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**PSYCHOSOCIAL SUPPORT FOR TEACHERS IN RURAL LEARNING ECOLOGIES
DURING THE CORONAVIRUS PANDEMIC.**

By

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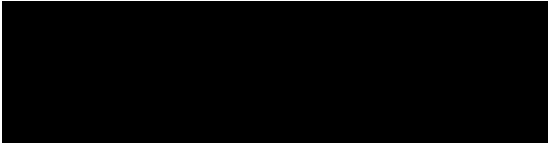
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July 2024

DECLARATION

I, Thembinkosi Victor Ndlovu, declare that:

1. The research reported in this dissertation, except where otherwise indicated, is my original research.
2. This dissertation has not been submitted for examination of any other degree at any other university.
3. This dissertation does not contain other person's data, pictures, graphs, or other information unless specifically acknowledged as being sourced from other people
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 Signed: _____ Date: 12 July 2024

DEDICATION

To the glory of God, the creator of all things.

To my wife Zine Goodness maMthembu Ndlovu for your unwavering support through thick and thin, Ngonyama!

To my wonderful children: Sithabile, Ayanda, Sibonginkosi and Sphumelele thank you for being my glory, crown and inspiration.

To my loving parents Ntombi umaZuma and Elias Ndlovu. Ngibonga uNkulunkulu onigcinile kwaze lapha, nize nidle izinyoni zabantwana benu. Nginethulela nant' igwalagwal' elibimvu!

To my beloved siblings Lindiwe, Zanele, Thulisile, Sifiso and Mthembeni, thanks for your love.

To my High School teacher and Principal Dr C.J. Buthelezi. At last, here is the full payment of my life-time debt to you. You said "Viktorrr you must become a doktorrr!".

To the saints at Mustard Seed Church (MSC) for your prayers and love. May God do to you and your children and grandchildren more and more, Grace upon Grace. MSC is the best!

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My former colleagues at Elangeni TVET College and my fellow students at UKZN for always wishing me well. God bless you all.

WORDS OF INSPIRATION

'Life for me ain't been no crystal stair.

It's had tacks in it,

And splinters,

And boards torn up,

And places with no carpet on the floor-

Bare

But all the time

I've been a'climbin' on,

And reachin' landin's,

And turnin' corners,

I've still climbin',

-Langston Hughes

There is a time for everything under the sun. God has made everything beautiful in its time. He has also set eternity in the hearts of men.

-King Solomon

"There is a tide in the affairs of every man, which when taken at a flood leads to fortune, omitted, all the voyages of life are bound to shallow and distress".

-Sir William Shakespear.

"There's no man who's an Ireland entire to itself, every man is part of the main and piece of the continent. You can never be what you ought to be, until I am what I ought to be, and I can never be what I ought to be until you are what you ought to be, this is the interrelated structure of reality".

-Dr Martin Luther King jr

That I may know Christ, and the power his resurrection, if by any means I might attain and apprehend that which he apprehended for me, reaching forth I press for the prize of the high calling.

-Apostle Paul

"Such knowledge is too wonderful for me, too lofty for me to attain."

-King David

Abstract

Originating in China in 2019, a veritable avalanche of the coronavirus ruthlessly engulfed the whole world. The entire human race was besieged. Teachers were psychologically and socially negatively impacted, especially teachers in rural learning ecologies because of unique dynamics of structural disenfranchisement. They were gripped by fear, stress, anxiety and depression. Stress is known to collude with myriad diseases to kill people as it significantly reduces the immune system. The purpose of the study is to investigate psychosocial systems to support medical interventions, to restore psychological wellbeing and normal social functioning:

The critical paradigm is employed for description of the phenomenon of psychosocial support (PSS). The nature (ontology), the knowledge (epistemology), the value and significance (axiology) and acquiring (methodology) of PSS are explored through the critical paradigm. The critical paradigm also has emancipatory tenets for promotion of advocacy. The integrative theoretical framework of psychosocial support principles (PSSP) and the appreciative inquiry principles (AIP) is developed. AIP is a strength-based theory that is appreciative in nature, rather than problem-oriented. Whereas PSSP is a strength regaining process. The two theories have similar domains of strength yet with different operational expositions: one of innate strength discovery (AIP) and the other of lost strength recovery (PSSP). Psychosocial support provides framework and domain not only to explore but also to recover hope and cultivate resilience. Traumatized individuals may require the help of PSSP to get them out the rut of fear, pessimism and despair before they can focus on the positive for fruitful engagement in an AI process.

Purposive sampling: comprising 16 participants from four rural schools in KZN including teachers, members of School Management Teams (SMT), School Based Support Teams (SBST), District Based Support Teams (DBST), Special Needs Education Services (SNES), Employee Health and Wellness (EHW) from Pinetown District. This sampling ensured complimented stakeholder participation and collaboration in rallying psychosocial support for teachers. Data was analysed using descriptive phenomenological analysis. Findings (through literature review and participants' accounts) show that psychosocial support was not readily available, yet it was very instrumental in mitigating against psychosocial crisis effects due to the pandemic. The study recommended collaborative teacher psychosocial support from all stakeholders.

Keywords: Psychosocial support, Appreciative inquiry, coronavirus, rurality, wellbeing.

Acronyms

AIDS	:	<i>Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome</i>
CPTD	:	<i>Continuous Professional Teacher Development</i>
DoE	:	<i>Department of Education</i>
DOH	:	<i>Department of Health</i>
Erlc	:	<i>Education relations labour Council</i>
ESS	:	<i>Education Support Services</i>
EWP	:	<i>Employee Wellness Program</i>
GAD	:	<i>Generalised Anxiety Disorder</i>
GBH	:	<i>Grievous Bodily Harm</i>
HIV	:	<i>Human Immunodeficiency Virus</i>
IMF	:	<i>International Monetary Fund</i>
LRA	:	<i>Labour Relations Act</i>
NCCC	:	<i>National Coronavirus Command Council</i>
NGO	:	<i>Non-Government Organization</i>
NPO	:	<i>Non-Profit Organization</i>
OVC	:	<i>Orphans and Vulnerable children</i>
PFA	:	<i>Psychological First Aid Continuous</i>
PIRLS	:	<i>Progress in International Reading Literacy Study</i>
PPE	:	<i>Personal Protective Equipment</i>
SACE	:	<i>South African Council for Educators</i>
SACMEQ	:	<i>Southern African Consortium for Monitoring Educational Quality</i>
SRD	:	<i>Social Relief of Distress</i>
UNAIDS	:	<i>United Nations and AIDS</i>
UNESCO	:	<i>The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization</i>
UNICEF	:	<i>United International Nations Children’s Emergency Fund</i>
USAID	:	<i>United States Agency for International Development</i>
WHO	:	<i>World Health Organization</i>

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CHAPTER ONE

1. INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

1.1 Introduction

Chapter one is the introductory chapter meant to introduce the study. A brief introductory account of the study design is presented on the following aspects of the study: *Background and context of the study, Statement of the Problem, Rationale of the study, Focus and purpose of the study, Research objectives and questions, Research design, Theoretical framework, Synopsis of the methodology, Selection of Participants, Data analysis, Trustworthiness, Limitations of the study, Delimitations of the study, Ethical Considerations, and Arrangement of chapters.*

To clarify the background of the study, the context of the study is described. The study was done post the coronavirus pandemic that took the whole world by surprise and impacted lives in unprecedented ways. World economies suffered a severe setback, with the severest impact felt in developing countries, more especially in rural areas because of marginalization and underdevelopment. All sectors of economic life were affected to different extents. This study focuses on the devastation the coronavirus caused in the education sector, particularly in rural areas. Special attention was placed on the impact of the coronavirus on the psychosocial support given (or not given) to teachers to survive the pandemic, from the introduction of new teaching modes to livelihood.

A pandemic like the coronavirus causes huge psychosocial challenges in the lives of individuals including teachers. Teachers were psychologically affected when their colleagues got infected, fell sick, or died. Death of colleagues induced anxiety for teachers (Page et al., 2021; Mellon, 2022). Teachers needed to retain their psychological wellbeing to be able to function normally again. Psychosocial support became vital. Psychosocial support is a form of psychological intervention that works to correct psychological derailment and restore social functioning. The rationale of the study is the motivation for doing the study. A study of this magnitude needs sustained motivation to carry out to its completion. As the world was affected by the pandemic in differing forms and to different extents, I was also affected and suffered severe setbacks in many areas including in my health, career, and finances. I lost friends and colleagues to the pandemic. Many of my

colleagues and I needed psychosocial support but did not receive any, so I decided to conduct this study, which has been very therapeutic for me and the participants. Teachers needed empowerment to be able to face such disasters. There are many other forms of disasters recently affecting human psychological wellbeing. This informs the choice of the theory that framed the study as well as the paradigm. Also critical is the selection of participants for the study to achieve a holistic coverage, not only of the impact but also the challenges experienced by many stakeholders in education to get empowered for future challenges.

1.2 Background and context of the study

In December 2019, the covid-19 or coronavirus was first reported in Wuhan, China. The virus soon spread throughout the world (Anger et al., 2024). In March 2020, the World Health Organisation declared it as a pandemic (WHO, 2020; Dzinamarira et al., 2024). The medical science researchers had to find answers very fast. The disease was discovered to be transmitted mainly through contact with the respiratory droplets of an infected person (Cheema et al., 2024). Governments worldwide imposed measures to prevent or minimise the escalation of the coronavirus. These measures included social distance regulations, which were enforced through lockdown of towns, cities and public places like schools. The lockdown measures were designed to restrict movements of persons to avoid contact (Armstrong et al., 2020). The whole country was closed down, allowing only essential services needed for life sustenance like food, health, and security. Schools were also closed (Subasinghe & Pathirana, 2022).

Although the disease had less direct impact on young people and children (Cheema et al., 2024), it was feared that if they contracted it, they could pass it onto the vulnerable elderly people at home, who had high mortality risk if infected (Stnkovcka et al., 2020; Díez González et al., 2024). Schools were closed to curb the spread of the virus. This caused significant social and psychological impact on the society, especially on teachers. Teachers were excluded from the list of essential workers, yet the disturbance to their work had a huge and long lasting psychological effect and psychological wellbeing of the whole community (Granziera et al., 2021; Liu, 2023). Teachers were negatively affected psychologically and socially. Teachers in rural areas faced unique dynamics caused by systemic isolation (Subasinghe & Pathirana, 2022; Padmanabhanunni et al., 2022).

The coronavirus pandemic glaringly exposed the vulnerabilities of both learners and teachers in rural areas (Konyana & Matheolane, 2023). These circumstances brought traumatic experiences and other psychological constructs such as anxiety and depression for teachers. Almost everybody knows someone who got infected, got sick or passed away; either a close relative or a colleague. Many teachers succumbed to the disease (Coberly, 2023) and many were sick to the point of near-death, including myself. The lockdown was one prison-like experience. Teachers could not meet with their colleagues for mutual psychosocial support. These experiences caused much frustration. Teachers were not able to meet and help learners with school work. These circumstances and the resulting fear of the unknown required psychosocial interventions for teachers (Brooks et al., 2024; White, 2024).

This study sought to determine whether teachers in rural areas received psychosocial support to mitigate the adverse effects of the pandemic. There is a grey area when it comes to provision of psychosocial support for teachers. This was further exposed by the advent of the coronavirus as they were not accorded the status of front-line workers. However, teachers believed their profession was an essential service (Waters et al., 2022). Teachers in rural areas are often blamed and sometimes vilified for poor results without being given psychosocial support. This project will, through the integrative framework of psychosocial support (PSS) principles and appreciative inquiry (AIP), endeavor to contribute to coping strengths and skills development. I hope it will significantly contribute to raising awareness for the plight of teachers and rallying psychosocial support for teachers in rural areas during the such disaster as coronavirus pandemic and beyond. I also foresee a significant contribution to the body of knowledge in psychosocial support.

1.3 Statement of the problem

Psychosocial support for teachers would empower them in turn, to provide psychosocial support and academic guidance to their learners (Omodan, 2020). Psychosocial implies psychological as well as social factors (Kaljee et al., 2017; Green & Reid, 2021). Psychological distresses inevitably lead to social or relational problems. Psychosocial support promises a holistic intervention in the lives and functioning of families and communities for psychologically sound societies. Little differences made by psychosocial support can contribute to social cohesion, social justice, and world peace.

Teachers' psychological wellbeing was shaken during the pandemic. Time spent out of the classroom caused anxiety for them. Part of psychological challenges, teachers also experienced tremendous frustrations of isolation from their colleagues that deprived them of mutual support (Lu & Hua, 2024). Inability to provide academic support for their learners was also depressing. Under stressful conditions of lockdown and isolation, they had to learn to use technological applications for online teaching and learning (Aditya, 2021; Abedi & Ametepey, 2024). Learners also did not have the online equipment and data connection. Even where they could get these tools, they had no knowledge to use them (Munyanyo & Simuja, 2024). They were used to learn physically attending in a classroom and not through the online learning mode (Rajkhowa & Kumar, 2021; Akbana & Dikilitaş, 2022).

These new developments presented serious challenges for teachers, especially in rural areas. The pre-existing, unique factors besetting rural areas presented as predisposing factors for vulnerability, which made it difficult for them to navigate these unfamiliar situations (Myende & Hlalele, 2018; Padilla, et al., 2021). They would naturally need psychosocial support to make meaning or understand the situation to re-orient their psychological wellbeing. However, the set of conditions in rural settings, including social inequalities due to rural disenfranchisement, made it difficult to have a conducive context for the proper execution of psychosocial support principles (Duckers et al., 2017; Bhadra, 2022). Nevertheless, teachers need psychosocial support for their wellbeing as well as empowerment to re-focus and do their work (Padilla Rodríguez, 2021; Mahaye, 2020).

This study explores the psychosocial support for teachers in rural learning ecologies during the coronavirus pandemic (Omodan, 2020; Dube, 2020). If psychosocial support is essential for overcoming adversities, for meaningful and positive human development, and for creating sustainable rural learning ecologies, then a supportive context is required (Palmer et al., 2021). Effective psychosocial support in rural learning ecologies requires that contextual challenges be addressed (Bhadra, 2022; Mapasela et al., 2012; Calabrese et al., 2010). The development should focus, not only on socioeconomic growth, but also on the inclusion of other psychological and social dimensions. Such inclusivity and wholesome approach can ensure meaningful and sustainable development (Yudarwati, 2019; Sijbrandij et al., 2020). There is a research gap in the

discipline of Educational Psychology this research sought to address. There are gaps in knowledge and coping mechanisms for similar situations

1.4 Rationale for the study

My experience as a Life Orientation (LO) and mathematics teacher, as well as a Student Counsellor in semi-rural schools has been a motivator for me to do research on psychosocial support (PSS) for teachers in rural learning ecologies. In those roles, especially as student counsellor, teachers often came to me for psychosocial help. I have been approached by teachers seeking what they normally referred to as ‘advice’ regarding their psychosocial needs. I perceived a desperate need for psychosocial support for their social needs. My Masters degree thesis which was about exploring psychosocial support for learners found that vulnerable children are in desperate need of psychosocial support (Ndlovu, 2019). Doing that research further brought me to a realisation that teachers also needed psychosocial support.

Teachers need to sustain their commitment and efficacy in supporting vulnerable learners. It is inconceivable that they are expected to provide psychosocial support when they are also in dire need of it (Beausaert et al., 2023). Children and young people living in areas of high poverty, abuse vulnerability and violence may be exposed and show to poor mental health and may require additional resources and necessary skills to transition to adulthood (Laurenzi et al. ,2024). Teachers are expected to be the additional resources for providing requisite skills and knowledge for developing and driving school-based psychosocial support programmes for learners (Seekles et al., 2023). Teachers also have special attachment to their learners and become emotionally involved if their parents get infected, sick or die, which happened during the coronavirus. Teachers also worry much about their colleagues. News of colleagues getting infected, sick, or dying induced stress and anxiety (Page et al., 2021; Mellon, 2022).

Teachers also bemoan the dysfunctionality of Guidance and Counselling in schools (Lephoto & Hlalele, 2021). They are expected to do more than delivering the set curriculum, but also deal with counselling for learners, for which they may have no specialised training. They have little or no supportive systems to carry out their core work of delivering the curriculum, not to mention the extra demand of providing psychosocial needs to learners and their colleagues. Everyday teachers

grapple with a variety of issues in their work environment which have stressful impact on their own lives. Teachers need to be capacitated and supported so they can be a reliable support system for learners and for each other. However, professional development for them is not catered for, especially in rural areas (Yu & Xianzhong, 2024). According to Du Plessis & Mestry (2019, p. 2) “rural teachers often have less access to support services, and fewer opportunities to attend in-service courses”.

Teaching is a stressful profession that becomes even more difficult without proper psychosocial support (Yu & Xianzhong, 2024). The role of a teacher is more than delivering of the curriculum. It even goes beyond the walls of a classroom. In rural learning ecologies, teachers are looked up to by members of the community since they are usually the most educated in a given rural catchment (Liu, 2023). These expectations and demands put stress on teachers and they find themselves psychologically burdened. Such extra responsibilities or expectations lead to emotional depletion on them (Thomas et al., 2021; Hadi et al., 2009).

The advent of the coronavirus brought added and urgent need for psychosocial support for teachers in rural learning ecologies (Green & Reid, 2021; Rangasami et al., 2024). At the fall of 2020 when the coronavirus was at its pick, I also contracted the virus while I was at the external marking center for TVET Colleges end of year examinations. I was very sick and narrowly escaped death. I did not receive any psychosocial support from the college. While I was battling for my life, I also received a letter of termination of my work contract. The college was downsizing staff for the following year as they were planning for online dominated teaching mode (Westvik, 2024). I lost income and livelihood. I spend most of my time at a rural village taking care of my elderly and sickly parents. My father had also been on my medical aid when I was working.

Doing this study gave me a purpose. It provided some psychosocial support as I continually tried to understand this global phenomenon and to make meaning of my own circumstances and experiences. I did this study mainly online. The rural ostracisation due to systemic disenfranchisement made it difficult. The internet connectivity was very poor. Sometimes there was no connection for up to ten days. Sometimes, I had to climb the mountain to get connectivity to download study material and get feedback from my study supervisor. I was unemployed due to

the coronavirus. I had to self-motivate for resilience and self-efficacy. It explains the rationale to do this study.

1.5 Focus and purpose of the study

1.5.1 Focus of the Study

The study focuses mainly on psychosocial support provided (or not) to teachers in rural areas during the coronavirus pandemic. The first focus is on the exploration of the psychosocial support as a phenomenon. The second focus is on the rural conditions as the contextual framework forming part of the psychosocial domain (Green & Reid, 2021). The third focus is to locate or frame the study within the coronavirus conditions, yet projecting the effects (repercussions and lessons) beyond the pandemic. Teachers in rural areas face psychological and social impediments every day. The impediments they encounter daily were aggravated by the coronavirus pandemic (Khatoony & Nezhadmehr, 2020). As a result of the psychological barriers experienced by teachers, some end up frequenting mental health services. The psychological pressures due to their work stressors worsened during the pandemic (Pressley, 2021).

The coronavirus pandemic affected all spheres of life but with added severity in rural areas due to marginalisation (Dube, 2020). The psychosocial support systems for teachers in rural areas are scarce or non-existent (Ozamiz-Etxebarria et al., 2021). This causes the onset of burnout and low morale because of feelings of helplessness (Reich et al., 2020). Their stressors emanate from all spheres of their encounter, responsibility, and accountability. They stem from learners, parents, community, as well as the Department of Education. Teachers are required to learn new ways of teaching as frequently as every year, including revised teaching programs and new technology software. This was a lived reality during the coronavirus pandemic (Koch, 2022).

The insurgence of the coronavirus induced high levels of fear and uncertainty among teachers in rural learning ecologies, and the resulting anxiety and depression impacted negatively on their psychological wellbeing, as well as effectiveness in their work due to low levels of motivation, low self-esteem, and low self-efficacy (Koch, 2022). According to Aliakbari et al. (2020, p.11), “mental health means emotional and psychological health in which one can use one’s thinking and

abilities, have a function in the community, and fulfil the usual needs of everyday life”. A school is a microcosm of community and society (Manjari, 2021; Joseph et al., 2024).

Many problems that manifest in schools are community-borne and inherent. They affect, not only teachers, but also all members of the society, directly and indirectly affecting even parents. Parents seem to have no answers to these socio-educational challenges and, at times, leave everything up to teachers (Gumapac et al., 2021). Teachers in rural areas cannot shoulder the burdens they are expected to carry. This leaves them feeling overwhelmed and exposed to emotional strain and exhaustion (Mellins & Malee, 2013).

The first objective of this research project is the exploration of the psychosocial support systems for teachers in rural learning ecologies so they can wade off mental and psychological challenges. They need psychosocial support so they can deliver on the mandate of education. They may need to understand the psychosocial support and use that understanding to improve the state of their mental health as well psychosocial wellbeing, this can help to address the barriers frustrating the delivery of this essential education (Granziera et al., 2021; Liu, 2023). This objective may be achieved by many means for teachers in general. This study sought to achieve that objective by addressing the questions, How can teachers in rural areas be supported psychosocially to improve their mental health and wellbeing, as well as to remove or minimise their work impediments due to the coronavirus pandemic?

It was important to locate where psychosocial support is needed, how its understanding and actualisation could be achieved for these teachers. Research has found that the collaboration of stakeholders in education can provide formidable psychosocial support systems for learners (Ndlovu, 2019). It is possible to imagine a rural learning ecology where teachers' psychological wellbeing is promoted through collaboration of stakeholders (Granziera et al., 2021). The stakeholders would include those in education and in other social institutions and government departments such as Department of Health, Department of Police, and others. Such collaborations can enhance the capacity and scope of their services (Ozamiz-Etxebarria et al., 2021; Hlalele & Mosia, 2020).

I contend that collaborative psychosocial support can help teachers in rural learning ecologies, for their own sake and for the sake of learners as well as for enhancement of the community as a whole. The knowledge and resilience gained will help to push back the frontiers of social pathologies. This project sought to explore and enhance psychosocial support systems towards the edification of teachers during the coronavirus pandemic. (Manjari, 2021; Cooperrider & Fry, 2020).

1.5.2 Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to explore the need, importance, availability, and impact of psychosocial support for teachers in rural learning ecologies during the coronavirus pandemic and beyond. The secondary purpose was to lobby, advocate, and facilitate psychosocial support and empowerment for teachers affected by the coronavirus pandemic (Kramer et al., 2022; Rangasami et al., 2024). The aim was to build teachers' psychosocial well-being post coronavirus pandemic (Reutter et al., 2024). Part of the secondary purpose was to empower the participants to imagine and achieve a better future. Appreciative inquiry, as the theoretical framework of the study (discussed in chapter three), does not only collect data, but is emancipatory in that it seeks to change the status quo (Armstrong et al., 2020).

The study explored how the pandemic shaped the teachers' understanding of their circumstances and how they used the understanding and experience to shape their future and that of others. The purpose of this study, as alluded in above section, was not limited to collecting research data and making findings, but to encourage the participants to get over the victim mentality and use the gained resilience to foster a positive future for themselves, regardless of their past or current situations. It is for that reason that the study adopted appreciative inquiry as the framework for the study. Exploring their understanding within the realm of appreciative inquiry will help make meaning of their situation. Appreciation of the nature and magnitude of the situation is not enough or helpful if people cannot imagine a way out of that situation. Zhou & Zao (2020) found that when teachers received increased social support from one another, they built positive interpersonal relationships which helped them to satisfy their need for belonging and relatedness.

The support helped them to better understand themselves and their situations, as they opened up and freely shared their experiences and emotional feelings with others (Liu et al., 2016). Increased interpersonal relationships also helped in discussions around the pandemic, with the aim to reconstruct their understanding and create new meaning. The new meaning brought about new perspectives that enabled an individual to glean positive things from the adversity. The purpose of the appreciative inquiry process was to help individuals imagine a future despite the present calamity. To encourage us to see light out of the gloom, the study asked positive reflective questions about teachers' preparedness to face the challenges of the coronavirus pandemic. I explored, among other things, whether they received any psychosocial support during the pandemic.

