school qualification. Put differently, learners are acutely aware that exiting the schooling system without matric significantly diminishes their chances of employment and upward class mobility. According to the learners I interviewed, more than matric, post-high school qualifications would give them better opportunity to improve their lives. As this chapter illustrates, learners displayed varied levels of normlessness in education. Some learners did not exhibit any normlessness conduct, while other learners demonstrated dysfunctional behaviours that are antithetical to school conduct and broader social norms. This chapter also identifies a new dimension of normlessness in education, not present in the literature on alienation in education: *teacher and school*

dysfunction. This dimension emerged from interviews with learners, who had sometimes negative observations and perceptions of their schools and teachers.

This chapter further conveys that, in some instances, the Western-centric notion of alienation in education is insufficient for understanding the rural South African context. It suggests that such literature, for example Brown, Higgins & Paulsen (2003), Çağlar (2013), Hascher & Hadjar (2018), Martin (2008), Morinaj et al. (2017) and Schulz (2011) may mistake the consequences of structural forces for normless behaviours. The thesis posits that in such instances, normless behaviour may be antithetical to school culture, but nuance and sensitivity must be applied when analysing, discussing, and seeking remedies for these normless behaviours (for example, learners frequently arriving late for school). This chapter shows how the experiences of alienation of rural high school learners in the Eastern Cape are unique to existing accounts in the literature (but perhaps not unique to the broader, rural South African context). This is exemplified in four ways, namely their alienation from their parents, guardians, families and communities; the emergence of self-imposed isolation; the widespread prevalence of a sense of powerlessness and alienation in education *induced by social injustices*; and, finally, the normlessness – what I have termed *teacher and school dysfunction* – displayed in rural schools, which learners perceived as “lawless.”

This study takes the position that rural learners and rural communities are endowed with cultural capital, as argued by Yosso (2005). Thus, **Chapter Five** simultaneously elucidates that learners exercise multiple adaptive and adjustment strategies to confront and overcome adverse socio-economic conditions specific to the Eastern Cape. The chapter highlights some of the adaptive and survival strategies that learners employ daily to uplift themselves, which include resilience; hustling and navigating to succeed; self-sufficiency; personal and psychological motivation to push against challenges; principles anchored on future aspirations to uplift their families out of poverty; and their understandings of the South African structural landscape beyond high school.

5.2. Isolation

5.2.1. *Isolation from classmates*

Thembekazi explained her isolation as a result of her academic diligence. She expresses that her commitment to schooling, and being vocal about this commitment, likely posed a challenge to making friends. In her case, she is estranged from her peers because she is a high achiever. Brown (2010) documents how learners sometimes exclude or exhibit openly hostile behaviour towards high-achieving peers. In the case of Thembekazi, her perceived estrangement from her peers and self-proclaimed pariah status in class are forms of alienation. Although she is estranged from her peers, Thembekazi exercises self-sufficiency and demonstrates personal motivation to push against these challenges, not yielding to social pressure. This observation highlights positive, perhaps unintended, outcomes of being alienated from the peer group. Thembekazi potentially has the freedom to exercise her autonomy and safeguard herself from values and norms that are, according to her, antithetical to being a high achiever.

Karabo suggests that her shy nature may be a reason for her isolation from peers and inability to make relationships. According to Chen & Santo (2016), shyness is present when a person wishes to engage with the relevant peer group, yet simultaneously, they are inhibited, self-conscious or uneasy about what may happen in the engagement. In addition, Chen & Santo (2016) support the claim made by Wang, Rubin, Laursen, Booth-LaForce & Rose-Krasnor (2013) that children and adolescents who are too shy to initiate social engagements with their peers are more likely to be excluded by their peers and experience isolation. At the same time, Karabo implicitly highlights a conscious choice and commitment to limit her social circle to her younger sister. She identifies that her relationship with her sister helps them both “avoid trouble.” This demonstrates her understanding of the structural landscape she resides in, a landscape in which drugs and alcohol are easily accessible and relatively cheap. Further, it is an environment with social pressures to conform, and often, caregivers are not present to offer guidance.

When analysing the voices of learners as they relay their experiences of estrangement, and more specifically, the actions or inactions they take to avoid social pressure, three resounding and interconnected themes emerged. First, learners are acutely aware of the South African structural landscape beyond the high school, including issues such as child-headed households, unemployment, teenage drug use and drinking, teenage pregnancy, and high dropout rates.

Second, learners resisted these social ills by exercising their agency by, for example, choosing fewer companions. Finally, learners navigate these challenges by, for example, avoiding socialising, particularly over weekends, by making resolute decisions anchored on the aspiration to uplift their families from poverty. These themes were demonstrated by Lerato when she noted that she did not drink in taverns over weekends, despite receiving insults for being a teetotaler and being teased by her peers. This example further highlights the personal resilience learners exercise to safeguard themselves from social ills in their communities.

The isolation that Bongani feels is a function of the individualistic manner in which learners conduct themselves. He points to a school culture premised on the idea that “every person [must fend] for themselves,” which is consistent with the hallmarks of isolated learners as described in the broader literature (Brown, Higgins & Paulsen, 2003). The idea of having no one to support them was a recurring theme expressed by participants; in the case of Bongani, there was no one at school to support him. These experiences are not unique to South Africa. For example, an international study by Brown, Higgins & Paulsen (2003: 5) highlights that isolated learners are “the students who cannot name anyone they can confide in and feel there is no one to turn to for support when they are unhappy.”

Even though some commonalities can be drawn from the international literature on alienation (Brown, Higgins & Paulsen, 2003; Çağlar, 2013; Hascher & Hadjar, 2018, Martin, 2008; Morinaj et al., 2017; Schulz, 2011), the findings in this study provide unexplored or underexplored insights into the phenomenon of alienation in education. While these issues exist internationally, they are perhaps not the most pressing matters in countries with better socio-economic conditions than those in South Africa. Rather, this thesis posits, in South Africa (broadly and in former Bantustans specifically), powerlessness and alienation in education induced by social injustices and teacher and school dysfunction are pressing concerns that directly affect millions of citizens.

5.2.2. *Isolation from teachers*

Concerning estrangement from teachers, the comments by Sipehelele on teacher favouritism and by Azola on unapproachable teachers align with Çağlar (2013), Morinaj et al. (2017), and Hascher & Hadjar (2018) who argue that the perceptions that learners have of unjust and/or

differentiated treatment from teachers may lead to defiance from learners. This in turn may exacerbate alienation and isolation from teachers. More so, Azola highlighted that learners perceive their teachers as lacking empathy and understanding, which makes it difficult for learners to confide in teachers. From the vantage point of learners, they believe that developing a relationship with their teachers is often impossible. This estrangement from teachers may be the reason why the critical challenges and aspects of learners' lives that require teacher assistance remain concealed from or go unnoticed by teachers, challenges and factors, if revealed, that could enhance the school experience for learners and potentially minimise some of their experiences of alienation, including isolation and powerlessness. According to Phelan, Davidson & Yu (1998: 196):

For many students, caring is the attribute most necessary to the establishment of meaningful student/teacher relationships. Teachers who demonstrate explicitly their care about students are in a much better position to win cooperation in academic endeavours.

For this gap to be bridged – due to the asymmetrical power relations between teachers and learners – this study posits that teachers must cultivate more amicable and approachable demeanours, albeit with professional boundaries. Nevertheless, learners also have a duty to initiate dialogue with teachers. However, focusing on the agency of learners and teachers cannot ignore how the rural Eastern Cape school system is plagued by a myriad of elements that contribute to the dislocation of learner-teacher relationships. These include but are not limited to curricula that may misalign with the lived experiences of learners (as noted by policymakers), lack of resources for teaching and learning, and the limited experience of many rural teachers.

According to Ntombi, a high school dropout, the estrangement of learners from teachers results when teachers rush through learning content without ensuring that all learners have a full grasp of the content. I argue that in a different context, accelerating the pace of learning may not be an isolating experience for learners, especially when there are support structures in schools and the broader community. Examples of support structures could be additional lessons after class in which individual learners receive one-on-one attention; and homework programmes run by guardians, teachers, or community members. However, in rural contexts, where often the only learning resource for learners are their teachers (as noted by administrators), feelings of alienation from teachers and isolation from learning are aggravated when teachers move at too fast a pace for some learners. Feelings of isolation from teachers and the learning process are

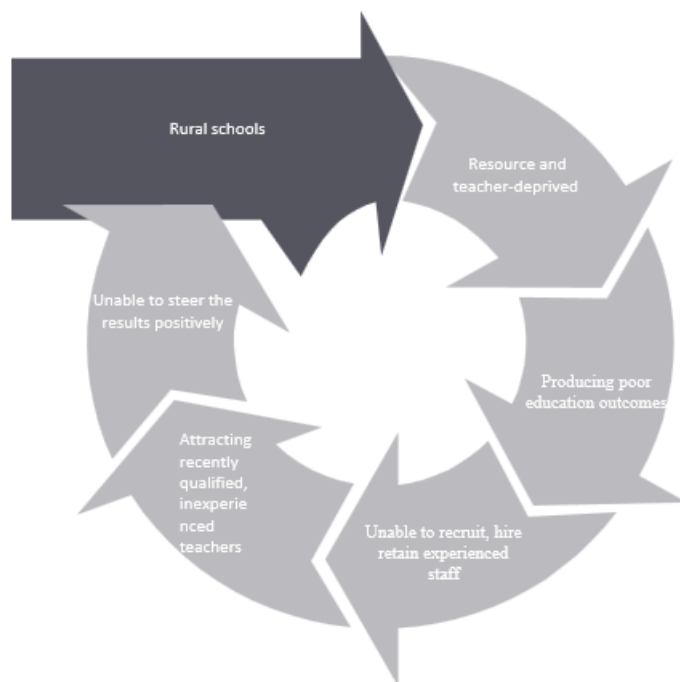
intensified by two factors: first, parental absence (including from death, ill-health, and migrant labour), and secondly, parents with low levels of literacy. The latter means that parents and guardians are often unable to assist with academic components of schooling. In addition, as implied by Ntombi, collaborative learning strategies that involve dialogue are not applied in rural schools. Freire (1970) states that teaching models without discussion and participation dehumanise learners. This thesis supports this hypothesis and further claims that involving learners through conversation can diminish their feelings of estrangement from teachers and the learning process.

However, an analysis of estrangement from teachers highlighted pervasive underlying themes, namely the inadequate provision of teachers in rural schools and the under-resourced and unsupportive structure rural teachers teach in. The study takes seriously the structural injustices that have led to the severe resource constraints in rural schools that hinder applying collaborative teaching. Structural inequities may also be responsible for teachers speeding through content and having little to no time to develop individual relationships with learners. Historically, the legacy of Native Education for Africans, enacted through the Bantu Education Act (1953) by the NP, is directly responsible for unequal and racially differentiated resource allocation and outcomes between predominantly urban former whites-only schools and primarily poor and under-resourced African rural schools (Anderson 2020).

The objective of subordinating Africans into a class of disposal cheap, low-skilled workers and the aim of engineering the former Transkei – where the learners now reside and go to school – into a reservoir of cheap labour (Harvey, 1980; Anderson, 2020; Nkomo, 2021) required the introduction of conditions that directly opposed the cultivation and nurturing of African learners' intellectual ability. These conditions guaranteed sustained under-resourcing and overcrowding of African schools. Further, this racial capitalism necessitated the implementation of inferior curricula that further underdeveloped and neglected to develop the cognitive abilities of Africans so as to guarantee their servitude in a labour market geared towards the needs of the minority White settler population (Nkomo, 2021). The democratic South Africa, the Eastern Cape, and particularly, the OR Tambo region, suffer the dire impacts of past policies, and the reality in the Eastern (as illustrated in **Chapter One**) is further compounded by the inherited harsh socio-economic reality of the population.

Consequently, the ways in which rural high school classes are organised impede learners from succeeding academically. The high learner-teacher ratio, multi-grade classes, and poor and inefficient classroom resources limit teachers from taking time to earn the trust of learners, growing the voice of learners, and developing the agency of learners. This diminishes opportunities for fostering engagement, integration, and connection between learners and teachers from both a relational and learning outlook. It could be argued that the distortion of African education under colonialism and apartheid created a dysfunctional teacher employment cycle for rural schools that continues to reproduce itself today (see *Figure 5* below). This employment cycle at rural schools, operating in poor environments, occurs at schools deprived of material resources that struggle to recruit, hire, and retain experienced staff, while attracting recently qualified, inexperienced teachers who must adapt quickly to teaching in under-resourced and unsupported schools and are often unable to steer the results positively. Further, the agency of rural teachers is often diminished within this broken cycle, illustrated below.

Figure 5. Rural education employment cycle.



The employment cycle in *Figure 5* makes illusive the development of meaningful relationships between learners and teachers. This cycle both produces dysfunction and destruction of African education and concurrently maintains disadvantage and dysfunction.

5.2.3. Isolation from the family and community

Some of the experiences of rural high school learners revealed themes currently ignored by the existing literature. The research found that the school experiences of rural learners cannot be divorced from their home and community environments. Notable themes from the in-depth interviews were uncovered, and these confirmed new interconnected patterns of isolation related to family and community. These four themes were, first, isolation of learners from peers caused by the high dropout out rates in their communities; second, isolation from family members who dropped out of school early on, who cannot help them with academic components of schooling; third, isolation from community members who generally are unable to relate to learners' schooling experience, as they too exited the system prematurely; and finally, isolation from community and the broader society caused by inadequate social networks to help them navigate school and post-schooling life. These point to a common thread linking this research from beginning to end: structural injustices. Specifically, the institutionalisation of underdevelopment of Africans designed and applied during colonialism and apartheid, which continues to impact the present circumstances of rural high school learners.

At the heart of isolation from family and community are the low levels of education prevalent in the OR Tambo region, where more than half the population have limited or no formal education (Kavese & Mbali, 2022). These facts often mean that learners are the first or only school goers in their homes or communities. This often leads to feelings of estrangement from family and community. These themes highlight how learners are acutely informed of the workings of their communities and are able to discern how their lives differ from those of community members. Some learners revealed that they are often the only person in their community to not have dropped out. Others disclosed that even at the high school phase, they are often the only ones in their families to have reached this level of schooling. This highlights how attending school creates a chasm between learners and their communities and between learners and their families, leaving learners with feelings of isolation. Participants expressed that even at home, no one guides them in navigating their social positions as high school learners, since those around them are not learners or have not completed high school. Therefore, in this context, the current plight of learners can be derived from the history of

colonialism and apartheid, in that these engineered rural spaces to sustain low educational outcomes.

Learners' feelings of isolation and indeed separation from families and community are corroborated by Mr Nyathi, a Deputy Director for the ECDoE, who noted that parents of rural learners typically have limited education. Therefore, he postulates, they cannot support or encourage learners because of their own limited education, which in turn, he said, results in nothing "that catalyses or triggers your [their] excitement in education."

This study suggests that these personal accounts indicate that education for rural high school learners is both alienating and can be alien, as the learners have often never seen it done before. Their participation in education and school inadvertently leads to isolation from their communities and homes. This may be a consequence of being the first in their families or peer groups to pursue school to such high levels. This further alienates learners from their communities and vice versa, as guardians and community members do not possess the required knowledge or skills to mediate or guide academic matters, such as homework. According to Stephens, Hamedani & Destin (2014: 949), first-generation university students typically obtain lower grades and experience more "background-specific challenges" than students with at least one parent with a university qualification. First-generation university students often lack the financial, material, and academic support needed to navigate the university terrain (Stephens, Hamedani & Destin, 2014). Evidently, for high school learners in rural contexts, education becomes an alienating experience rooted partly in the lack of representation at home or in the community of role models who have completed high school or who have pursued education post-high school.

However, Patfield, Gore & Fray (2021) dismiss "deficit framings" of families and communities of first generation students. Instead, they show how these families provide encouragement and assistance in other ways, notably by emphasising that education is pivotal for constructing a better life. Moreover, Patfield, Gore & Fray (2021) articulate how these families note that higher education is a reward for toiling and striving in lower grades. Nevertheless, some of the observations from the literature and anecdotes from participants affirm that the rural high school experience is in fact isolating for learners, an experience that begins a process of estranging them from their communities and families. Their role as school goers may mean that their integration into their communities is hindered. According to Durkheim (1972), rural

areas characterised by organic solidarity often punitively disincentivise non-conforming behaviour (also see Vyain et al., 2012).

However, in line with the community cultural capital model by Yosso (2005), this study found that parents and communities offer learners support in other areas of their lives, beyond academic knowledge and skills. More so, focusing on the educational level of parents and community members is a deficit view of categorising the parents and the community. This view is often internalised by learners and administrators. Although not without shortcomings, communities and guardians are able, adequate, and interested in helping learners navigate their school lives (Matentjie, 2019). For example, communities and parents support learners through (unpaid) reproductive labour, this is labour that characteristically functions at the household level, such as domestic labour and caregiving often undertaken by grandmothers, women, and girls (Cantillon, Moore & Teasdale, 2021). In addition, from a monetary perspective, participants highlighted how their grandparents, siblings, and parents often support them using money from grants. Specifically, one learner noted how her parents took out a loan to support her education. In addition, numerous learners noted that even though their families or parents had low levels of education, they supported and encouraged them throughout their schooling.

5.2.4. Self-imposed isolation

Another significant departure from the traditional theory of isolation in education is what I term “self-imposed isolation.” Self-imposed isolation is a recurring theme that emerged from the findings as a strategy that learners employ to safeguard themselves from the hardships of community life. Isolation can be used as a strategy to resist participation in activities that may threaten their academic aspirations. This study has foregrounded the challenges in the rural Eastern Cape including endemic poverty and structural unemployment, drug and alcohol abuse, and high rates of school dropout. Many learners employ isolation as a strategy to avoid underage drinking, drug use, and other imminent and pervasive dangers facing their peers and communities. Therefore, we can state that self-imposed isolation is an example of the survival, adaptive, and adjustment strategies that rural learners employ daily to shield themselves from the social challenges in their communities. These survival, adaptive, and adjustment strategies are demonstrated by the vivid illustration of personal and psychological motivation to push through challenges. This is demonstrated by evidence of principles anchored on future

aspirations to uplift themselves and their family out of poverty and an acute understanding of the micro and macro realities they face. Consequently, the study asserts that the interplay of the socio-economic structure with learner autonomy shapes and influences how learners respond to their environments.

Karabo, a 17-year-old girl in Grade 11, gave a clear example of self-imposed isolation. She shared that she has no friends at school or in her community except for her little sister. She reasoned that not having friends helps her avoid “all the trouble and issues other learners face.” Correspondingly, Modise, a 19-year-old man in Grade 12, said that he tries to distance himself from his clique of friends, dropouts who consistently pressure him into skipping school. Although participants believed that this strategy protects them from peer pressure, it could be argued that by actively distancing themselves from their friends, peers, and community members, learners are inadvertently excluding themselves from emotional and psychological support. Academic success does not shield them from their social needs, such as making friends and other meaningful connections. This isolation may cause learners to internalise academic pursuits as solitary affairs.