Psychosocial support provides the encouragement to see hope. The study explored whether teachers in rural learning ecologies received any psychosocial support during the coronavirus pandemic to help them better understand their situation. Psychosocial support comes in many forms. It can come as motivation, counselling, or provision of resources to support livelihood. The study explored what kind of support teachers received and from whom. This exercise helped participants to recognise all possible resources. It is hoped that engaging in this study would lead to psychosocial support benefits and personal empowerment to forge a better future. The understanding and coordination of stakeholders is central to appreciative inquiry.

The study also explored the involvement of relevant stakeholders such as the school governing bodies (SGBs), the school management teams (SMTs), the school-based support teams (SBSTs), and the district-based support teams (DBSTs) from the Department of Basic Education in rendering psychosocial support for teachers in rural areas. It also explored the impact of targeted training and induction programmes for novice teachers as well as in-service psychosocial support for serving teachers in rural learning ecologies (Rangasami et al., 2024). The study also sought to explore community involvement through various community organisations. “Psychosocial crisis prevention and intervention models should be urgently developed by the government, health care personnel and other stakeholders” (Dubey, 2020, p.784) including education department from policy level to implementation level.

The teacher participants in my master's thesis lamented inadequate preparedness in their professional training as teachers and the lack of ongoing psychosocial support when they were confronted with the realities that demanded their expertise. They felt they could have been better capacitated as beginners and better supported as serving teachers. A caregiver participant who is a formally trained counsellor in an orphanage of children mostly living with deafness and various other vulnerabilities made an assertion teachers were lacking when it came to student counselling. He added, "...Even the Life Orientation teachers only teach for examinations rather than for life". This observation by the caregiver, together with teachers' own confessions of helplessness, necessitate further exploration, especially during the coronavirus pandemic. Guided by the integrated theoretical framework of the principles psychosocial support and appreciative inquiry, the study highlighted psychosocial support strengths from which the teachers in rural areas could gain a better perspective and understanding of their situation, so they can to forge a better future for their learners and for themselves (Rangasami et al., 2024; Munyanyo & Simuja, 2024).

1.6 Objectives and Research Questions

1.6.1 Objectives

- 1.6.1.1 To explore teachers' understanding of their psychosocial support in the rural learning ecologies during the coronavirus pandemic.
- 1.6.1.2 To explore how teachers' understanding of psychosocial support systems can shape their perspectives and future.
- 1.6.1.3 To understand why psychosocial support for teachers in rural learning ecologies during the coronavirus pandemic must be shaped in particular ways.

1.6.2 Research Questions

- 1.6.2.1 What was the teachers' understanding of their psychosocial support in rural learning ecologies during the coronavirus pandemic?
- 1.6.2.2 How can the teachers' understanding of their psychosocial support during the coronavirus pandemic change their perspectives and future?

1.6.2.3 Why must psychosocial support for teachers in rural learning ecologies during the coronavirus pandemic be shaped in particular ways?

1.7 Clarification of Key Concepts

1.7.1 Psychosocial: Psychosocial is the relationship, influence, and interaction between psychological and social dimension aspects of a person's life (Kaljee et al., 2017).

1.7.2 Psychosocial Support: An ongoing process of meeting psychological and social needs of an individual or a community with the aim to uplift from distress. (Mapasela et al. 2012). Psychosocial crisis prevention and intervention strategies by the government, health care personnel and other stakeholders (Dubey, 2020). Psychosocial support provides context conducive to promoting psychosocial wellbeing, interpersonal skills, preventing and treating psychological disorders due to a crisis or disaster (Bhadra, 2022; Mallarangan et al., 2024; Makhalemele & Nel, 2021).

1.7.3 Learning ecology: A learning ecology is a set of contexts found in physical or virtual learning spaces that provide opportunities for learning (Mapasela et al., 2012; Normak et al., 2012; Myende & Hlalele, 2018; Padilla, et al., 2021; Nonaka et al., 2024; Adolph, 2020)

1.7.4 Rurality: Traditionally defined with reference to geographical location, non-urban, and farming practicing communities (Halfacree, 1993; Cloke, 2006), synonymous to observable underdevelopment, marginalization, and poverty (Hlalele, 2014), yet more rural dynamics keep changing with socio-cultural transitions from traditional indicators such as observable population density, socioeconomic status, infrastructure development and technological innovations (Nelson et al., 2021). more recently, definitions include the psychological contextual framework of rurality as forming part of the psychosocial domain (Green & Reid, 2021; Yu & Xianzhong, 2024; Welsh, 2024).

1.7.5 Program: In this project, the concept of program refers to a broader scale syllabus or collection of many learning activities.

1.7.6 Programme: Specific or individual activities or sessions within a program.

1.8 Research design

The research design for this study is appreciative inquiry (AI). AI is used with the descriptive phenomenological study design to reveal the unique experiences of individuals. Descriptive phenomenological design is especially useful where there is little existing research work on the subject or phenomenon (Subasinghe & Pathirana, 2022). The AI design process works to explore an individual's lived experience. The participants were engaged in generative group discussions. The descriptive phenomenological design is a situational study of a phenomenon. Historically, phenomenology stems from philosophical thinking and writings of German mathematician Edmund Husserl (1859-1938). Phenomenology is not only about the procedures of a research design, but also has a philosophical dimension (Lichtman, 2013; Creswell & Poth, 2016). It is a philosophical belief and principle that solutions to problems can be found, and that situations can be improved through description and analysis (Lichtman, 2013). It is naturalistic as it endeavours to get the data without manipulation or disturbance of the ecology (Zadok-Gurman et al., 2021).

1.9 Synopsis of Methodology

1.9.1 Research approach

The study assumes a qualitative research approach. This is the process of generating empirical data involving discursive strategic stages. A qualitative approach allows for in-depth probing through open-ended questions and generative discussions. Appreciative inquiry process was adopted to direct the qualitative study. As a type of action research, it can change the status quo. Armstrong et al. (2020) says "Appreciative Inquiry (AI) is a well-documented approach to helping individuals and systems move from a deficit-based paradigm to a strengths-based perspective" (p.2). This strength-based approach teaches us new ways of appropriating new skills and creating new existence in an altered reality. Appreciative inquiry provides a strategically unique methodological

process to engage participants so that they, inter-subjectively recreate their world (Bushe & Marshak, 2016).

This is a qualitative phenomenological study. (The descriptive phenomenology is deployed to describe the phenomenon of psychosocial support. (Subasinghe & Pathirana, 2022; Leigh-Osroosh, 2021) It is an inquiry for understanding the phenomenon being studied and generating knowledge (Ataro, 2020; Aspers & Corte, 2019). Ataro (2020, p. 20) says “methodology is the strategy, plan of action, process or design lying behind the choice and use of particular methods and linking the choice and use of the methods to the desired outcomes”. Methodology is discussed in greater detail in chapter four.

1.9.2 Research design

The research design adopted is the appreciative inquiry design. AI process engages descriptive phenomenological (Castillo & Barrameda, 2024) to explore lived experiences to get to a description or interpretation of the meaning of the phenomenon (Padilla-Díaz, 2015). Phenomenological design is applicable in qualitative investigations, and serves to describe the richness of content in human complex functioning and dynamisms (Padilla-Díaz, 2015).

1.9.3 The paradigm of the study

The Paradigm of the study is the critical paradigm (CP). The critical paradigm is inspired by Marxist thinking (Rodríguez, 2021). It concerns itself with social justice issues and interpretation of social issues with a view to emancipating the oppressed (Scotland, 2012). It was adopted by the Frankfurt thinkers, for its emancipatory properties but without the dogmatic Marxist radicalism (Rodríguez, 2021). This positions it for empowerment of participants without being overly obsessed with blaming the authorities. The strong participatory tenets of the critical paradigm also sought to do away with bureaucratic power of the researcher as the superior knower. It is designed and orientated to bring about change and transformation rather than merely exploring and leaving the status quo unchanged. Within the critical paradigm, there is a development of empowerment strategies (Scotland, 2012). In the critical paradigm, the researcher assumes a subjective role and, together with the participants, makes use of their lived experiences to make meaning of the phenomenon and its implications in life.

The critical paradigm promotes advocacy and capacity-building for participants, not only to understand, but also to deal with their situation (Olle, 2018). The privilege and possible superiority complex of the researcher is kept in check so as not to stifle the voice of the participant in knowledge creation (Scotland, 2012). Epistemologically, in the critical paradigm the knowledge is intersubjectively constructed by people in a social context (Scotland, 2012). Also important to acknowledgement and respect cultural influences in the creation of such knowledge (Mihas, 2019; Khanlou & Wray, 2014). Due consideration is observed and given to culture as a way of doing things and solving problems.

Culture is intertwined with indigenous knowledge systems existing in the community (Hlalele, 2019). In this study, the critical paradigm helped to empower emancipation initiatives for teachers in the rural areas at different stages or levels. Participants fully engage in all methodological engagements, as they are assisted to make sense of the situation through psychosocial support within the appreciative inquiry, thereby empowered to re- create their reality. Generative conversations emanating from brainstorming, discussions, and dialogues that yielded data for the study (Bushe & Marshak, 2015; Slavik, 2021).

Generative conversations will be engaged in the 5D iterative cycle of appreciative inquiry design.

1.9.5 Selection of Participants

Participants are selected according to appreciative inquiry process and methodology. A group of sixteen participants comprising school management team (SMT) members and district office-based officials was selected. The participants were purposively selected given of their first-hand experience in working in education sector, especially during the coronavirus pandemic and in rural learning ecologies (Noon, 2018). In appreciative inquiry, selection of participants involves forming a group to attend the appreciative inquiry summit (AIS). The group comprised sixteen teachers and education officials (including principals or members of SMT, members of School

Based Support Team (SBSTs), members of District Based Support Teams (DBSTs), Special Needs Education Services (SNES) from Pinetown District, and other teachers from selected rural schools in KwaZulu-Natal. This was to make sure that the selected participants represented hierarchical tiers in the department to cover most views and attitudes to achieve data saturation (Theofanidis & Fountouki, 2018). The selection of participants will be discussed in greater detail in chapter four.

1.9.6 Data analysis methods

The descriptive phenomenological method for data analysis was employed (Morrow et al., 2015). This process involved the description, verification, and refining of the emerging codes. Patterns were identified as they emerged from the data generated (Chang & Wang, 2021; Skea & Cert, 2016). Data generated from generative conversations produced in the appreciative inquiry summit and individual interviews were analysed using Colaizzi's (1978) descriptive phenomenological method for data analysis, *annexure*.

Data analysis methods are further discussed in greater detail in chapter four.

1.10 Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness ensures the rigour and quality of the study. The Four-Dimensional criteria were applied to maintain trustworthiness (Forero et al., 2018). Transferability is assured by giving adequate contextual information about the demographic setting of the study, sampling strategies, and the sample size, as well as the interview procedure. One of the criteria for ensuring trustworthiness of the study is the construct of dependability. According to Watts & Finkenstaedt-Quinn, (2021) dependability and reliability are both concerned with the consistency of the research process, adding to quality of the study. Dependability is improved by monitoring the process followed by the study from research design to findings, whether it meets the criteria of a rigorous methodology process, including data generation and use of data in interpretation.

Participants selection procedure, data generation methods used and the natural context description, all ensured credibility of the study. The credibility of data was also enhanced by adopting triangulation of data generation methods, for confluence of data strength (Bowen, 2009). The data

generation methods are individual interviews as well as AIS engagements, as alluded to in the sampling section above. The research contexts were fully described to enhance transferability. This was done so that the results could be applied to similar contexts (Creswell & Poth, 2016). Trustworthiness is further discussed in chapter four.

1.11 Limitations of the study

Limitations are elements and conditions of the study which a researcher may have no control over. The limitations, arising from the methodology of the study should be declared to improve the validity of the study. These limitations may also be affected by the context of the study, sampling and the composition or representiveness and the number of participants, as well as such things as language barriers etc. Also important are delimitations or research boundaries determined by the researcher which should also be mentioned (Jorgensen, 2015). Power issues involved in an appreciative inquiry practice will be declared and described. The limitations are elements and conditions of the study which I had no control over. The study is confined to the rural learning ecologies context in the KZN province, yet the literature review draws similarities and inferences from a context outside those boundaries. Some of the findings from the literature review papers and in the findings of this research may be represented as facts when they are actually mere suggestions. Limitations for this study are mentioned in chapter four.

1.12 Delimitations of the study

Jorgensen (2015) accentuates the importance of delimitations or research boundaries to be determined by the researcher, which should also be declared. Declaring delimitations and assumptions will improve the quality of the findings and the interpretation of the evidence presented (Theofanidis & Fountouki, 2018). The boundaries of this research design include those suggested by the research design, which is the appreciative inquiry. The appreciative inquiry theoretical framework may require some level of motivation before the participants can focus on their strengths. The engagement of participants may affect their attitudes. That change may translate as positive empowerment for them. Aspects of sampling context also need to be defined. Delimitations of the study are discussed further in chapter four.

1.13 Ethical Considerations

Researchers have an obligation to ethical conduct in their practice. The coronavirus pandemic has brought added ethical consideration in doing research. The new social distancing regulations means that all interactions have to be done with necessary precautions (Newman et al., 2021). This calls for special and careful planning, execution, and ongoing evaluation of adherence to prescribed protocols as part of research ethics during the pandemic. Participants' rights to safety were respected. This included respecting their rights not to divulge their status if they mentioned being infected with the virus. Their identity would be protected. Their real names were not used anywhere in the study, but pseudo-names were used. Traditional protocols and regulations prescribed by the university research committee were adhered to. Gatekeeper permissions from the Department of Basic Education (DBE) and school principals were secured (Elkayal et al., 2020). Ethical considerations are further discussed in chapter four.

1.14 Arrangement of chapters

The study consists of seven chapters.:

Chapter one is the introductory chapter. It provided the layout of the study. It introduced and set the tone for the study.

Chapter two is the literature review chapter. The focus of the literature review is the psychosocial support for teachers in rural areas during the coronavirus pandemic.

Chapter three presents the theoretical framework that underpins the study. Appreciative inquiry forms part of the theoretical framework for this study. It was chosen because of its emancipatory principles. Chapter four outlines the methodology, including research design and the paradigm.

Chapter five presents data presentation and data analysis. Ten participants took place in the interviews as well as in the four-day Appreciative Inquiry Summit (AIS). Data was well saturated and allowed for generous selection of parts that were most relevant in the description of the phenomenon psychosocial support. The psychosocial domain as well as the concept of rurality were fully described. The data showed a significant change of attitude of the participants as they

were urged to focus on their social potential. Descriptive phenomenological analysis will be used to distill the data corpus. Chapter six presents the findings and the discussion of the findings. Chapter seven presents summary, chapter synthesis and recommendations.

1.15 Chapter synthesis

Chapter one presented the introduction to the study starting from the background of the study to the rationale, and the rationale behind the study. A brief discussion of the literature review, theoretical framework, and methodology was done. The methodology synopsis included the paradigm of the study, research design, participants' selection and composition, as well as data generation methods, process, and analysis. The trustworthiness of the study was also discussed to ensure the rigor and credibility of the study.

CHAPTER TWO

2. REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

2.1 Introduction

This chapter reviews related literature on psychosocial support for teachers in rural learning ecologies during the coronavirus pandemic. Special attention is given to the constructs or phenomenology of psychosocial support, rurality of the learning ecologies, the prevalence and the impact of the coronavirus pandemic. Much time is dedicated to the concept of psychosocial support as a phenomenon. I also review the collision between psychological capital and social capital. The literature review expands the background laid in chapter one. The chapter is dedicated to the examination of relevant literature on the topic in support or contrary to the hypothetical assertions made in chapter one.

Previous research on the phenomenon under study is reviewed as a baseline assessment exercise to appraise the current situation and interrogate previous findings on the subject. New developments are explored, starting from the international level and zooming into local trends to get a holistic picture. The literature review gave an indication of what to expect in this study. I kept an open mind in case I found results contrary to the trends. I endeavored to discuss any idea, facts, or knowledge against the initial hypothesis. Because this study is in the discipline of educational psychology, it explores psychological concepts applicable to the study.

I distinguish between two objectives of reviewing of literature. Such reviewing may be done to expose gaps in the available or published literature or it can develop and broaden understanding of the phenomenon and further ‘provoke thinking’. In the literature review a researcher considers work done in support arguments for, as well as opinions against, their hypothesis. This is described as an “ongoing hermeneutic (the art of interpretation and understanding of human behaviour) process of developing understanding” (Maxwell et al., 2020, p.7). The significance of hermeneutic process in research is to provoke thinking (Boell & Cecez-Kecmanovic, 2014). The study endeavored to interpret and understand the behaviour and functioning of teachers impacted by the coronavirus pandemic. The goal was not limited to the researcher’s understanding but to bring

teachers to an understanding of their own situation. Furthermore, the study sought to investigate the psychosocial support provided to alleviate the teachers' situation.

2.2 The coronavirus pandemic

Covid 19 originated from a city of China called Wuhan in 2019. This severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2), causing the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) (Anger et al., 2024), rapidly spread throughout the world. The World Health Organization (WHO) declared it a global pandemic in March 2020. All countries were thrown into a panic mode (Subasinghe & Pathiranage, 2022). Hundreds of deaths soon became thousands and millions. Globally, 607,497,755 infection cases and 6,492,948 deaths were recorded by August 2022 (Sinha & Maiti, 2024; Cheema et al., 2024). The escalation of insurgence and deaths called for extreme measures to tame the wild and ferocious disease (WHO, 2020).

Medical science had to come up with strategies to protect the citizens of the world from the infections and deaths (Stankovska et al., 2020). They found that the infections occurred through transmission of small air-borne droplets from person to person in close proximity as they cough or even had physical contact. The air-borne droplets thrived under certain conditions such as indoor temperature, relative humidity, and other environmental conditions. The other environmental conditions refer to indoor confined spaces increasing transmission rate and lifespan of droplets from respiration, talking and sneezing (Bahramian, 2023; Reimers, 2021; Sinha & Maiti, 2024). Hence, there were regulations imposed prohibiting physical contact and widening distance between persons to curb the invisible monster. The social distancing protocols made it difficult for normal schooling as school is normally a crowded space (Dube, 2020). The lockdown measures meant that teachers and learners could not go to school (Kundu & Bej, 2021).

Teachers were already faced with many challenges even before the pandemic. It is reported that more teachers leave the profession than are newly recruited, especially in rural learning ecologies (Mapasela et al., 2012; Li et al., 2020). The exodus has been due to a variety of challenges like low salaries, low job satisfaction, and lack of support from other stakeholders (Robinson et al., 2023). The teacher exodus problems are compounded in rural learning ecologies as teachers leave

rural hardships (Green & Reid, 2021) and less career development opportunities (Anderson, 2022). As a result, there are always less experienced teachers in the rural learning ecologies. Learners are deprived of experienced teacher expertise, and novice teachers face trying conditions with less psychosocial support from veterans. Recent studies have found that the coronavirus added to the problem of teacher retention and increased the attrition rate (Coberly, 2023; White, 2024).

The coronavirus thrives where there are other health and social comorbidities and in socioeconomic under-development like in rural learning ecologies (Hashim et al., 2020; Fukuda & Fukuda, 2022). The coronavirus pandemic exacerbated teacher attrition (Devers et al., 2024; Ineye-Briggs, 2024), directly and indirectly. Indirectly, it was a catalyst for other comorbid diseases causing the death of many teachers. It indirectly gave rise to secondary stress-induced illnesses such as High Blood Pressure (HBP), hypertension, mental disorders, and even escalated to psychosis (Loch et al., 2022). However, psychosis affected urban more than rural citizens (Pereira-Sanchez et al., 2020). Stress-induced illnesses are difficult or even impossible to reverse. Psychosocial support interventions are vital to relieve the stress before it escalates to irreversible disorders and deadly pathologies (Dzinamarira et al., 2024). It is medically supported by research that stress is the cause of many illnesses, including severe mental health illnesses (Somashekar et al., 2020).

There are adverse work conditions associated with, and unique to, rural learning ecologies which are causal factors to poor mental health (Vidyalakshmi, 2022). Such rural conditions include geographical isolation and perceived or rural marginalisation (Hlalele & Mosia, 2020). This marginalisation means little professional development and even less research data available to appraise any development of rural teachers (Hu et al., 2021; Karadimou, 2022). The outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic aggravated the disenfranchisement of rural learning ecologies (Mahaye, 2020). This heightened the urgency for researchers to explore psychosocial coping strategies for teachers in rural learning ecologies (Fakuda & Fakuda, 2022; Reich et al., 2020).

The impact of the house confinement measures was psychologically far-reaching, especially in rural learning ecologies (Munyanyo & Simuja, 2024). The lockdown measures affected schooling negatively on a large scale. Schools were closed for a long time which disrupted teaching and

learning (UNESCO, 2020). Learners not attending schools for extended period may have their academic achievement negatively affected. This contributed to higher school dropout statistics when dropout rates were already at unacceptable levels (Wills & van der Berg, 2024; UNESCO, 1994). It was reported by the South African Department of Basic Education (DBE, 2021) that a worrying number cohort of learners did not come back to school after the lockdown (Li et al., 2021; Sosu & Klein, 2021; Ager et al., 2024).

Many teachers did not come back due to sickness, fear, mental health issues, or death (Kumwenda, 2024). While there is not much literature on teacher mental health problems (Cheema et al., 2024), research has found a myriad of mental health issues and associated conditions in learners. These include stress-related sicknesses, anxiety, depression, conduct disorders and mood swings, stomach/ eating/ sleeping disorders, feelings of loneliness, suicidal ideations or attempts, and grief (Pillay, 2023; Buckley et al., 2024). Kim (2024) corroborates the finding that sleep deprivation may cause suicidal ideations in adults.

During the lockdown, the rise in child abuse and gender-based violence (GBV) cases was reported (Kourti et al., 2023). The issue of children exposed to GBV was one of teachers' many worries during the coronavirus. Schools are safe havens for children so they do not have to spend long hours in unsafe environments that characterise many dysfunctional homes (Nldovu, 2019; Sen & Narula, 2024). In rural farming communities, some children are forced into child labour due to socioeconomic hardships (Khalid et al., 2024).

The movement restrictions and the resulting home confinement during the lockdown created many health concerns for teachers, including psychological and physical issues (Subasinghe & Pathirana, 2022). Lockdown negatively impacted the mental health of teachers and reduced the emotional well-being of teachers and communities, who reportedly experienced somatic difficulties due to increased frequency, and spending time on electronic devices' screen. They cited feelings of stress due to spending more time doing schoolwork online (Subasinghe & Pathirana, 2022), hence, the need for psychosocial interventions and mutual support (Lephoto & Hlalele,

2021; Cooley et al., 2021). Many studies including (Collie, 2021; Sindhya, 2022) found that the pandemic effects were rife in different locations because of social inequalities.

There were more concerns for teachers when schools eventually re-opened (Wang, 2024). Teachers were incessantly bombarded with disinformation from all media sources (Ameen & Faye, 2024), and information avalanche increased confusion, fear, and uncertainty (Cheema et al., 2024). Still under a cloud of uncertainty, the DBE coerced teachers to go back to school to save the academic year. The teacher unions protested, blaming the employer for prioritising the curriculum over the lives of teachers (Hemphill & Marianno, 2021). Teachers also had to deal with psychologically unstable learners. Learners presented with added problems that were both behavioural and academic (Kramer et al., 2022; Marionno et al., 2022; Dlamini & Zulu, 2024).

All these challenges presented psychological burdens for teachers in rural learning ecologies. There was unrelenting acute stress in every classroom (Huang et al., 2020). Learners came with the baggage of burdens; emotional, physical, and physiological, which became learning barriers. According to Maslow's hierarchy of needs, learners cannot learn before their life-threatening needs are met (Maslow, 1943). The teachers had new roles and added responsibilities. They became caregivers and counsellors who went out of their way to understand how each learner felt. Platoon classes, designed for maintaining social distancing after the lockdown, added more responsibility on already burdened teachers (Wang, 2024). They had to teach the same thing twice (Kramer et al., 2022).

Teachers in rural learning ecologies were exposed to more psychologically distressing factors than those in urban settings (Omokhodion, 2022) due to their marginalisation in the provision of resources (Vidyalakshmi, 2022; Akbana & Dikilitaş, 2022). Structural, health, and educational resources made a huge difference between life and death during the coronavirus pandemic (Pillay, 2021). There was fear, helplessness, stress, and psychological distress for teachers in rural learning ecologies. The psychological distress, anxiety, depression, as well as poverty, which were exacerbated by the coronavirus pandemic, have been blamed for several suicidal tendencies or ideation and even deaths of teachers and students in rural areas during that time (Al-Sabbah, 2021; Munyanyo & Simuja, 2024). Many factors worsened the impact of the pandemic on schooling

(Wills & van der Berg, 2024). Factors like socioeconomic hardships (Mahaye, 2020) and geographical isolation (Vidyalakshmi, 2022; Hu et al., 2021) gave the coronavirus impetus in rural learning ecologies (Shifa et al., 2022). Research in Scotland, post-lockdown (Sosu & Klein, 2021), found increased absenteeism among pupils from low socioeconomic communities. Li et al., (2021) found similar results for rural communities in China (Anakpo et al., 2024; Cheema et al., 2024).

These measures brought by the pandemic called for blended teaching and learning, whereas “access to blended learning by rural teachers is inadequate and of less beneficial to the students” (Ajani & Gamede, 2021, p.598) due to deficiencies in teaching and learning skills (Aditya, 2021). This inadequacy and frustration from not being able to fulfill their mandate negatively affected teachers psychologically (Mellon, 2022). The need for psychosocial support for teachers became vital. South Africa, a developing, largely rural country beset with poverty, was not spared from these realities faced by teachers. The South African Schools Act (DoE, 1996, p.1) had envisaged "the eradication of poverty and the economic wellbeing of society, protect and advance our diverse cultures and languages, uphold the rights of all learners, parents, and educators." This ideal has remained a moving target for over three decades. The coronavirus exposed, compounded, and exacerbated the dire socioeconomic realities.

The education White Paper 6 (DoE, 2001, p.1) regards education as “...the cornerstone of any modern, democratic society that aims to give all citizens a fair start in life and equal opportunities as adults”. Education plays a critical role in the attainment of socioeconomic rights such as employment, which provides access to food, and proper housing. The coronavirus pandemic added to the high unemployment as many businesses closed during the national lockdown (Shifa et al., 2022). The lockdown, not only flattened the disease prevalence curve, but also caused the unemployment curve to skyrocket (Armstrong et al., 2020). The pandemic caused a disruptive psychosocial and socioeconomic viability and sustainability, calling for equally aggressive measures of psychosocial interventions to address the psychological, social, physical, and economic challenges affecting teachers’ wellbeing (Armstrong et al., 2020; Mellon, 2022).

The impact of the pandemic further exposed the inequalities in South African society and schools (Wills & van der Berg, 2024). “It might be regarded as somewhat of a watershed moment; it was

no longer possible for the state to conceal the extent of the deprivation that exists in the education system” (Maistry, 2022, p.3). The deprivation is evident in the skewness of infrastructure provision. Further, these disparities expose a lack of regard for, and adherence to, the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa (RSA, Act No 108 of 1996) and the implementation of its values and dictates through the South African Schools Act (RSA, Act No 84 of 1996 (35)), which states that “Subject to the Constitution and this Act, the Minister must determine norms and minimum standards for the funding of public schools” (Sefoka, 2022).

The government has been taken to court many times for not delivering on these laws, by the NGO’s lobbying on behalf of the schools and individual children who fell into pit toilets (Veriava & Harding, 2023). While these laws are in place to protect teachers and ensure necessary support and provision, the problem is lack of political will to implement. This political apathy was also criticized (Khanare and de Lange (2017) as an impediment to the democratisation of support and care (Hebinck et al., 2023). Ndlovu, (2019) also found that there was a lack of political awareness in rural communities, hence they did not organise service delivery protests. Lack of service delivery in rural learning ecologies is a travesty to social justice (Maistry, 2022) and is against the constitutional promise and mandate to all the citizens (Constitution of the Republic of South Africa Act 108 of 1996).

According to research (Mahaye, 2020), the South African education system is the fourth most affected by the coronavirus, partly due to schools’ infrastructure backwardness. The same research also pointed to a lack of technology for e-learning in rural learning ecologies (Aruleba & Jere, 2022). More research (Pozo et al., 2021) found that teachers were poorly prepared to use Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) in their teaching where these were available. Integration of ICT into teaching and learning was already long overdue in South Africa. More so for rural learning ecologies (Abedi & Ametepey, 2024).

Rural schools could not supply the requisite digital equipment and so most teachers had to buy devices and data for themselves. Apart from lacking the digital equipment, they lacked proficiency in the use of virtual devices (Padmanabhanunni et al., 2022; Müller & Goldenberg, 2020). Apart scarce supply of ICT equipment, there is also very poor network coverage and access to the

internet. (Onyema et al., 2020, Du Plessis & Mestry, 2019). These dynamics directly impacted the psychological wellness of teachers in rural learning ecologies (Mutesasira & Marongwe, 2024). Teachers in disenfranchised rural areas were reportedly falling into excessive worry and depression (Cooley et al., 2021). They required psychosocial support to re-orientate their psychological functioning (Reimers, 2021; Cheema et al., 2024; Shava & Ndebele, 2024).

The lack of teacher expertise points to absence of teacher in-service training and continual upgrading (Darling-Hammond et al., 2024). Teachers felt unprotected by the Department of Basic Education and by their immediate senior officials (Karadimou, 2022). They experienced unprecedented and overwhelming circumstances during the coronavirus pandemic (Fukude & Fukude, 2022). Reich et al. (2020) mention three main areas where teachers in rural learning ecologies experience challenges; namely, lack of professional development, professional frustration and burnout. Burnout and lack of capacity to regulate personal emotional responses can, over time, lead to depressive symptoms (Sánchez-Pujalte et al., 2023).

These challenges, especially burnout, bring about set back on teachers' self-efficacy (Turner & Garvis, 2023; Sánchez-Pujalte et al., 2023), which is an essential for their belief in themselves and confidence to help learners to believe in themselves. Also for their motivation as teachers as life-long learners to continually upgrade themselves as professionals so they can effectively execute their duties (Pressley, 2021; Gonzalez et al., 1990). The societal imbalances in terms of provision and receipt of psychosocial support means that the circumstances in rural learning ecologies are dire (Dube, 2020; Green & Reid, 2021). All these issues are disposing factors for teacher burnout and work against self-efficacy.

Burnout is defined as a “prolonged response to chronic emotional and interpersonal job stressors; it is characterized by emotional exhaustion, cynicism, and reduced personal accomplishment”. (Turner & Garvis, 2023, p. 3). This feeling of personal non-accomplishment in productivity (Subasinghe & Pathirana, 2022) is a constantly nagging feeling in teacher's subconscious minds. The large cohort of their school leavers roaming the streets, not in training or employment but contributing to poverty and crime statistics (Msweli, 2024) are psychological indictments and antagonistic to teachers' self-efficacy. This situation causes difficulty in upholding teachers' self-

esteem which may cause them to give in to pessimism and burnout (Turner & Garvis, 2023). Burnout contributes to teachers leaving the profession, especially in rural learning ecologies (Reimers, 2021; Devers et al., 2024).

The coronavirus pandemic brought about high levels of psychological distress and impacted adversely on teachers' functioning (Ran et al., 2024). The teaching profession is considered one of the most stressful occupations in the world (Hadi et al., 2009; Du Plessis & Mestry, 2019). It is evident that the coronavirus aggravated teachers' stress and frustrations (Liu, 2023). Research has reported high levels of anxiety and depression among frontline workers and teachers during the coronavirus pandemic (Santomauro, et al., 2021; Huang et al., 2020) The first source of anxiety was the fear of becoming infected, sick, and possibly dying. The secondary psychological distress was brought about lockdown frustration and effects. Apart from inducing psychological stress, the lockdown was a physical barrier to education (Padmanabhanunni et al., 2022; Kumwenda, 2024).

The impact on the teachers directly translated to the impact on teaching and learning. The demands of sudden transitioning to online teaching was an added anxiety to teachers (Rajkhowa & Kumar, 2021; Koch, 2022). They had to up-skill their digital literacy and learn to use technological devices in a short space of time (Aditya, 2021). Research has found that time pressure is one of the stressors in teaching profession, even contributing to emotional exhaustion and career burnout (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2016; Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2020). While anxiety may subside for other frontline workers, teachers still fear the consequences of lost teaching and learning time (Daar & Nasar, 2021; Sánchez-Pujalte et al., 2023).

The challenge of loss of teaching time did not affect teachers in more opulent communities as much, as they were cushioned by the facilities and resources they have (Daar & Nasar, (2021). They quickly switched to e-learning (Karadimou, 2022). Educated parents in the cities assumed home schooling (Flynn et al., 2021), whereas parents in rural learning ecologies found themselves wanting and helpless (Rajkhowa & kumar, 2021). Research (Cruz, et al.,2021) found that, "parents' lack of skills and expertise regarding how to teach their children is one of the most challenging aspects". Teachers and learners in rural settings had no means to acquire the technology for e-learning (Rajkhowa & Kumar, 2021

). The challenges exposed teachers to various mental health issues and depression. These psychological distresses warranted psychosocial support and intervention for teachers (Reich et al., 2020; Mellon, 2022).

2.3 Predisposing factors for teacher mental health

Mental health challenges emanate from a wide range of life issues including exposure to traumatic situations and disasters like pandemics (Leppold & Reifels, 2024; Powell & Knox, 2024). These factors are made worse by a myriad of intersecting social determinants like structural marginalisation (Kirkbride et al., 2024). “These structural conditions include factors such as income, employment, socioeconomic status, education, food security, housing, social support, discrimination, childhood adversity, as well as the neighbourhood social and physical conditions in which people live, and the ability to access acceptable and affordable health care” (Kirkbride et al., 2024, p.59). Mental health refers to emotional and psychological health in which one can use one’s thinking and abilities, function in the family and society, and fulfil personal needs of everyday life (Aliakbari et al., 2020; Mulholland & Parker, 2024).

The inability to provide academic support for their learners was also depressing (Mellon, 2022). Under stressful lockdown and isolation conditions, people cannot freely use their thinking abilities without being distracted by anxiety (Sung, 2022; Aliakbari et al., 2020). Individuals handle stressful situations differently. Studies (Robinson et al, 2023) on teacher stress, anxiety and depression reveal that anxiety, depression, and stress are not homogeneous (Brooks et al., 2024). For many people, anxiety or excessive worry ushers them into a depression where their functioning is completely paralysed (Santamaría et al., 2021; Santomauro et al., 2021).

The coronavirus pandemic affected all spheres of life, but had added severity in rural learning ecologies (Dube, 2020). The psychosocial support systems for teachers in rural learning ecologies are hypothetically scarce or non-existent (Ozamiz-Etxebarria et al., 2021). This leads to low morale because of feeling of helplessness (Reich et al., 2020; Su-Keene & DeMatthews, 2022). Their stressors emanate from all spheres of their social encounter, responsibility, and accountability. Eachers feel they are answerable to everybody; to learners, parents, the community, all the way to the Department of Education. Koch (2022). Teachers are required to learn new ways

of teaching every year. There frequently revised teaching programs and new technology software. This frequent change dynamism became a forced reality during the coronavirus pandemic, which was worsened by the prevalence of other health and social comorbidities and poor socioeconomic development in rural learning ecologies (Hashim et al., 2020; Fukuda & Fukuda, 2022),

Mental health care for teachers in South Africa has not been taken as seriously by the government as it should (Dzinamarira et al., 2024), yet the need is overwhelming (Woudstra et al., 2018). Psychopathology teaches that childhood depression and PTSD can sometimes have a delayed etiology only to manifest as serious mental health issues at an adult stage (Mash & Wolfe, 2012; Burke, 2013). Some teachers from vulnerable communities may carry much psychological burden themselves, starting from their unresolved childhood psychological issues such as poverty, growing up in a violent environment, child neglect, among others (Cheema et al., 2024). With all those unresolved psychological issues for themselves, they are then faced with the burden of mentoring children with psychological issues (Mulholland & Parker, 2024). Teachers also have the burden of dealing with teenage pregnancy which is often blamed on their lack of mentoring and guidance to learners (Ramalepa et al., 2020). There have been reports of learners giving birth in classrooms and school toilets. This is traumatic for teachers as they are not trained to birth-deliver children (Mvune & Bhana, 2023).

There are more challenges and adverse conditions predisposing teachers to low mental well-being (Ran et al., 2024). A teacher in a rural school may come to school only to be told that one of their learners has been abducted and taken into a forced marriage, or three teenage boys have died at a circumcision school or a child's home was swept in a flood. Tomlinson et al., (2022, p.34) note that "humanitarian crises and shocks such as conflict, climate change and pandemics tend to intensify inequalities and highlight the fragility of our support systems." There is a myriad of pre-existing scourges and recurrent disasters such as pandemics that perpetuate vulnerabilities in the lives of teachers (Cheema et al., 2024).

Teachers in rural learning ecologies felt the intensity of the pandemic due to the challenges they are faced with. They are subjected to humanitarian crises referred to by Tomlinson et al. (2022) as coming in many shapes and forms. These include natural disasters due to climate change, which

affect rural areas most because of poor infrastructure. (Leppold & Reifels, 2024). These situations lead to helplessness (Gurefe & Bakalim, 2018). In South Africa, there are many social pathologies at the level of humanitarian crisis proportion (Ntsanwisi, 2024). These include high levels of violence and crime in South Africa (Masekela et al., 2024) which leave many with permanent psychological scars and prone to paranoia, anxiety and depression (Mulholland & Parker, 2024). Even before the outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic, there were already many long-term and underlying health issues in communities (Zimmermann & Curtis, 2020).

Psychosocial support for teachers is vital if they are to navigate these harsh realities (Cheema et al., 2024). Such PSS can begin with a short tutorial on mental health literacy for teachers to recognise and understand mental health so they can organise appropriate psychosocial support (Ely, 2017; Namome et al., 2021). Such literacy would provide knowledge on underlying medical issues that collude with traumatic situations and cause psychological disorders like PTSD (Armstrong et al., 2020). There are short-term and long-term repercussions if there is no immediate intervention and prevention of long-term consequences (Namome et al., 2021).

These psychological underlying issues may affect individuals and well as the society as whole. Psychologically unwell society becomes a breeding ground for many overt social pathologies (Cheema et al., 2024). People need psychosocial interventions to help them come back to normal mental health after a traumatic experience (Mulholland & Parker, 2024). Psychosocial intervention and support is a buffer and psychological resolve that can help people to make meaning of a situation and find closure (Zhang et al., 2022). One of the evils of home confinement or lockdown was that people could not attend funerals of their loved ones, and could not find proper closure on their loss, which had negative psychosocial implications (Armstrong et al., 2020; Ntsanwisi, 2024).

People find closure after proper grieving for their loss (Zhang et al., 2022). The entire humans race lost a variety and multitude of things during the coronavirus pandemic. There was loss of income, loss of hope, and some experienced the ultimate loss of loved ones (Mudenda et al., 2024). Proper grieving with psychosocial support is necessary for regaining healthy psychological functioning (Chokhani et al., 2024). During the coronavirus pandemic, lockdown measures meant that people could not go through proper grieving because of imposed isolation. Psychosocial support also

helps to moderate and regulate the mourning experience and period so that grieving does not reach a psychological tipping over (Fang & Comery, 2024). When bereavement has run its course it gives way to normal living and functioning (Namome et al., 2021; Buckley et al., 2024).

During the coronavirus pandemic, grief episodes would habitually overlap. Before grieving period was over, more deaths took place either of family relative or colleagues (Kumar, 2023). Propensity to chronic and pathological grief escalates to propensity to psychological hyper-arousal and paranoia (Ndlovu, 2016). Hyper-arousal and paranoia relay a vicious cycle of anxiety and depression. Psychosocial support is necessary for getting closure after a significant loss, such as death of a loved one. Counselling and psychosocial support will take a grieving individual through grieving process which is concluded by meaning-making (Breen et al., 2023; Chokhani et al., 2024).

Health issues besetting rural learning ecologies contributed to the poor mental health of teachers (McKay et al., 2024). The coronavirus worsened an already skewed society in terms of health care provision. This means that blacks, the majority of whom are poor, receive inadequate health care and even health education. This was even more skewed on gender lines as women were most affected (Kabeer et al., 2021). Research (Pillay, 2021) has shown that black South Africans are the most infected with aids, and this is directly linked to marginalisation by apartheid and continuing. The economic marginalisation of rural areas forces husbands to leave home and seek work in the cities, putting them in danger of contracting HIV (Jochelson et al., 2020). It was reported that the coronavirus thrives and is more fatal where there are other comorbid opportunists like HIV (Prabhu et al., 2020).

The apartheid legacy lingers on The demographic distribution of services does not favour rural areas where the HIV prevalence is high. Rural communities are in dire need of psychosocial resources and responsive health systems (Núñez-Regueiro et al., 2024). Many other social pathologies are distributed according to apartheid creation of inequality (Heikkinen, Kirsi-Marja et al., 2024). Rural development is virtually nonexistent and the coronavirus has made things worse (Du Plessis & Mestry, 2019). Rural development and improved subsistence farming can help

reduce food insecurity (Khowa et al., 2022). Diseases thrive when there is food scarcity (Hlalele, 2014; Drysdale, 2021).

South African educators are exposed to high levels of violence in society as well as in schools, the school being a microcosm of the sick society. Teachers and learners witness violence almost daily, even on school premises. Many classrooms are a war zone with learners assaulting teachers (Lamula-Mthanti, 2023). There is also the problem of gangsterism in South African schools (Geldenhuys, 2023), especially in the so-called informal settlements. Informal settlements may not be located in deep rural areas but also suffer rural disenfranchisement (Nhambura, 2020; Qwabe et al., 2022). Gang violence is perpetrated largely by school going youth, and mostly affects and kills teenagers. Young children frequently get shot by stray bullets. This is a huge psychosocial crisis for teachers.

While the war in cities is about drug peddling territories, and gang violence. in rural areas the war (*impi yezigodi*) can be caused by issues like stock theft, or wrangles over girlfriends. This is a cause for great concern for teachers and parents as school going youths are involved. The government is trying everything it can to subdue gang violence and reduce the death of children. It has amended the Firearms Control Act no 60 of 2000 in a bid to control the widespread proliferation of illegal guns in the society (Qwabe et al., 2022). Teachers time and again are robbed at gun point in school premises. The Department of Basic Education, through the South African Schools Act of 1996, is also trying to assist schools with a suitable code of conduct to curb the scourge of violence. Almost all the schools in South Africa have security guards at the gate, yet the social ills prevail in schools more than in general society (Masekela et al., 2024).

Another cause for violence is peddling of drugs to school children (Rose et al., 2019). There is a high rate of drug abuse in South Africa, which inevitably leads to substance abuse disorders (Rachel et al., 2022). According to Tomlinson et al. (2022), these disorders were prevalent among teenage patients treated in drug rehabilitation centers in the last semester of 2020 (Dada et al., 2020). The drug peddlers turn the schools into battlefields as they fight for territory to sell their illicit products, even to minor children (Irwin et al., 2022). Teachers are seen as enemies by the violent

and unscrupulous drug lords because they continuously discourage children from taking of drugs. This makes teachers targets of drug lords and they sometimes receive death threats.

Drugs are among the reasons why learners have become violent against teachers (Lamula-Mthanti, 2023). There have been reports of teachers assaulted by learners in school premises (Dlhlamini, 2023). Drug abuse by learners and their mental health problems are among the many reasons cited for learner violence (Makhasane & Majong, 2023). Nobody is protecting teachers against these violent learners. Ironically, the South African Schools Act (Republic of South Africa, 1996) protects learners from corporal punishment, which is a good and progressive thing, but teachers cannot even defend themselves against violent learners attacking them (Rose et al., 2019; Woudstra et al., 2018). The coronavirus outbreak added more responsibility on teachers to exercise discipline on learners, as teachers had to enforce coronavirus preventive protocols on learners who were complacent because they were not at fatal risk because of their age (Zimmermann & Curtis, 2020).

Another predisposing factor for mental health vulnerability for teachers is the issue of socio-economic destitution in rural learning ecologies (Mulholland & Parker, 2024). Pillay (2021) refers to this economic hardship as the ‘slow violence’. With the current unemployment rate, a teacher has to take care of many extended family members (Amusan et al., 2023). This is a burden for many teachers, especially in rural learning ecologies. The DBE gave teachers 0% salary increase, 1% in 2021, and 3% in 2022, whereas the inflation rate was hovering around 7%. The South African Reserve Bank has recently increased the prime lending rate in a bid to curb the rising inflation. High interest rates affect unbudgeted increases on housing and vehicle loans teachers have with banks (Loewald, 2024). The South African government has announced further austerity measures to curb the exorbitant fiscal expenditure (Sachs et al., 2024).

The Department of Treasury observes that salaries of civil servants take a lion’s share of their budget. The government is accused of embarking on “rights-eroding budgetary decisions” that are policy incoherent (Liebenberg, 2021, p.186), which according to Sachs et al. (2024, p. 24) “eroded the credibility, performance, and quality of the fiscal framework.” These economic hardship exacerbates the anxiety and depression levels suffered by teachers (Webb, 2021). It is also a

demoralising factor when they are not adequately remunerated for the challenging work they do whilst the inflation rises unabated (Amusan et al., 2023; Armstrong et al., 2020). Teachers in South Africa also fall into a category called the ‘missing middle’ (Cloete, 2016), which refers to the middle-class professionals who are not eligible for free housing yet they cannot afford houses in decent neighborhoods befitting their level of education (Zungu & Walji, 2024).

Teachers have to choose between owning a house and buying a car. If they take a bond for housing, they cannot afford a loan for a car. Their children are not eligible for student funding by National Student Funding Scheme (NSFAS) and yet they cannot afford tertiary education for their children (Ntombana et al., 2023; Zungu & Walji, 2024). They also have to pay for their own further education and up-skilling, and when they have improved their qualifications, the department does not reward or reimburse them. A PhD in the education sector gets paid the same as a diploma. They get paid less than their equivalent counterparts in private sector with same NQF level qualifications (Regmi, 2022; Feng, 2020). All these factors add to the negativity and pessimism in life and career of teachers, especially in rural learning ecologies and further aggravated by the coronavirus pandemic (Cloete, 2016).

The South African government bemoans the high wage bill and has recently been facing off with labour organisations as it tries to implement austerity measures to ease its fiscal constraints (Sachs et al., 2024). Fiscal confines are stated as the reasons not to hire more teachers, more teachers would significantly reduce the workload and save teachers a myriad of predisposing factors that come with being overworked (Pillay, 2021; Chirinda et al., 2021). Teachers also need the services of other support personnel to support their work so they can exclusively focus on their core duty of teaching. The government is reluctant to provide support staff professionals. Teachers need support of educational psychologists, social workers, and assistant teachers. Schools need cleaners to maintain high level of hygiene to wade off diseases carried by germs and viruses such as the malicious coronavirus pandemic. Educational institutions need security personnel to mitigate the high levels of crime and violence at quintile 1 to 3 schools (Subasinghe & Pathirana, 2022).