Interestingly, Tshepo, an 18-year-old man in Grade 11, introduced a gendered strategy of self-imposed isolation. He utilises this strategy to safeguard himself from the community and his peers at and outside school. Tshepo noted how he preferred to pursue friendships with girls, as girls do not smoke marijuana or cigarettes, he said. He added that socialising with women instead of men made him feel safe, since they did not go to taverns or places where alcohol is consumed. The idea that men are more susceptible to drug use and anti-social behaviours was supported by other learners, who noted that “the [drug and alcohol] problem is with boys” (Thembekezi, 18-year-old woman, Grade 12) and that “male learners have a drug problem” (Xolani, 20-year-old man, Grade 10). The pattern revealed by learners of associating men with disruptive behaviour helps to make sense of the strategy employed by Tshepo to only hang out with girls. It also gives us further context for understanding Tshepo’s choice to disengage and retreat from other boys and men as he attempted to stay focused on his schooling and meet his academic goals. More so, as a whole, participants pointed to a lack of support for boys and men learners in or outside class. The behaviours of learners will be explored in more detail in the later part of this chapter.

The findings from the interviews with rural high school learners and dropouts lead me to a critical line of reasoning by Nkambule et al. (2011) who note the need for critical scholarship that focuses on the unique challenges of rural learners and schools. Subsequently, this study affirms that the application of alienation in education must be adapted and extended to the South African environment to be effective. Analysing estrangement from community, family, and self-imposed isolation lens extended the theory of isolation in alienation in education. In South Africa, one cannot ignore the relationships between schooling, home, and communities. Furthermore, the conceptualisation of alienation offered in the introductory sections of this study did not make room for the child-headed households prevalent particularly in the rural South African context. Therefore, by introducing new dimensions of isolation in education (isolation from the family and community and self-imposed isolation), ones that move beyond viewing alienation purely from the vantage of school environments, contributes to a deeper understanding of alienation in education and, more broadly, education in South Africa and the rural Eastern Cape.

5.3. Powerlessness

This section conveys that the traditional theory of powerlessness in education clarifies the experiences of alienation in education for rural high schoolers. For example, Thembekazi and Tshepo noted how being school children made them feel vulnerable, disempowered, and inferior relative to teachers and adults. Their feelings display a sense of powerlessness in education for learners. Their comments illustrate their lack of autonomy and agency in resisting some of the challenges they face as learners. Yet, the central focus of the traditional theory of powerlessness in education on learners' perception of their authority from only a school perspective is limited. For example, the traditional theory of alienation in education recognises that alienation impacts more acutely learners from historically oppressed and exploited groups in society (Brown, Higgins & Paulsen, 2003; Martin, 2008).

However, it fails to engage further the structural forces that diminish the ability of learners to direct their academic paths. For example, Pohlan (2019) and Peters & Besley (2013) suggest that economic conditions are drivers of alienation in education yet do not adequately explore these conditions nor their severity. This section notes that powerlessness in education, as displayed by rural high school learners in the Eastern Cape, is typified by severe economic

hardships that often prevent learners from staying in school, thriving in school, or having unalienating experiences in school. However, this section also highlights, a sense of powerlessness does not prevent learners from exercising their agency.

5.3.1. Powerlessness by social injustice

Powerlessness induced by social injustice is a new layer of powerlessness in education developed in this thesis to complement the existing theory. Elements of powerlessness in education caused by social injustices were highlighted by almost all of the participants and are typified by economic constraints and burdens that learners cannot resolve as individuals. Although there are differences in the financial conditions that participants face, a comparative view of these unique experiences reveals strong similarities between learners' experiences of powerlessness induced by their economic situations. Accounts by learners of their schooling illuminated the unfortunate economic reality, which leads to disappointment, discouragement, a lack of motivation, and pessimism. These emotions, coupled with empty promises from the government and schools, poverty, and the absence of parents conjured up feelings of alienation manifesting as a sense of powerlessness.

As documented in the findings, Azola, a 22-year-old man in Grade 12, described how he is constantly on the precipice of dropping out of school because of financial hardship. Due to the multidimensional nature of alienation in education, I contend that this sense of powerlessness and material deprivation experienced by learners has associated costs that may disrupt other aspects of alienation. The lack of food or clothing for school, induced by social injustices, are emotionally painful experiences that may cause learners to unconsciously withdraw from their peers, communities, and teachers, which in turn increases feelings of powerlessness and estrangement. Nevertheless, even though learners such as Azola are faced with seemingly insurmountable challenges to basic nutrition, housing, and school uniform; a critical exploration of the interviews also uncovered adaptive and adjustment strategies employed by learners to combat some of these challenges, highlighting their inherent agency as learners. For example, Azola stayed at school despite contemplating dropping out. His reasoning for persevering and remaining committed to completing his schooling emerged from observing his mother's unemployment, which forced him to recognise that dropping out of school would undoubtedly compound his challenges. Azola is resolute and actively combats the structural

limitations he faces by staying in school. His reasonings for staying in school represent recurring themes throughout other interviews with learners. For many learners, including Azola, some of the more dominant reasons for persevering included personal motivation to push through challenges, principles anchored on future aspirations to uplift their families out of poverty, and understandings of the structural landscape beyond high school and the implications for dropping out in the South African economic climate.

Bongani, a 20-year-old man in Grade 11, who lives alone, also contemplated dropping out of high school. Ultimately, he chose to remain in school. Despite his constant material challenges, he applied several adaptive strategies to stay in school. These two examples, Azola and Bongani, indeed demonstrate individual power and commitment. However, in line with Swartz, Cooper, Batan & Kropff Causa (2021), I recognise that some learners will overcome economic powerlessness, go on to complete matric, potentially enter institutions of higher learning, and contribute positively to their communities. Yet, the burden placed on learners to overcome structural realities is unjust. Instead, there is a need to interrogate and change the very conditions compelling learners to exercise extreme resilience. Swartz et al. (2021: 399) opine:

Of course, there have been, and will most likely always be, individual stories of success emanating from the Global South: young people who pulled themselves up by their bootstraps, overcame incredible odds to succeed in work and life, and who have—through grit and determination—uplifted themselves and their communities and gone on to live lives the rest only dream of... However, to focus only on the exceptional few, and on those able to adapt against the odds, is to expect too much.

An important finding was the lack and inadequate provision of textbooks and other learning materials, including stationery and exercise books. These fundamental resources were often not supplied to learners. They cited that the provision of these essential learning resources was sporadic, occurring in one year but not in the next. This observation related to the empty promises from school and government. This occurrence was consistent with the realities of their (under-resourced) homes, schools, and community environment. They also spoke about how they did not have access to a library. Many learners could not fill the gap left by the unfulfilled promises of school and government. Many learners turned their attention to supplementing this lack of provision of essential school materials. Reflecting on this, Lerato said, “We have to hustle for ourselves.” Learners reported a myriad of strategies to offset their circumstances, including sharing one textbook among several learners, drawing on summaries

of textbooks by teachers, and sharing textbooks on WhatsApp when these were available. Learners recycled exercise books from previous years, used exam pads, and borrowed writing paper from their peers. Tshepo further noted how he would like to sponsor textbooks for the school in the future. Again, these observations highlight the adaptive and adjustment strategies that learners employ to uplift themselves, including hustling to succeed and self-sufficiency. This further reinforces the recurring trope that learners continue to pursue their education despite structural injustices and limitations.

I turn now to a closer examination of some of the structural issues that led Daniel, (a 32-year-old man, who dropped out of school in Grade 8), Qama (a 27-year-old man, who also dropped out in Grade 8), and Charmaine (a 24-year-old woman, who dropped out in Grade 11) to drop out of school. It is important to highlight their autonomy and some ways they actively resisted structural constraints. Daniel, for example, highlighted incredible personal motivation to push against material limitations by sewing his tattered school pants daily after school. The worn uniform did not immediately lead him to drop out of school. More so, his motivation to continue schooling amid economic challenges mirror those of Qama. In addition to his personal motivation, Qama mentioned how he had (albeit limited) support of his family and kin, namely from his grandmother and sister. But ultimately, their support did not provide Qama with adequate clothing for school. Qama and Daniel ultimately dropped out of school because they did not have sufficient resources for school, such as the uniform and other essentials.

The thesis recognises that dropping out is a complex issue that cannot be solely attributed to economic hardship. However, the findings support the argument that the increase in dropout rates among rural school children is directly related to poverty and inequality (Runhare, Ouda, Vele & Mudzielwana 2021). Although reasons for dropout may include learner-specific issues or “individual factors” (De Witte, Cabus, Thyssen, Groot & van den Brink, 2013: 19; Hartnack, 2017: 2), this thesis has found that rural high school learners are already impacted by structural issues before entering the school system. This limits their sense of control over their education, diminishes their chances of obtaining academic success in school and beyond, and ultimately restricts opportunities for upward mobility later on.

Commonly in South African, rural children and adolescents are restricted from schooling and/or continuing their education because their families cannot afford tuition, school uniforms, and transportation to and from school (Runhare et al., 2021). Regarding the appalling state of

infrastructure at her former school, Charmaine remarked, “There is no school here.” While this is an indictment on her school and the DoE both locally and nationally, it also demands an investigation into the infrastructural inadequacies of rural schools. Similarly, Abongile noted that the poor infrastructure at her school sometimes meant that four learners are forced to share a single desk; and that occasionally, classes are taught outside. Their experiences are validated by empirical evidence from documents by the DoE. For example, a 2009 discussion paper on infrastructure noted that over 50% of schools are in a weak or fragile condition compared to only 16% of schools either in good condition or new buildings (ECDoE, 2009). However, this thesis rejects any analysis that does not take into account the historical factors that have caused issues faced today. This issue must be assessed as a product of the structural injustices of colonialism and apartheid. The colonial and apartheid regimes ensured the unequal allocation of resources such that urban schools were prioritised, while rural schools, particularly those in the former homelands, were deliberately neglected (Westaway, 2012).

The schools attended by participants are housed in the OR Tambo region of rural Eastern Cape, within the borders of the former Transkei homeland. Accordingly, this thesis contends that the coordinated geographical segregation and government-sanctioned social, economic, and political deprivation of the OR Tambo region (then Transkei) faced under colonialism and apartheid remain immutable and impervious. This has resulted in poor and dilapidated schools with rotten wooden floors, leaking roofs, shortages of classrooms and furniture for staff, poor fencing and security, an absence of recreational facilities, and small classrooms that result in overcrowding. The learners who experience these conditions first-hand, like Charmaine, Qama, and Daniel, cannot overcome these realities by simply sustaining their resilience. The learners who were interviewed all attend Quintile 1 schools. Quintile 1 schools do not require parents to pay school fees and are referred to colloquially as “free” schools. However, all learners pointed to an annual amount that learners must pay to the school. In the interviews, this amount ranged from R60 to R400. This amount contributes to the upkeep of school operations that are not covered by the school’s expenditure from the DoE. Learners termed this contribution “school fees.” The issue of school fees was a significant theme that emerged from all participants.

Thatho specifically highlighted the fluidity and interconnected nature of the elements of alienation in education. Even though she successfully completed an academic year, Thatho was not allowed to progress to the next grade because she was unable to pay school fees. This

highlights the overlapping boundaries between the powerlessness she felt and her isolation from peers and teachers. The financial predicament of her family is something beyond her control, and rendered her powerless against the school and the teachers. Thato was ultimately estranged from her peers because she was not permitted to enroll for matric, and from her teachers who, she reports, distanced themselves from her during her ordeal. Thatho highlights that while the fees are indeed very low, the amount is challenging for learners and families to pay. Her response illuminated a myriad of issues, including the consequences of not being able to deliver this contribution, the legality of this contribution, and her inability to influence the outcome of her case within the context of the power of the school. In the face of this unfortunate and discriminatory set of circumstances, Thatho remained at home for two weeks but ultimately returned to school, noting that “I realised at the end [that], I need an education.” Returning to school after suffering this ordeal conveys her resilience, her personal motivation to push through challenges, and her future aspirations to uplift her family out of poverty.

It is critical to note that all schools that participated in this study are listed in a gazetted ECDoE document titled “Eastern Cape no fee schools” (2021). Furthermore, the South African Schools Act (1996: 5) states that “no learner may be refused admission to a public school on the grounds that his or her parents (a) is unable to pay or has not paid the school fees.” Further still, the DBE itself highlights that “a school may also not retain a learner’s report because the parent cannot afford to pay school fees” (South African Government, 2022: 1). Yet, what happened to Thato shows how she was unfairly and illegally prejudiced against and how the Constitution of South Africa (1996) did little to safeguard her in structures where she had little influence. Adding to the experience of Thato, Zenande, a 20-year-old woman in Grade 11, noted the general implications for learners who cannot pay the contributions requested by the school. Zenande documented how the vulnerability of learners was demonstrated by their inability to pay for Typek¹² and/or school fees, which has led to increased dropout. The structural conditions faced by Thatho, Charmain, Qama, Daniel, and Azola are indictments of South Africa’s pursuit of redress and the South African Constitution’s (1996) advocacy for social justice in South Africa.

Among other learners, Nthandokazi, a 14-year-old girl in Grade 8, who lives with her parents, also highlighted how poverty is a barrier to her fulfilling her academic potential, as there was

¹² Typek is the name of a brand of white printing paper often used by schools in lieu of exercise books. Each learner is asked to contribute R60 towards Typek. Typek is produced and sold by SAPPI.

often no money in her home to cover her schooling needs. Reflections by learners that highlight how economic conditions confined and constrained their actions are not surprising given the severe and grave poverty and unemployment prevalent in the OR Tambo region (Kavese & Mbali, 2022; Picard, 2005). In the poorest province in the most unequal country in the world, learners can hardly be expected to finance their own education. Learners cannot be expected to finance Typek, textbooks, stationery, and exercise books in a province where most household income comes from government grants (Statistics South Africa, 2022a). It is worth noting that 70% of people living in the Eastern Cape live below the poverty line (Statistics South Africa, 2017). This thesis reaffirms that high levels of poverty and inequality in the Eastern Cape are rooted in segregationist policies of separate development, including the historical, deliberate reduction of Africans' ability to produce adequate food for subsistence through land grabs during the 1800s and 1950s that reduced the ability of Africans to sustain their livelihoods. This reduction forced families to enter labour migration and rely on (meagre) migrant wages for subsistence. This has left a permanent mark on society that is prevalent today in Mqanduli and the OR Tambo region (Hajdu, Neves & Granlund, 2020).

Learners noted that the lack of financial means diminished their abilities to succeed. However, the literature only briefly touches on the relationship between dire economic realities and alienation. For example, Morinaj et al. (2017) and South, Baumer, & Lutz (2003) note that high school learners from homes and communities that do not meet their expectations, desires, or needs have a higher probability of becoming psychologically and physically disengaged and ultimately alienated from the school system. More so, the existing literature on alienation in education fails to engage critically with the agency of learners and the ways in which they influence their environments and circumstances by using approaches that do not require financial or external resources (Swartz et al., 2021).

In addition, existing literature on alienation in education fails to critically discuss some of the structural forces and influences which may limit the agency of learners. Therefore, deliberately engaging alienation in education and its associations with social injustice bolsters arguments by among others Morinaj et al. (2017) and South, Baumer, & Lutz (2003). However, unlike this study, the literature on alienation in education generally fails to describe the home environments of working-class students, specifically from the perspectives of learners. Martin (2008: 32) notes that "Critical Pedagogy recognises that student alienation is a major, systemically generated difficulty that all critical educators, especially those working with non-

elite students, must confront in the authoritarian schools characteristic of hierarchical societies.” This study commends the contribution and insights of Critical Pedagogy in Education originally espoused by Paulo Freire (1970). Freire wrote about this teaching method in his seminal book, *The Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970). The book offers insights into the material conditions of oppressed learners. It also focuses on teaching methods and the pedagogies that underpinned these (Freire, 1970). The thesis introduces the dimension of “powerlessness induced by social injustice” and supports literature that highlights how learner experiences and the dialogue between learners and teachers are vital in the teaching and learning process.

I return now to the voices of learners in this section. Their accounts highlight how their autonomy is limited by social injustices both in school and beyond. These learners did not exaggerate their conditions; their circumstances are symptomatic of the socio-economic conditions enveloping learners in the broader region of rural Eastern Cape. Reflections from Qama, particularly his assertion that “I was trying, but it was not enough” (Qama, 27-year-old man who dropped out of school in Grade 8), exemplify his agency as a learner and his individual efforts to combat his challenging circumstances. Alienation in education, indicated by the perceived absence of control over directing one’s path in education, is clearly present in the schooling experience of rural learners. Their autonomy diminishes in the schooling system and this sense of powerlessness destabilises their schooling. Sometimes, learners drop out of the system prematurely. It is impossible for learners to separate their home lives from their school lives. It is unjust to expect learners to concentrate fully and remain focused at school while they live in permanent economic hardship. As a result, many rural learners are present at school but are actively disengaged and alienated from the learning process.

5.4. Meaninglessness

The perceptions of learners of the value of schooling and education in their lives currently and in the future are broadly positive and hopeful. These positive sentiments are primarily grounded on ideas of what school could do for them and their families economically in the future. This is exemplified by their responses to the question, “What does school mean to you?” which stressed the importance of school in providing the best chances for gainful employment. Their broad perceptions of schooling spoke to three of their adaptive and adjustment strategies

revealed in the findings. These are, first, future aspirations to uplift their family out of poverty; second, personal motivation to push through challenges; and third, understandings of the structural landscape beyond high school. Among other professions, individual learners noted that they aspired to become teachers, brain surgeons, mechanics, engineers, actors, nurses, lawyers, businessmen, and adult education teachers. The study views aspirations through the lens of Arjun (2004: 76), who remarked that aspirations provide all adolescents and youth with the capacity to create new horizons, regardless of structural limitations. This ability, he notes, is intrinsic irrespective of class, status, or race (Arjun, 2004).

The views of schooling expressed by learners highlighted profound meaning in their actions at schooling. In other words, they found purpose in school. This purpose is linked to their hard work to accomplish their academic aspirations, which could in turn lead to gainful employment, thus enabling them to uplift their families and community from challenging material circumstances. Nonetheless, the positive perception of education was, at times, conditional. The research found that many learners want to go beyond obtaining a high school education and want to obtain higher education. Abongile is a 24-year-old woman who dropped out of school after failing Grade 11 in 2019 and currently works as a cleaner at a local school, sanitising people at the entrance of the school. In response to the question “Has school helped people in your community?” Abongile bluntly conveyed the challenges that learners will face if they do not do well in school. She said that school had not helped people in her community and noted that many learners who completed matric in her community are currently unemployed or are not attending institutions of higher learning because they matriculated with poor results.