Subasinghe and Pathirana (2022, p.172) assert that “Student wellbeing could be positively influenced by improving educator well-being, through interventions such as task sharing that

reduce job demands and increase job resources”. Teachers experience high stress levels associated with the load of their work (Wang, 2024). However, the hiring of ‘Teacher aides’ by the BDE during the coronavirus was welcomed by teachers as it assisted them to cope with their workload. There is even more under-provision of resources, including human resources (Mallarangan et al., 2024) in rural learning ecologies (Du Plessis & Mestry, 2019).

The complication of learners’ psychological problems and the resulting mental health issues unfairly demand that every teacher be a counselling expert in their classroom, which they are not (Beausaert et al., 2023; Fierro et al., 2024). They do not feel equipped to keep up with the overwhelming demands of mental health problems besieging their learners. The psychological burden and helplessness experienced by teachers undermine their ability to respond satisfactorily to learners’ psychological and emotional needs (Gonzalez et al., 1990). This can also affect the teacher-learner emotional interactions and relationships (Fierro et al., 2024). It requires the teacher to be balanced in emotional involvement and emotional intelligence to navigate these psychosocial challenges. This psychological load directly affects the teacher’s psychological well-being.

The outbreak of the coronavirus aggravated the pre-existing predisposing psychosocial factors and vulnerabilities for teachers (Chirinda et al., 2021; Shelke et al., 2022). There are many predisposing factors for rural teacher vulnerability to mental health and psychosocial issues (Mulholland & Parker, 2024). Such predisposing factors include climate change as alluded to in the above paragraphs (Blanco et al., 2024). Climate change is a global phenomenon and a classic example of survival of the fittest at a global scale. The developing countries are at the receiving end of the exploitation of natural resources by the first world countries. It is caused by mining and extraction of fossil oil, gas, and coal. The mining of these gases, coupled with depletion of trees cause carbon emissions (Bekun, 2024). The carbon emissions cause greenhouse gases that destroy the firmament, thereby disturbing natural regulation of climate (Cordero et al., 2020). Rural ecologies find themselves at the extreme end of this marginalisation (Xie et al., 2024).

The effects of the harsh trends of climate change can also contribute to psychosocially predisposing factors for teachers in rural learning ecologies causing what (Bouchard et al., 2023) refer to as ‘psychotraumatology’. Drought and food insecurity in rural communities bring about anxiety for

the future, especially in the face of high rate of unemployment (Amusan et al., 2023). Before teachers in Kwazulu-Natal could make sense of the coronavirus pandemic, the province was struck by devastating floods (Mutambara, 2023). The floods were blamed on the global climate change. The mud school buildings were destroyed. School gardens were eroded. The pit toilets were flooded, and sewer was running all over.

KwaZulu-Natal is largely a rural province (Anekwe et al., 2024). The impact of continued marginalisation and underdevelopment, as well as apartheid inequality, sidelined planning of infrastructure like roads, bridges, and settlement spaces contributing to the consequences of the flooding (Bouchard et al., 2023; Drysdale et al., 2021). Nevertheless, the flood disasters did not cause cholera outbreaks in South Africa as was feared. However, cases of the cholera outbreak were reported in some Southern African countries including rural districts of Zimbabwe and Malawi. The bridges and roads were swept away such that teachers and learners could not reach schools and were cut off from towns where they could get food supplies and other necessities (Amusan et al., 2023).

The death of teenagers in illegal circumcision schools is another source of great concern for teachers. The life of a teacher in rural learning ecologies is exposed to many risk factors for mental health problems. A life subjected to a series of traumatic events (Leppold & Reifels, 2024) leads to hyper arousal and continued fearful state of mind where the person's nervous system struggles to maintain a state of calmness. Such restlessness renders sufferers dysfunctional in most human facets (Allwood et al., 2022; Kira et al., 2022).

2.3. Emotional investment in social media

A study on youth activities during the coronavirus (Moitra & Madan, 2022) found that there was increased depression symptoms among youth due to the fear contracting the coronavirus (Díez González et al., 2024), social isolation, and inadequate or poor quality sleep. Interestingly, studies have found that elongated screen time did not have any bearing on adverse impact on mental health. However, as would be expected, excessive screen time promotes physical inactivity, eating disorders, and consequently health issues among young adults (Moitra & Madan, 2022; Santos et

al., 2024). Adults showed higher prevalence for hyperactivity/impulsivity, anxiety, and depression (Mano, 2020).

The Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR) brought with it a myriad of positive innovations. Research found that teachers relish the possibilities that came with 4IR for convenient communication and teaching & learning enhancement. The blended or mixed methods and platforms provided new possibilities that widened the teaching and learning context (Jogezai et al., 2021). Artificial Intelligence (AI) is another innovation brought by 4IR. The widespread of computer applications to all areas of life is self-evident. In education, there are many applications that advance teaching and learning. Educational psychologists and teachers can now tap into artificial intelligence applications that assist with personalised teaching using personalized learning using specialized education applications. Such artificial intelligence applications can assist every learner to cope as per their learning style and pace (Ahmad et al., 2022; Pratama & Sampelolo, 2023).

Artificial intelligence is set to revolutionise the delivery of education with significant impact. It is already playing a big role in the personalised teaching systems, which have an effect on their teaching and learning (Khosravi et al., 2022). New and advanced teaching innovations like a variety of learning and teaching resources enhanced the possibilities of learning and contexts (Pratama & Sampelolo, 2023). All these-laudable developments are welcome. However, they bring many negative phenomena like cybercrime and cyber bullying. On the flip side of artificial intelligence are many concerns for teachers. Their emotional vexation takes a heavy toll due to widespread reports of children being lured to abuse by internet sexual child predators (Ali & Asif, 2023).

Teachers worry about the computers taking over learners' cognitive exercises and functions such as basic mental arithmetic computations (Vale & Graven, 2023). They are not happy about slang writing, language distortion, and improper language use as propagated by social media. It looks like teachers and educationists need to lobby the computer programmers and app developers to come up with cognitively challenging applications for learners. Most of these technological advancements are still out of reach in some parts of rural South African learning ecologies (Ajani & Gumede, 2021; Aruleba & Jere, 2022). Such falling behind all contribute to negative outlook

for teachers' psychosocial well-being in rural learning ecologies (Liu, 2023; Granziera et al., 2021).

The mass social media came with many negatives (Ameen & Faye, 2024). Social media allows users to create content (Cho et al., 2024), thus lending the platform to misuse and abuse by unscrupulous, immoral, and unethical users. The proliferation of social media illicit products such as fake news and misinformation has been blamed for creating unnecessary panic, anxiety, and frantic social behaviour. People have been given unqualified medicinal advices because of the fake news peddled by fake doctors (Micallef et al., 2024). Pseudo-doctors and pretentious advisors prevailed during the coronavirus pandemic (Markariani & Toradze, 2024). The unrecognised traditional healers also surfaced in rural communities (Thapliyal et al., 2024). This social behaviour require concerted effort from the authorities to come up with ways to deal with unethical and misleading use of social media. "Necessary are robust public information systems and infrastructure where valid and vetted information is easily accessible...to respond to the evolving features of social media and user behaviours." (Cho et al.,2024, p.954).

There was frantic stock piling of groceries due to misinformation peddling. Free exchange of unauthenticated information allowed for fake news to travel fast. Widespread and frequent broadcasting of fake news made it to be believed by gullible citizens (Jogezai et al., 2021). Not only teachers were concerned about distortion of knowledge and information in the social media but also the disruptions by learner's e-devices spontaneously and randomly ringing in class. Learners and teachers alike suffered the consequences of emotional investment in social media (Bekalu et al., 2019). Learners were reported to having been unwittingly lured to date rapes through the social media platforms. Even unscrupulous older persons bought expensive cellphones for minors in exchange of statutory rapes. Poverty prevailing in rural learning ecologies made it easy to lure school going children (Ali & Asif, 2023). This was all cause for concern and source of anxiety for teachers (Cho et al., 2024; Ameen & Faye, 2024).

Social media bullying is one area of concern for teachers and parents that caused unprecedented emotional exhaustion and depression (Nesi et al., 2022). Clinical psychologists researching on emotional extraction from written texts have established links between physical health and stress

caused by emotional investment in social media (Shelke et al., 2022; Mellins & Malee, 2013). These e-commodities have also escalated the level of bullying and peer pressure in schools. There has also been an increased or widening poverty gap and inequality as low socioeconomic parents in rural learning ecologies could not provide for their children (Swick & Powers, 2018; Malik & Dadure, 2024).

The 4IR also disturbed the operations of libraries. Traditional libraries were already fading away even before the coronavirus. This was because of the transformational migration to digital library services (Lai & Widmar, 2021). Some libraries completely closed down and a few introduced internet services to start a hybrid service (Soulen & Tedrow, 2022). The hybrid service means libraries now spend less funds on purchasing new books, which erodes the culture of reading (Aditya, 2021). South African learners rate very lowly in Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) literacy scores for Grade 4/5. In fact, PIRLS reported that more than in South Africa reading literacy is so low such that 80% of grade 4 learners cannot read for understanding in any language (Morris, 2024). According to the Southern and Eastern Africa Consortium for Monitoring Educational Quality (SACMEQ), numeracy scores for Grade 6 and National School Effectiveness Study (NSES) for Grades 3–5 are very low (Pretorius & Spaul, 2016; Spaul & Pretorius, 2019).

Every change comes with the good and the bad effects. Teachers will always miss the traditional libraries for their ability to instill and cultivate the culture of reading, discipline, and commitment. Digital libraries are a good innovation in this information age (Barsha & Munshi, 2024), but are unfathomable for rural learning ecologies as they require advanced devices and internet connection (Mellins & Malee, 2013; Aditya, 2021). Coronavirus forced changes which, though inevitable, required a smooth transition that takes along the rural communities (Ajani & Gamede, 2021).

2.5 The levels of stress, anxiety, and depression among teachers

High stress and anxiety levels due to the pandemic have been reported for teachers and learners as well as parents (Ran et al., 2024). In many cases, the anxiety has escalated to depression (Shayo et al., 2024), and other mental health issues and psychological disorders like PTSD (Santiago et

al., 2023). The persistent or chronic experience of stress is associated with adverse mental health outcomes, including the onset of major depressive disorder, which result in prolonged exposure to stress (James et al, 2023). Prolonged stress leads to chronic fatigue disorder due to depletion of stress hormones such as cortisol and adrenaline (Joro, 2023).

Teachers experienced psychological stress and anxiety during the coronavirus. They experienced anxiety at a personal level, for fear of contracting the disease (Díez González et al., 2024). At a professional or educational level, they worried about curriculum coverage. A research by Wakui et al. (2021) found that educational anxiety rated very high on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (not at all) to 5 (very anxious). When schools eventually opened, the anxiety of getting infected became high. This anxiety brought with it a paralysing fear on teachers such that some found it hard to perform normally or optimally (Dlamini & Zulu, 2024).

Padmanabhanunni et al. (2022) define anxiety as an adaptive response to threat that can prompt adaptive threat-mitigating cognitive appraisals and behaviours aimed at protecting the individual from harm. Naturally, the said cognitive appraisals and behaviours use cognitive resources that would be needed for individual's cognitive functioning (Shayo et al., 2024). High levels of stress and anxiety impede normal functioning in a human, and may lead to various anxiety disorders (Zhou & Yao, 2020). Psychology describes a number of anxiety disorders including Panic Disorder, Generalised Anxiety Disorder (GAD), Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder (OCD) (Gamm et al., 2010; Burke, 2013). While Panic disorder and GAD may subside after the hit of the trauma, PTSD and OCD may persist long after the trauma has resolved. Studies show that many individuals, patients, and nurses, still exhibit OCD symptoms long after they recover from the coronavirus (D'Angelo et al., 2024).

OCD prevailed during and the coronavirus pandemic as people with heightened fear of getting infected tended to wash their hands excessively and compulsively (Alavi et al., 2024; Díez González et al., 2024). Like many disorders, OCD has a tendency of escalating or scaffolding to other disorders. Due to their increased fears of contamination, individuals sooner or later developed unfounded anxiety of running short of cleaning products and then started panic shopping to stock up on sanitisers, disinfectants and soaps, which also became an added burden

on their socioeconomic challenges in rural learning ecologies (Jelinek et al., 2021, Linde et al., 2022).

Excessive health anxiety causes (and is caused by) such disorders as OCD and GAD, a psychological vicious circle (Weinert et al., 2021; Alavi et al., 2024). The anxiety leads to physical complaints and lead to panic-stricken misinterpretation of minor bodily symptoms and feelings as the sign of deadly disease e.g a normal cough is interpreted as evidence of coronavirus infection. Psychosocial support is vital to break these abnormal thoughts, feelings, and behaviour (Dubey, 2020). Part of the principles of psychosocial support is to provide correct information to allay exaggerated fears (Molebatsi et al., 2021; Díez González et al., 2024).

Since the Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR) is upon this generation, there is growing interest in incorporating educational technology in preparation and delivering of the subject material (Maistry, 2022). Focus is not only on interest but also on a compelling demand for teachers to incorporating latest technology in the classroom activities (Fernández-Batanero et al., 2021; Abedi & Ametepey, 2024). This is a source of enormous stress for teachers in rural learning ecologies (Aruleba & Jere, 2022). Changes in teaching methods always come with much pressure for teachers as they need to acquire new skills or upgrade their knowledge (Shaukit et al., 2022). A generalisable research (Siyaya et al., 2022) found that most high school teachers in the ILembe district in rural Kwazulu-Natal are incompetent in the use of educational technology (Siyaya et al., 2022; Abedi & Ametepey, 2024).

Buchanan et al. (2015) argue that the necessity for information technology (ITC) in education is requires political will to fully implement (Zubaidi & Velusamy, 2024). ICT is necessary to support economic growth and also to contribute to efficiency and enhancement for social inclusion (Selwyn, 2015). It is regrettable that the digital education revolution (DER) has escalated rural ostracization, further widening the poverty- opulence / rural- urban gap in developing countries like South Africa. Buchanan and McPherson (2010) argue that factors such as accessibility to technology, geographic location, and socio-economic status undo the efforts of promoting community development and social justice (McArdle, 2024).

Most research on technology in education largely focuses on improving learning experiences of learners. There is little research on how teachers have been coping or impacted by the revolution of educational technology in their teaching experiences (Aruleba & Jere, 2022). This technological revolution brings with it enormous amount of stress and anxiety for teachers since they need to learn as they teach (Luckin & Cukurova, 2019). This makes teaching to be stressful (Maurya & Yadav, 2024). However, there are adequate education laws and policies provided for the support of teachers. The Constitution of the Republic of South Africa Act 108 of 1996 (Section 195(1)(h)) seeks to encourage lifelong learning for teachers so they can continually develop their skills and careers as teachers. This provision is meant to assist them to keep abreast with new developments in education, such as educational technology (RSA, 1996a).

The Department of Basic Education should help teachers to improve their skills by providing refresher workshops. The DBE should look into the provision of incentives for teachers who upgrade themselves through the universities. That kind of psychosocial support would provide cushioning for stress and anxiety in a time of the 4IR (Zhou & Yao, 2020). Educational technology advancement is lagging in rural learning ecologies (Wilmot, 2024). There is poor or non-existent internet connectivity, lack of technological devices, and technological illiteracy for teachers and learners (Abedi & Ametepey, 2024). Lifelong learning should be encouraged by the department and considered by teachers for their development in the area of education technology (Selwyn, 2015). This can save them stress and anxiety and feelings of incompetence (Mollo, 2022; Ametepey, 2024).

Teacher training in the use of education technology would be a futile exercise if the authorities do not ensure connectivity in rural learning ecologies. Aruleba and Jere (2022) argue that providing technologies and connectivity to rural communities can contribute to bring those communities close to development and training (Mallarangan et al., 2024). Teachers in rural learning ecologies need psychosocial support and proper training to do their work (Thomas et al., 2021; Joro, 2023). However, they lament that they are thrown into the deep end and left to cope on their own with little or no support (Ndlovu, 2019; Aditya, 2021). Teachers believe that their training does not equip them psychologically to cope with challenges, yet they are required to provide psychosocial support for disenfranchised and circumstantially vulnerable learners (Chinyama et al., 2021;

Mahwai, 2020; Reid, 2019). This points to the impact of the coronavirus to teachers in rural learning ecologies causing their vulnerability to stress (Wills & van der Berg, 2024).

Stress experienced by teachers, not only affects mental health of teachers, but also manifests as physical symptoms, social negative implications, and psychological issues (Bautista-Rodriguez et al., 2023). Psychological problems experienced by an individual impact negatively on all people in their work and family life. During the coronavirus pandemic the stress levels of teachers were felt by everyone around them, starting from family members to their learners to their colleagues (Robinson et al., 2023). Research by Shaukat et al. (2022) found that there was increased risk of ‘family- work conflict’ during the coronavirus pandemic. Teachers received communications and online queries from students, colleagues, parents, and work supervisors. Some of the communication and conversations took place at awkward times that infringed family-together times. The family-work conflict during the coronavirus pandemic has led to emotional misalignment and disruptive behaviour in many cases (Lacey et al., 2024). These all put pressure on teachers’ psychosocial well-beings, adding to already high levels of stress, anxiety, and depression (Shaukat et al., 2022; Ran et al., 2024).

Fernández-Batanero et al. (2021) defines stress in the workplace as the response adopted by individuals when faced with a threatening situation in the workplace. The disposing factors for high teacher stress and anxiety continually increased the need to get familiar with the use of new educational technology applications (Akbana & Dikilitaş, 2022; Robinson et al., 2023). To add to their frustration, educational technologies change too rapidly for teachers to keep up. New software and new devices are introduced every month. In rural learning ecologies, the challenge of technology is further compounded by the poor connectivity problems (Aruleba & Jere, 2022; Shayo et al., 2024).

There are hardly any network signals and no or not enough network coverage (Fernández-Batanero et al., 2021). This is a cause for stress and frustration for teachers (Robinson et al., 2023). Burnout syndrome is cited as the symptom and also a result of anxiety and frustration (Turner & Garvis, 2023). It results from accumulated emotional exhaustion due to stressful demands in their career (Miconi et al., 2024). Burnout syndrome in teachers has been found to affect their level of

commitment in their work responsibilities (Sheng et al., 2023; Su-Keene & DeMatthews, 2022). It could be alleviated or prevented if a person is surrounded by working psychosocial support systems. (Ozamiz-Etxebarria et al., 2023).

Long before the coronavirus outbreak, a study by Pillay et al. (2005) found that there is a relationship between competence of teachers and burnout, and that such competence or challenges arise partly from the demands and pressures of trying to keep up with technological innovations (Turner & Garvis, 2023). The outbreak of the coronavirus did not afford teachers the luxury to catch up with the technological innovations at their own pace. The situation demanded rapid learning under extremely trying circumstances (Fernández-Batanero et al., 2021; Pillay et al., 2005; Akbana & Dikilitaş, 2022).

High levels of stress for teachers affects their lives in many aspects (Ran et al., 2024). As alluded earlier, their families suffer due to less commitment and unfulfilled family responsibilities (Joseph et al., 2024). The interpersonal relationships at the workplace take a strain. Teachers may manifest mood changes, lack of tolerance, and negative attitudes towards their colleagues and learners (Robinson et al., 2023). Parents and the whole community may also feel the negative energies from stressed and burned-out teachers (Zellweger et al., 2019). Notwithstanding the real threat that causes fear to teachers (Díez González et al., 2024), one cause of fear and anxiety is the media hype in reporting. The reporting frenzy by the media sometimes exaggerates the situation, thereby inducing excessive fear among teachers (Ameen & Faye, 2024). The psychological counsellors advise teachers to refrain from over-consumption of bad news about the pandemic (Zhou & Yao, 2020). Psychosocial support was mentioned by Molebatsi et al. (2021) as providing correct and credible information that helped to allay exaggerated fears during the pandemic.

2.6 Psychosocial support provision

It is hard to remain productive in life under mental health conditions of stress and anxiety (Buckley et al., 2024). The etiology of stress and anxiety can be traced to fear of the unknown. Everybody subjected to stress needs motivation and psychosocial support intervention so they function normally and optimally (Omodan, 2020; Mallarangan et al., 2024). Kirkbride et al. (2024, p.59)

assert that “investigating the importance of psychosocial factors in causing mental disorder has remained a peripheral focus for scientific discovery and clinical psychiatry”. Ignoring psychosocial factors causing mental disorders is not done only by the psychiatric fraternity, but also by government authorities responsible for addressing the same (Kirkbride et al., 2024). The necessary intervention by authorities are lacking for teachers because of the historic systematic isolation. Teachers in rural learning ecologies continue to suffer the consequences of apartheid (Hlalele & Mosia, 2020).

Colonial and apartheid infamous legacy still lingers on and looms large in South Africa (Sefotho, 2024). The glaring inequalities are evident in the whole landscape of the country (Jansen, 2024), including the education sector (Roberts, 2021; Kgari-Masondo & Mkhabela, 2021). Schools in rural learning ecologies are at the extreme negative of this continuum of inequality in South African education system (Morris, 2024). Schools are segregated along poverty lines. These poverty lines are called quintiles (Desai et al., 2024), with quintile 1 being the poorest and under-resourced. They are largely situated in rural and informal settlements, and belong to black Africans. Quintile 5 schools are the wealthiest and are situated in opulent, predominantly white areas, despite the demolition of the group areas act of the apartheid dispensation (Chirinda et al., 2021). Apartheid deliberately created this education ecosystem with evil intentions. This inequality stubbornly lingers on. It is survival of the fittest in community ecological terms (Sefotho, 2024; Jansen, 2024).

The schools formerly known as model-c are enjoying the legacy of being cushioned by apartheid policies (Sefotho, 2024). They enjoy a myriad of facilities and amenities bestowed to them by education segregation and fragmentation. The mostly white opulent parents with enormous economic heritage and apartheid reserves continue to support their schools’ infrastructure and status (Du Plessis & Mestry, 2019). They hire more teachers over and above the government’s Post Provisioning Norm (PPN) so they can have small classes (Pillay, 2021). They also hire a large contingency of support staff including psychologists, administration personnel, and cleaning and garden maintenance staff. Such a working environment helps to maintain high standard of educational support for teachers (Sefotho, 2024).

Middle class parents from the townships (including teachers) send their children to these schools and are charged exorbitant school fees (Ndimande, 2023). It is argued that these high fees are an apartheid weapon designed to exclude poor children from attending previously white schools. Parents in rural learning ecologies suffer systematic economic traction and cannot afford these high fees due to high unemployment (Amusan et al., 2023) and the transport costs to town where these schools are situated. It has been said that the government is failing these communities by not developing these learning ecologies (Pillay, 2021; Du Plessis & Mestry, 2019).

Teachers in rural learning ecologies face hardships due to marginalisation. It is important to heed other elements of an ecology, other than the continuous struggle for survival. Such elements as interdependence (Mkhize, 2020; Hlalele & Mosia, 2020). Interdependence is the essence of survival, sustainability, and continuation of any ecological system (McLaren & Hawe, 2005). While interdependence may give the notion of keeping the balance in the ecology which include ‘survival of the fittest’, mutual support has the connotation of accommodating others and represents helping one another for survival of all. It can be exemplified by the famous African concept of Ubuntu (Omodan, 2020). Ubuntu sets the human ecology apart from animal ecology (Miller, 2024; Kumwenda, 2024; Ndasauka, 2024).

Ubuntu is humans looking after one another. It is a traditional African empathy and rapport between members of a community (Ndasauka, 2024), but also extends to welcoming strangers into this caring environment (Skea & Cert. 2016; Ndlovu, 2019). Ubuntu is understood by Skea and Cert (2016, p.1144) as “a human trait, a moral imperative, an affect, an interpersonal relationship”. It also espouses cordial relationships and support based on mutual esteem and appreciation between teachers, school management, and parents. It embodies powers of therapeutic intervention (Epstein, 2018). This culture of helping one another (Omodan, 2020) reduces vulnerability to mental health risks by creating a psychosocial support environment conducive to increasing knowledge production and self-resourcefulness for the sustenance of the learning ecology (Chidakwa & Hlalele, 2021). This psychosocial support is what Skea & Cert (2016) calls “the epistemological aspects of caring”, where knowledge about social phenomena is created in context and compassionately disseminated for the benefit of all.

This culture of psychosocial support can be created and nurtured in communities for the benefit of teachers. It has the potential to capacitate and develop holistic, creative, and cohesive responses to issues (Graham & Harwood, 2011; Bonell, et al., 2019). Before the outbreak of the coronavirus, conditions unique and characteristic of rural communities already had negative effects on teachers (Miconi et al., 2024). There was already a desperate need for access to psychosocial support and mental health help (O'Malley et al., 2018; Bangpan et al., 2024). Many other social ills existed at alarming proportions. Besides the harsh socioeconomic and relentless political conditions, crime and violence are at a rise.

South Africa is a very violent country. The crime statistics recently released by the police ministry revealed shocking figures. Over six thousand people were murdered in South Africa between July and September 2022. This includes 558 children murdered and further 294 attempted murders on children, 1 895 assaults causing grievous bodily harm (GBH) including children (SABC News, 2022). Teachers hear about gruesome stories of the murder of their learners and are in constant fear of their lives and those of their children, relatives, and colleagues. Besides the high numbers of crime and murders, South Africa is heavily laden with a myriad of other social pathologies including poverty, inequality, and unemployment (Hoosen et al., 2022; Chauke et al., 2021).

The school being a microcosm of society, bears the brunt of social ills (Bahall, 2024). Teachers are at the cutting edge of all these societal problems, including unsafe work environments in their schools. Teachers would need intentional psychosocial support against these social challenges. Mapasela et al. (2012) assert that psychosocial support involves creating an environment conducive to teaching and learning, and the safety of educators and learners. Safety during the pandemic would include measures to protect teachers from contracting the virus. In rural learning ecologies, there was scarcity of water (Midzi et al., 2024) for basic hygienic protocols prescribed by The National Coronavirus Command Council (NCCC). There are no proper ablution facilities in schools. The general outlook of the socioeconomic situation makes it difficult to observe all safety protocols. This lack of amenities and tools to implement coronavirus safety protocols add to the teacher's anxiety and fear of contracting the virus, which further escalate to GAD (Weinert et al., 2021; Alavi et al., 2024; Díez González et al., 2024).

The outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic further exposed the desperate socioeconomic situation prevailing in rural learning ecologies as discussed above (Soudien et al., 2021; Padmanabhanunni et al., 2022). The psychosocial support should not only be provided as an emergency or disaster response, but as a socioeconomic development or upliftment on a continual basis (Bragin, 2020). Teachers need to be supported and not discriminated against when it comes to economic empowerment (Mapasela et al., 2012). There has been a constant cry from teachers concerning their plight, even about the debate that their years of training and the essential work they do is not commensurate with the salary they get. There are no incentives to encourage them to upgrade their qualifications (McKay et al., 2024).

There is no tangible help about improving their financial support, only endless promises. Recently, the South African government has not been making any promises. On the contrary, it even reneges on the agreement made at The Public Service Coordinating Bargaining Council (PSCBC) which is backed by law (section 35 of the Labour Relations Act, 1995 (LRA)). As alluded to before, teachers were offered 0% salary increase in 2020, 1% in 2021, and 3% in 2022 whereas the inflation rate was hovering around 7%. There is apathetic "acknowledgement of African teachers' voices" (Kgari-Masondo & Mkhabela, 2021 p.1) regarding their marginalisation. If schools in a learning ecology are to be resourceful centers for community development and sustainability (Hlalele, 2014), then teachers are indispensable agents and community human resources for that community development to happen (Chidakwa & Hlalele, 2021; Du Plessis & Mestry, 2019; Referring to disaster education, Fu and Zhang, (2024, p.2) accentuate that "teachers, being integral members of communities, often serve as role models, sources of information, and pillars of support during and after disasters".

The advent of the coronavirus awakened communities to the important role of teachers in the community (Fu & Zhang, 2024; McArdle, 2024). The concept of psychosocial has involves interaction of two dimensions: psychological dimension (spiritual, emotional and cognitive) social dimension (social context and interpersonal relationships) of a person's life (Kaljee et al., 2017). In their research findings, Castillo and Barrameda (2024) identify psychosocial programmes as including spiritual formation and mental health programmes to support the development of teachers (Vincent, 2023). Mapasela et al. (2012, p. 99) also define psychosocial support as an

ongoing process of meeting physical, emotional, social, mental, and spiritual needs (Fu & Zhang, 2024).

These definitions imply and assume the creation of a supportive context, both psychologically and socially. The supportive context can be best understood through the principles of psychosocial support: provision of information and basic aid (getting adequate information about the nature of crises or disaster and those affected, as well as providing basic supplies such as food); promoting a sense of safety, calmness, self-and community efficacy, connectedness to others, and hope (the five essential psychosocial support principles for individuals and community-based support; and social acknowledgment (victim's experience of positive reactions from the society that show appreciation) (Duckers et al., 2017). These psychosocial principles can be modified and adapted to different contexts and communities. In their article, 'Psychosocial responses to disaster: An Asian perspective', Sundram et al. (2008) developed a version they believed relevant to users from Asian countries. Their version was aptly adopted by ten collaborative writers who designed the curriculum for Psychosocial Support Training for teachers (Annexure 6).

These psychosocial support principles sum up the context and function of psychosocial support. They provide essential context conducive to psychosocial wellbeing, interpersonal skills, but also preventing and treating psychological disorders that usually manifest after a crisis or disaster (Bhadra, 2022; Mallarangan et al., 2024). Psychological disorders manifest in many different forms. They can manifest as a disturbance in mental/emotional state, physically as diseases, and also spiritually (Vincent, 2023). Mortality, morbidity, depression, and many other deleterious health-related and bad livelihood outcomes have been associated with the absence of psychosocial support from family, friends, and colleagues (Dubey et al., 2020).

Psychosocial support for teachers in rural learning ecologies can be a critical promoter of their psychological and general well-being and that of learners, and by extension, the livelihood of the whole school community and the society at large (Jennings et al., 2021; Van IJzendoorn, et al., 2001). According to Hlalele (2019, p. 90), livelihood "is sustainable when it can cope with and recover from stresses and shocks and maintain or enhance its capabilities and assets both now and

in the future." Though it is possible to invoke inner strength, sustenance of livelihood of any organism invariably requires support from outside of that organism (McLaren & Hawe, 2005).

While teachers are largely dissatisfied about the government's commitment to their psychosocial well-being, the government should be commended for supporting livelihood of the unemployed citizenry. The government set up a Solidarity Fund, designed to do mega fundraising for coronavirus response programmes. Provision of aid (food or monetary) is part of psychosocial support. McKay et al. (2024) view psychosocial support as the social construct to be honoured by authorities. Department of Treasury also provided R23 million for the creation of a solidarity fund. The fund enabled the Department of Social Development (DSD) and the South African Social Security Agency (SASSA) to provide food parcels and to administer the Special COVID-19 Social Relief of Distress (SRD) grant of R350 per month for unemployed citizens. Although the Food Poverty Line per person per month was R624, the small gesture was appreciated by many as providing some marginal relief for acute hunger and the scathing poverty prevailing in the country (Blecher et al., 2021; Mathebula et al., 2022).

There are, however, mixed feelings about this government's gesture, even among teachers. However, it is welcomed by many who desperately need it. The high unemployment rate in the country means that working few have many family members to support and extended family members as per African culture and norms. The Social Relief of Distress (SRD) grant also provides some relief to working teachers who have many extended family members looking up to them (Goldman et al., 2021; Khowa et al., 2022). It is also welcome by some wealthy people who view it as some marginal attempt at mitigating against the escalating numbers of crime. There are those who are against it, arguing that it is propagating the culture of dependency and entitlement. Still others say it is unsustainable and further plunging the country into debt as some of the money to set up the Solidarity Fund borrowed from International Monetary Fund (IMF). The government of South Africa spends about R355 billion to service the debt of around 4.7 trillion it owes such international funding bodies (SABCNews, 2023; Webb, 2021).

The deleterious effects of the coronavirus on teachers in rural learning ecologies can be mitigated through psychosocial support. Psychologically well teachers have confidence and energy to do

their job (Thomas et al, 2021). The psychological wellness of teachers is directly proportional to students' psychological wellness and success (Emmers et al., 2019). Teachers' psychological wellness is linked to their increased self-efficacy in their teaching and psychological development of learners (Zellweger et al., 2019; Botha & Kourkoutas, 2016). In rural learning ecologies, psychosocial support for teachers is very scarce and largely unavailable, yet it is of utmost importance for their psychological well-being as well as for the provision of much-needed mitigation strategies for student's psychological well-being and academic success (Themane & Thobejane, 2019; Jennings et al., 2017). Research has found that there are no programmes by the Department of Basic Education (DBE) aimed at promoting teacher psychological well-being in rural learning ecologies (Novelli & Smith, 2011; Granziera et al., 2021).

As part of the provision of psychosocial support for teachers in rural learning ecologies, there should be health education provided to dispel myths and allay fears aggravating such traumatic events as caused by the coronavirus (Sindhya, 2022; Liu, 2023; Díez González et al., 2024). However, there are not enough properly resourced health facilities in rural learning ecologies. They function only as satellite clinics that to stabilise the patients and refer them to health facilities in the cities. There are generally no personnel to dispense basic health and hygiene education. This means that there would be no proper education even on the importance of vaccines in preventing the infection by the virus (McKay et al., 2024).

It is encouraging though that Khowa et al. (2022) found on their study at rural Mbashe municipality. The traditional leaders and ward councillors at Mbashe municipalities have taken it upon themselves to organise awareness campaigns with the aim to educate residents about the coronavirus, yet still, unfortunately, their campaigns did not cover the education about vaccines. Other myths about the coronavirus were addressed in these campaigns except those that concerned vaccination matters, and the misinformation about the vaccine continued (Gumede, & Govender, 2024). People interviewed in that report still believed the myth like vaccination can change a person's DNA. There were inadequate government programmes aimed at educating communities about the vaccines (Khowa et al., 2022; Gumede, & Govender, 2024). Vaccine hesitancy is discussed in the next section.

Psychological counselling can also be rallied as a psychological strategy to provide psychosocial support (Stankovska et al., 2020). Counselling is defined as a purposefully structured permissive relationship between the counsellor and the counselee that allows the latter to gain self-understanding that enables him or her to take new positive actions in the light of the new perspective and orientation (Prosek & Gibson, 2021). Whereas psychosocial support can involve many people, counselling is usually between two people; the counsellor and the counselee. There are exceptional cases of family counselling and group counselling. The counsellor assumes a role of a professional and the counselee is a client (Zarawi Mat Nor, 2020). Counselling helps to facilitate individual's understanding of self in relation to the environment. It is an interactive engagement designed to re-align the counselee after a psychological dislodgment caused by traumatic events like an accident or pandemic (Zarawi Mat Nor, 2020; Prosek & Gibson, 2021).

The eminence of psychosocial support is manifest when it has taken its effect, and is seen when an individual comes out of depressive cocoon. Psychosocial support has run its course when there are visible signs that the individual gains control of their affairs and functioning. A study was done in USA by Zadok-Gurman et al. (2021) on the effect of the psychosocial support on teachers affected by the coronavirus-induced deleterious psychological issues, including depression (Miconi et al., 2024). The findings were that teachers gained improved psychological affect and capacity to achieve self-awareness through their empowered 'cognitive reframing'. Cognitive reframing is the ability to adapt to the change of interpretation (Zadok-Gurman et al., 2021). It can also be referred to as the renewal of the mind towards renewed awakening and interest to do their own self-inquiry, self-exploration, and self-interpretation. They gain skills in self-cognition and self-regulation, i.e. they become open to experience a different interpretation of their situation.

Psychosocial support interventions were found to improve individuals' intrinsic motivation to embrace positive well-being practices (Granziera et al., 2021; Liu, 2023), "raising self-capacity, and re-enforcing thought patterns that empower participants to adopt health behaviours of a healthy lifestyle personal realization and empowerment" (Zadok-Gurman et al., 2021, p.10). Psychosocial support helps to develop its beneficiaries' skills for self-care and self-regulation, and also for sustainable livelihood (Onishchenko et al., 2023).

Psychosocial support was also found to be a sustainable intervention to reduce burnout experienced by teachers due to overwhelming work stress as aggravated by the coronavirus (Sundaram et al., 2023; Turner & Garvis, 2023). Psychosocial support cultivates resilience from adverse life challenges and traumatic encounters (Buitrago et al., 2024). Resilience is viewed as the maintenance of physical and psychological health in the face of threats and/or adversity (Sayed et al., 2024). Resilience gained through psychosocial support further enhances the work and benefit of the same psychosocial support. Resilience (protective factor) and psychosocial support (strength regaining process) work in synergy to wade off physical and psychological disposing factors (Yıldırım & Tanrıverdi, 2021).

2.7 The attitudes towards coronavirus vaccine

The insurgence of the coronavirus induced high levels of fear and uncertainty among teachers in rural learning ecologies (Alavi et al., 2024). The resulting anxiety and depression impacted negatively on their psychological well-being as well as effectiveness in their work due to low levels of motivation and low self-esteem (Koch, 2022). Manjari (2021, p. 141) says that teachers' and students' susceptibility to mental health issues depends on their resilience or ability to withstand challenges. According to Aliakbari et al. (2020), mental health refers to emotional and psychological health in which one can use one's thinking and abilities, have a function in the community, and fulfil the usual needs of everyday life. Psychological health will therefore be affected by mental health literacy and general health literacy. The level of health literacy will consequently affect decisions about such issues as taking of a vaccine (Nalipay et al., 2024).

Many problems are community-borne and inherent. They affect, not only teachers, but also all members of the society. They also directly and indirectly affect parents. Parents seem to have no answers to these social-educational challenges and, at times, leave everything up to teachers (Gumapac et al., 2021). Teachers in rural learning ecologies cannot shoulder the burdens they are expected to carry. They are expected to be educated leaders of the community, yet at times they do not have all the answers. For example, teachers are not qualified to advise parents and learners

about such issues as taking of vaccines. This leaves them feeling overwhelmed, and the whole situation exposes them to emotional strain and exhaustion (Mellins & Malee, 2013).

Apart from emotional strain and exhaustion, there is psychological and mental health issues. These are overwhelming and induce fear and anxiety in teachers. The spread of the coronavirus and the alarming death cases induced fear among people, especially those working in crowded spaces, like teachers (Khowa et al., 2022). Naturally everybody was looking for a panacea to curb the disease. Vaccines were introduced and recommended by the department of health. And the knowledge that something can reduce the virus contraction rate, went a great deal to alleviate fear and anxiety. The sense of security provided by the vaccine is beneficial as psychological stability over and above the medical prevention (Kar et al., 2020). Research shows a great deal of vaccine hesitancy in the sub-Saharan Africa, especially in rural areas (Kabakama et al., 2022; Gumede & Govender, 2024).

Many countries introduced incentives for people vaccinated for coronavirus, in a desperate bid to woo citizens to take the vaccine (Persad & Emanuel, 2021). Before the outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic, global health bodies and institutions were registering concerns about the vaccination hesitancy as a threat to the efforts of fighting infectious diseases (WHO, 2016). Rural Africa has shown high resistance in taking vaccines due to what Ushe (2024, p. 40) calls ‘regressive impact’, referring to the impact on the poor and marginalized citizens. There is a short supply of public health facilities in rural areas (Cooper et al., 2021; Ushe, 2024). There is also a lack of education about the vaccine in rural areas. Rural places do not have adequate clinical institutions and emergency equipment to respond to the pandemic (Wiyeh et al., 2019). Teachers in rural learning ecologies look at the dire health and medical resources in their communities and fear the possibility of death even more (Nachega et al., 2021; Shifa et al., 2022).

The worry, stress, and anxiety of getting infected with the coronavirus, and possible death, lead to depression among these teachers (Ran et al., 2024). Vaccination should have reduced fear of infection and death, and reduce the anxiety gripping teachers (Koch, 2022). However, there exists much vaccination hesitancy among teachers. Authorities have tried to promote the vaccine as a preventive measure against transmission and mortality, especially for people working in the health

sector, people in crowded spaces like teachers, older citizens, and people living with comorbidities (Persad & Emanuel, 2021; Schuster, 2015). More hesitancy prevails in rural learning ecologies. Among other reasons is what the Department of Health bemoans as the avalanche of fake news or misinformation on unfounded side effects of the vaccine (Nachega et al., 2021).

Research found that lower level of education is directly proportional inclination to get vaccinated due to beliefs in myths associated with vaccination (Mukembo et al., 2024). However, given the level of their education, many teachers do not believe myths like one that the vaccination changes a person's DNA. Yet, there were still many other reasons for hesitancy (Khowa et al., 2022). One general fear of vaccination came from mysterious composition of the vaccine. The fact that the vaccine is made from the virus itself scared some people. There are different attitudes, fears, beliefs, and norms among teachers in rural areas (Bratu, 2021). There is also a great deal of mistrust for politicians (Kar et al., 2020).

Streetwise political narratives like the vaccine being a conspiracy or ploy of the 'West' to reduce the African population, the religious convictions, the alleged impotence among men, and women's inability to bear children, are among many fears and myths that added to anxiety and hesitancy. This resulted in high levels of Generalised Anxiety Disorder (GAD) besetting teachers in rural learning ecologies (Cao et al., 2020; Wiyeh et al., 2019). GAD is caused by multiple stressors occurring concurrently as well as the fear of the unknown. It is a disorder responsible for trust deficit and contributes to the vaccine hesitancy (Ruggeri et al., 2024).

Death of relatives, colleagues, and acquaintances increased fear and anxiety. It forced teachers to rethink their hesitancy stance (Khowa et al., 2022). Scholars (Koch, 2022; Schuster, 2015) maintain that psychosocial support is important to reduce or manage fear and anxiety among teachers, and to dispel the myths such as causing vaccine hesitancy (Cooper et al., 2021). The Department of Health has tried to promote the taking of vaccine (DoH, 2021), yet there is still much resistance. Research (Cooper et al., 2021) has found that, among the factors influencing vaccine hesitancy is the geographical location. Notwithstanding the accessibility of the vaccine, rural folk had a great propensity to doubt and resistance (Khowa et al., 2022).

The South African government launched interventions aimed at persuading the unvaccinated to vaccinate. The interventions included providing incentives, and improved accessibility by even providing on-site vaccinations (Kahn et al., 2022). It is interesting that there are research findings against the popular notion that rural residents of lower education exhibit much hesitancy (Cooper et al., 2021). People with higher level of education, including teachers, displayed similar percentage of hesitancy as the ‘uneducated’. Although no research conducted specifically for teachers in rural learning ecologies is available, teachers would be on the highest strata of education in these areas (Nachega et al., 2021; Ruggeri et al., 2024).

2.8 Teachers’ attitudes on seeking mental health and psychosocial help

The attitude towards seeking mental health and psychosocial help can be determined by the level mental health literacy (Nalipay et al., 2024). Mental health literacy is defined as a mental health education that focuses on the knowledge and attitudes people hold towards mental health (Ma et al., 2023). The level of mental health literacy determines the ability for psychological self-maintenance and self-regulation (Wei et al., 2015). WHO (2004) describes mental health as an individuals’ ability to deal with thoughts and feelings. A person needs to actualise or realise their abilities to cope with stresses of life, function normally and productively, and contribute meaningfully to their community (WHO 2001a).

Teachers in rural learning ecologies can make a meaningful contribution to their communities if they are given necessary psychosocial support (Zimmermann & Curtis, 2020). The theory of mental health literacy has seven descriptive aspects: the ability to identify mental disorders, recognising when to reach out for mental health resources, knowledge about risk factors and causes of mental illness, education surrounding self-treatments, awareness of professional resources, a mind-set catered towards recognition, and help-seeking (Keyan et al., 2024).

2.8.1 The ability to identify mental disorders

Mental health literacy is the ability to identify mental disorders (conditions that affect thinking, mood and behaviour). This can be achieved by seeing mental health as representing a syndrome

of symptoms. Literacy would be the knowledge of analysing the syndrome (group of symptoms occurring together) for symptoms and arrive at conclusive identification or diagnosis. (Zhou & Yao, 2020). Mental health literacy is not professional psychological diagnosis but should be useful for lay people to refer themselves and for primary health care givers to refer patients appropriately (WHO, 2004). UNICEF South Africa's U-Report poll 2021 highlighted a strong recommendation that caregivers (including teachers) should be adequately empowered with appropriate skills to be able to identify mental health issues and recommend appropriate referrals (Tomlinson et al., 2022).

Oades et al. (2021, p. 326) defines two other important concepts which are subsidiaries of mental health literacy. These are: *wellbeing literacy* as “a relational process between a person and their environment” and *emotional literacy*. These two literacy concepts provide a capability model that is” fluid, dynamic, and interwoven formation of skills, knowledge, opportunities, choices and behaviours that emerge as a dialectic between a person and the environment” for identification of mental disorders (Oades et al., 2021). Emotional literacy will boost emotional resilience, emotional intelligence, and emotional maturity.

2.8.2 Recognising when to reach out for mental health resources

According to WHO (2004, p. 26), mental health is “a state of well-being in which the individual realizes his or her own abilities, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and is able to make a contribution to his or her community”. Mental health literacy is, not only acknowledging the existence of symptoms, but also the discernment to know where to refer those symptoms. However, cognitive decline due to mental health illnesses might dim the ability to recognise when and where to take action about a condition. Psychosocial support is required to raise personal awareness level, even about personal hygiene required for prevention of infections (Ely, 2017).

Mental health literate individuals recognise when their mental health condition needs help and also know where to seek for help (Nalipay et al., 2024). They may not properly name their problem but they know when they feel symptoms such as melancholy or when they feel down (Sheehan et

al., 2023). Self-referral is considered a sign that an individual recognises when to reach out for help. People who look out for mental health resources on their own are most likely to implement the therapeutic interventions prescribed and are restored to normality and fruitful functioning in the shortest prognosis time. It is worth noting that the high-level stigmatisation around mental health illnesses in rural communities discourages teachers from reaching out for mental health resources (Tiefenthaler, 2023).

2.8.3 Knowledge about risk factors and causes of mental illness

Knowledge about risks of mental illness would help individuals to take necessary precautions and seek help as early as possible when risks can be reversed or effectively managed. Apart from malfunctioning and difficulty in self-regulation, mental health illnesses can lead to unnatural death from stress induced illnesses, suicide, aggression, violence, and homicide (Dubey, 2020). Mental health illnesses were mentioned as one of the huge comorbidity contributors to death cases during the coronavirus pandemic (Goldberger et al., 2022). The deductive implication would be that it also contributed to the reported teacher attrition during the pandemic. Lack of knowledge and poor awareness about risks and causes lead to exposure and vulnerability towards the mental health illnesses (Dubey, 2020).

Poor perception of causes of diseases reduced concern about personal hygiene can increase the chances of acquiring diseases. The coronavirus and the resulting mental illnesses were blamed for death as well as for teachers leaving the profession (Gillani et al., 2022). The ability to recognise individual's own mental health condition as well as its impact on life and functioning is a central motivator to finding help. The classic example is that of an individual taking drugs to feel good and not knowing or ignoring the risks in a long run. I found out as a student counsellor that the most powerful weapon to confront and influence learners to rethink taking drugs was when I taught them how it affected their brain cells. Exposing them to people who have been hooked and whose functioning was deteriorated also served as a deterrent (Sheehan et al., 2023).