These reflections from Abongile on school not helping individuals who have passed Grade 12, albeit with poor results, to find employment or further their education are mirrored by Xolani. He notes that by witnessing those who have completed high school suffering unemployment and hardships, he is discouraged. Herein lies the possibility of the conditionality of the positive sentiments of schooling noted by learners; school loses its utility if it ends with a high school certificate or dropping out before completing high school, which is the aggregate outcome for learners from rural South Africa (Kavese & Mbali, 2022). This thesis found that the thoughts of learners of the meaning of schooling are consistent with the literature on the utility of education as an instrument to improve their lives (Dieltiens & Meny-Gibert, 2012; Peruzzi, 2015; Mayombe, 2016). Yet, their experiences were contradictory to the meaning they found.

The thesis argues that learners frame their thinking in line with the human capital theory, which purports that:

Formal education is necessary to improve the productive capacity of a population. In short, human capital theorists argue that an educated population is a productive population... Education and health care are the key to improving human capital and ultimately increasing the economic outputs of the nation (Almendarez, 2013).

However, critiques of this theory note that the approach negates, among others, two fundamental considerations (Bowles & Gintis, 1975; Fix, 2018). First, capital or wealth, often in the form of economic assets, supersedes the education needed for effectively competing in the labour market. Second, the human capital theory does not reflect on class position, the lived conditions of different people, and the implications of this for access, advancement, and decision-making in the labour market (Bowles & Gintis, 1975; Fix, 2018). In South Africa, economic capital and material conditions are linked to the historical context of racialised oppression and injustice.

As previously mentioned, globally education is considered the great equaliser of society, an instrument to cultivate the abilities of children and enhance their prospects of happiness, integration into society, and fulfilment and attainment later in life (Peruzzi, 2015; Hascher & Hadjar, 2018; Duncan, 2021). More so, in South Africa, education is seen as a tool to redress the unjust policies and practices of colonialism and apartheid that systematically marginalised Africans (Hlalele, 2012b). Despite this, the reality in South Africa is more complex and this proclamation is often left unrealised. For example, only 9% of adults in the OR Tambo region have a matric certificate or above (Kavese & Mbali, 2022). This indicates that learners have limited role models who can provide them with access to information or inspire them to overcome their challenges and meet their academic and career aspirations. Having no role models may contract their understanding of possibilities and shrink their educational and career aspirations. More so, the scarcity of role models may leave a void that may cause learners to incorrectly think that challenges can only be overcome through their individual responsibility, which, limited by structural constraints, could lead to further meaningless and feelings of powerlessness.

Rural high school learners in the Eastern Cape ascribe an elevated meaning to education, rooted in its prospects as an avenue for human development. Human development is defined as the

heightening of choices and real freedoms available to individuals that enable them to live a fulfilling and healthy life with the ability to pursue goals they value (Alkire & Deneulin, 2009). The elevated meaning that learners ascribe to obtaining an education is justified given the material challenges in rural areas. However, despite exercising resilience and agency, in the current moment, there is an observable mismatch between what learners aspire to and reality. Structural barriers and social injustices limit the ability of learners to meet their academic aspirations in the future. This mismatch may create meaninglessness, as learners understand the implications of not completing high school or leaving high school with poor matric results in a country where human capital theory principles, especially norms around obtaining higher education to gain employment, continue to gain traction. This begs the questions, what becomes of learners like Nthandokazi, who dream of becoming lawyers, when they realise that they will not achieve their aspirations? What happens to their personal motivation?

Although the thesis noted adaptive strategies employed by learners in the face of social injustices or “socioeconomic adversity” as described by Schoon & Bynner (2003: 23). The burden of responsibility should not be on learners, as they have to utilise their fortitude, grit and commitment to overcome structural inequalities and disadvantages (Hart et al., 2016). The burden of responsibility must instead be placed with other stakeholders, not only national and local government departments but also the private sector, non-governmental organisations, labour federations, school governing bodies, guardians and parents, higher education institutions, civil society, and communities. All are instrumental in driving educational transformation and equality. More so, the shifting of the burden of responsibility from learners to these stakeholders forces a re-engagement with schooling within the broad context of development in South Africa, including healthcare, housing, and water and sanitation. The thesis posits that the private sector must play an instrumental role in the development of education. They have built world-class facilities that cater to a minority of South Africans. On the other hand, public systems, with limited and overstretched resources, cater to several million South Africans.

5.5. Normlessness

This section contends that learners simultaneously honour school rules while transgressing others. The prevalence of the latter, normlessness behaviour in rural high schools, was evident

in how learners relayed stories of disobedience and frightful behaviour that frequently occurs in their respective schools and communities. This misconduct includes frequent use of marijuana and cigarettes in toilets during recess, learners selling marijuana and cigarettes inside school premises, disruption of class by learners who are “under the influence” of drugs and/or alcohol, learners drinking over weekends, dropping out of school, and learners frequently arriving late for school. The thesis posits that normless behaviour often stems from three sources: first, from behaviours practised in the community finding their way into the school premises, since the school is part of the community; and second, from structural and socio-economic realities that learners are unable to change, including the absence of parents, or living in child-headed households or rentals near the school; and third, from a school culture that is incongruent with the aspirations of learners.

In addition, a new form of normlessness was identified in the findings, what I termed *teacher and school dysfunction*. This dysfunction is acutely perceived by learners. This layer of normlessness is also marked by unconstitutional practices conducted by the schools and teachers that include punishment of learners unable to pay school contributions. The findings unmasked frequent drug and alcohol use at schools and in communities by learners. I argue that this behaviour is partly evidence of how behaviours practised in the community find expression on school premises. For example, drinking outlets in rural areas typically allow underage children to purchase alcohol (Maserumule, Skaal & Sithole, 2019). More so, the Eastern Cape has a ratio of one compliance inspector per 380 establishments where liquor is sold (Jubase & Sgqolana, 2022). This is a clear sign that monitoring underage drinking is a challenge since it is unlikely that one compliance inspector can effectively oversee and enforce the conduct of over 380 outlets.

In addition, I argue that the behaviours exhibited in the community reflect the disconnection and alienation of the rural community from the greater South Africa. Like rural learners, rural communities, particularly former homelands, are forgotten spaces which have largely been left out of development (Westaway, 2012). They are now forced to fend for themselves with minimal assistance from the government and private sector relative to their urban counterparts. The Eastern Cape, specifically the former Bantustans of the Ciskei and Transkei, now the OR Tambo region, suffer social injustices including structural unemployment and deeply entrenched poverty that Westaway (2012: 117) describes as distinct forms of marginalisation:

The other key point here is that unemployment in the former Bantustans is a very long-term condition. A typical life trajectory of a Bantustan resident... is to start school at age 6, leave at about 19, with a poor Grade 10 certificate, sink into permanent unemployment thereafter, and die between the ages of 50 and 60.

This observation highlights the perennial exclusion from the labour market that rural Eastern Cape citizens must navigate. This is corroborated by Seekings & Nattrass (2005), who argue that structurally unemployed individuals are more likely to live in rural regions in poverty and with low levels of education.

Thus, normlessness (evident in misconduct of learners) and some of the community behaviours that are incompatible with schooling, such as excessive and underage drinking at school, can be seen as an active form of desensitising themselves against diminishing opportunities for impoverished areas, especially for adolescents (Farrow, 1993; Livermore, 1994; South, Baumer & Lutz, 2003; Peters & Besley, 2013; Pohlan, 2019). Again, we see the connection between elements of alienation and a sense of powerlessness that perhaps leads to normlessness and misconduct. From this perspective, normlessness is partly a product of structural injustices that learners and their communities face regarding their present and future circumstances. More so, their actions, from this perspective, highlight their agency as they deliberately choose to partake in this behaviour.

Of course, there is no single explanation for why learners participate in anti-social activities at school and in their communities. Nevertheless, the thesis also supports the hypothesis by Makhubele (2012) and Mokwena & Setshego (2021) that the weakening of family configurations and societal relationships within a community may be an additional driver of drug and alcohol abuse, as these often help to ease the pressures of social exclusion (Makhubele, 2012; Mokwena & Setshego, 2021). Closely related to Makhubele (2012) and Mokwena & Setshego's (2021) hypotheses, a participant in this study, Zenande, offered a slightly obvious recommendation for mitigating drug and alcohol use among learners: advice from parents. In the context of normlessness, parental involvement in the lives of rural Eastern Cape children were distorted by colonial and apartheid frameworks, which often absorbed African parents into the migrant labour system. More so, the absence of parents still remains prevalent in rural areas due to factors including but not limited to continued labour migration and high death rates of parents, as indicated by the policymakers.

The study has documented that several learners reside in child-headed households, women-headed households with their grandmothers, or rentals near the schools. These households often lack the familial support and guidance needed during this crucial period of their lives, and this can cause feelings of alienation. The thesis posits that the destruction of the African family is a significant cause of this alienation. The systematic breakdown of the African family in the Eastern Cape, clearly evident today, started in the 1800s when the colonial government initiated a deliberate involution of agricultural trade outside of the territory, thus limiting the expansion of African residents and businesses to produce adequate food for subsistence farming (Beinart & Bundy, 1987; Peires, 2011). The colonial government further imposed taxes and legislations such as the Glen Grey Act (1894) which forced Africans to pay labour and land taxes to colonial administrators (Ntsebeza, 2011; Bouch, 1993). These laws and legislations were instrumental in posturing the Transkei as one of the key reservoirs of the migrant labour needed to serve the commercial, industrial, domestic and agricultural interests of settler-colonisers (Ntsebeza, 2011; Peires, 2011).

This study affirms that the expansion of the migrant labour system and the subsequent reduction of the ability of Africans to produce adequate food for subsistence in the 1890s left one of the most significant and enduring legacies in the former Transkei and broader Eastern Cape. This forced families to rely increasingly on labour migration and migrant wages for subsistence. The effects of this are still prevalent today in Mqanduli and the OR Tambo region (Hajdu, Neves & Granlund, 2020). These legislations by colonial and apartheid regimes forced African families in the Eastern Cape to rely on labour migration, which played a significant role in distorting family configuration in contemporary Eastern Cape. For example, the migrant labour system contributes to increased parentless households, women-only households, child-headed households, and the absence of role models in rural areas (Hajdu, Neves & Granlund, 2020). Today, these issues play a significant role in alienating learners in education. Learners like Zenande can easily discern that advice from parents is a powerful instrument in mitigating normlessness among learners.

Rural areas, particularly those located in former homelands, are engulfed by a magnitude of socially destructive behaviours, including teenage drinking and drug use (HSRC, 2005). Although these behaviours are frequently practised in the broader community, they remain antithetical to widely accepted norms and cultures of schools in these communities. However, they are partly practised in the school environment because of the social fluidity between

households, communities, and schools. Lerato, a 16-year-old girl in Grade 12, commented about the ubiquity of teenage drinking in her community and the accepted culture of school children frequenting taverns over weekends. These comments by Lerato reinforces the fact that societal issues prevalent in the community impact school children. The schools and communities cannot be divorced from each other nor from learners, and it is not surprising that some of these behaviours are reproduced on the school premises.

According to participants, arriving at school on time is the school rule most frequently broken by learners. Learners who live far from the school expressed their inability to arrive on time because they have to walk far distances, with some walking for as long as three hours to get to school and another three to return home. According to Balfour, Mitchell & Moletsane (2008: 100), “one of the most noticeable features of rural life is the time it takes to move from place to place in space.” The topography where learners must walk long distances to and from school often does not have infrastructure or roads, thus adding to the burden of arriving at school on time and may contribute to late arrivals and absenteeism. Learners also added that adverse weather conditions make them arrive late for school and sometimes miss consecutive school days. The thesis posits that residing far from school and walking prolonged distances to school are functions of the economic hardship that burden rural communities. These socio-economic conditions impact schooling directly and often lead to misconduct or non-adherence to school rules, namely arriving at school on time. Frequent lateness for school disturbs learning because learners miss school time, particularly when they are barred from entering school for arriving late. This was the case in all the schools interviewed for this thesis.

Though frequent among learners, missing classes and potentially school because of exceedingly far distances between school and home can, by definition, be viewed as contravening school conduct. However, this thesis attests that lateness and absenteeism due to these factors cannot be construed as normlessness and that describing these in such a way contributes to the perpetuation of injustices and stereotypes. It is not the intention of learners to break school rules. Instead, they inadvertently break the rule of arriving on time because of the socio-economic challenges they face. These challenges cannot be resolved by learners of their own volition and are historical products of South African spatial (racial) segregation. Therefore, fixed and uncritical applications of the concept of normlessness in education to the rural South African context may conceal the injustices that learners face. In addition, uncritical applications of normlessness in education to the rural Eastern Cape may miss the fact that some

learners come from homes where missing school is not necessarily viewed as an issue or where learners are forced to miss school to care for a relative or clean the home.

In line with Phelan, Davidson, & Yu (1998: 100), I argue that “economic circumstances make it difficult to adopt behaviours necessary” for learners to function well both academically and socially. As such, all educational stakeholders need to ensure that learners are not disadvantaged or impeded by economic circumstances and that they (learners) can develop fully as high schoolers. To prosper academically, learners need to adhere to school rules and customs.

Moving on to culture, interestingly, only one of the learners I interviewed referred to how cultural practices sometimes conflicted with school conduct: “The teachers always remind us that we cannot wear traditional bracelets to school. I hide mine under my shirt.” (Siphelele, 17-year-old boy, Grade 11). This reflection reveals the more significant debate about universalism particularism. In rural areas, particular customs, norms, and practices differ from those prevalent in urban areas. Rural areas are home to people with culturally defined identities, who place importance on heritage and spiritual values, and whose livelihoods centre on the cultivation of land and related activities (Chigbu, 2013). Yet, in South African policy, rules for schools are universalised. The thesis argues that this cultural incongruency exacerbates feelings and experiences of alienation in rural high schools. This is supported by Brown, Higgins & Paulsen (2003), who conducted a study that found that disparities between the cultures of learners and that of the educational institutions play a part in adolescent alienation. Brown, Higgins & Paulsen (2003) highlight that youth are sensitive to the differences between their own culture and school culture. They mention that this tension creates discord between learners and the school authorities. They further note that educational institutions with existing social systems may alienate learners from external ethnic or racial groups. This is indeed the case in some rural areas, as learners from a particular cultural context and home environment are placed in schools that are modelled on “pre-existing norms... norms which do not necessarily shift just because of expanded student numbers” (Davids, 2019: 4).

In addition, the thesis uncovered an alternate position on normlessness, notably that opposed to learners disapproving of school rules. Instead, some learners perceive the teachers and the school as dysfunctional. From this perspective, it is perhaps the teachers and school who are suffering from normlessness and not the learners. The thesis theorises this dysfunction as

teacher and school dysfunction. This dysfunction is evident in comments such as “The teachers are not strict. People do as they please. They get up to mischief and are not punished by the teachers” (Lerato, 16-year-old girl, Grade 12). These comments are not surprising given how a participant explicitly noted the issue of teacher absenteeism, which perhaps allows learners to “do as they please.” This form of teacher and school dysfunction, teacher absenteeism, is well documented in the Eastern Cape (Mampane, 2013). The Eastern Cape is reported to have the highest rate of teacher absenteeism in the country (Mampane, 2013). In the bigger scheme of things, South Africa reportedly “has the highest rate of teacher absenteeism in the SADC region. Teacher absenteeism in the SADC is on average 9 days per teacher annually, whereas in South Africa, teacher absenteeism was on average 19 days per teacher annually” (Msosa, 2020: 4). The thesis argues that this fuels the normlessness of learners and contributes directly to schools struggling with enforcing codes of conduct.

In addition, teacher and school dysfunction are evident in the unconstitutional and severe measures taken against learners who cannot pay the annual school contributions, termed “Typek” or “school fees” by learners. Arguably, when teachers and principals sometimes prohibit learners from progressing to higher grades, this is unconstitutional. Schools in South Africa are viewed as vehicles to redress meant to safeguard learners from the challenges they may face at home (Hlalele, 2012b). However, for rural learners, there is a gap between what schools are theoretically and what they do practically. The unjust punishment of learners already facing challenging economic circumstances leads to their disengagement from and distrust of schools. This may potentially lead to displays of dysfunctional values by learners themselves. The unlawful punishment of Thato and others must be examined in the context of rural South African communities. The social and economic conditions learners face, the empty promises from government, and the punitive treatment towards learners who cannot pay schools fees render them vulnerable. One could ask how learners are meant to respond to the normlessness in education they witness. It is plausible that some of the unhealthy behaviours exhibited by teachers encourage learners to do likewise.

This thesis finds that the literature on alienation in education has not, to its knowledge, engaged with how normlessness can emanate from learners perceiving teachers and schools as dysfunctional: the more the latter are perceived as normless or dysfunctional by learners, the more learners engage in normlessness themselves. The thesis again reiterates that many schools suffer from teacher and school dysfunction, evident in teacher absenteeism and unfair treatment

by teachers towards learners who cannot pay school fees. However, the thesis argues that geography matters. Eastern Cape schools, particularly those residing in former Bantustans, suffer disproportionate teacher and school dysfunction because of their geographical and historical positioning. More so, during interviews, policymakers postulated that some rural schools are dysfunctional and that the management practices of schools, teachers, and parents fail learners, denoting how various stakeholders are at fault and may exhibit normlessness.

5.6. Conclusion

The findings presented new patterns of isolation in education not expressed by the existing literature on alienation in education, which focuses exclusively on isolation from classmates and teachers. The findings uncovered how learners are isolated from their peers, parents, guardians, families, and communities. This is not the introduction of a new theory of alienation in education, but rather an extension of the existing theory. This section explored, discussed, and interpreted the findings from interviews with rural high school learners to uncover their experiences of alienation in education (as presented in the preceding chapter). This chapter revealed the distinctive form of alienation in education displayed by learners in the socioeconomic context of the rural Eastern Cape. It made valuable and unique contributions to the literature of alienation in education. It is clear from the discussion set out in this chapter that there are certain conditions that learners must negotiate to make their history, which include their geographical, historical, and socio-economic difficulties. They inherited this environment; it is not of their choosing, yet they must still struggle against it (Marx, 1926). This chapter showed how the broader environment potentially creates, enables, and expedites, the extent to which rural high school learners experience alienation in education.

Importantly, outside of the central phenomenon of alienation, this chapter discussed themes that emerged from the data, namely the agency, commitment, aspirational, and survival strategies employed by learners. Agency was a significant concept in this thesis because it highlights how rural high school learners exercise their agency and autonomy even in difficult circumstances. However, the chapter concluded that in South Africa, structural issues of, poverty, inequality, unemployment, colonialism, apartheid, and racism precede the phenomenon of alienation in education and seriously constrain the agency of learners. The next

chapter details the findings that emerged from interviews with key policymakers and administrators.