2.8.4 Education surrounding self-treatments

Self-reliance is one coping mechanism which delays the proper address of a condition. Self-reliant individuals close themselves into a cocoon so that even psychosocial support cannot get through. Self-treatment is more prevalent among health workers, especially doctors who know the problem or the suffering they have but somehow think they know how to fix themselves without consulting a psychologist or psychiatrist. Doctors' mental health illiteracy is in not knowing that not all conditions are solved medically by taking pills (Jonsson et al., 2023). Mental health condition requires targeted therapeutic treatment. It requires objective treatment by a psychiatrist or psychologist and should be completed through subjective psychosocial support. Psychosocial support is very effective because it is more of collaborative than individualistic approach (Zimmermann & Curtis, 2020).

2.8.5 Awareness about professional resources

Seekers of mental health need to know about professional resources available to them and how to access those resources or health services (Wei et al., 2015). They also need to know some information on the effectiveness of those mental health services. Research done in rural communities in China (Sun et al., 2021) found that rural communities have a difficulty accessing health care professionals or resources (McKay et al., 2024). Teachers in rural learning ecologies may recognise their need for mental health services that may not be available. (Ozamiz-Etxebarria et al., 2021; Namome et al., 2021).

Korhonen et al. (2022) found that individuals with higher education or literacy levels have higher mental health literacy. However, they do not always get it right when it comes to referring to appropriate professionals. Teachers in rural learning ecologies may take their condition to a wrong professional. There are no psychiatrist or psychologists in rural areas or adjacent small local towns. They consult traditional healers because of beliefs and cultural practices. Having recognised the need and the time to seek professional helps someone to save prognosis time and money (Shah et al., 2023; Zhou & Yao, 2020).

2.8.6 A mind-set catered towards recognition

Health literacy can be defined as the ability to recognise, acquire, process, and understand basic health information. It is wise to implement such knowledge and use it to benefit others (Kale et al., 2015). Health information is not readily available in rural communities. One can recognise the need for mental health services but encounter a frustrating situation when access to help is not available. Outpatient health facilities are not available in rural areas and so if people are not screened early, that might lead to further complications including onset of mental disorders (Gamm et al., 2010). Excessive str anxiety, if not treated can escalates to disorders as OCD and GAD. Mental health disorders can be recognised by thinking absurdly, mood swings, and change in behaviour associated with distress and impaired functioning (Beames et al., 2021).

2.8.7 Help-seeking

Due to low mental health literacy, individuals may employ coping strategies that may not be helpful and may even prolong their suffering and continue to impact their functioning negatively (Nalipay et al., 2024). These coping strategies can present as denial or resignation from the reality and they are not able to cope. Denial is not just refusing to recognise the problem, but also enduring and living with their mental problem (Ma et al., 2023). This approach to coping is referred to as stoicism and present as barriers to accessing mental health care (Keyan et al., 2024). They not only refuse to recognise the problem, but also deny its impact on the individual's condition. The common example is that of drug abuse that continues to cause harm as long as its reality is denied. Denial delays mental health intervention and support while the condition advances its negative impact (Joyce, 2023). Stigma attached to health services users is another deterrent to seeking mental health intervention (Ndlovu, 2016; Ma et a l., 2023; Wei et al., 2015).

Tendencies in seeking mental health and psychosocial help varies depending on different cultures, beliefs and norms. DeVitre and Pan (2020) refer to this phenomenon as depending on enculturation, i.e. strong belief and adherence to traditional beliefs and/or adaptation to modern western cultural believes. The rural learning ecologies, in this study, all have teachers of African origin, and rural African cultures in South Africa are still largely bound by traditional beliefs when

it comes to seeking psychosocial support during stressful times such as the pandemic (Ndlovu, 2016). The values of Ubuntu would naturally make it easy to seek psychosocial support in african traditional ways, yet with some level of reluctance when it comes to euro-centric psychology (Kumwenda, 2024; Ndasauka, 2024).

Psychological distresses affect individual life and functioning which require specialised counselling intervention (Wei et al., 2020). However, there is a stigma attached to seeking help for psychological or mental health illnesses by individuals. Ma et al. (2023) define mental health stigma as attitudes and beliefs regarding mental disorders. Research (Ndlovu, 2016; Mkhize, 2016) found a growing tendency to move towards western healing practices among the educated africans who include teachers. This trend was found to be influenced, among other things, by the mental health stigma. Adding to the stigma is the perceived discontent with the traditional healing. Mkhize (2016) proposed infusing traditional and modern counselling models services for provisions of mental health interventions (Ndasauka, 2024).

The amalgamation of traditional and modern healing practices has potential to defuse or dispel the stigma, real or perceived, associated with consulting traditional healing. An excuse made by teachers is that they do not have time to visit a clinic for therapy, and they fear the stigma attached to mental health users (Swick & Powers, 2018). Psychological distress emanating from the pandemic is a communal phenomenon more than an individual's mental illness (Omodan, 2020). The whole community is sick. The individual is a symptom bearer, and there is no need to fear stigma (Goldenberg & Goldenberg, 2012; Ndlovu, 2019; Zellweger et al., 2019). Gergen & Gergen (2008) refers to such illnesses as cultural or social phenomenon.

Mental health services users are labelled, ostracised, and shunned by people with low level of mental health literacy. Psychosocial support is not only supposed to be an intervention, but also an environment that prevents people from falling into mental illnesses in the first place. Teaching is considered a stressful profession because of it being too emotionally involving (Ghasemi et al., 2023). Psychosocial support provides a cushioning and emotional substrate that mitigates against emotional exhaustion before it escalates to mental illness or psychological disorders (Dzinamarira et al., 2024). It is said to be preventive when it reduces the risk of predisposing stress escalating to

mental health issues like depression. Psychosocial support will help an individual to cope with acute stress (Zhou & Yao, 2020), chronic stress, and other predisposing stressors due to disasters or pandemic (Skaalvik, & Skaalvik, 2011; Polaha et al., 2015; Leppold, & Reifels, 2024).

Professional counselling for teachers also migrated to online counselling services during the coronavirus. This brought another exclusion for teachers in rural learning ecologies. Beside the fact that professional counselling is not available or accessible, there exist other impediments like poor network coverage/ reception, lack of Wi-Fi, lack of technological devices because of the socio-economic situation and the lack of expertise to use technology. Research also found that even professional counsellors for teachers and school counsellors for learners were not immune to stress and anxiety pressures (Nalipay et al., 2024). They encountered new challenges that required them to be more innovative in the new territory of online counselling (Košir et al., 2022; Abedi & Ametepey, 2024).

2.9 Teacher support groups, parent support and community participation

Teacher peer support has been highlighted as a formidable support system for mutual psychosocial support (Walker et al., 2022). Research has found that teachers in group formations provide much needed psychosocial support for group members (Murphy & Masterson, 2022; Akinyemi et al., 2020). Teachers find trusted confidantes in their peers as they share their concerns. The high levels of trust among the members makes it easy for members to confide in, and get psychosocial support from, among themselves. They feel safe about their problems being discussed among the members, and solutions are found within their groupings (Akinyemi et al., 2020; Poultney, 2020).

Peer groups provide a space for sharing responsibility and optimising psychosocial support for the enhancement of members' psychological, emotional and social functioning and well-being. Peer psychological support has been found to assist teachers in their professional development (Walker et al., 2022), thereby capacitating them to be confident and resilient (Feldman, 2020). Teachers cope better with job stress when they draw emotional and psychosocial support from their colleagues (Walker et al., 2022). Psychosocial support by nature, works in collaborative engagements of mutual trust and upliftment.

Community Psychology highly recommends community participation for addressing social ills. Aughterson et al. (2024) suggest what they call ‘mechanisms of action’ to engage community support groups to enhance psychosocial connectedness and well-being, to yield results such as: “increased social connectedness, heightened self-esteem, increased patient activation, greater optimism, and improvement in health-related behaviours.” (p3). These mechanisms include engaging in groups such as music and choir participation, physical exercise teams, arts groups, sports teams, reading clubs, and gardening societies as support groups. The mechanisms of action comprise psychological, social, and behavioural dimensions. Figure 2.1 illustrates the impact of each dimension as contribution to psychosocial well-being.

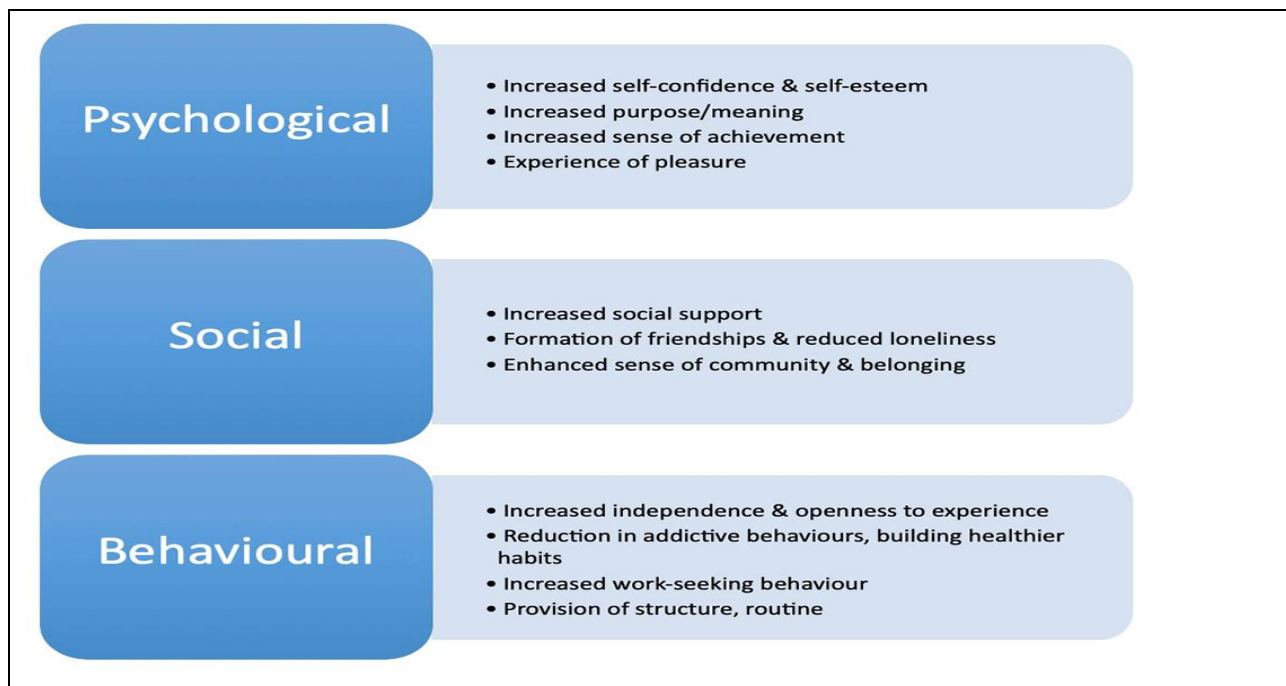


Figure 2.1: Community group’s support mechanisms for psychosocial well-being: Adopted from Aughterson et al., 2024.

Healthy relationships in the learning ecology create a sense of belonging much needed for teachers’ positive affect and job satisfaction (Rosales et al., 2024). All contributors in education, including the department as well as parents, should maintain healthy relationships. Teachers also benefit

from cooperative engagements with parents (Henriques et al., 2024). They would do well by creating and maintaining channels of communication. It is important to keep the parent-child-teacher triad communication channels open. These pillars of support, not only provide much needed psychosocial support for teachers, but also lend themselves for effective collaborative problem solving strategies (Skaalvik, & Skaalvik, 2011; Darling-Hammond et al., 2024). At the peak of the coronavirus pandemic and during the hard lockdown, teachers and parents were forced to forsake blame apportioning in teaching and learning (Myende & Nhlumayo, 2022). Teachers have to remove their self-exalted sovereignty and superiority complex (Subasinghe & Pathirana, 2022). Parents became acutely awakened to the indispensable role of teachers in education of their children (Waters et al., 2024; Tang & Zhu, 2024).

Parents realised, appreciated, and accepted the important role of teachers, not only as curriculum teachers, but as holistic partners in their children's psychological well-being and up-bringing (Gumapac et al., 2021; Handaka et al., 2022). This reality was more manifest when their frustrations, helplessness, and dependence were exposed by the effects of the pandemic. More exposed were parents in impoverished rural learning ecologies, given the dynamics of disenfranchisement and under-resource (Myende & Hlalele, 2018). Many parents in rural learning ecologies have a low level of education (Du Plessis & Mestry, 2019; Lunga & Mthiyane, 2021), which meant they could not home-school their children during the lockdown. Even before the pandemic, some were unable to assist their children with homework.

In addition, the low socioeconomic outlook pre-existed the coronavirus and they were also unable to provide technological equipment for virtual tutoring to support learning (Khowa et al., 2022). With the pandemic-forced reorganising of the curriculum and the need to adopt new teaching methods and strategies, mutual understanding and mutual support between teachers and parents became paramount (Amin & Mahabeer, 2021; Dlamini & Zulu, 2024). The parents' anxiety was not limited to curriculum coverage. Parents in rural learning ecologies grapple with unavailability of money to buy data and/or poor network connectivity. They also are worried about the quality of education received through online teaching. Everybody was thrown into an unfamiliar context of teaching using technology (Du Plessis & Mestry, 2019; Almusharraf & Bailey, 2021). The

consequences of this change added to many other educational and societal problems like school dropouts (Wills & van der Berg, 2024).

The Department of Basic Education (DBE) in South Africa raised concern about the fact that not all children returned to the school system after the lockdown. Children being out of school led to their vulnerability to engaged in drug abuse. Other youth related social ills like teenage pregnancy rose in statistics. These issues escalated problems for the communities already besieged by a myriad of social pathologies resulting from school dropouts and teenage pregnancies (Chikovore & Sooryamoorthy, 2024). The communities can expect rise in unemployment, drug abuse, and crime statistics as dropouts have nothing to do (Desai et al., 2024). Further, children's extended exposure to the internet brings about fears of them consuming age-inappropriate content and even cyberbullying (Lase et al., 2021; Amin & Mahabeer, 2021). Cyberbullying has also become a fertile ground for child trafficking (Spowart, 2024; Malik & Dadure, 2024). These developments and dynamics require collaborations and community coordinated systems of psychosocial support for teachers in rural learning ecologies (Swick & Powers, 2018; Fu & Zhang, 2024; Wills & van der Berg, 2024).

2.10 Collaborative psychosocial crisis prevention

The models of psychosocial crisis intervention and prevention (Powell & Knox, 2024) should be developed and put in place by the governments, education departments and public health systems to benefit learners and teachers (Zimmermann & Curtis, 2020). Two decades before the outbreak of the coronavirus, schools' support teams were proposed for the South African schools. The White Paper 6 (DoE, 2001) of South Africa envisaged the establishment (SBSTs) and (DBSTs) comprising of school counsellors and psychologists of education (Makhalemele, & Nel, 2021).

The functions of the DBST are meant to promote school operational, organizational, and specialised support such as psychosocial support for learners and teachers (Makhalemele & Payne-van Staden, 2018). On the school level, the (SBSTs) have the duty to support the process of identifying the learning needs so as to develop and plan appropriate teaching to strategies (Lephoto & Hlalele, 2021; Motitswe, 2014). The White Paper 6 also envisaged the provision of educational

psychologists and school counsellors to key strategic positions to provide support and counselling in schools. This task is now in the hands of teachers to provide mental health support for learners and for each other, since the governments do not satisfactorily provide these services.

UNICEF South Africa's U-Report poll 2021, UNICEF (2022) reported that 73% of learners and young adults in South Africa needed mental health care and support during the previous year. The report recommended that caregivers (including teachers) be adequately empowered to identify mental health needs and to seek appropriate help (Tomlinson et al., 2022). Teachers empowered with appropriate skills can work better and collaborate with their peers to make sense of the challenges in rural learning ecologies (Epstein, 2018; Lyons et al., 2016). Research (Gross, 2015) shows that teacher commitment is directly proportional to student success (Emmers et al., 2019). But, how can they be committed without proper psychosocial support?

Some educational psychologist, including Bradley-Johnson et al. (2000) suggest *indirect services*, which means that psychologists may not be directly involved with learners but can, together with teachers, develop specialised programs to support teachers. Teachers can use such programs to support learners as they have more contact and better placed to offer more locally-focused psychosocial support (Lephoto & Hlalele, 2021). Locally, focused psychosocial support was impossible during the pandemic, more so, for rural and special needs teachers and learners (Rice, 2022), and this was a cause for frustration for teachers (Johnson et al., 2022).

Teachers in rural learning ecologies can benefit from psychosocial support (Cooperider & Fry, 2020) from all stakeholders in education (Mapasela et al., 2012). Engelbrecht et al. (2017, p. 16) make particular mention of "collaboration between teacher education institutions, provincial departments of education, and local schools in the development of well-structured teacher education programs, the development of effective multi-professional support on district levels that can further develop the capacity". Capacity-building for teachers can be achieved through collaborative provision of psychosocial support. During the coronavirus pandemic, teachers lost much contact with their learners and colleagues (Sindhya, 2022; Reich et al., 2020).

The situation was even direr for rural learning ecologies where virtual connections were not possible. According to Mapasela et al. (2012, p.92), a learning ecology is a "set of contexts found in physical or virtual spaces that provide opportunities for learning." It is interesting that these "virtual spaces" referred to were not limited to ICT or technical means. Teachers could no longer interact with their colleagues for mutual psychosocial support. Teachers also received minimal communication from their superiors, limited to instructions and directives and not much psychosocial support (Reich et al., 2020). They needed psychosocial support, motivation, and encouragement even by such as social or cultural means.

Cultural and traditional gatherings of communities are social and spiritual healing for rural residents (Forson, 2023). Rural ecologies have a strong sense of communal living where there are cultures embraced and practised by the collective. In community-oriented societies, the individual tends to be submerged in the wider collective where collective gatherings, events, and consequences have significance than in individualistic societies (Nanda & Ryan, 2022). These communal and traditional experiences tend to become natural psychosocial intervention harbors in turbulent times of collective trauma such as those brought by the coronavirus pandemic (Tsabedze, 2023). However, such gatherings were prohibited (Somasundaram, 2007). Social gatherings usually carry rituals that promote the recreation and strengthening of communal values and beliefs (Forson, 2023). Periodical festivals, gatherings, and celebrations such as those in places of worship are helpful in relieving individuals from personal pain. Shared emotions reciprocally expressed and shared tend to break individual melancholy (Nanda & Ryan, 2022; Forson, 2023).

Psychosocial support has emotional, cognitive and spiritual dimensions (Kaljee et al., 2017). Hence psychosocial support is also referred to as "an ongoing process of meeting...spiritual needs" (Mapasela et al., 2012, p.99). During the coronavirus, churches were also under lockdown regulations which meant that spiritual counselling were out of reach for church goers. Christian worshipers could not hold their annual mega events of the Passover celebrations. Such events involve singing and dancing, and music has therapeutic effects on a downcast soul (Agres et al., 2021; Carey, 2021). Religious coping invokes positive emotional feelings (Grotowska, 2022). Religious coping and therapy are resilient practices that have stood the test of time (Carey (2021; Nolan, 2021).

Other traditional gatherings include the use of stimulants and alcoholic beverages which some say help to drown their melancholies. The communal gatherings nurture “collective confidence” (Cooperider & Fry, 2020, p. 266) and bring about emotional psychosocial support and new confidence in life. Rural communities in South Africa have a tradition of communal Christmas parties where everyone *brings* their stomach and *shares* food as they participate in and enjoy the festivities regardless of their socioeconomic standing. That is an unsolicited traditional psychosocial support for socioeconomically vulnerable community members that was lost during the pandemic.

Traditional research by famous sociologist Durkheim (1912) and others confirmed that participation in collective gatherings, such as mourning ceremonies, yield psychosocial benefits and emotional upliftment (Páez et al, 2015; Simmons, 2022). Traditional gatherings and ritual engagements (cultural, sporting and community religious gatherings) in rural societies are seen as psychosocial support engagements that enhance mental well-being for participants (Simmons et al., 2022; Fang & Comery, 2024). One of the most important attributes the rural learning ecologies lost during the coronavirus pandemic was the psychosocial support for teachers by the community (Ndasauka, 2024). The purposeful collaboration of community entities is essential for creating and sustaining a learning ecology (Mapasela et al., 2012) (Praptika et al., 2024).

Cooperrider and Fry (2020, p. 270) note that the collaboration of “social and cultural assets, technical and economic ones, psychological and spiritual strengths, ecological strengths of nature, and the strengths of moral models” to enhance conducive environment for supporting of teachers. Teachers supported this way enhance capacity and creativity in their work (Castillo & Barrameda, 2024). It is interesting that there were positive gains brought about by the lockdown which an appreciative inquiry research could highlight and explore. One of those gains was the parents’ heightened concern for their children’s education (Collie, 2021). There seemed to be improved involvement of parents in their children’s education. Parents did their best to support their children where they could. Notwithstanding the rural dynamics which made it difficult for parents in rural learning ecologies to reach out to schools, parents contacted teachers and schools more frequently than before the pandemic, (Sindhya, 2022; Collie, 2021).

2.11 Educational support systems

A learning ecology constitutes a constellation of “overlapping communities of interest; cross pollinating with each other; constantly evolving; and largely self-organizing” (Mapasela et al., 2012, p.92) for the sustenance of the ecology. These communities of interests can be viewed as stakeholder organisations playing from different positions towards the same goal of sustainable learning ecology for the edification of education (Kim, 2024). There are many organisations, globally and locally that form a wide constellation of many social support systems including government and independent organisations that concern (or should) themselves with the quality of education, and care about the role of teachers as the primary resources for provision of education. Caring about their role would be shown by first taking care of teachers’ well-being and development (Waters et al., 2022; McKay et al., 2024).

2.11.1 Global organisations

Among the international humanitarian and education bodies, are organisations such as the United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF), The International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR). The ICESCR and the World Bank have shown commitment and advocacy for global education issues, especially during the coronavirus pandemic (Kramer et al., 2022). UNESCO (2020) added their voice and concern that the coronavirus pandemic negatively affected the schooling activities of students around the globe (Shaukat et al., 2022; UNICEF, 2020).

Development of teachers have been an ongoing conversation for many decades before the coronavirus pandemic. Many countries around the globe take education seriously as an important sector to solve many issues pertaining to social justice and issues of growing the economy and fighting unemployment and poverty (McArdle, 2024). Education plays a very crucial contribution to holistic development of societies for the realisation of SDG4 goals for social justice and world peace sustainability (Holst et al., 2024; UNESCO, 2020). Yet, education was one of the worst affected sector during the coronavirus, especially in rural learning ecologies (UNESCO, 2020; Reimers, 2024).

Development of any country is largely dependent on the level of development of its human resources which can be achieved through quality basic education (Du Plessis & Mestry, 2019; Mallarangan et al., 2024). Psychosocial support for mental health promotion is imperative to the support and development of human resources. According to WHO (2004), mental health promotions are sociopolitical activities and they include improving schooling. These activities are the functions and responsibilities of teachers, governments, as well as NGOs. I have already alluded to the plight of rural learning ecologies as hard hit by the new mode of teaching and learning due to remote and economic reasons. This new online learning and teaching context appears to be a struggle for both students and teachers, with potential negative influences on physical, emotional, and economic conditions (Almusharraf & Bailey, 2021). The ICECSR looks for provisions of the right to education laws by governments, whether they have sound laws and rights pertaining to education, and that they implement their own laws (Nanima & Durojaye, 2019).

2.11.2 The Constitution of the Republic of South Africa

In South Africa, there are many entities or organisations that concern themselves with education-related issues. The first is the government's DBE which carries the mandate to deliver basic education for all South Africans as enshrined in the Constitution of the democratic Republic of South Africa (RSA). Section 195(1)(h) of the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa Act 108 of 1996 provides for teacher development, so they can improve their skills and advance in their profession (RSA, 1996a). The constitution is there to defend and advance the democratic rights of its citizens. All the education laws are derived from the Constitution and the Bill of rights enshrined in the Constitution. Education laws in the new transformative curriculum, The Revised National Curriculum Statement (RNCS) approved on 15 April, 2002 and implemented in 2004, envisaged teachers as key agents of change and contributors to educational transformation in the Republic of South Africa (Msila, 2007).

The RNCS envisaged teachers who are qualified, competent, dedicated, and caring. These teachers would assume various roles including that of mediators of learning, interpreters and designers of

Learning Programmes and Materials (LPM), leaders, administrators and managers, scholars, researchers and lifelong learners, community members, citizens and pastors, assessors and Learning Area or Phase Specialists (DoE 2002: 3). This policy may be juxtaposed against the earlier policy framework, which is White Paper 6 on inclusive education regarding training and preparedness of teachers, which envisaged that *'educators will need to improve their skills and knowledge, and develop new ones. Staff development at the school and district level will be critical to putting in place successful integrated educational practices.'* (DoE, 2001, p., 18; Mckenzie et al., 2023; Reddig & VanLone, 2024).

The Department of Basic Education is faced with a huge responsibility to develop and support teachers to become competent in fulfilling their roles. The teacher training institutions took cue from these outcome ideals to align their training programa along the requirements and they constantly endeavor to deliver on the same mandate (Themane, and Thobejane, 2019; Reddig & VanLone, 2024). Nevertheless, the Department of Basic Education is found lacking in terms of induction programmes and in-service training (Mollo, 2022). Scholars (Darling-Hammond et al., 2024) observe that some teachers had inadequate preparedness in their training and also lacked ongoing psychosocial support when they were first confronted with the realities that demanded their expertise (Myeni, 2024). They feel they could have been better prepared by being more capacitated as beginners and better supported as serving teachers (Ndlovu, 2019; Themane & Thobejane, 2019; White, 2024).

Psychosocial support involves many aspects. Apart from proper training, there is need for support psychologically and socially to prevent mental health issues like stress, anxiety and depression. Teachers would need to be financially incentivised and their livelihood improved so they can better focus on their work (Maree, 2022). The coronavirus exposed the inequalities created by the apartheid legacy in South Africa. The Department of Basic Education derives laws from the Constitution but those laws and policy instruments are not satisfactorily used to develop adequate policies to deal with emergencies such as the coronavirus pandemic. Long before the coronavirus first infection case was reported in schools, the Minister of Basic Education informed school principals to heed ad hoc instructions from the department of health (DoH) (Chauke et al., 2022). That instruction shows that there were no contingency plans or policies in place for emergent

situations as the pandemic. It is in the public discourse and has been reiterated by some researchers including (Maree, 2022) that the DBE was caught off guard in terms of policies in case of emergency (Mathews & Siegfried, 2020).

2.11.3 Teacher professional bodies

South African Council for Educators (SACE) is a teacher registration and regulation professional body. SACE was not only created for enforcing the code of conduct for teachers but also for teacher development. According to education researchers (Mollo, 2022; Wadesango, 2022), SACE has not achieved its purpose of guiding, supporting, and improving teachers in their profession. SACE cites conflicting views of various stakeholders as hindrances for not attaining its mandate of providing development for teachers as envisaged in Section 5(b)(iv) and 5(b)(v) of the SACE Act Section 5(b)(iv) states that:

The Council, with regard to the promotion and development of the education and training profession, must manage a system for the promotion of the continuing professional development of all teachers.

In preparing this section of its Act, SACE developed professional development schedule points for Continuous Professional Teacher Development (CPTD Points Schedule) which contain type 2 school-led activities for promoting learning in schools. These learning activities should encourage schools to be learning organisations that endeavour to be involved in:

School-based meetings, workshops, developmental activities, support sessions, seminars, mini conferences, action research, projects, twinning, networks, responding to school results, professional learning communities at school level and subject cluster meetings (SACE, 2013; SACE, 2011)

Teachers on the ground have not seen these acts come into fruition in their schools, especially in rural learning ecologies. This leaves SACE as a mere policing body only active when it comes to disciplinary matters. Teachers would appreciate to see that their subscriptions earn them benefits in terms of their improvements and support (Mollo, 2022). SACE may also do well by prioritising development of teachers in rural learning ecologies. Research has shown that teacher development

is very low or non-existent in rural learning ecologies (Wadesango, 2022; Cheung et al., 2023). As a result, there is lack of qualified teachers and poor career opportunities to attract teachers to these areas (Du Plessis & Mestry, 2019). Notwithstanding SACE's own mandate on teacher development, SACE could do well either collaborating with DBE or filling the gaps by bringing a variety of CPTD activities (Ndaba et al., 2023; Wadesango, 2022).

2.11.4 School Governing Bodies (SGB's)

Schools Act provides responsibility for School Governing Bodies (SGBs) to ensure that learners get quality education (DoE, 1996). They are expected to provide effective and efficient governance. However, most members on the SGB have difficulty dealing with the complex issues of administration as determined by school governance and management prescripts in the Schools Act (Du Plessis & Mestry, 2019). The SGBs in rural learning ecologies are usually constituted by people who have inadequate knowledge and skills pertaining effective school governance (Polischuk, 2002; Myende & Nhlumayo, 2022). It is incumbent upon other stakeholders like DBE, teacher training institutions, as well as the private sector, to train, invest and contribute to developing necessary skills and knowledge to school governance structures (Darling-Hammond et al., 2024).

A well capacitated SGB can better support teachers. As the most important human resource, teachers need to fulfil their Constitutional mandate of ensuring that learners get quality education (Moorosi et al., 2020; Du Plessis & Mestry, 2019). The DBE has an overarching responsibility to capacitate teachers to take up their responsibilities with full confidence. However, education is the responsibility of everybody including parents. South African Schools Act (DoE, 1996) gives powers and responsibilities to parents as the custodians of their children's education. Parents as School Governing Bodies (SGBs) conduct interviews for hiring educators and recommend to the department the teachers they want for their schools. This is a mammoth task for parents, the majority of whom have low level of education. Sometimes, their inferiority complex causes them to put defensive mechanisms. Sometimes teachers display a superiority complex too (Naidoo, 2019).

This situation creates mistrust and tension between teachers and SGB members. Teachers have to beg the SGB to approve funds to acquire operational resources. Resources including office equipment, stationery, support staff, cleaning staff, and security personnel (Moorosi et al., 2020). The coronavirus pandemic has brought added stress, anxiety, and operational expenses. The school needs to acquire PPEs, additional classrooms for social distancing, and additional staff (UNESCO, 2020). Though teachers have a representation in budget meetings, parents are a huge disproportionate majority (Du Plessis & Mestry, 2019). This causes much frustration and distress for teachers.

Research shows a correlation between the lack of coronavirus preventative measures and teacher burnout (Zadok-Gurman et al., 2021; Sundaram et al., 2023). Teachers in rural schools have no proper staffrooms and, in some cases, even the principal may not have a proper office. In one rural school I visited, the principal did not have an office and operated from his van. SGB members should support teachers by fundraising for school infrastructure and facilities. Teachers need proper ablution facilities, especially in the wake of the coronavirus (Du Plessis & Mestry, 2019; Naidoo, 2019). The parent-teacher relations are explored in this study, because amicability can benefit teachers and education.

2.11.5 Teacher unions

Teacher unions play significant roles in education reform and progression. They play a part in bargaining for teachers' rights and benefits at the Education Relations Labour Council (ERLC) (Hemphill & Marianno, 2021). Their endorsement of changes by the government and other stakeholders ensures much needed ownership of, and commitment to, the policies by teachers (Kim et al., 2022). In this way, they contribute to quality education by collaborating in improving and maintaining a high standard in education (Mafisa, 2017). Apart from their role in lobbying for teachers' rights and improved working conditions, teacher unions also have a responsibility to ensure that psychosocial support is provided for the benefit of teachers (Nyfoudi et al. 2024).

Psychosocial provision includes the augmentation of safety measures for members during the coronavirus pandemic (Kim et al., 2022). Nyfoudi et al. (2024, p.1) point that employee voice

should be “acknowledged as an important alleviation mechanism during turbulent times” such as during the coronavirus and climate change disasters (Powell & Knox, 2024). Their role is very important so teachers can focus on teaching knowing that a union looks after their rights. There are many trade unions competing for teachers’ membership in South Africa (Hemphill & Marianno, 2021; Dahill-Brown & Lavery, 2023).

All unions had something to say in favor of their members during the coronavirus pandemic. They expressed deep concern about the safety of their members (Stark et al., 2024), especially when the Department of Basic Education first wanted to open schools after the first lockdown (Kim et al., 2022). They expressed fear and anger and accused the education ministry of being insensitive and prioritising curriculum coverage above the lives of teachers (Pillay, 2021; Marianno et al., 2022). The DBE pushed ahead with the phased reopening of schools without or before adequately putting proper measures in place (Wang, 2024). This sparked a row between the DBE and teacher unions. Not only did the unions express concern, there were more contestations from concerned parents and other stakeholders (Chauke et al., 2023; Dahill-Brown & Lavery, 2023).

Platooning system after reopening of schools also added extra burden and stress for teachers as they had to repeat lessons as they had to teach half the class at a time (Marionno et al., 2022; Wang, 2024). Rural teachers had no means to switch to online teaching and they received no support in this area (Akban & Dikilitaş, 2022). Research (Nwokeocha, 2021, p.19) found that “...in most places, teaching and learning moved to online platforms but there was no significant support from governments to teachers to help them to teach online effectively” (Ceesay, 2021; Stark et al., 2024). According to teacher unions’ assessments, the department had not provided all schools and teachers adequate personal protective equipment (PPE) to protect members from getting infected with the virus (Stark et al., 2024). The unions had long been contacting the department about the poor infrastructure like the poor ablution conditions in rural schools (Du Plessis & Mestry, 2019).

There is scarce or no running water for washing hands in some rural schools (Midzi et al., 2024), and yet during the coronavirus pandemic, water was needed more for hand-washing. Water is a basic commodity when it comes to psychosocial support principles (Marianno et al., 2022); Dubey, 2020). The government missed countless promises and targets of its own to eradicate pit toilets in

rural schools (Odeku, 2022). In South Africa, a child or two falls into a pit toilet and dies every year (Veriava & Harding, 2023). It is only then that the officials are reminded of their missed promises. The South African Human Rights Commission (SAHRC) points to negligence and violation of basic human rights to dignity as characterising authorities that fail to solve the pit toilet problem (Odeku, 2022).

Seven provinces, out of nine, in South Africa, including KwaZulu-Natal, Free State, Eastern Cape, Mpumalanga, North West, and Limpopo provinces, are largely rural and have schools using pit toilets (Odeku, 2022; Veriava & Harding, 2023). A child falling into a toilet pit is a huge factor for teacher anger, stress, anxiety, and psychological disturbance. Even if it happens in a school far away not known to teachers, it sends shock waves through the country. The toilet system is another thing eroding the dignity of teachers in rural schools. According to Maslow's hierarchy of needs (annexure 5), excretion is at the bottom of physiological needs that need to be met before a person can do any other thing including teaching and learning which requires much self-esteem and confidence to engage and achieve self-actualisation.

South African civil organisations such as Section 27, have an interest in human rights and rights to quality education. They do advocacy on constitutional and education laws as do teacher unions (Kramer et al., 2022). These organisations concern themselves with education in South Africa and have displayed militancy against the challenges of besetting education. They continually lobby for service delivery in schools according to the dictates of the Constitution and other subsidiary education laws (Du Plessis & Mestry, 2019; UNESCO, 2020). Such stakeholder participation should be encouraged to uplift education and teachers (Mapasela et al., 2012).

More commitment from all stakeholders in education, including the teacher professional bodies and the educator training institutions, can contribute towards the realisation of psychosocial support for teachers (Ceesay, 2021; Shakimova et al., 2024). Teacher training institutions are commended for the proliferation of research and publications about the state of teachers and education, though their involvement is only academic. Perhaps they could do well by providing some post-graduation support to teachers (Myeni, 2024). Professional training should be augmented by what Kourkoutas and Hart (2015) describe as psycho-educational, a specialised

form of education to provide psychosocial awareness and knowledge to teachers. There is need for a directed and specialised education (McKay et al., 2024). The first reason is to arm teachers with necessary skills, and the second is to provide mitigating strategies during a crisis such as the coronavirus pandemic (Ceesay, 2021; Nhambura, 2022; Odeku, 2022). Psychosocial support provides mitigation against such psychosocial crisis as due to pandemics (Montero et al., 2024).

The Department of Basic Education has many psychosocial support systems in terms of education laws (RSA, 1996). The education professional registration body for teachers (SACE, 2011), as discussed in the above section, makes provision of support for teachers on paper. It is unfortunate and regrettable that, despite so many good intentions of the education law and those of different institutions, there is little help reaching teachers and other stakeholders, especially in rural learning ecologies (Gamede & Uleanya, 2021). This lack of support can be attributed, among other factors, to the lack of proper collaboration of stakeholders (Kim et al., 2022). One other reason for the lack of implementation and performance is lack of accountability (Leo et al., 2020). Teacher unions are supposed to be watchdogs for the implementation of the rights for their members.

The department should create strong checks and balances to appraise and reckon its work against the prescripts of its Constitutional mandate (RSA, 1996a). A study by Kakar et al. (2020) made findings and recommendations that governments should improve the supportive policy to create conducive education environments, together with the involvement of partnerships in the education sector like the NGOs concerned with education and sustainable community development. This advocacy finding corroborates earlier results by Dinpanah and Ghezalflo (2019) who note that the role of NGOs in achieving sustainable rural development should not be limited to advocacy, but extended to the most needed educational and agricultural training programmes, especially for small farmers. (Kramer et al., 2022; Robinson et al., 2024).

Civic organisations like Section 27, Equal Education (EE), Equal Education Law Centre (EELC), as well as the media, should be applauded for making the government account for lack of implementation (Argon, 2015; Veriava & Harding, 2023). Practical implications to benefit teachers' mental health well-being (MHWB), initiatives can be implemented to reduce job demands while increasing resources to support teachers (Kim et al. 2022). More requisite support

can be ensured through increased collaboration between the department of basic education and other government departments even beyond the pandemic (Armijos et al., 2023; Ceesay, 2021; Wang, 2024).

Accountability is, not lacking only on the part of the department, but also on the school leaders and administrators (Argon, 2015). It is not uncommon to find that important directives and instructions are not implemented at the school level by an irresponsible school leadership (Constantia et al., 2023). Argon (2015) juxtaposes accountability with the concepts of responsibility, honesty, and social justice when it comes to serving the public. Serving the ideals of democracy can be achieved through observing the Code of Ethics and Professional Conduct by all officials concerned (Moll, 2022; Ndaba et al., 2023; Jones, 2022). The voice of teachers through their labour organisations is very important (Nyfoudi et al., 2024) as a means to foster communication and to marshal accountability as a contribution and duty to solving public service issues (Vedder-Weiss et al., 2024).

2.12 District-Based Teams (DBT) and School-Based Teams (SBT)

During the 20th century, the education support services (ESS) were developed and introduced in South African schools (Hay et al., 2021). These ESS were intended to be resources for professionals at school level, to provide optimal support to the school system and specifically to learners and teachers. They were intended to bring various disciplines and specialists such as psychologists and school social workers, among others. The trends of ESS were a direct result of the ‘special education services’ which was first conceptualised in the 18th century globally. During that time, the psychologist’s functions were limited to assessment and screening learners for placement to special schools. In the 19th and 20th centuries, these more specialised psychologists became known as school psychologists or educational psychologists (Hay et al., 2021).

This meant that the ‘optimal support’ was no longer available for teachers as was envisaged by ESS. The question now is who is helping the helper? (Bregin, 2020). Working with psychologically and emotionally distressed people is psychologically and emotionally draining for

the helping professionals (Md Nor et al., 2023). They become emotionally dry without being replenished (Bragin, 2020).

Teachers are required to render education, support, and care to learners of different skills levels, and different psychosocial vulnerability and distress, without being offered proper up-skilling and appropriate training and psychosocial support (Makhalemele & Tlale, 2020). Merely separating learners according to their physical or mental ability does not serve any purpose if teachers are not trained accordingly and given due psychosocial support. The special education services were later taken over by inclusive education (Engelbrecht et al., 2016).

The shift from exclusivity to inclusivity has been long coming. It was because of human rights activist fighting against the sub-human treatment given to people living with disabilities. At the dawn of democracy, South Africa incorporated in the Bill of Rights the protection of vulnerable children and people living with disability in the Constitution (Act 108 of 1996). In South Africa, before the advent of democracy in 1994, the education system was not only segregated according to learner disability or ability, but also along racial lines. It is regrettable that the legacy of apartheid still lingers on, especially in rural learning ecologies. Good laws are appreciated to provide psychosocial support for vulnerable learners and marginalised teachers, especially in rural communities, but implementation remains a problem for the attainment of all the supporting resources (Boloka & Ngoepe, 2024).

The democratic government of South Africa has since passed many laws to support education and close the inequality gap in society, especially in education (Muthukrishna & Engelbrecht, 2024). Taking a cue from the Salamanca (UNESCO, 1994), that governments are expected to provide of educational psychology programs and psychosocial support systems to support education for all children including vulnerable learners, the South African government embarked on changes in the education system (Ambelu et al., 2019). Provision of education to vulnerable children is more than ensuring physical access to school buildings, but extends to inclusivity in all aspects of provisioning of quality education for all citizens. (Halawa & Salmi, 2024).

The department of education, taking cue from the Constitution in 1996, the National Commission on Special Needs in Education and Training (NCSNET) was constituted to make recommendations to the minister of education. Among other things, NCSNET stood for delivery of a range of opportunities for education provision and support services in the integrated system of education (DoE 1997). This was in line with the outcomes and recommendations of the Salamanca Framework for Action. The South African government subsequently published the Education White Paper 6 on Education (DoE, 2001).

The infamous legacy of apartheid and the lingering inequalities means that the government of South Africa finds it impossible to provide every school with a psychologist (Engelbrecht, et al.,2017). The Education White Paper 6 (DoE, 2001, p.50) envisaged that:

“at the institutional education level, partnerships will be established with parents so that they can, armed with information, counselling and skills, participate more effectively in the planning and implementation of inclusion activities, and so that they can play a more active role in the learning and teaching of their own children, despite limitations due to disabilities or chronic illnesses”.

This ideal was to provide a system where adults in the learning ecology would be up-skilled and supported so they could support the inclusive education system (Makhalemele & Payne-van Staden, 2020). It is also recommended by educational psychologists (Bradshaw et al.,2019; Engelbrecht, et al., 2017) that school-based support teams should be established and capacitated to provide psychosocial support programmes at a local level (Epstein, 2018; Lyons et al., 2016). The school-based support teams, constituted by teachers and capacitated by educational psychologists, are supposed to provide learners with counselling and the much needed psychosocial support to teachers as well (Hay et al., 2021). Research has found ‘moderate evidence’ of the effectiveness of the role played by school-based interventions in mental health literacy and reducing the stigma associated with being a mental health user (Ma et al., 2022). Collaborated responsibility and dedicated leadership (Lewis, 2016) for provision of PSS would greatly benefit teachers and learners.

A collaboration between the public health departments and the District-Based Teams can help the SBSTs with support and education in the learning ecologies to provide psychological support, not only for learners, but for teachers as well, as they also show marked susceptibility to stress (Qin & Song, 2022). The outbreak of the coronavirus glaringly exposed the absence of support for teachers by both DBSTs and SBSTs in rural learning ecologies. Teachers found themselves with no psychosocial support to navigate the turbulent waves of the coronavirus pandemic (Makhalemele & Payne-van Staden., 2020).

Research shows that teachers do not get support from their superiors at school, as well as from district offices (Lepphoto & Hlalele, 2021). Teachers in rural learning ecologies bear the brunt of poor communication from the district offices to parents, which adds to their anxiety and stress. (Pressley, 2021; Hu et al., 2021). Before the coronavirus outbreak, teachers were already bemoaning the lack of support from the District Support Teams. They blamed the officials for grand-standing and wielding power in a top-down approach, remotely enforcing policies without due support (Ndlovu, 2019). During the coronavirus pandemic, teachers blamed the department for pushing to rescue the academic year at the expense of their lives (Dlamini & Zulu, 2024).

2.13 Chapter synthesis

This literature review explored literature on the impact of the coronavirus on the lives, livelihoods, and professional life of teachers in rural learning ecologies. The coronavirus has wreaked havoc to humankind globally, with added intensity on the lives of teachers and schooling in rural learning ecologies. It is also evident, according to the available literature, that teachers did not receive satisfactory psychosocial support during this most trying time. The void and the missed opportunities are still there. Nobody was prepared for the pandemic of this magnitude. However, the far-reaching damage can be blamed on the pre-existing conditions of the rural learning ecologies.

There is no collaborative support for teachers from the teacher professional bodies and the teacher training institutions. Teacher training institutions are commended for the proliferation of research and publications about the state of teachers and education, and it seems that their involvement is only academic. Maybe they can do well by providing some post-graduation support to teachers.

Other professions like psychologists are offered internship programmes whereby students start working whilst attached to the training institution for at least a year before they take their board exams leading to professional registration. Attorneys also serve as interns before they write professional board exams. However, teachers are registered by SACE without any form of professional development and post-training support and assessment of their readiness, and they are thrown into the deep end to learning swimming for survival. It is encouraging that teachers work together and support one another in knowledge-generation, and they share the knowledge to guide beginner teachers.

Experienced teachers can use their experience to initiate novice teachers into the practice. Teachers should get opportunities for development whereby they can get professional empowerment and continuous up-skilling. Peer development platform is also encouraged for the sharing of positive ideas on mutual support and learner support. The Department of Basic Education has psychosocial support systems in the education law. Yet, despite the good intentions of the education law, there is very little help reaching teachers, especially in rural learning ecologies. This lack of support can be attributed, among other factors, to the lack of proper collaboration of stakeholders.

The second reason for the lack of implementation and performance is a lack of accountability. The department should create strong checks and balances against its Constitutional mandate. Reckoning is an accounting concept referring to accounting for every number or entrant in the balance sheet. Civic organisations as well as the media, have done a sterling job in holding the government to account. The review of existing literature shows that there has been keen interest on the writers reporting on chronological events, the prevalence and impact of the coronavirus pandemic on the lives of teachers, and the citizens of the globe in general.

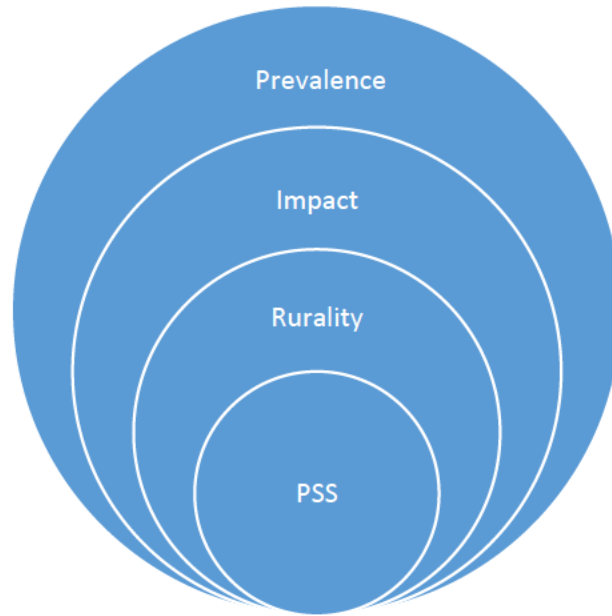


Figure 2.3: the order of reporting/research coverage: prevalence>impact>rurality>PSS

It appears that psychological impact was huge and it continues to haunt teachers, months after the pandemic has subsided. The next issue that caught the attention of the writers was the concept of rurality. It seems that it was impossible to fully report on the prevalence and the impact of the pandemic without any reference to issues of socioeconomic hardships caused by marginalisation of rural learning ecologies. Surprisingly, the phenomenon of the psychosocial support received the least coverage of the three phenomena. It shows that there is a research gap when it comes to the psychosocial support of teachers or even other frontline workers like the health workers during the coronavirus pandemic.