6. CHAPTER SIX – FINDINGS FROM INTERVIEWS WITH POLICYMAKERS AND ADMINISTRATORS

6.1. Introduction

This chapter presents the findings from five in-depth interviews with key policymakers and administrators from the OR Tambo District and the national DoE offices. They responded to questions about the ways in which “rural” is framed in education policy and the role of education policy in rural areas. The questions posed to them were based on an analysis of government policy documents and associated reports conducted before the interviews. This chapter responds primarily to the research question “How is rurality framed in education policy, and how does this play a role in alienating learners in education?”

This chapter presents the findings related directly to the research question “How is rurality framed in education policy, and how does this play a role in alienating rural learners in education?” The data presented in this section were drawn from interviews with five policymakers and administrators. This chapter uncovers three critical themes. First, there is typically no differentiation in education policy that considers the distinction between rural and urban. Second, it highlighted that current government policies may be imperfect for rural areas. Thirdly, it found that failures around the implementation of policy often hampers the provision of education in rural areas.

6.2. Policy matters

This section shall look at the responses that spoke about no demarcation in education.

When asked “Do you think policy adequately addresses ‘the’ rural in education?” Mr Nyathi, a Deputy Director for the DBE responded:

Policy on [the] national level is set for every learner. [The] policy states that everyone should be equal and should be provided with equal opportunity. [The] policy is very clear on that. [The] National policy does not differentiate amongst learners. It is the context that dilutes policy implementation.

Mr Nyathi responded similarly when asked “How do you feel about rural education?” He said:

It is not correct to refer to education as rural education. We do not have demarcations in the system. When you say rural education, it sounds like there is urban education and we do not have anything like that. Rather, talk about education in the rural areas. Rural education gives the impression that we have different types of education systems. We only have one education system.

When asked the same question, Mr Jolobe noted, “There is no policy towards rural schools, but the policy is accommodative to rural schools.” Mr Madikiza, a Circuit Manager for the ECDoE, answered in the same way to the question “How do you feel about rural education?”:

According to the educational policy and the CAPS [National Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement] document, education can be accessed by any learner, and it is meant to be the same, as per the Constitution. However, learners coming from rural backgrounds are suffering from challenges that deprive them from equality. The only difference between rural education and other education, whether urban or otherwise, is the quality of the provision of education. According to me, they are receiving a poorer quality [of] education compared to urban areas.

When asked the same question, Ms Rhalarhala shared similar sentiments, saying, “There is no rural education. Education in rural areas is equally [as] important as education in urban areas.” I asked Ms Rhalarhala to expand on this, and she noted:

South Africa has one education system. This system operates in rural areas and in urban areas, but we can say that the rural areas need more support to improve the quality. We can see that the rural quality is compromised. The curriculum and policies are the same as in the urban areas.

Numerous respondents spoke about how policy was imperfect for the rural setting. For example, Ms Rhalarhala shared an incisive observation of the application of education policy in rural areas. When asked if she thinks policy adequately addresses “the rural” in education, she said, “Policies are good, but there should be room for one to make situational judgement and management when applying [them].” When asked about why room should be made for situational judgment, she said, “The policies work in a perfect world, not in rural areas. They only help for guidance but not for solving the problems faced here.”

Mr Jolobe, a Subject Coordinator for the DoE, was asked “How do you feel about rural education?” He said:

For starters, we can't divorce it [rural education] from the broader rural spectrum's socio economical. If you place it here, in the rural spectrum, it is not as attended as the opposite counterpart of urban. In that respect, you talk about resources. For example, the department has put them [schools] in quantiles. But you rarely get quantiles four to five in rural [areas] due to economic strength. Little of [the] economy or little injections of the economy renders that area disadvantaged.

Similarly, Mr Nyathi, a Deputy Director of the DBE, commented on the socio-economic conditions in rural areas, saying, "There is much that can be done for learners in the rural areas, as there are challenges that are systematic; challenges that have to do with the setting." When asked "What are the systemic challenges facing rural schools?" he said that challenges include "the infrastructure, the tough economic conditions, [and] the lack of expertise." In addition to socio-economic matters, when asked "Do you think how education policy is written biases the urban or rural?" Mr Nyathi reflected on the application of policy, saying:

[The] policy does not disadvantage anyone over anyone over the other. [The] policy states what is offered; for example, subject choices. The requirements and opportunities are all offered in policy, without segregation. What disadvantages learners, particularly in rural areas, is the application of policy. For starters, if you are in the rural areas, where agriculture is thriving, it stands to reason that as a school or as an institution, align your learners to agriculture-related subjects. You cannot end up with a school in an agriculturally thriving background that is not interested in agriculture. If you are in such a school, and you choose subjects that are not within your reach or interests, that is when there is disharmony. This is not policy, it is the implementation. It is the implementors, whether it is the school, the district, or the circuit. But equally, we do not say, "close the doors to learners who want to do other subjects," but there must be appropriate infrastructure. The policy is clear. All that matters is [for] the implementors, the school and the SGBs [school governing bodies] to apply their minds, to look at their context, their infrastructure [and] to make better choices.

Mr Madikiza, a Circuit Manager of the ECDoE was asked "Do you think policy adequately addresses 'the rural' in education?" His response touched on the divergence he perceives between urban and rural schools:

To me, the policy is saying something totally different from what is happening. It is imaginary. It looks like it was written by someone who has not experienced reality. The policy talks about equality, but the reality is [that] there is a big difference [between

schooling in rural areas and urban areas]; hence, there is an exodus of rural children to urban schools. Where I am working and living, parents who are working are taking their kids to the towns. They see that on paper, every learner is meant to be getting a good education. However, rural learners are not any closer to being provided [with] a good education.

In response to the question “How do you feel about rural education?” Mr Nyathi, a Deputy Director of the DBE, reflected on potential shortcomings of policy, specifically on teacher allocation:

We have [an] appointment of teachers in relation to the number of learners at a school in rural areas. In rural areas, you end up with a smaller subscription of learners per school. Once you have a smaller subscription, the number of teachers will be just as limited and smaller too. And that impacts the efficiency of the education system. For every teacher, there must be around about 35 learners or so. If you go to a rural school with 500 learners from Grades R to 12, that heavily impacts the number of teachers required. What becomes a challenge of this policy is that the teachers at the school will then have to cover a number of subjects, which comprises the quality of education.

In addition, it became apparent among the administrators and policymakers that many believed that policy implementation, not policy, is the real issue facing rural education. When asked “What do you think about policy and its focus on rural education?” Mrs Xaba, a Senior Education Specialist of the DoE, said:

There is a wide gap between rich and poor. It is also visible in education. [The] government are trying with policy, but they are not implementing. It has been many years with policy, but there is no difference. What is important [is that] there must be implementation on policy. Nothing can be done if the policy is not implemented.

Mr Jolobe, a Subject Coordinator of the DoE, talked about education policy and its focus on rural education, saying:

The ANC government has the best policies, but the policy implementors do not use them. For example, there is a policy for concessions. It says that learners with concessions should always be considered whenever there is a formal activity. But people misinterpret it to only apply to the final examinations. What does this mean? It means [that] depending

on the challenge of the learner, certain [extra] minutes are given to the learner in accordance with their disadvantage and possibly rurality.

When Mr Jolobe was asked “Do you think there should be a specific rural education policy?” he responded emphatically and said:

We do not want to have more policies. The policies are there, but people do not implement them. There is a big document that covers rural education, Act 108 of 1996 in the South African Constitution. It is a question of people picking up those policies and implementing them and monitoring the system. It is a question of consequence management. What will happen if you do not do this? The ANC policies are the best in the world. We do not need to reinvent the wheel. The policies are there.

Mr Madikiza, a Circuit Manager of the ECDoE, noted the lack of policy implementation in his response to a question about the kinds of changes he thinks are needed in education policy in rural areas. He said:

The [teacher] incentive is there on paper, but it is not implemented. This would compel those subject specialists to come to the rural areas. We need to talk about how we will attract teachers to rural schools.

He further mentioned the lack of implementation of the Minimum Uniform Norms and Standards for Public School Infrastructure policy (2013), indicating that some rural schools do not even have toilets. In response to the question “What resources in the rural communities can help address these challenges?” Mr Madikiza addressed several issues including parental illiteracy, care, and responsibility outside of academic work. He also highlighted why policy implementation may be an issue:

We need parents to visit schools. Parents who will be storytellers and talk to learners. In some schools, parents help with building classrooms or with other little things. Perhaps they cannot help now because of the economic challenges. But parents could still take care of their children, those who are lucky to have parents. The parents need to look after the children and even ask how the kids are doing after school. They do not need to assist them in terms of school work, because the parents are likely illiterate. Just asking “how did you survive today?” The parents need to take responsibility of the children’s education... In terms of school governing bodies, they understand [that] they have to play a role. However, they need training, they are inactive or needing guidance and not

knowing what their roles are, often interfering with governance. Parents do not turn up for parent meetings. One will come, and she will say she is representing five to ten learners.

6.3. Examples of policies not being implemented

6.3.1. Education White Paper 6: Special needs education, building an inclusive education, and training system, 2001

In response to the question “What policy document, white papers, or guidelines promote positive rural education outcomes?” Mrs Xaba, a Senior Education Specialist for the DoE, said:

White Paper 6 on Inclusive Education says [that] all learners have the right to learn, whether disabled or not. It is fighting this idea that learners must be taken to special schools because of disability. Schools must be fixed so that they accommodate all learners. So [that] learners can go to school near home and stay with their parents. However, not all schools accommodate all learners. Again, it is [the] policy, which is not implemented, but there are some full-service schools which are emerging.

6.3.2. Curriculum Assessment Policy Statements (CAPS) and Curriculum Failure

Mr Nyathi, a Deputy Director of the DBE, offered curriculum failure as an example of policy failure in his response to the question “What issues do you think should be in a rural education policy?” He noted:

National policy is clear on curriculum offering, but the implementors may get it wrong and thus disadvantage rural learners. Teams in rural areas may still want to pursue subjects even though they do not have [the] expertise or facilities, which disadvantages learners. Curriculum development and teacher deployment are weaknesses in the implementation of policy implementation in rural areas. You end up with multi-grade teaching and teachers without specialisation. If the school structures the curriculum to meet the settings, the learners can do well.

6.3.2. Employment of Educators Act (1998) on Teacher Allowance

When asked “What issues should be addressed in a rural education policy?” Mr Jolobe, a Subject Coordinator of the DoE, mentioned teacher allowances. He said:

There is a policy that speaks about teachers teaching in rural areas [and] that they need to be compensated more than others. There is a particular allowance for rural teachers. This is to attract them, otherwise they migrate to go to urban areas. Two, this is also to assist them because everything is far, and travelling is expensive. You cannot get what you need in the rural areas. You need to travel to town. This is what is called a rural allowance. Teachers should be assisted. It would be bad if this is no longer the case.

6.3.4. Policy on Screening, Identification, Assessment & Support (2014)

Mr Jolobe also gave a clear example of how the Policy on Screening, Identification, Assessment & Support (2014) is incorrectly implemented. (See Mr Jolobe quote on page 145).

6.3.5. No-fee schools policy (2006) under the Education Laws Amendment Bill (2004)

Though no policymaker mentioned the no-fee school policy, Thato, a 19-year-old woman in Grade 11, detailed a terrible and unjust ordeal she suffered at the school because she could not afford the annual contributions, which she called “school fees.”

6.3.6. National Learner Transport Act (2015)

In terms of transport for learners, Mr Madikiza, a Circuit Manager of the ECDoE, noted:

Government has things on paper, for example, learner transport. [The] Government is saying they are supporting learners who are travelling over 7 km. It is there as a policy, but it is not implemented.

6.3.7. Minimum Uniform Norms and Standards for Public School Infrastructure (2013)

Mr Madikiza addressed the failures of the Minimum Uniform Norms and Standards for Public School Infrastructure (2013) policy, saying:

Some facilities need to be there at schools, like toilets. It only happens in the rural areas where learners relieve themselves in the open area. We need to talk about a standard for a school to be a school. These things need to be met. The minimum standard. So that we, if we are talking about a school, we talk about a place with toilets and classrooms. I believe this policy is there but not implemented.

Correspondingly, various other practitioners spoke about the inadequate resources that limited the potential for learning and teaching in rural areas. Mr Nyathi highlighted the lack of resources for specific subjects. When asked “What could block rural learners from achieving their educational aspirations?” he said:

You cannot have a school that offers Physics that does not have a lab, or [offers] Science subjects with no labs to do experiments. In rural areas, you have a school offering Science and does not have sufficient resources. It does not have a lab, and it does not have a library, but it offers languages.

Mr Madikiza also noted how poor infrastructure impedes learners from achieving their aspirations. He said:

Lack of resources from schools. I am referring to the infrastructure, the quality of schools, walls, and buildings. Some learners are still learning from outside, under a tree. Rotational learning was made normal by COVID [19]. I am aware that some schools are still employing rotational learning because there is not enough room or space. This is not a theory; there are learners who sit on bricks in class. We still have schools with two or three teachers from Grades R to 7. There are multi-grade classes in these cases.

6.4. Policy is imperfect for rural settings

Ms Rhalarhala shared an interesting observation about the application of education policy in rural areas. When she was asked if she thinks policy adequately addresses “the rural” in education, she said:

Policies are good, but there should be room for one to make situational judgement and management when applying. The policies work in a perfect world, not in rural areas. They only help for guidance but not for solving the problems faced here.

Similarly, the response from Mr Madikiza to the question “Do you think policy adequately addresses ‘the rural’ in education?” touched on how policy is imperfect for rural areas. He noted that, regardless of the policy proclamations, in reality, rural learners were receiving a poor education. A practical example of how imperfect policy is for rural schools, noted by Mr Nyathi, is found in the Employment of Educators Act (76 of 1998), which led to the Post Provision Model (1998), a policy that governs the distribution of teachers in accordance with the number of learners. Mr Nyathi noted that sparse and smaller population sizes are disadvantaged in terms of teacher allocation, which means that teachers have to teach multi-grade classes, which compromises the quality of education for rural learners.

6.5. Lack of knowledge about policy

In response to the question “What do you think about policy and its focus on rural education?” Mr Jolobe draws attention to how educational practitioners in rural areas lack knowledge of policies:

You will find that the school management team, the school governing body, and the teachers do not know about this policy or are not well versed on this policy. [You will find them saying] there is no policy towards rural schools, but the policy is accommodative to rural schools.

When asked “What policy document, white papers, or guidelines promote positive rural education outcomes? Mr Jolobe, a Subject Coordinator of the DoE, stated:

Policy in the DoE, generally, and other departments, are biased towards Africans. So, policies are assisting rural learners. We [as administrators] know that no policy will disadvantage them [African learners]. All policies are pro-poor and pro-rural. The policy is there but it is for people to implement. If you find a rural school or a rural learner suffering, the policies are there but are not implemented.

I asked Mr Jolobe to comment specifically on infrastructure to gauge the infrastructure available to support policy implementation. He conceded:

Schools in rural areas are not well cared for in terms of infrastructure. The best school in the rural area will be the worst school in the urban area. Infrastructure is a sore [spot]. It is an Achilles heel. You will learn from papers that in the Easter Cape, money has been returned to [the] Treasury because the infrastructural budget was not spent. How can you not spend, when you have mud schools and children who attend [classes] under a tree?

Mr Madikiza, a Circuit Manager of the ECDoE, also noted a lack of knowledge about available policy. In response to “What policy document, white papers, or guidelines promote positive rural education outcomes?” he said:

Teachers need to be trained to know about these policies and be exposed to these policies; to also understand the learner and the environment. It is easy for me as a teacher to say that the learner is not learning because of a shallow understanding of the learner’s environment.

6.6. Conclusion

This chapter presented the findings related directly to the research question “How is rurality framed in education policy, and how does this play a role in alienating rural learners in education?” The data presented in this section was drawn from interviews with five policymakers and administrators. First, the interviews uncovered no differentiation or distinction in education policy that take into account the geography where learners reside. Second, the chapter revealed that existing policies might misalign with the rural setting. Finally, it highlighted the failures around the implementation of policy often hinders the provision of education in rural areas.

7. CHAPTER SEVEN – DISCUSSION AND ANALYSIS OF INTERVIEWS WITH POLICYMAKERS AND ADMINISTRATORS

7.1. Introduction

In this chapter, the findings presented in the previous chapter and the significant categories and sub-categories that emerged from these are discussed, analysed, and interpreted. In addition, the findings are juxtaposed with relevant literature. This thesis professes that the disaffection and discontentedness felt by rural learners, which in this study has been assessed, conceptualised, and understood through alienation in education, can partly be attributed to how “the rural” in education is positioned in policy documents.

First, the chapter suggests that the universal policy approach applied in South African education policy typically makes no distinction between regions, habitually neglects to mention rural or urban in its documents, and frequently fails to outline or accommodate specific contextual conditions in rural areas. The cost of this universal approach to policymaking and the inconsideration of particular issues facing rural learners and communities can result in the alienation of learners, which may manifest as suffering, estrangement, frustration, disappointment, lack of motivation, powerlessness that may lead to them to perceiving school as inessential or deficient (Dean, 1961; Elster, 1986; Brown, Higgins & Paulsen, 2003). Second, the cost of the universal approach to education policy is that it enhances pre-existing conditions, such as infrastructural inadequacies, that catalyse and accelerate alienation. The study acknowledges that after 1994, the South African government opted for a universalistic approach, based on South Africa’s separatist history where location and race “[were] used to control access to productive resources and access to skills” (Broad-Based Black Economic Empowerment, 2003).

Additionally, this study claims that various policy matters negatively impact already-compromised education provision in the rural Eastern Cape. I assert that these policy matters (notably inadequacy or absence of policy implementation, the lack of knowledge about education policy, and possibly policy misalignment with rural settings) are fundamental weaknesses in the policy landscape that adversely impact rural learners. These reasons clarify how policy matters directly cause alienation in education or, at the very least, intensify existing feelings of alienation for rural learners. This chapter critiques analytical perspectives that focus only on the individual learner and their home environment and not on the socio-economic and

historical context of the former Bantustans. The discussion in this chapter posits that the learners are often not at fault for the poor educational outcomes in their rural communities. Instead, structural injustices are largely responsible for producing and reproducing appalling socio-economic outcomes and obstacles in rural regions.

In line with Galtung (1969: 171), this thesis posits that:

There may not be any person who directly harms another person in the structure. The [structural] violence is built into the structure and shows up as unequal power and, consequently, as unequal life chances.

This chapter highlights that improving the lives of the most marginalised must go beyond viewing issues from a contemporary lens. The structural landscape of the rural Eastern Cape was built over time, from colonialism to apartheid to democratic South Africa. Systematic legislation applied over the last three centuries excluded rural communities and positioned them as reservoirs of cheap labour. It is inappropriate to neglect this history, as it is being reproduced in contemporary times. Thus, learners are born into unequal education systems and cannot be allotted with blame for their under-education. Despite this, learners and communities continue to actively apply their knowledge and expertise to navigate the conditions they experience.

7.2. Policy matters

7.2.1. Universalism in education

Deputy Director of the DBE, Mr Nyathi, reflected on the policy approach taken by the DBE, noting how policy is set for every learner. He elucidates that there is often no distinction made between localities, races, and genders in crucial education policy documents. This comment is supported by the use of the word “everyone” in Section 29 of the South African Constitution (1996):

Everyone has the right to a basic education, including adult basic education; and to further education, which the state, through reasonable measures, must make progressively available and accessible” (Constitution of South Africa, 1996: 12).

Mr Madikiza, a Circuit Manager of the ECDoE, further emphasised the lack of differentiation in education policy, articulating that policy documents uphold the ideal of uniformity across learners. Reflections on uniformity by Mr Madikiza and Mr Nyathi draw attention to the issue of universalism in South African education policy, characterised and sanctified in various government policies. These policies highlight that government education policy does not focus on rural nor does it distinguish between rural and urban, but instead applies a homogenous approach to policymaking.

It is critical to return to how universalism is defined. The fundamental tenet of the universalistic approach is informed by the belief that there ought to be a common standard of treatment of all individuals (United Nations, 2021). In the South African context, the Ministry of Education demonstrates this by acknowledging that the formulation and implementation of education policies and management of schools after 1994 were based on “treating everyone in the same way, no matter their differences” (DoE, 2005b: 2). Further proof of the lack of differentiation in education policy is the seminal South African Schools Act (1996), one of the pillars of the South African basic education policy framework but one that fails to mention rural areas or rural learners.

Hlalele (2012a: 271), Maserow (2015), Sayed & Kanjee (2013), and Wright (2012) validate the perspective that the universal approach disadvantages rural learners. They postulated that a critical challenge confronting the education system is the “wilful ignorance” of the government to acknowledge conditions in rural areas and schools. The government further fails to acknowledge the true environment and context in which policies are implemented. The study opposes this view of not differentiating education policy across contexts, as this causes alienation in education in two ways. First, failing to plan for difference and nuance can directly lead to the alienation of learners through the failure to provide guidelines and recommendations around the particularity of schools in the town of Mqandulu and OR Tambo region. Some inescapable elements include multi-grade and overcrowded classes, and inexperienced teachers with limited access to teaching and learning materials (textbooks, exercise books, and stationery). Another reality is the general unavailability of adults to assist learners with homework, career mapping, or general guidance because their (parents) absence, illiteracy, inexperience with schooling, or low levels of education. Second, by neglecting these particularities and rural nuances, a universalist approach inadvertently enhances pre-existing

conditions in Mqanduli and OR Tambo region that further catalyse and accelerate feelings of alienation.

Neglecting to address the nuanced experience of rural communities discounts and dismisses the systemic neglect and disadvantage they suffered under colonialism and apartheid. It also fails to recognise that the cornerstone of the colonial and apartheid regimes was the enactment of spatial policy frameworks that limited the mobility and freedoms of Africans to specific spaces, notably reserves which later became Bantustans (Broad-Based Black Economic Empowerment, 2003). The learners in this study reside and attend school in the town of Mqanduli and surrounding villages, in the former Bantustan of the Transkei. A universalist approach inadvertently ignores the structural and historical barriers to accessing education in rural areas, such as topography, sparse populations, long walks to school, the inability to recruit, hire or retain experienced teachers, the inexistence of recreational and learning facilities, the lack of school infrastructure, teacher shortages, widespread poverty and unemployment, high school dropout rates, and the oversupply of taverns and drinking establishments.

The study supports a policy approach that includes particularism, which dictates that even with universal human rights, space must be made for differentiation and the particular (Singh & Parihar, 2021). For redress to successfully occur in the South African education system, specific universalistic principles must be challenged. This evokes a debate similar to the awareness of difference, at the heart of the Broad-Based Black Economic Empowerment (BBBEE) policy. BBBEE is a policy that recognises the particular experiences of Black¹³ people in South Africa and aims to overcome historical economic deprivation they faced under colonialism and apartheid. However, it acknowledges that “despite the right to equality, not all people in South Africa are born to equal circumstances” (Kardamilakis, 2018: 1). Therefore, through various preferential employment and procurement measures, it aims to ensure that Black people attain equality (Kardamilakis, 2018).

The neglect of geography in crucial education policy documents is a strong signal that “the rural” in education policy was strategically avoided as a way to move far away from apartheid’s

¹³ “The term “Black people” is a generic term which means Africans, Coloureds and Indians (BBBEE, 2003), who are citizens of the Republic of South Africa by birth or descent; or who became citizens of the Republic of South Africa by Naturalisation — (i) before 27 April 1994; or (ii) on or after 27 April 1994 and who would have been entitled to acquire citizenship by naturalisation prior to that date” (Broad-Based Black Economic Empowerment, 2003: 4).

legacy of Bantu Education. Bantu Education hinged on spatial discrimination in townships, rural areas, remote rural regions, and peri-urban areas (Gardiner, 2008). Because of these realities, the new government of 1994 chose to abandon spatial matters in education policy documents. The thesis argues that some post-apartheid policy documents paradoxically discriminate against the same previously disadvantaged areas because of the avoidance and intentional neglect of geographical geography.

This policy neutrality was flagged by Mr Nyathi, who said that policy is neutral concerning where students live and, as such, it does not disadvantage anyone over anyone. Based on the South African Constitution's (1996) notions of redress, I refute this view as this policy neutrality contradicts the Constitution (1996), which guarantees that the circumstances and conditions of the most marginalised learners will be prioritised. Neutrality to the locations where learners live and go to school also ignores the history of racial discrimination, segregation, and separate development as espoused by Hendrick Verwoerd (Prime Minister of Republic of South Africa, 1958 - 1966 and Minister of Native Affairs, 1950 - 1958) and the NP government that prioritised urban schools while neglecting rural schools, particularly schools in the former homelands (Nkomo, 2021). This view espoused by this thesis is supported by Harley & Wedekind (2004) who note that rural education continues to suffer as policy measures taken by the national government neglect to address the challenges specific to rural areas. As an example, they quote a rural high school teacher who said, "OBE is a good policy – but it's not for us" (Harley & Wedekind, 2004: 201). This utterance reflects how the resources, time, and skills required to successfully implement OBE were broadly not available to rural teachers and schools.

More so, the context and objectives of the democratic government differ vastly from those of the apartheid regime. Segmentation, differentiation, and spatial considerations in education under the democratic government would not be intended to prejudice or discriminate against certain groups, as was done under colonial and apartheid governments. Instead, it would be aimed at ensuring that requisite policy variations, resources, and time needed for redress are directed towards historically overlooked areas to attain equality for all South Africans. The relative absence of rural specific issues in critical policy documents and the lack of framing of "rural" in education policy documents play a part in the alienation of rural learners, which may manifest as experiences of isolation, estrangement, normlessness, meaninglessness, and powerlessness. Put differently, the absence of the specific conditions faced by rural people

from crucial policy documents (demonstrated by the failure to even mention the word “rural”) severely hinders teachers and administrators from applying policy, as social justice cannot be divorced from spatial justice in the South African context.

This erasure may magnify already present socio-economic realities in rural areas, realities that catalyse and accelerate the experiences of alienation in education for rural learners. In the main, this is demonstrated by the South African Schools Act (1996), the chief policy document on post-apartheid schooling, which too failed to include guidelines or clauses specific to rural areas. This absence of “rural” specific issues in critical policy documents and the lack of framing of “rural” contributes to exacerbating existing experiences of alienation in education of rural learners. This is the case because the context is largely not considered. Thus, policy documents often offer no immediate solutions to mitigate the challenges, pressures, and stress of rural schooling. As demonstrated, some of the rural-specific challenges, including the topography, sparse populations, long walks to school, the inability to recruit, hire, or retain experienced teachers, the lack of recreational and learning facilities, the lack of school infrastructure, teacher shortages, multi-grade classes, widespread poverty and unemployment, low levels of education, and the abundance of taverns have directly or indirectly led to estrangement of learners from their peers, teachers, and communities. Some of these challenges have led to experiences of a sense of powerlessness for learners. Others have contributed to learners contravening school norms and thus contributing to alienating experiences for some learners. In some cases, these challenges have led some learners to prematurely drop out of school.

The seemingly fixed position of universalism by the South African Government in education policy does not force this thesis to take an extremely particularistic approach to policymaking. This thesis opposes both extremes. However, it argues that universalism underscored by redistribution and particularism underpinned by recognition are equally important, and neither should be ignored in attempts to diminish alienation and improve educational outcomes for rural learners (Walker, 2013). Spotlighting rural-specific issues would not be a panacea for learner discontent. However, this study affirms that the design and formulation of policymaking must acknowledge the spatial politics of South Africa and should be more cognisant of the differential capacity, technical resources, and characteristics of particular spaces. In turn, this approach would remedy some of the current mismatch between policy and

implementation on the ground because policy would resonate with the lived realities of learners (Hebinck, Smith & Aliber, 2023).

7.2.2. Policy implementation, not policy, is the real issue

The thesis argues that poor policy implementation does indeed cause alienation in education for rural high school learners. The inadequate implementation of existing policy impacts the whole rural schooling system, harming the recipient of policy – the learners – and the implementors of the policy, the teaching practitioners. Mr Nyathi cites poor policy implementation as being the cause of learners’ disadvantage. He attributes poor policy implementation to the schools and the school governing bodies not adequately applying their minds. He also points to the mismatch between rural schools’ curricula offerings and their lack of resources to deliver them successfully. Although the thesis hypothesises that policy implementation is a critical issue in rural schools. The study contests Mr Nyathi using schools, parents, and community members – who constitute the typical make-up of SGBs – as scapegoats for the poor policy implementation. Policy implementation is indeed an issue that directly or indirectly causes alienation. Still, his analysis takes a narrow school’s reductionist bias that unfairly places the burden of responsibility on the individuals who interact with learners daily. This is an unreasonable responsibility to shoulder solely on the rural population.

As documented throughout the study, the low literacy levels of rural people essentially preclude them from effectively supporting learners in various ways, for example, with school work, participating in school governing bodies, aiding with technical governance of schools, such as finance (Hendricks, 2009). However, the thesis does not seek to exonerate any stakeholders in the educational eco-system, including school governing bodies. It instead advocates for a nuanced interpretation of the challenges in rural schools. It affirms that school governing bodies and school principals are sometimes responsible for school failures and poor administration. For example, a study by Corruption Watch (2022) noted that some school governing bodies have allegedly mismanaged funds, misappropriated resources, or embarked on compromised procurement and employment procedures. The study further notes that “in this province [Eastern Cape], misappropriation of resources and maladministration are higher than the national average” (Ncala, 2022: 9). Evidence of maladministration, misappropriation of

resources, and the flouting of government-legislated procurement or employment guidelines signals how the available policies are not being adequately implemented.

This thesis supports the assertion by Lemon (2004) that the GEAR policy framework restricted educational policies to redress past injustices. Instead, education policy frameworks under GEAR restructured and decentralised school governance, shrinking state control over schools and placing greater the responsibility on communities. Yet, “nothing was done... to address either the accumulated inequality of generations of unequal funding or the demand from black groups for a unitary education system for all South Africans” (Lemon, 2004: 270). Therefore, the contemporary functionality of school governing bodies is not sole the cause of disadvantage for learners. In some ways, school governing bodies disadvantage learners by causing legitimate discontentedness, anxiety, fear, hunger, social exclusion, expulsion from school, and an inability to access school essentials such as uniforms, textbooks, and exercise books. However, on close examination, the historical context of South Africa, the post-apartheid policy framework, and the social challenges inherited from colonial and apartheid regimes also play important roles in the poor implementation of policy.

In addition, the research found that poor policy implementation in rural regions partly results from the inadequate infrastructure to support policy implementation. Mr Nyathi mentioned that schools lack specific infrastructure to successfully teach the curriculum. This is not surprising given that the Chairperson of the National Planning Commission Trevor Manuel noted that “our state lacks capacity in critical areas” (National Planning Commission, 2012: 1). Mr Nyathi suggests that to offset the lack of capacity, schools must restructure their offerings to counter limitations of infrastructure and resources. This is, however, a temporary solution that could limit the educational outcomes and life opportunities of rural learners. Such an approach perpetuates injustice because it immediately excludes rural high school learners from taking specific subjects. This thesis posits that the narrative of “the lack of policy implementation and, not policy” being a hindrance to rural education brushes aside and conceals legitimate barriers to policy implementation in rural areas. Barriers to policy implementation include an inability of rural schools to recruit, hire, or retain experienced teachers, inadequate teaching and support materials, poor infrastructure, and a lack of skilled personnel in local communities to contribute to school governance through school governing bodies.

It is vital that this thesis re-affirm that like learners, rural parents and communities possess assets that are currently undervalued and often unrecognised. Indeed, the interviews with policymakers showed that parents can be a valuable resource to education, beyond helping with homework and school governance. The study reaffirms the comments made by learners and policymakers that parents and communities can look after, support, and care for learners, advocate for, and provide learners with emotional support. In addition, parents and communities can also assist schools in a number of ways, including painting, security, involvement in the national nutrition programme, providing housing for classes, and rental accommodation to learners and teachers. The following section details examples of how policies are incorrectly applied or not applied at all, which, it argues, can potentially lead to alienation of rural learners in education.

7.2.2.1. Policy on Screening, Identification, Assessment & Support (2014)

Mr Jolobe, a Subject Coordinator of the DoE, pointed to the Policy on Screening, Identification, Assessment & Support (SIAS) (2014) as an example of a policy document that has not been sufficiently implemented. The policy seeks to “provide a policy framework for the standardisation of the procedures to identify, assess, and provide programmes for all learners who require additional support to enhance their participation and inclusion in school” (Street, 2014: 2). Mr Jolobe noted that the people responsible for implementing this policy have failed to do so because of how they interpret or misinterpret its ends. Subsequently, rural learners who qualify for concessions (such as additional time or specialised support for examinations) are not sufficiently considered. The ways in which teachers interpret or misinterpret the policy suggests that educators and other policy implementors require training on maximising policy measures so that learners benefit from it. This thesis aligns with Wright (2012), who advocates for regular professional development for teachers. Wright (2012) hypothesises that the neglect of teacher development and the systematic failure of government to provide them with advancement and growth opportunities are fundamental reasons for poor outcomes in South African basic education.

The assertions by Mr Jolobe show that rural learners are excluded from policy measures designed to mitigate their exclusion from teaching and learning. The misinterpretation and misapplication of the SIAS (2014) directly alienates learners in rural areas, learners who

experience legitimate learning challenges and may already be feeling disconnected from teaching and learning. These learners cannot access the additional support and instruments guaranteed to them, and this may act as a catalyst or stimulant of alienation. Alienation in education is partly defined as the estrangement of students from content and pedagogy (Martin, 2008; Schulz, 2011; Çağlar, 2013; Hascher & Hadjar, 2018). Sadly, while the SIAS (2014) policy intended to facilitate inclusive learning and pedagogies, it has been futile in providing programmes for all learners who require additional support to enhance their participation and success in school. Instead, the misapplication of the policy directly causes alienation for rural high schoolers and stimulates pre-existing feelings of estrangement from teaching and learning.

7.2.2.2. Education White Paper 6: Special Needs Education, Building an Inclusive Education and Training System, 2001

Senior Education Specialist for the DoE, Mrs Xaba, asserted that despite the policy frameworks set out in the *Education White Paper 6 Special Needs Education* (2001) and the *Guidelines for Full service/Inclusive Schools* (2010), under which all learners have the legal right to learning regardless of their (dis)abilities, many schools in the rural areas do not accommodate differently abled learners. Additionally, rural schools often do not offer services for differently abled learners. Policy language shifted from “special needs education” to “inclusive, full-service schools” to ensure that learners are not estranged or excluded from education because of their (dis)abilities (DBE, 2001). However, the case of Cikizwa Ntlali, an 18-year-old woman from the village of Mgojweni in rural Eastern Cape, shows the reality of pitfalls in policy. Ntlali was profiled in an online news publication (Sizani, 2022a) that brought attention to this matter. Ntlali is paralysed. She is meant to be completing Grade 8 but remains out of school, as no schools in the vicinity have the services needed to support her learning. Reportedly, the closest inclusive, full service school is a five-hour drive away, in East London (Sizani, 2022a).

The *Education White Paper 6 Special Needs Education* (2001) stated that “the curriculum and education system as a whole have generally failed to respond to the diverse needs of the learner population, resulting in massive numbers of drop-outs, push-outs, and failures” (DBE, 2001: 5). The thesis argues that this policy framework has not been successfully applied in the rural Eastern Cape, as suggested by Mrs Xaba and evident in the story of Cikizwa Ntlali. This misapplication of policy causes learners like Ntlali to experience alienation from education

because they have no access to schools with the requisite accommodation for them. These conditions may lead learners to internalise negative views about education or to experience feelings of loss of agency that are typical for alienated learners (Brown, Higgins & Paulsen, 2003; Brown, 2010).

7.2.2.3. Fee policy and free schools

The discrepancies between education policy and the unmet realisation on the ground for rural learners, as indicated by administrators, force us to revisit learners' experiences as they relate to the lack of poor policy implementation. The thesis shall now explore learner experiences in relation to "school fees." The South African Schools Act (1996: 5) declares that "no learner may be refused admission to a public school on the grounds that his or her parents (a) is unable to pay or has not paid the school fees." Furthermore, the DBE highlights that "a school may also not retain a learner's report because the parent cannot afford to pay school fees" (South African Government, 2022: 1). Yet, multiple participants highlighted how these policy guidelines are contravened in rural schools. For example, Thato, a 19-year-old woman in Grade 11, detailed how she suffered at school because her guardians did not have money to pay R300 in "school fees" that her school demands from every learner. Because of her inability to pay, she was forced to repeat a grade that she had, in reality, successfully completed.

This thesis postulates that this unconstitutionality is possible partly because of the absence of parents in rural communities (as they often leave to seek a better life in urban areas), the existence of the low levels of education and literacy of guardians, a sense of powerlessness for learners, and the presence of child-headed households. These factors diminish the likelihood of learners successfully challenging the school. This injustice led to profound feelings of alienation for Thato. She began to view herself as unworthy and viewed school as a hopeless pursuit. Her anecdote sadly reflects what Hlalele (2012b) observes: that non-payment of school fees marginalises rural school goers and impacts their psychosocial well-being, as the economic (in)security of households drastically shapes the emotional welfare of children. Thato's feelings of alienation mirror the arguments put forth by Morinaj et al. (2017), that learners whose expectations, desires, or needs are unmet at home or in their community are likely to be psychologically and physically disengaged and, ultimately, alienated from the school system.

Zenande, a 20-year-old woman in Grade 11, touched on the general implications for learners who cannot pay the annual contributions requested by the school. Zenande explained that countless learners drop out because their results are withheld from them when they cannot pay for “Typek.” She notes that learners in this predicament often have no idea how to source the money and, ultimately, they drop out. These anecdotes highlight how, in these instances, there is no adherence to policy declarations about school fees. The comment by Thato, “I thought what I was doing was pointless,” is symbolic of learner alienation in education, which is characterised as a perception held by learners that education is not essential to them or that it is deficient of something (Dean, 1961; Elster, 1986; Brown, Higgins & Paulsen, 2003). The thesis argues that the lack of policy implementation directly caused Thato feelings of alienation. Drawing on the comment by Zenande, “Many learners drop out because of not having money,” it is not unfounded to infer that the alienation suffered by Thato can be directly attributed to the poor policy implementation and that this impacts a far greater number of rural learners. Most learners in the rural Eastern Cape suffer crippling economic conditions (Kavese & Mbali, 2022). To shield learners from their financial circumstances, schools in the rural Eastern Cape, including the OR Tambo region, are placed in the “no-fee school” category (DBE, 2018). However, the no-fee policy is in reality contravened by the schools under study here.

Nevertheless, this analysis remains incomplete without an examination of why schools contravene government legislation. The schools are increasingly given reduced government subsidies and typically lack funds to meet their operational costs (Hendricks, 2009). These costs include electricity, bolstering underfunded and under-resourced nutrition programmes, textbooks, stationery, teacher salaries, and repairs to dilapidated schools. Consequently, schools raise funds from tuition fees. It would be negligent if this thesis did not acknowledge that these challenges are partly a product and consequence of the failures of the post-apartheid government to deliver and implement the basic services urgently needed in rural schools. On 16 March 2011, Minister of Education, Mrs Angie Motshekga invoked Section 100(1) of the Constitution (1996) against the ECDoE, thus placing the administrative control of the unfit ECDoE, which was unable to meet its obligations, to the national government. This study agrees with Hoeane (2011), Hendricks (2009), and Kota et al. (2017) who claim that in the Eastern Cape, the delivery and implementation of policy, the distribution and supply of fundamental services, including education, have been hampered by governance failures characterised by government inadequacy, especially at the provincial level.

7.2.2.4. National Learner Transport Act (2014)

Mr Madikiza, a Circuit Manager of the ECDoE, also noted that the goals of government policy do not materialise in reality. He points to the National Learner Transport Act (2014) as an example of a policy that has not been properly implemented. Since they have not reaped the benefits of improved transport to and from school, learners know firsthand how this policy is not adequately enforced. Most notably, Sindo, a 16-year-old girl in Grade 11, described walking three hours to school, leaving at 04:00 AM and arriving at school 07:00 AM.

Research indicates that learners commonly walk 20 to 30 km to and from school in the rural Eastern Cape (Macupe, 2019; Khumalo, 2021; Sizani, 2022b). Long distances often lead to exhaustion, affecting the ability of learners to participate and focus in class in varying degrees (Macupe, 2019; Khumalo, 2021; Sizani, 2022). Exhaustion and fatigue estrange learners from the learning process. According to Mr Madikiza, challenges associated with exhaustion from walking to school may lead learners to transgress rules and regulations, with many learners struggling to adhere to the rules because they are tired and fatigued. The observation by Mr Madikiza is an example of how the mis-implementation of the National Learner Transport Act (2014) policy leads to normlessness. A further complication of not properly implementing the transport policy is conveyed by Mrs Xaba, who states that adverse weather conditions in the rural Eastern Cape (where learners sometimes have to cross dams or climb hills) restrict learners from attending school and increases the number of school days missed by learners. These observations are corroborated by learners who too noted that walking long distances to and from school inhibit their learning in multiple ways.

This thesis argues that the contravention of the National Learner Transport Act (2014) may trigger or intensify feelings of alienation. For example, the lack of transport to school may erode learners' feelings of control and the sense of agency that learners have in directing their education, which may further enhance their sense of estrangement from classmates and teacher. The thesis further argues that feelings of hopelessness by learners are caused and indeed aggravated by arduous daily walks to school, that bring on exhaustion, lack of concentration in class, and increased absenteeism. These scenarios connected to the lack of transport for rural learners restricts their autonomy in education. More so, poor implementation of the National Transport Act (2014) leads to normlessness or aggravates existing normlessness because

learners cannot follow the general rules of the school. These factors attributed to arduous commutes eventually estrange learners from the curriculum, their peers, their teachers, and their schooling. This estrangement may lead to feelings of inadequacy, not belonging, disappointment, low self-esteem, demotivation, idleness, lack of resilience, and anxiety. More so, feelings of alienation, which manifest as these varying states of mind, may be compounded by empty promises from government about specific resources, including school transport.

7.2.2.5. Minimum Uniform Norms and Standards for Public School Infrastructure policy (2013)

The egregious deficiencies in infrastructure in rural Eastern Cape schools are irrefutable cases of policy shortcomings that create a restrictive learning and teaching environment for learners. This directly causes intense feelings of powerlessness in education. Mr. Madikiza addressed how the Minimum Uniform Norms and Standards for Public School Infrastructure policy (2013) has failed to ensure that these standards are in fact met. He revealed how, despite the existence of the policy, today, rural schools still did not have toilets or adequate classrooms. Inadequate infrastructure has been referenced throughout the thesis. Numerous participants, including Charmaine, a 24-year-old woman, who dropped out of high school, with aspirations of matriculating, painted a grim picture of how, from the perspective of learners, the lack of infrastructure impedes education. Charmaine noted how inadequate infrastructure contributed to her feelings of powerlessness and her inability to meet her academic goal of completing her schooling. She criticized her school, saying, “it is not a school” due to its poor infrastructure and limited classrooms. She commented that poor infrastructure and limited space meant that some learners spend time waiting around outside while others attend classes in the available classrooms.

The assertion by Charmaine, that inadequate infrastructure contributed to her dropout, is not unreasonable. Indeed, not having adequate classrooms, seating four learners at a desk meant for two, being taught outside, under a tree, and not having a library or science laboratory are barriers to education for rural children. When asked about how these challenges of infrastructure impacted her learning, Charmaine responded, “I am a high school dropout. I failed Grade 11 in 2016. I repeated [it] in 2017 and failed it again. I gave up. I lost hope.” Her comments highlight how structural conditions produce alienation in the education of rural

learners. In this context, failure to implement a policy to regulate minimum standards has failed her and other rural learners who cannot receive education because of space restrictions. This in turn results in feelings of dissatisfaction with school, anger, frustration, disappointment, failure, and hopelessness about achieving their academic objectives.

7.2.2.6. Lack of knowledge about policy

One of the chief causes of poor policy implementation is the lack of policy knowledge by key stakeholders in the education ecosystem. I argue that this knowledge deficit, which Mr Jolobe ascribes to policy implementors (including teachers, school management teams, and the school governing body), is symptomatic of uneven capacity in South Africa's public sector. The varying levels of capacity in the South African public sector signal an oversupply of skills and expertise in some districts and localities and an undersupply of capabilities and skills in others. According to Muthien (2014: 126), critical constraints that hinder the attainment of South African development goals emerge not from the limited capacity of the state, but from high levels of inequality within the state. Muthien (2014) states that some state departments, geographies, and institutions are world-class in quality. In contrast, others struggle and have limited capacity and capabilities.

The result of this is uneven capacity to implement public policy. The inequality of departments and institutions manifests, among others, as a lack of knowledge about policy, including in education. I argue that the OR Tambo region in the Eastern Cape, part of the former homeland of Transkei, is to a large extent, but not exclusively, a victim to failures in governance and the provision of services (Wright, 2012; Borman & Coombes, 2020) perhaps more acutely than other provinces because of the historical and systematic underdevelopment of the region and its position in South Africa as a reservoir of disposable, cheap labour for the mines and other industries (Peires, 2011; van Niekerk, 2012).

7.2.2.7. Policy is misalignment with the rural setting

Ms Rhalarhala shared an incisive observation of how education policy is applied in rural areas. She noted that although policies are beneficial, there needs to be room for practitioners to apply

judgement and management that are situational and nuanced. She convinces us of the necessity for a more nuanced application of policy because, in her opinion, the rural setting is a challenging context to apply policies in. This reflection mirrors some of the sentiments agreed on in the literature on government policy (Hlalela, 2012; Wright, 2012). This reflection from Ms Rhalarhala notes how the government did not fully acknowledge the full context of rural areas when designing policies. Mr Jolobe highlights the rural context as one characterised by a lack of resources and minimal economic activity which disadvantages rural people.

The thesis argues that despite these conditions and structural limitations in rural areas, particularly former homelands, the government approaches policy as though it would be carried out in a highly functional, fully competent, well-ordered system, disregarding the actual environments (Hlalele, 2012b; Wright, 2012). Though Ms Rhalarhala noted that policy is imperfect for rural areas, the study reinforces the claim that it is the socio-economic context of the rural Eastern Cape (including high unemployment, inequality, low levels of literacy, poor infrastructure, lack of healthcare, inadequate sanitation facilities, and lack of electricity and water) a product of colonialism and apartheid, which renders policies imperfect. As previously noted, the thesis supports the position that rural spaces, specifically former homelands, were socially constructed (Lefebvre, 1991) to serve a capitalist class in South Africa. As a result, this thesis posits, the patterned deprivation of the rural Eastern Cape and the deliberate historical obstruction of education for rural inhabitants have led to administrators and other educational stakeholders viewing policy as a blunt instrument to mitigate challenges in the rural Eastern Cape.

Elements of the universal approach by South African policymakers to policy, as administrators assert, may indeed be ill-suited or, at the very least, disadvantageous to some provinces because of the existing disparities between the regions. The thesis supports Hebinck, Smith, & Aliber (2023: 1) who posit that there is an urgent need for the South African government's rural education policy approach to critically acknowledge the different elements of the lives of people in the rural Eastern Cape and "to interface with the interests of individuals and communities." A practical example of how policy misaligns with rural schools is noted by Mr Nyathi in the form of the Employment of Educators Act (1998), which led to the Post Provision Model (1998). This policy regulates the ratio of teachers to learners. Mr Nyathi commented on how rural areas, because of sparse and small population sizes, are disadvantaged in terms of teacher allocation. The thesis argues that teacher shortages are ubiquitous in rural areas,

particularly in the rural Eastern Cape. It is directly caused by, among others, the disbursement of the Employment of Educators Act (1998), which led to the Post Provision Model (1998) that did not consider the uniqueness of the rural context. As indicated by Mr Nyathi, Eastern Cape schools received fewer teachers, a reality which leads to multiple grades being taught in one class (Sephton, 2017).

The thesis argues that teacher shortages and multi-grade classes directly cause relational fractures between teachers and learners, as teachers struggle to develop meaningful dialogue with learners. This may alienate rural learners because they cannot receive the full support from teachers as educators, mentors, caretakers, and advisors.

7.3. Conclusion

Suppose the educational aspirations of South African learners, on the one hand, and policy documents, on the other, are gauged against the educational outcomes of rural areas. Then, those poor outcomes dictate that we view both the attainment of those hopes and the guiding documents as abject failures. This chapter documented the visible fractures that cause a disconnect between rural learners and the education they are pursuing due to shortcomings of policy implementation, the intentional neglect of geographical considerations in policy formulation, and failure of policy to include guidelines or clauses specific to rural contexts. This chapter highlighted why spatial considerations are essential for South African educational policy to consider, especially in socio-economic contexts with deep histories of colonialism and apartheid, such as the rural Eastern Cape.

8. CHAPTER EIGHT – CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

8.1. Introduction

This final chapter summarises the findings and arguments of the study, highlights the original contributions of the study to different bodies of research, highlights possibilities for future research, and offers recommendations from the perspective of learners as well as policy implications expressed by policymakers.

8.2. Summary of findings and argument

This thesis uncovered that the inequality and poor outcomes prevalent in South Africa's basic education system, which remain stubbornly entrenched, are persistent and deep-seated in the former Transkei, specifically in Mqanduli, its surrounding towns, and the OR Tambo region of the Eastern Cape. It revealed that the legacy of apartheid spatial dimensions, notably: the production and delineation of Bantustans (homelands), which today remain rural enclaves, face severe deficits in several social domains, including in education, in the development of infrastructure, and in the provision of services such as healthcare and electrification. In addition, the research uncovered the ways in which multi-generational poverty and inequality burden rural families who are essentially trapped in unending cycles of poverty (National Planning Commission, 2012). These severe deficits are observable in the descriptive anecdotes and perspectives shared by learners, dropouts, policymakers, and administrators in the interviews. These views were echoed in secondary sources such as policy documents, legislations, newspaper articles, research papers, academic theses, and government departmental reports. Given the structural nature of challenges rural areas, former Bantustans, and rural provinces such as the Eastern Cape face, it is unsurprising then that this research uncovered discouraging and widespread manifestations and experiences of alienation in education among rural Eastern Cape high school learners. These manifestations are noted in separate categories which overlap, converge, and diverge.

Participants' experiences of alienation in education manifested as estrangement from their classmates, teachers, parents, guardians, and communities. Further, they expressed feelings of powerlessness that emerged from their (perceived) diminished abilities to direct their academic paths. The study boldly conveyed that feelings of discontentedness among learners are often the product of structural forces and injustices. Participants narrated primarily hopeful

perceptions of schooling principally anchored on the economic and social opportunities that school could afford their families. However, feelings of meaninglessness featured as learners questioned the utility of exiting the school system without a matric certificate or not obtaining some kind of post-high school qualification. The thesis uncovered varied experiences of normlessness in education, ranging from absent or milder manifestations to explicit representations of dysfunctional behaviour that were noted as antithetical to school culture and broader social norms. Importantly, the analysis identified a new dimension of normlessness, what I termed *teacher and school dysfunction*, displayed within rural schools, as perceived by the learners.

The thesis successfully argued that experiences of alienation in education among rural Eastern Cape high school learners are unique to what exists in the literature of alienation in education, exemplified in four notable ways, namely alienation from their parents, guardians, families and communities; the emergence of what I called *self-imposed isolation*, brought on by complexities within the education ecosystem which at times led learners to voluntarily distancing themselves from their peers and communities (It is ironic then that learners adopted *self-imposed isolation* to counter their estrangement from education. However, this thesis showed that sometimes willingly alienating oneself can safeguard and mitigate learners against perceived risks associated with behaviours in peer groups or communities); the prevalence of a sense of powerlessness and alienation in education induced by social injustices; and finally, normlessness relating to teacher and school dysfunction in rural schools, which I termed *teacher and school dysfunction*.

Notably, this thesis illustrated multiple adaptive strategies that learners utilised to confront and overcome the hostile structural socio-economic conditions in rural areas, specifically in former Bantustans. The study revealed six related adaptive strategies that learners employ daily to uplift themselves. These are resilience, hustling to succeed, self-sufficiency, personal motivation to push against challenges, principles anchored on future aspirations to uplift their families out of poverty, and finally, understanding the structural landscape beyond high school. These highlighted how learners continually exercise their agency and autonomy despite the environmental limitations they encounter. Their agency was not limited to the school context. It was exercised everywhere learners exist, including their homes and broader communities.

In addition, the study uncovered that the state of disaffection and discontentedness felt by rural learners (which in this study has been assessed, conceptualised, and understood through alienation in education) can be partly attributed to the framing of “rural” and geographical considerations in education policy documents. The universal approach to policy applied in South African education typically makes no distinction between rural and urban localities, habitually neglects to mention rural or urban in policy documents, and frequently fails to outline and accommodate specific contextual realities in rural areas.

The study highlighted that the cost of this universal approach to policymaking and the neglect of particular issues facing rural learners and communities result in feelings of suffering, powerlessness, or loss that may lead learners to perceive schooling as unessential to them or lacking something. This may lead to the enhancement of pre-existing conditions that create or aggravate alienation. The study revealed that historical and contemporary complexities of government policy frameworks, which habitually neglect to make distinctions between areas so as not to repeat the egregious transgressions of apartheid, may inadvertently perpetuate disadvantages that they sought to remedy. Furthermore, the thesis argues that various policy matters negatively impact the already compromised education provision in the rural Eastern Cape. It conveyed that the misapplication of policy implementation, the lack of knowledge about education policy, and education policy misaligning with the rural context are fundamental weaknesses in the policy landscape that adversely impact rural learners. The study demonstrated how these policy matters directly cause alienation in education for rural learners.

In addition, the study stressed that the systematically engineered poor distribution of opportunities and resources in the Eastern Cape cannot be ignored when evaluating policy implementation. It noted that historically, methodical government-sanctioned policies incorporated rural communities into the national economy by positioning them as reservoirs of cheap, black labour. Despite this observation, this thesis also highlighted that the democratic government is culpable for some of the shortcomings of policy implementation because of mismanagement, failure, and under-achievement in the provision of basic services to rural schools and communities. This thesis also found that in contemporary South Africa, school governing bodies have at times been obstacles to policy implementation through the mismanaging of funds, misappropriation of resources, and failure to implement employment procedures. This thesis pointed out that learners and communities continue to actively apply their knowledge and expertise in order to navigate the conditions they find themselves in,

despite facing historical injustices and the failure of the government and school governing bodies.

Although rural regions are not a monolith, it is critical to re-establish one of the significant principles binding this thesis and covering its entirety: the common uniqueness and attributes the OR Tambo Municipality (housed in the former Transkei) shares with other former homelands. Although the study argues that the experiences of alienation are unique relative to those documented in the literature, it also maintains that these experiences may occur in other former homelands, namely Ciskei (now in the Eastern Cape), Bophuthatswana (now in the North West), Venda and Lebowa (now in Limpopo), Gazankulu, KaNgwane, and KwaNdebele (now in Mpumalanga), KwaZulu (now in Kwa-Zulu Natal), and QwaQwa (now in the Free-State). This signifies how qualitative research is able to make claims beyond its sample, departing from perceptions about its limitations of applicability beyond the research sample.

8.3. Contribution of the thesis

The study made significant theoretical contributions. Studies on the phenomenon of alienation in education are firmly established in North America, Europe, and Asia. Because of the historical contexts that such studies are located in, this study has applied theories of alienation in education to a novel context, the rural South African context. Therefore, this study contributed to scholarship conceptually by focusing on alienation in education as it manifests in the context of rural South Africa. As noted, the study found that the conceptualisations of alienation as offered by Karl Marx (Marx, Mandel & Fowkes, [1867] 1992; Marx & Engels, [1848] 2004), and further developed by Melvin Seeman (1959; 1975) were limited when applied to the South African context. These failed to account for the particularities of rural South Africa including family configurations, the historical and cultural contexts, the endemic poverty, and high inequality. As a result, this study extends the theoretical framework of alienation in education offered by Marx ([1848] 2004) and developed by Seeman (1959; 1975).

The literature, findings, and discussion in this thesis conveyed that alienation in education is primarily attributed to poverty and its associated deprivation. Therefore, in rural South Africa, alienation in education was found to be partly the product of what the thesis termed

powerlessness induced by social injustice. The study contends that this insight complements the existing theory of powerlessness in education.

For example, it expands on the ideas of Brown, Higgins & Paulson (2003) and Martin (2008) who acknowledge that alienation in education impinges most acutely on learners from historically oppressed and exploited groups. More so, it expands on the works of Farrow (1993), Livermore (1994), Peters & Besley (2013), South, Baumer & Lutz (2003), and Pohlan (2019) who suggest that increasing unemployment and hopelessness of youth may contribute to or lead to alienation. However, this study showed that in the South African context, structural and socio-economic issues, produced by severe economic hardship, matter more than learner-specific issues and trigger and accelerate feelings of alienation. It uncovered that how issues of powerlessness, typically those induced by the severe economic hardship confronting learners (including endemic poverty, structural unemployment, drug and alcohol abuse, and high rates of dropout from school) compelled several learners to deliberately estrange themselves from peers and the community. The study theorised that this occurrence of deliberate isolation from others as *self-imposed isolation*.

It simultaneously conveyed a component of normlessness unfamiliar to the existing literature on alienation in education, that of *teacher and school dysfunction*. It noted that this element of alienation in education was produced by, among others, the high prevalence of teacher absenteeism in the Eastern Cape, which is well above the national average (Mampane, 2013; Msosa, 2020). In addition, the perceptions of learners of how their schools do not sufficiently discipline disruptive learners who bring cell phones and knives to school, who drink alcohol and smoke (cigarettes and marijuana) at school, or who cause general mischief. But perhaps the most egregious demonstration of teacher and school dysfunction was the unfair measures taken against those who were unable to pay the mandated school contributions. Due to this inherent dualism conveyed in the findings, between manifestations of alienation in education and the agency of learner, this thesis suggests that the theoretical framework of alienation ought to pay more critical attention to the element of agency, so that learner experiences are not limited or constrained by theories that silence their subjective capabilities that are constantly at play.

This thesis also makes a methodological contribution to data coding, in its unique analyses of the experiences of alienation in education. This study recommends that qualitative studies

interested in meaning-making avoid deductive coding. Instead, inductive coding should be employed exclusively. The study posits that using deductive coding in qualitative research may limit the possibilities for unearthing broader experiences of the phenomenon under study. This study initially used a deductive approach to code the data, but upon reflection and further analysis, critical segments of the data seemed not to fit into the preconceived set of themes within the theoretical framework of alienation. Instead, the methodology chapter, **Chapter Three** of this dissertation, highlighted that using deductive coding unintentionally and “uncritically,” as noted by Nyoka (2013: 19), superimposed an existing theory onto the experiences of participants rather than the other way around. The study subsequently pivoted to using inductive coding to analyse the data on the experiences of learners in the sample. This approach was subsequently used to analyse interviews with high school dropouts, policymakers, and administrators.

This thesis has repeatedly pointed to the dearth of studies in South Africa on rurality and rural education which centre the voices of rural participants. This thesis has added to these gaps in knowledge about rural education from the perspectives of rural learners themselves. The study specifically sought input from primarily rural high school learners in the Eastern Cape, thus incorporating their voices into studies about them. The study looked beyond widely reported statistics on education to reveal the multifaceted experience of rural learners. Among others, it added to the discourse that using solidarity as yardstick for understanding rurality is rapidly changing. Anecdotes from learners highlight the fragmentation of the rural family structure and how some of their encounters are characterised by individualised and less communal experiences.

The sample and research site both contribute to education studies research. Through interviewing rural high school learners and dropouts, the study enhances the voices of rural learners, especially on matters related to their education. Furthermore, it also adds the voices of policymakers to this body of knowledge. The present study provides foundational evidence that supports the need to rethink policymaking in South Africa. Specifically, it added accounts of the practical experiences of learners in the rural Eastern Cape, accounts that provide a glaring critique of the universalist policy discourse, by highlighting how negation of geography marginalises rural learners. The study also showed how, ultimately, universalism is a catalyst and enhancer of learners’ experiences of alienation in education.

8.4. Recommendations

One of the cornerstones of this thesis was the recognition that learner voices are best suited for narrating and detailing their lives. They identify the convergences of their education, family, and community, and they have the capacity to design the solutions needed to address some of the academic, familial, and community-level dilemmas that they must navigate daily. This view supports the position of this study that rural learners and communities possess inherent community cultural capital, as argued by Yosso (2005). This capital illuminates the wealth of agency that the marginalised use to navigate structural inequalities. As such, this section of **Chapter Eight** responds directly to the research question “In what ways do rural learners believe their school experience can be improved to counter their alienation?” This section puts forward several dynamic recommendations that build on those offered by learners (see the interview findings in **Chapter Four** and a detailed discussion of these in **Chapter Five**).

These recommendations highlight how learners possess a vantage point that allows them to organically understand their contexts such that they can prioritise tackling their most pressing challenges, perhaps even more than other stakeholders in rural education. Although the recommendations are segmented into particular issues, they could easily be categorised under others. Across the multiple interview questions, learners noted several methods, strategies, and ideas for improving the conditions driving their alienation in education. A core issue that emerged from participants included working together as peers to mitigate feelings of isolation. The following summarises ideas from learners about teamwork and collaboration:

Xolani said that collaborative engagements among peers could resolve some of their collective challenges. He said learners can assist each other by talking to one another and advising each other on the dangers of using drugs.

Bongani reflected on a similar approach for academic subjects. He advised that learners could improve their chances of success by collaborating and forming study groups to support each other. He noted this would be particularly useful in Mathematics.

Lerato and Sipehelele both noted the need to improve the relations between teachers and learners. They argued for an intervention to address the negative ways in which teachers treat

some learners. They highlighted that teachers must treat learners fairly and talk to learners with respect.

Thatho thought that helping other learners with schoolwork could improve her strained relationship with her peers. She considered that her academic prowess might help those who struggle and may help her in making friends.

Modise spoke about the need for encouragement and support. He said that there is a critical need for adults to listen to the challenges lamented by learners.

Learners offered recommendations on how to reduce their feelings of powerlessness in education and to remove barriers to accessing education. The following summaries highlight carefully considered and planned solutions from learners, solutions that are grounded in their lived experiences:

Thandokazi spoke about the need for school infrastructure to be maintained and upgraded. She noted that classrooms need to be fixed, telling how in one of her classrooms, a gaping hole in the floor was a constant safety hazard.

Siphelele commented on the provision of transport. He stated that transport urgently needs to be provided to learners. He further noted that gravel roads for transport already exist in the villages.

Thatho highlighted the need for adequate and safe accommodation for learners. She explained that having a hostel within school premises would be beneficial for learners.

Lerato highlighted the need for both hostels and improving school infrastructure. She opined that her “school is not a school” because of the plastic and temporary structures serving as classrooms. She emphatically noted that “a proper” school needs to be built with accommodation for learners inside the school.

Modise spoke about the need for transport and implicitly noted the need for hostels. He commented that staying closer to the school would enable him to arrive on time and to attend evening classes. Like Siphelele, he recommended that the government provide transport for learners who walk long distances to school.

Thembekazi spoke about the importance of family planning programmes from government and school so as to prevent child and teenage pregnancies. She believes that the teachers should organise for nurses to speak regularly at the school and to educate learners about teenage pregnancy. She further advocated for education about the different forms of contraception, such as injections, that can be administered at school by certified healthcare practitioners.

Lerato spoke about the need for improving the provision of textbooks and exercise books for all learners. She observed that the current provision of textbooks caused learners to blame the school for academic failure.

Azola spoke about the need for urgent interventions around rent and food. He said he requires urgent financial support and funding for food and rent. He declared that not having food made him constantly ponder dropping out of school.

Azola also mentioned the need for providing employment opportunities as a way to aid learners with addressing their material challenges. He said employment opportunities would enable him to get a piece job over weekends and empower him to buy food and other essentials required for school. He added that would make him more committed at school.

Thatho spoke about the need for waving school fees, proclaiming that learners must be believed when they say that they cannot contribute financially to the school. Sindo shared related feelings about monetary contributions to the school. She said that school should be free of all financial costs and that learners should not pay for schooling.

Learners also provided valuable and illuminating insights about how their educational experience of normlessness could be minimised. Their views demonstrated an acute awareness of the perils of alcohol and drug use for learners. They provided subjective and institutional approaches to combat normlessness in education, including security measures and rehabilitation, as the following summaries show:

Modise spoke about reintegrating dropouts back into the school system. He said that he would personally attempt to motivate his friends to return to school. He added that having his friends back at school would make his life better.

Zenande pinpointed several potential security interventions. She suggested that security inspections at school could mitigate the risk of learners bringing knives and drugs to school.

She proposed that school goes with weapons, drugs, or cell phones be barred from entering school premises.

Tsepo shared a similar reflection, saying a that patrol unit would be of essential assistance in his community.

To remedy the frequency and availability of alcohol to youth, Lerato recommended establishing more community development. She said her community has an oversupply of taverns and an undersupply of schools. She reports that her peers, mostly 17-years-old, frequent taverns on weekends.

Moreover, Lerato also commented on potential interventions for learners using and addicted to drugs. She said solutions need to be found to help learners who are using or addicted to drugs.

Sipho commented on what can be done about learners whose conduct is antithetical to school norms. He said that parents need to be notified about the behaviour of their children. He said that he could personally help by notifying parents of misbehaviour by his peers.

Similarly, Zenande remarked that interventions to curtail bad behaviour need to involve the parents of learners. She discussed that she would try to highlight to parents the importance of school and subsequently, parents would compel their children to listen to teachers and not cause disruptions in class.

Lerato shared a related concern on the primacy of parents in disciplining learners. She recommended that parents of learners not give up on their children. She advocates that parents discipline their children accordingly.

Zenande spoke about enforcing mandatory schooling for children. She detailed the prevalence of children in her community not attending school. She expressed that it would become difficult for these children to change their circumstances without obtaining an education.

Policymakers and administrators also made essential recommendations for improving education results in rural Eastern Cape. This section highlights that regardless of the advantages of not segregating areas in educational policy, neglecting to include specific rural provisions in education policy contexts at the very least causes inequality in education for rural high school learners. It proposes the implementation of the Language in Education Policy (1997) to

alleviate a significant component of alienation. In addition, it contends that a change in the teaching allocation policy would increase the number of teachers in rural areas, thereby increasing the chances of integrating and facilitating an environment that may lessen learners' feelings of estrangement from teachers. Further, it argues that differential training of teachers would benefit learners, as it would enhance the capabilities of teachers to understand the context of teaching and learning in rural areas.

Policymakers and administrators also offered recommendations to improve the educational experiences of rural high school learners. These included proposals on providing accommodation, transport, technology and connectivity, food and nutrition, psychological and social support services, community support, and parental support. The policymakers and administrators saw provisions as instruments to reduce the alienation of learners. The study contends that residences in the school could resolve a plethora of problems faced by learners. Building a functional hostel on school premises, for example, would alleviate a variety of pressures and stresses that cause or aggravate alienation in education. Hostels would enable that learners who face hunger and food insecurity, reside alone in rental properties, reside far from the school, walk for hours to school, or do not have access to technology or connectivity be cared for by the school, thus releasing these burdens from learners. For example, through the provision of the NSNP to two or three meals a day, schools would be responsible for providing some of these services to learners. More so, within school premises, psychological and social services could be made available to learners who experience trauma caused by living in insecure environments. More so, hostel parents, masters, and matrons would serve as parental support to these learners and create jobs in the broader community.

The lack of geographical segregation in education policy was a dominant theme throughout the study. Ms Rhalarhala emphatically stated, "There should not be a specific rural education policy. It would be a dividing factor." However, the thesis argues that we should look at this matter more nuancedly. Instead of calling for the division of education, the thesis argues that rural high schools, learners, and communities would benefit from provisions within the existing policy that speak to their context. As articulated earlier in the study, the wilful ignorance by the government about the actual conditions in rural areas and schools and using an exclusively homogenous approach to policymaking combine to disadvantage rural learners. Ensuring these provisions within existing educational policy documents would highlight the true nature of rural areas, thereby offering an opportunity for the differential implementation of policy,

which, I argue, are not discriminatory but obligatory because of the significant differences between rural spaces, particularly former homelands, and urban areas. This would safeguard rural areas from impractical policy implementation and ensure that learners are not alienated at a structural level.

Various policymakers commented on the current policy on language. As per the current policy on instruction in mother tongue languages, learners are typically only taught in their mother tongue up to Grades 4 to 6 (DBE, 2010). Thereafter, mother tongues are taught as subjects and not used for instruction. Teaching learners in their home languages would benefit learners profoundly and would minimise alienating experiences that arise from not understanding the language of instruction and subsequently the content being taught. Teaching in the home languages of learners would also eradicate learners who “can listen but cannot speak” due to an inability to speak or understand English comprehensively (Maniar, 2021: 156). Simultaneously, the thesis recognises that English is a global language, therefore, being taught in English opens learners to both local and international opportunities.

Detailed reflections provided specific insights into education policies focused on teachers. For example, the current policy on teacher allocation causes an unbalanced distribution of teachers that negatively impacting rural schools. This is due to a variety of factors, but notably because rural schools have lower numbers of learners because of sparse populations (Sephton, 2017). About the current policy on teacher allocation, Mr Madikiza said:

We are currently using a model that is saying that the teachers in a school are supplied [according] to the number of learners. There is a ratio of 40, for example [40 learners per single teacher]. However, in rural areas, a classroom may have 15 learners. But the fact is that all subjects are done. Are we saying it becomes impossible because of the practical implication of the school? There must be a teacher for every subject. If we have seven subjects in a grade, let us make sure there is a teacher for each subject, as opposed to looking at numbers.

As suggested by Mr Madikiza, the current model prioritises, among others, the number of learners in a classroom. More learners in a classroom typically mean more teachers allocated to a school. However, due to its geography and context (outlined in the **Chapter One**), rural schools have fewer learners, often resulting in a smaller number of teachers allocated to them.

This impairs rural learners, who are subsequently taught in multi-grade classes by teachers who are not subject specialists.

Nevertheless, measures to ensure that rural schools are not disadvantaged could play a significant role in helping learners overcome isolation and estrangement from teachers. Mr Jolobe referenced the Employment of Educators Act (1998), specifically the section on “Improvement in conditions of service for educators,” when asked what should be addressed in rural education policy. He noted the need for better incentives for attracting teachers to rural areas and compensating them for additional transport costs associated with living in rural areas. Sadly, from 1 April 2022, the DoE noted that it had withdrawn incentives for rural teachers because of constraints with budgets (Nkosi, 2023).

The study highlighted that environmental difficulties, including the lack of support and resources for rural teachers, and poor facilities and infrastructure (Chakaninka et al., 2012) challenge the chances for rural schools to attract and retain teachers (du Plessis & Mestry, 2019). In addition, Kota et al. (2017) show a conditional shortage of teachers, with some subjects and regions impacted more than others. Withdrawing incentives for teachers could have lasting implications for rural education, further alienating rural learners from education because without incentives, less teachers would be motivated to apply for positions in rural areas. For rural learners, this means being taught by inexperienced teachers who may not understand the peculiarities of their contexts and therefore leave limited opportunities for engagement with educators.

8.4. Future research

More research is needed to understand the many issues of alienation in education for learners in rural Eastern Cape. I am excited about what can emerge from exploring this phenomenon from the perspectives of teachers, parents, and guardians. The findings of this thesis highlight how teachers, parents, and guardians are instrumental in the lives of learners and have significant influence over catalysing, accelerating, diminishing, and curtailing alienation in education. In addition, it would be valuable to ask similar interview questions asked in this study but use a different research methodology. For example, mixed methods could explore learner alienation experiences in education. Quantitative studies could explore the relationship

between alienation and factors such as the rate of engagement with peers and teachers, community involvement, poverty, inequality, unemployment, and the level of parental involvement in education. Such research would improve understandings of learner alienation in education for rural high school learners.

Moreover, the gendered dimension of alienation is an avenue that should be further explored. For example, a recurring idea about the susceptibility of boy and men learners to drugs and unhealthy behaviours were relayed by learners who said, “The problem is with boys” (Thembekazi, 18-year-old, woman, Grade 12) and “Male learners have a drug problem” (Xolani, 20-year-old man, Grade 10). Additionally, issues of safety related to walking far distances and residing alone were more acutely expressed by girl and women learners. Therefore, it is essential for future studies to dive deeper into the gendered dimensions of alienation in education. They could focus on, among others, child-headed households run by girls, safety, gendered precarity, domestic labour, and the impact of pregnancy on learners.

Lastly, the thesis highlighted how rural areas across South Africa, particularly former homelands, face similar issues. As a result of these similarities, exploring the phenomenon of alienation in education in different locations including in Kwa-Zulu Natal, North-West and Limpopo would broaden understandings of alienation in education and enable the discovery of the various dynamics at play in different rural localities.

8.5. Concluding remarks

The experiences of alienation in rural education detailed in this study demand a direct response from various stakeholders in education including learners, teachers, heads of departments, principals, government administrators, policymakers, and guardians and parents. The recommendations offered here are not exhaustive but seek to influence some of the critical stakeholders, based on the findings and discussions of the thesis.

To learners: continue to reject the limitations present in your environment. Remain steadfast in your resolve to improve the conditions of your families. Many might say that your ambitions are unrealistic and that you face too heavy a task. However, in the words of anthropologist Margaret Mead, quoted in (Keys, 1982: 79), “Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world; indeed, it’s the only thing that ever has.”

To teachers, principals, and heads of departments: directly assist learners in navigating and solving this critical but sometimes lonely journey of high school. Most often, they plead to be heard and do not seek immediate solutions or remedies for their challenges. To be heard, respected, and cared for by educators is frequently all they request from you. This is often lacking from their primary caregivers (parents and guardians), who are often caught up in labour migration or are deceased. In addition, find creative ways to embed strategies for group work and collaborative teaching into your repertoires of teaching and learning to mitigate feelings of invisibility, isolation, and disengagement present in the lives of many learners.

To administrators and policymakers: disassociate from education policies that do not address the legacies of apartheid's distorted and unjust use of difference. At this juncture in rural education in the Eastern Cape, policy documents cannot remain neutral to geography, location, and spatiality. Neutrality will not shield rural learners from oppression and unintentionally implies equality across rural and urban schools which disadvantages rural learners. Even when applying universalist policies, make provisions for rural areas, townships, and peri-urban areas where there is a need for a nuanced focus that differentiates – where applicable – from urban education.

To national and local departments of government: inequality continues to divide provinces, and there is space between and within national and provincial departments to implement policy that ensures the monitoring and enforcement of existing legislation. Let us re-imagine collective engagement to mitigate the risk of poor policy implementation. Education policy coordination, planning, implementation, and performance management must be collaborative and monitored between national and local governments. Two-way secondments between regions and/or districts with historical shortcomings in implementing policy and those with enough resources and expertise for proper implementation must become standard practice. COVID-19 highlighted the appetite of and expertise in government to conduct inter-ministerial and inter-provincial coordination of activities and monitoring to diminish the risks associated with the pandemic. This approach to combating problems ensured the immediate correction or pivot in policy implementation. Educational outcomes in South Africa are in crisis and require more serious degrees of partnerships and quick responses to failures in the value chain of education.

To parents and communities: we cannot claim to be elders in our communities or seniors in our families while distancing ourselves from what is happening to our families, communities, and localities. We are all responsible for providing support for children in communities. Let us not

focus only on the role of government, given that there is a need for this. But the strength of our convictions to change our communities from the bottom up will compel and encourage government actors, civil society, and others to join us.

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List of annexures

Permission to conduct research from the Eastern Cape Department of Education

Ethics approval letter confirmation – Department of sociology UCT

Informed consent form – Learners

Informers consent form – Policymakers/administrators

Information participation letter – learners

Information participation letter – policymakers/administrators

Interview guide in-depth interviews – learners

Interview guide in-depth interviews - policymakers/administrators

Questionnaire guide – learners

Permission to conduct research



Province of the
EASTERN CAPE
EDUCATION

CORPORATE PLANNING, MONITORING, POLICY AND RESEARCH COORDINATION
Steve Vukile Tshwete Complex, Zone 6 Zwelitsha, 5608, Private Bag X0032, Bhisho, 5605 REPUBLIC OF SOUTH AFRICA:
Enquiries: Ms. F. Pakade Tel: 040 608 4537/4353 . Fax :040 608 4372. Email: fundiswa.pakade@ecdoe.gov.za
Website: www.ecdoe.gov.za Date: 29 October 2021

Mr. Teboho Moleko
9 uVimba Circle
Southridge Park
Mthatha
5099

Dear Mr. Moleko

PERMISSION TO UNDERTAKE A DOCTORAL RESEARCH: THE EXPLORATION OF THE EXPERIENCES OF ALIENATION IN EDUCATION FOR RURAL HIGH SCHOOL LEARNERS IN THE EASTERN CAPE

1. Your application to conduct the above-mentioned research involving three rural public high schools and five policy makers/administrators in OR Tambo Inland district under the jurisdiction of the Eastern Cape Department of Education (ECDoE) is hereby approved based on the following conditions:
 - a. there will be no financial implications for the Department;
 - b. institutions and respondents must not be identifiable in any way from the results of the investigation;
 - c. no minors will participate without the consent from the parent/guardian;
 - d. it is not going to interrupt educators' time and task;
 - e. the research may not be conducted during official contact time;
 - f. no physical contact with educators and learners, only virtual means of communication should be used and that should be arranged and agreed upon in writing with the Principal and the affected teacher/s;
 - g. you present a copy of the written approval letter of the Eastern Cape Department of Education (ECDoE) to the Cluster and District Directors before any research is undertaken at any institutions within that particular district;
 - h. you will make all the arrangements concerning your research;

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Customer care line: 086 063 8636
Website: www.ecdoe.gov.za

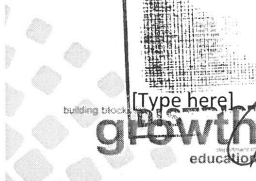
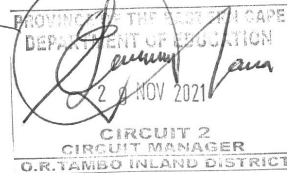
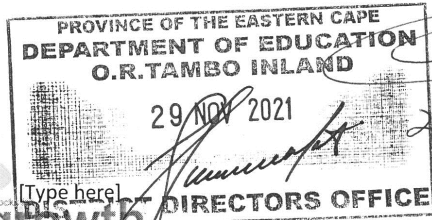




- i. should you wish to extend the period of research after approval has been granted, an application to do this must be directed to Chief Director: Corporate Strategy Management;
 - j. you present the Department with a copy of your final paper/report/dissertation/thesis free of charge in hard copy and electronic format. This must be accompanied by a separate synopsis (maximum 2 – 3 typed pages) of the most important findings and recommendations if it does not already contain a synopsis;
 - k. you present the findings to the Research Committee and/or Senior Management of the Department when and/or where necessary;
 - l. you are requested to provide the above to the Chief Director: Corporate Strategy Management upon completion of your research;
 - m. you comply with all the requirements as completed in the Terms and Conditions to conduct Research in the ECDoE document duly completed by you;
 - n. you comply with your ethical undertaking (commitment form);
 - o. You submit on a six-monthly basis, from the date of permission of the research, concise reports to the Chief Director: Corporate Strategy Management.
2. The Department reserves a right to withdraw the permission should there be non-compliance to the approval letter and contract signed in the Terms and Conditions to conduct Research in the ECDoE and/or legal requirements to do so.
 3. The Department will publish the completed Research on its website.
 4. The Department wishes you well in your undertaking. You can contact the Mrs. Fundiswa Pakade on the numbers indicated in the letterhead or email fundiswa.pakade@ecdoe.gov.za should you need any assistance.

T. MASOEU
CHIEF DIRECTOR: CORPORATE STRATEGY MANAGEMENT
FOR SUPERINTENDENT-GENERAL: EDUCATION

COPY RECEIVED BY: AM FOBO, DER DIR HRASB 'CLUSTER A'



Customer care line: 086 063 8636
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Ethics approval confirmation letter



Department of Sociology

Room 4.35 • Fourth Floor
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03 September 2021

Confirmation of Research Ethics Approval Teboho Banele Moleko [SOC2021/4]

This is to confirm that Teboho Banele Moleko's research proposal, "The exploration of the experiences of alienation in education for rural high school learners in the EC." under the supervision of Dr Nomkhosi Gama & Prof. Ari Sitas, has been reviewed by the Sociology Department Ethics Committee.

The department and supervisor is satisfied that the research carries no significant risk or harm to human subjects. We are further satisfied that appropriate informed consent and confidentiality/anonymity/data protection mechanisms are in place.

It is a condition for the acceptance of Mr Moleko's proposal that he complies consistently with strict ethical standards. This will entail proceeding only on the basis of the consistently informed consent of interviewees and will require regular monitoring of ethical issues which may emerge as the project develops.

Should you have any questions or concerns, please contact your supervisor at Nomkhosi.gama@uct.ac.za or the ethics committee chairperson natasha.vally@uct.ac.za.

Kind regards,

Zintle Mlindi

Information participation letter (learner)

Title of the Research Study: The exploration of the experiences of alienation in education for rural high school learners in the Eastern Cape

Principal Investigator: Teboho Banele Moleko

Supervisors: Dr Nomkhosi Gama and Professor Ari Sitas

Dear Participant,

My name is Teboho Moleko, a PhD student from the University of Cape Town. I am conducting a study exploring the experiences of alienation in education for rural high school learners in the Eastern Cape and, at the same time, situating their experiences within the broader educational and socio-economic context of South Africa. The study also aims to explore how policy frames rurality in education.

The study is interested in discovering learner experiences as learner voices are often neglected and forgotten in research about them. The study aims to move away from deficit approaches when studying rural areas. Instead, the study will use a community cultural wealth approach that recognises rural communities are endowed with capital (wealth and knowledge) that is often undervalued and unrecognised. The study will look at the following themes:

1. Learners' description of their experiences of alienation in education
2. Issues facing learners in the EC socio-economic environment
3. Similarities and differences learner's experiences of alienation in education
4. Framing of rurality in education policy, and how it plays a role in alienating learners in education
5. Learners' perception on how their school experience can be improved

As a participant in this research, you agree to take part in the interview voluntarily. By participating in the interview, you are indicating that you understand the provided information

and that you are giving consent to participate. Please note that there are no known risks to participating in this study. You may be invited for a follow-up interview.

In the event of any problems or queries, please contact my supervisor Dr Nomkhosi Gama.

Mobile phone number: 0722054585

Email: nomkhosi.gama@uct.ac.za

Kind regards

Teboho Banele Moleko

0793495243

mlkteb006@myuct.ac.z

Information participation learner – Policymakers and administrators

Title of the Research Study: The exploration of the experiences of alienation in education for rural high school learners in the Eastern Cape

Principal Investigator: Teboho Banele Moleko

Supervisors: Dr Nomkhosi Gama and Professor Ari Sitas

Dear Participant,

The study will be exploring the experiences of alienation in education for rural high school learners in the Eastern Cape. It will investigate learner perspectives while situating their experiences within the broader educational and socio-economic context of South Africa. The study also aims to explore how policy frames rurality in education.

The study is interested in discovering how rurality is framed in education and your understanding of issues of learner alienation.

The study aims to move away from deficit approaches when studying rural areas. Instead, the study will use a community cultural wealth approach that recognises rural communities are

endowed with capital (wealth and knowledge) that is often undervalued and unrecognised. The study will look at the following themes:

1. Learners' description of their experiences of alienation in education
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In the event of any problems or queries, please contact my supervisor Dr Nomkhosi Gama.

Cellphone number: 0722054585

Email: nomkhosi.gama@uct.ac.za

Kind regards

Teboho Banele Moleko

0793495243

mlkteb006@myuct.ac.za

Informed consent form (learners)

This document is a statement of agreement to participate in the research study

I hereby confirm that I have been informed by the researcher Teboho Banele Moleko about the nature, conduct, benefits and risks of this study.

I have received, read and understood the above-written information (Participant Letter of Information) regarding the study.

I am aware that the study results, including personal details, will be anonymously processed into a study report.

In view of the research requirements, I agree that the data collected during this study can be processed in a computerised system by the researcher.

I may, at any stage, without prejudice, withdraw my consent and participation in the study.

I have had sufficient opportunity to ask questions and (of my own free will) declare myself prepared to participate in the study.

I understand that significant new findings developed during this research that may relate to my participation will be made available to me.

_____	_____	_____	_____
Full Name of Participant	Date	Time	Signature

_____	_____	_____	_____
Participant's Guardian or Parent	Date	Time	Signature

I, _____ (name of the researcher) herewith confirm that the above participant has been fully informed about the nature, conduct and risks of the above study

_____	_____	_____	_____
Full name of researcher	Date	Time	Signature

Informed consent form (policymakers and administrators)

This document is a statement of agreement to participate in the research study

I hereby confirm that I have been informed by the researcher Teboho Banele Moleko about the nature, conduct, benefits and risks of this study.

I have received, read and understood the above-written information (Participant Letter of Information) regarding the study.

I am aware that the study results, including personal details, will be anonymously processed into a study report.

In view of the research requirements, I agree that the data collected during this study can be processed in a computerised system by the researcher.

I may, at any stage, without prejudice, withdraw my consent and participation in the study.

I have had sufficient opportunity to ask questions and (of my own free will) declare myself prepared to participate in the study.

I understand that significant new findings developed during this research that may relate to my participation will be made available to me.

_____	_____	_____	_____
Full name of participant	Date	Time	Signature

I, _____ (name of the researcher) herewith confirm that the above participant has been fully informed about the nature, conduct and risks of the above study.

_____	_____	_____	_____
Full name of researcher	Date	Time	Signature

Learner in-depth interview guide

OPENING QUESTIONS

1. What grade are you doing?
2. Do you have any educational aspirations? If yes, what are those?
3. What do you think could hinder you from achieving your aspirations?
4. What factors or situations do you feel support you in achieving or reaching your aspirations?
5. What are your best high school experiences?
6. What are your worst high school experiences?
7. Between home, school and community, which is your best space and why?
8. What are the big issues or challenges that undermine your school experience?
9. What are the biggest assets (capacities, skills and social resources) in your community that can help in redressing these challenges?
10. How can you help in redressing these challenges?

INTERMEDIATE QUESTIONS

Powerlessness

1. Have you experienced the problems of school as sometimes too big for you?
2. How have you experienced the problems of school as sometimes too big for you?
3. When did you start experiencing the problems of school life as sometimes too big for you?
4. Have you experienced the problems of life at home or in your community as sometimes too big for you?
5. How have you experienced the problems of life at home or in your community as sometimes too big for you?
6. When did you start experiencing the problems of life at home or in your community as sometimes too big for you?
7. Do you think this can be improved? If yes, in what ways can this improved?

Normlessness

8. Have you ever experienced a challenge in understanding what right and wrong behaviour at school is?

9. Give an example of where and how you experienced a challenge in understanding what right and wrong behaviour at school
10. When did you start experiencing this challenge of understanding what right and wrong behaviour at school is?
11. What do you think of the rules at school?
12. Have you ever broken any of the rules at school?
13. Why did you or did you not break the rules at school?
14. When did you start breaking the rules at school?
15. Do you think this can be improved? If yes, in what ways can this improved?

Meaninglessness

16. What does school mean to you?
17. Do you ever feel like you are wasting your time at school?
18. Why have you felt like you are school wasting your time at school?
19. When did you start feeling like school is wasting your time?/When did you first find that school is not wasting your time?
20. Do you think school will help you in the future?
21. In what ways will school help you in the future?/ In what ways will school not help you in the future?
22. Do you think how you feel about school can be improved? If yes, in what ways can this be improved?

Estrangement

23. Do you have any after school activities, e.g., sport, choir, debating or community work?
24. How do you perceive your relationship with other learners?
25. How do you feel about your relationship with teachers?
26. Do you think your relationships at school can be improved? If yes, in what ways can these be improved?

CLOSING QUESTIONS

27. In what ways do you think elements of the school experience can be improved?
28. In what ways do you think elements of the community experienced can be improved?
29. Lastly, is there anything else you would like to raise or address on this matter?

Policymakers in-depth interview guide

OPENING QUESTIONS

1. According to your knowledge, do rural high school learners have any educational aspirations? If yes, what are those?
2. What do you think could hinder them from achieving those aspirations?
3. What factors or situations do you feel support them in achieving or reaching their aspirations?
4. Between home, school and community, which is their best space and why?
5. What are the big issues or challenges that undermine their school experience?
6. What are the biggest assets (capacities, skills and social resources) in the local communities that can help in redressing these challenges?

INTERMEDIATE QUESTIONS (PART I)

7. What is your understanding of rural education?
8. What is your understanding of policy on rural education?
9. Do you think rural is framed or positioned adequately in education policy?
 - a. Expand
10. What existing policies address /promote positive rural education outcomes?
 - a. Teacher deployment
 - b. Language policy
 - c. Infrastructure
 - d. Curriculum development
 - e. School governing bodies
11. Do you think there is enough policy focusing on rural education?
12. In your opinion, where are the gaps or problems in rural education policy?
 - a. Teacher deployment
 - b. Language policy
 - c. Infrastructure
 - d. Curriculum development
 - e. School governing bodies
13. In your opinion, what can be done to correct the situation?
14. What are your thoughts on the proposed rural draft policy published in 2017?

15. Do you think the proposed rural draft policy addresses adequately the gaps, issues or problems facing rural education?
16. In what ways can the rural policy draft policy be improved, if any?

INTERMEDIATE QUESTIONS PART II

Powerlessness

17. Do you think learners experience the problems of school as sometimes too big for them?
18. How do they experience the problems of school as sometimes too big for them?
19. Do you think learners sometimes experience life problems at home or in your community as sometimes too big for them?
20. How do you think they experienced life problems at home or in your community as sometimes too big for them?
21. How does policy play a role in any or all the above?

Normlessness

22. Do learners experience a challenge in understanding what right and wrong behaviour at school is?
23. How have they experienced a challenge in understanding what right and wrong behaviour at school is?
24. What do you think the learners think of the rules at school?
25. How does policy play a role in any or all the above?

Meaninglessness

26. What do you think school means to learners?
27. Do you think they think school will help you their future?
28. How does policy play a role in any or all the above?

Estrangement

29. Do learners have any after school activities, e.g., sport, choir, debating or community work?
30. How do you perceive learners' relationships with other learners?
31. How do perceive learners their relationship with teachers?

32. How does policy play a role in any or all the above?

CLOSING QUESTIONS

33. In what ways do you think elements of the rural school experience can be improved more generally?

- a. Policy?
- b. Interventions

34. In what ways do you think elements of the rural community experience can be improved more generally?

- a. Policy?
- b. Interventions?

35. Lastly, is there anything else you would like to raise or address on this matter?

Learner questionnaire guide

OPENING QUESTIONS

1. What grade are you doing?

2. Do you have any educational aspirations? If yes, what are those?

3. What do you think could hinder you from achieving your aspirations?

4. What factors or situations do you feel support your in achieving or reaching your aspirations?

5. What are your best high school experiences?

6. What are your worst high school experiences?

7. Between home, school and community, which is your best space and why?

8. What are the big issues or challenges that undermine your school experience?

9. What are the biggest assets in your community (capacities, skills and social resources) that can help in redressing these challenges?

10. How can you help in redressing these challenges?

INTERMEDIATE QUESTIONS

Powerlessness

11. Have you experienced the problems of school as sometimes too big for you?

12. How have you experienced the problems of school as sometimes too big for you?

13. When did you start experiencing the problems of school life as sometimes too big for you?

14. Have you experienced the problems of life at home or in your community as sometimes too big for you?

15. How have you experienced the problems of life at home or in your community as sometimes too big for you?

16. When did you start experiencing the problems of life at home or in your community as sometimes too big for you?

17. Do you think this can be improved? If yes, in what ways can this improved?

Normlessness

18. Have you ever experienced a challenge in understanding what right and wrong behaviour at school is?

19. How have you experienced a challenge in understanding what right and wrong behaviour at school is?

20. When did you start experiencing this challenge of understanding what right and wrong behaviour at school is?

21. What do you think of the rules at school?

22. Have you ever broken any of the rules at school?

23. Why did you or did you not break the rules at school?

24. When did you start breaking the rules at school?

25. Do you think this can be improved? If yes, in what ways can this improved?

Meaninglessness

26. What does school mean to you?

27. Do you ever feel like you are wasting your time at school?

28. Why have you felt like you are school wasting your time at school?

29. When did you start feeling like school is wasting your time?/When did you first find that school is not wasting your time?

30. Do you think school will help you in your future?

31. In what ways will school help you in your future?/ In what ways will school not help you in your future?

32. Do you think how you feel about school can be improved? If yes, in what ways can it be improved?

Estrangement

33. Do you have any after school activities, e.g., sport, choir, debating or community work?

34. How do you perceive your relationship with other learners?

35. How do you feel about your relationship with teachers?

36. Do you think your relationships at school can be improved? If yes, in what ways can these be improved?

CLOSING QUESTIONS

37. In what ways do you think elements of the school experience can be improved?

38. In what ways do you think elements of the community experienced can be improved?

39. Lastly, is there anything else you would like to raise or address on this matter?