CHAPTER THREE

3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

3.1 Introduction

A theoretical framework serves as a microscopic lens through which the researcher views the process and elements of the study. It is used for various purposes at different stages of the research process: during the development of research questions and the rationale of its methodology, as a lens during the design and data collection stages, for framing data analysis and result interpretation (Ataro, 2020). The theoretical framework sets the stage and defines the context for the inquiry. It embodies the researcher's conceptualisation of the research constructs such as the phenomenon. Adequate description the phenomenon is enabled by the theoretical framework.

Usually, a theoretical framework is developed over a long period, and comprises many theories refined over time, with many philosophers and theorists involved in its refinement (McGaghie et al., 2001; Uher, 2019). A theoretical framework can also be formulated through an integration of theories "rendering a more complete picture of the phenomenon" (telling, 2001, p281). Theoretical framework helps to position and draws the focus of the researcher to the interest/ relevant information to pay attention to, concerning the phenomenon (Terre Blanche et al., 2006). It also helps the researcher to set the platform and to describe the context of the study (Osanloo & Grant, 2016). Ahmad et al., (2019) add by saying:

Theoretical framework reflects researcher's assumptions, ethics and personal beliefs, it should be aligned with the research problem, purpose statement and significance of the study. Additionally, theoretical framework should serve as an anchor for data analysis, discussion and conclusion of a dissertation or thesis.

A research journey starts with a concept that unfolds further and more deeply as the researcher articulates various ideas on how to conduct such research. These ideas should include the contexts, the beliefs or hypothetical theories, as well as the methods to be used. That can be loosely described as a conceptual framework. Conceptual framework provides the thoughts about why the study one wishes to undertake matters, and also attempting justify the appropriateness of the means and

methods to carry out a rigorous study (Ravitch & Riggan, 2016). This places a conceptual framework overarching and broader than a theoretical framework. Without engaging in a philosophical debate, I see a theoretical framework as a guiding framework and *modus operandi* or the method that translates the concept into reality (Osanloo & Grant, 2016). The appreciative inquiry, as a theoretical framework, guides and anchors the study by asking questions that influence the answers we find. The answers then become a product of our conceptualisation (Gergen, 2015; Merriam & Grenier, 2019). This study is based on the amalgamated theoretical framework of psychosocial support principles (PSSP) and appreciative inquiry principles (AIP).

3.2 The psychosocial support principles (PSSP) and appreciative inquiry principles (AIP)

3.2.1 The psychosocial support theory

The concept of psychosocial support was made popular by the psychologist Erikson, famous for his work on *psychosocial development theory* in the 1950s. In his book, *child and society* (Erikson, 1963), Erickson developed the eight stages of psychosocial development. He suggested that a person's life is a cycle of development from childhood to old age through which a person needs to strike a balance between binaries such as basic trust over basic mistrust (to development of hope and courage at infancy stage). This is the first step in psychosocial adaptation for healthy psychosocial well-being later in life. The last and eighth stage is Integrity vs Despair where an individual learns to search for inner peace. According to Erikson, (1963) He argues that each and every developmental stage is initiated or triggered by a 'crisis,' which defines a turning point ushering a new developmental milestone in a life stage of an individual (Erikson,1963). Psychosocial grounding and adaptation will determine how an individual negotiates future crisis in life (Knight, 2017).

To demonstrate strong theoretical linkage and overlap between appreciative inquiry principles (AI) and psychosocial support principles (PSS), I would like to start by the definition of psychosocial support. Psychosocial has two dimensions: psychological and social dimensions. Psychosocial support ensures a person's psychological well-being as playing out in social ecology. It is an ongoing process of meeting physical, emotional, social, mental, and spiritual needs

(Mapasela et al. 2012, p. 99). The definition is not comprehensive without a discussion of the four theories of psychosocial support as well as the principles of psychosocial support.

3.2.1.1 The four theories of psychosocial support

The four theories of psychosocial support are self-efficacy, stress and coping, learned helplessness, and social support. They provide an understanding for participants to navigate adversity through psychosocial support, projecting a positive outlook of things in their lives and practice. The four theories of psychosocial support are derived from the tenets of social psychology, and are further augmented by social epidemiologists (Gonzalez et al., 1990; Whitney et al., 2019).

The theories are particularly suitable to provide a model for psychosocial support during a pandemic such as the coronavirus. They provide a framework of communication between and among individuals, groups, and communities. Strategic and planned communication becomes a framework for coping strategies that produce generative conversations within participants engaging in an appreciative inquiry. In times such as the coronavirus pandemic or any other emergent situations (Holman, 2010), psychosocial intervention strategies are essential. Appreciative inquiry intervention provides such psychosocial intervention through the principle of social construction of reality (Bushe, 2007).

People exist in ecological settings, not only as individuals, but also in various relationships in families, groups, and organisations. Appreciative inquiry works with people as individuals as well as collectives, to create a conducive climate for psychosocial support and hope for the future. The psychosocial domain provides and creates a conducive environment for appreciative inquiry. This is an interwoven theoretical synergy. Appreciative inquiry encourages people to think positively and have progressive conversations about their situation and their shared environment (Bushe, 2012; Merriam & Grenier, 2019). They find answers by focusing on “what works” and what gives life to a group or community (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2007, p.102). Appreciative inquiry provides a paradigm change from a deficit problem-solving model to a strengths-based approach with strategic planning and for strategic change (Slavik, 2021; Alvarez-Robinson et al., 2024). AI

change is supported by PSS through the four theories of psychosocial support: self-efficacy, social support theories, stress and coping, and learned helplessness (Darling-Hammond et al., 2024).

3.2.1.1.1 Self-efficacy theory

Self-efficacy is cognitive and psychological strength supporting a positive outlook and well-being. It refers to people's beliefs in their capabilities to mobilise cognitive resources and execute the courses of actions needed to meet given situational demands (Bandura, 1986; Gonzalez et al., 1990). Self-efficacy is more specific and has a directed focus than the traits of self-esteem and self-confidence in that it predicts behaviour despite and beyond the challenges (Carleton et al., 2018). Self-efficacy can be changed or enhanced through motivation and by pulling together cognitive resources. Such cognitive resources are skills that one can acquire and perfect to produce and regulate events in their lives (Bandura, 1982).

Skills can be mastered by setting short-term achievable goals. Such goals must be clear, specific, and realistic. Realistic goals help to enhance the belief that they can be achieved (Darling-Hammond et al., 2024). Attainable goals motivate people because they are within reach for them. Specific goals provide clear directions on what is to be achieved. Psychosocial intervention (Gonzalez et al., 2019) can have positive impact, support change, and enhance self-efficacy (Carleton et al., 2018). Psychosocial intervention can change a person's behaviour and confidence as well as health status. The coronavirus had a negative effect on people's lives and was a source of emotional pressure and stress (Huang et al., 2020). Such emotional pressure and stress would need an individual with emotional viscosity to endure and resolve. Viscosity is an engineering term referring to the strength of a material to withstand pressure and strain.

Psychosocial support, through the appreciative inquiry, creates, not only knowledge and skills required to neutralise the grip and effect of fear, but also psychological elasticity (Ijntema et al., 2023) and emotional resilience (Gergen, 2022). Cognitive resolve helps to improve emotional viscosity and self-efficacy. Moreover, resolved feelings of anxiety alleviate an individual's emotional agility, hope, and optimism (Jacobs, 2023). Emotional support entails support from others to make a person feel cared for and loved. It also involves discussing a problem to size it

properly (neither to exaggerate nor to trivialise) but providing positive and accurate analysis to make meaning of a situation. That brings encouragement needed to improve a person's self-worth and transition from victim mentality to seeing new possibilities (Taylor & Seeman, 1999). Appreciative inquiry provides a supportive environment and framework for social support. That supportive environment can be referred to as psychosocial domain.

3.3.1.1.2 Stress and coping theory

Coping is defined as “the person's constantly changing cognitive and behaviour efforts to manage specific external and/or internal demands that are appraised as taxing or exceeding the person's resources” (Gonzalez et al., 2019, p.19). It is also defined as the thoughts that individuals contemplate and actions they take to deal with stressful events (Huang et al., 2020). Coping strategies keep changing according to specific demands and situational circumstances. Therefore, stress and coping theory effects can be appraised from person to person and according to differing situations.

3.2.1.1.3 Social support theories

Seeking social support is an indication that a person recognises the importance of the support systems that can help to face or resolve their challenges. Such recognition is therapeutic and is a first step to healing, and shows a glimmer of hope and a ray of light at the end of the channel (Akwa et al., 2022). Social support provides the social dimension and understanding of the psychosocial concept. Social support has been found to have a positive effect on recovery from psychological distress and maintenance of well-being (Wallston et al., 1983; Kaljee et al., 2017). This means that psychosocial support can alter one's perception of a situation, belief about one's future accomplishments, and the resulting behaviour. This is supported by the tenets of appreciative inquiry, especially that of generativity (Whitney & Trosten-Bloom, 2019).

Generativity originates from the psychosocial development theories (Erikson, 1963). Number seven in Erikson's eight stages of psychosocial development is *generativity vs stagnation*. This is the area of operation where psychosocial support and appreciative inquiry collide to change the

status quo. According to McAdams et al. (1997, p.678), generativity refers to “adult concern and commitment to wellbeing of next generation with the aim to contribute” using their life stories to impart and bequith “positive legacy that will outlive the self.” Generativity encompasses “stories that intergrate their reconstructed past, perceived present and anticipated future”, (678).

Part of social support is the concept of ‘social aid’. As seen in the literature review, the South African government provided social support to many vulnerable citizens during the lockdown. The fund was used to make available emergency food parcels (Akwa et al., 2020; Khowa et al., 2022). This is a type of social support known as ‘instrumental aid’ that involves focused social interest and care in dealing with challenges facing victims (Zhou & Yao, 2020). Such care-driven determinations increase enthusiasm for problem solving and decision-making for, on behalf of, and together with the victims (Gonzalez et al., 1990). It encourages active and prompt decision making by the authorities, without imputing blame for wrong decisions made whilst exercising cautious self-control in not overstepping victims’ autonomy in the name of psychosocial support.

The victims are also expressly assured that they are not blamed and that it is not because of what they did or did not do to deserve bad things happening to them (McKay et al., 2024). They also learn to distinguish what they can control as opposed to what they cannot control. They get to say what kind of psychosocial support they would like, while authorities to exercise self-control (Gilman, 2021). Self-control is cautious restraint while providing coping strategies in case something does not go well. It is also avoiding self-guilt which usually visits victims’ thinking. Self-guilt can cause individuals to think that they called bad things to happen to them through bad behaviour or irresponsible decision-making. The example would be a rape victim beating themselves thinking they somehow led the perpetrator to commit such a heinous act. A person might think they deserve to get a virus because they did not follow the safety protocols (Sung, 2022; Usher et al., 2020).

Others may blame themselves for bringing the virus home to infect an elderly person who died of the coronavirus symptoms or illness (Sung, 2022). It is a psychological counsellor’s function to dismiss blame and culpability also for health workers who might think they could have done anything to prevent the death of a patient. Some health workers refused to work in a coronavirus

unsafe environment, and they could harbor guilt for the death of patients (Huang et al., 2020; Kar et al., 2020). The last coping strategy under stress and coping is positive appraisal. Positive appraisal is a strategy with remarkable success results with sick people. They are encouraged to focus on what they can do, instead of dwelling on what they cannot do. It is used by health counsellors to help people identify, set, and work sturdily and patiently towards those goals (Gonzalez et al., 1990). This positive mindset is best achieved in a framework of appreciative inquiry.

3.2.1.1.4 Learned helplessness theory

One of the negative beliefs which engagement in the appreciative inquiry and psychosocial support will help to change is ‘Learned helplessness theory’. It is another theory derived from social psychology useful for mental health behaviour change. Learned helplessness is the direct opposite of self-efficacy in terms of beliefs. Because of repeated failures and adverse experiences, people who resort to learned helplessness believe and come to a generalisation that their situation cannot be changed. They believe they have no control and that none of their efforts can bring about desired outcomes (Filippelo et al., 2018). It may lead to despair and can be a causal factor for depression (Prihadi et al., 2019; Gonzalez et al., 1990).

According to Gurefe and Bakalim (2018, p. 155), “learned helplessness is when one observes a discrepancy between one’s behaviour and the outcome of such behaviour, and the lack of will to repeat the same behaviour in future believing that the same outcome will occur, even when it is evident that it will not lead to the same outcome.” It comes into play by three identified binaries of causal dimensions: internal versus external, global versus specific, and stable versus unstable. Internal versus internal explains and distinguishes between the circumstances a person believes they have control over and those that a person believes they have no control over (Gonzalez et al., 1990; Gurefe & Bakalim, 2018).

A person may have to determine if the contingent response to an eventful situation is located and dependent on internal personal attributes or external global factors. Does it require invoking inner resources or there’s nothing to do to salvage or counter the situation except to pray? Prayer is one

of the psychosocial support coping mechanisms that may be answered miraculously by supernatural powers or the supernatural powers may give strength and wisdom to ecological psychosocial support systems. Prayer comes with the belief that what I am helpless to do, the Creator of the universe out there may make happen for me (Burke, 2013). That belief brings about therapy and produces faith through revived hope.

When people feel overwhelmed and helpless in their inner strength, there is help available. The process of appreciative inquiry helps to wreak inner strength and promote belief through a dimension of interpersonal caring as a support system (Gonzalez et al., 1990). Through the principle of human inter-dependence called Ubuntu and through the analogy of ecological dynamics people provide contingency for one another's difficult circumstances (Gonzalez et al., 1990; Gurefe & Bakmlim, 2018; Filippelo et al., 2018). This is collective efficacy that promotes individual efficacy for members belonging to a group that they may experience positive outcomes in the group (Hobfoll et al., 2009).

3.2.2 The principles of psychosocial support

The elements of the principles of psychosocial support are a sense of safety, calm, self-and community efficacy, connectedness, and hope (box 3.1). They are a framework for dissipating fear and addressing feelings of anxiety; to bring a sense of safety and calmness, to resolve pressures that cause stress, and to re-establish connectedness to bring back the sense of belonging and future hope. These elements of intervention principles provide a framework to inform and guide prevention and intervention initiatives at early to mid-term stages (Sijbrand ij et al., 2006). The old saying that prevention is better than cure cannot be over-emphasised when it comes to mental health care (McKay et al., 2024). Following the measures of prevention in the healthcare, priority order for mental health intervention is early intervention.

The principles of psychosocial support provide skills and strategies on what to do when performing Psychological First aid (PFA). Unlike a psychological trauma briefing which is usually one session taking victims through engagements that make them re-live the trauma, PFA does not see survivors only as victims, but it is designed to promote elements that are more supportive and providing

sustainable psychosocial healing (Sijbrandij et al., 2006). Healing takes time and needs a proper supportive framework to finish its course. Sijbrandij et al. (2020) define Psychological First Aid (PFA) as an approach to helping people affected by an emergency, disaster, or other adverse event such as pandemic.

A pandemic like the coronavirus wreaks psychosocial havoc in the lives of people. It has already been established in the literature review that the coronavirus has negatively affected human functioning and livelihoods, especially in rural communities (Kim, 2024). The principles of psychosocial support provide a framework for rallying formidable psychosocial support during and after the grip of the coronavirus pandemic (West et al., 2021). Juxtaposed and fused in implementation and enactment with the phases of the AI, the principles of psychosocial support provide a unique collaborative framework for psychosocial support (Barker-Davies et al., 2020; Kim et al., 2020).

The psychological and social enactment provided by the appreciative inquiry is a good framework for the application of the psychosocial support principles to mitigate the effects of a disaster such as the coronavirus pandemic. Appreciative inquiry embraces, supports, and enhances psychological as well as social dynamics of human functioning to promote the positive attributes and enhance supportive social elements that help human beings to thrive (West et al., 2021; Bhadra, 2022). However, Psychosocial resources which including coping style and social support are differentially distributed by social class (Núñez-Regueiro et al., 2024). Rural communities are in dire need of psychosocial resources (Heikkinen, Kirsi-Marja et al., 2024). The perpetual relentless rural marginalisation deprives teachers of much-needed psychosocial support. They could benefit from the principles of psychosocial support as a means of mitigating the effects of poverty (Goldman et al., 2021; Green & Reid, 2021).

The principles of psychosocial support are:

- (i) Provision of information and basic aid (getting adequate information about the nature of crises or disasters and those affected, as well as providing basic supplies such as food)
- (ii) Promoting a sense of safety, calmness, self-and community efficacy, connectedness to others, and hope (the five essential psychosocial support principles for individuals and community-based support)
- (iii) Social acknowledgment (victim's experience of positive reactions from the society that show appreciation) (Duckers et al., 2017).

Box 3.1 The principles of psychosocial support

Provision of information and basic aid is an ongoing need for teachers and schools in rural learning ecologies. In an appreciative inquiry process, the purpose of data and information gathering is not limited to data analysis and findings, but goes further to feed into knowledge creation. During the coronavirus pandemic, teachers in rural learning ecologies struggled to get useful information about the nature and the extent of the pandemic and the disaster. For example, it was much later that medical science discovered that the virus was spread through air droplets (Bahramian, 2023). Lack of accurate information causes speculation that can exacerbate fear (unfounded or ill-informed fear of getting infected and infecting family members), anxiety (loss of control) about the situation, and depression (Dubey, 2020). This causes feelings of anger, frustration, and despondency.

The appreciative inquiry process provides information necessary for making sense of the disaster. It has been established in this literature review that making meaning of the situation is the first step in the psychological healing journey. The Appreciative inquiry process empowers teachers with new communication skills in information sharing and information processing for psychosocial support enhancement among their colleagues, family, and the community at large. In appreciative inquiry engagements, teachers process information to produce new knowledge. Powered with new knowledge, teachers become activists and community leaders so that fear will no longer grip the community in case of future disasters (Kappler et al., 2024).

A sense of safety, calmness, self-and community efficacy, connectedness to others, and hope constitute five essential psychosocial support principles for individuals and community-based support. Modal (truthful, necessary, and contingent) information should be made available to bring a sense of safety, calmness, and connectedness. Such information can inspire hope necessary for belief in the continuation of life (efficacy). Social acknowledgment is a victim's experience of positive reactions from society that show appreciation). People in leadership and authority have a duty to show regard and appreciation for their subjects or situations.

These psychosocial support principles sum up the contextual framework and functioning of psychosocial support. They provide essential context conducive for promoting psychosocial well-being, as well as for preventing and treating psychological disorders that usually manifest after a crisis or disaster (Bhadra, 2022; McKay et al., 2024). It has been established in the literature review that psychosocial support for teachers in rural learning ecologies was very scarce. Yet, in the situation where psychosocial support is not adequately provided from out-community sources (Taylor & Seeman, 1999), teachers can be encouraged and empowered to rally mutual support within their Communities of Practice (CoP) groupings (Akinyemi et al., 2020).

Communities of Practice are groups of people who share a common vision of bettering their lives and that of others as a group or community. They network and rally psychosocial resources (Taylor & Seeman, 1999; Heikkinen, Kirsi-Marja et al., 2024) to generate knowledge for solving life problems and wisdom for future applications (Bushe, 2013). They learn from one another in an informal way and share their collective strength and expertise. They design practical processes to drive their self-help and emancipation programmes (Wenger, 2011; Wenger & Snyder, 2000). Appreciative inquiry provides such empowerment for groups, organisations, and communities (Sun et al., 2022; McArdle, 2024). Appreciative inquiry theory integrates into the theory and principles of the psychosocial support.

The integrative framework is suitable to foster applicability, theory, and practice in exploring the phenomenon of psychosocial support (Tellings, 2011). This can be clearly demonstrated in the application of psychosocial support in building of resilience for teachers even in the absence of social support from other sources or responsible stakeholders (Gamede & Uleanya, 2021).

Psychological resilience has proven essential for cushioning and mitigating against psychological distress caused by traumatic events or diseases such as the coronavirus.

The traditional definition of resilience is “bouncing back” (Zhang et al., 2022, p.20) meaning bouncing back to the original state of normality. But I like the definition of psychological resilience as ‘bouncing forward’ which implies gaining empowerment to face future challenges (Hynes et al., 2020; Bartuseviciene et al., 2024). Psychological resilience is made possible in the integrative theoretical framework of psychosocial support principles (meaning for healing) and appreciative inquiry (strength to move forward). Research by Zhang et al. (2022) found that during the coronavirus pandemic, teachers’ perceived support from other stakeholders was below the average, whereas psychological resilience was above the average (Clark, 2021; Bartuseviciene et al., 2024). Psychological resilience has the same origin as positive psychology of the appreciative inquiry. It can be regarded as a mental strength that keeps one standing when very little help comes by (McArdle, 2024).

Psychological resilience is the fortitude that helps individuals to develop strength and defense mechanisms against situations of adversity (IJntema et al., 2023). It helps to shield individuals from risk factors, and to recover from adverse experiences due to psychological pathologies caused by exposure to traumatic situations. Psychological resilience can also assist in lessening the impact of stressful events on the psychological well-being of individuals (Zhang et al., 2022; Sun et al., 2022). Whereas appreciative inquiry accentuates and uses ‘what worked’ during a psychosocial crisis to address the issues, psychosocial support can also play a preventive role. Psychosocial support can prevent the onset of such mood disorders as depression. Since when depression has started, individuals isolate themselves and it makes it difficult for them to benefit from psychosocial support or counselling (Burke, 2013). In other words, PSS can provide a domain for successful implementation of AI, since it would be difficult to get people to a positive disposition once they are deep in mood disorders and depression. PSS and AI provide a great framework and domain for community resilience (Ndasauka, 2024; McArdle, 2024).

3.3 The appreciative inquiry

3.3.1 Historical background of AI

The appreciative inquiry is the framework and conceptual background that provides the philosophical thinking and the methodological steering of the direction of the study. (Cooperrider et al., 2003). The historical background of appreciative inquiry can be traced back to David L. Cooperrider and Suresh Srivastva who developed it in the 1980s (Bushe, 2005; Alvarez-Robinson 2024). David Cooperrider was a doctoral student of Professor Suresh Srivastva. For his study, Cooperrider collected data on problems and issues about Organisational Behaviour (OB). He was encouraged by Srivastva to “put the problems aside and focus on what gave life and vitality to the organization” (Bushe, 2012, p.8).

Later, a collaborative engagement on an Organisational Development (OD) project between Cooperrider, another student, Srivastva, and another professor, plunged them into an uncomfortable argument due to the emotional baggage from their past experiences. They resolved their impasse by agreeing to focus on asking positive questions that helped them to view their past experiences positively. That engagement, together with Cooperrider’s doctoral dissertation: *the impact of inquiry on social systems*, gave birth to appreciative inquiry (Bushe, 2012; Watkins et al., 2011). Philosophically, appreciative inquiry draws from the Socratic concept of *episteme*, or knowledge embedded in the active accomplishment of a goal, with *techne* representing the craft-like ability to make or perform (Gergen, 2015). The founders also believed that “inquiry into the social potential of a social system should begin with appreciation, should be collaborative, should be provocative, and should be applicable” (Bushe, 2012, p.1).

3.3.1.1 Appreciation

Appreciation means to know, to be conscious of, or to take full account of something. It may also mean to gratefully recognise the goodness of something or to have esteemed regard of a person. It demands action from those who appreciate what others value at the time when it still matters (Grant & Humphries, 2006). Cooperrider initially called appreciative inquiry the ‘appreciative analysis’. To analyse is an idea of considering parts of something with a view to finding out what it is made

of or how it works (Cooperrider & Srivastva, 2017). The appreciative inquiry pays attention to social potential and what gives life to an organisation and to a social system. This, it does, by accentuating or appreciating what is good in it (Bushe, 2012). This ordinarily assumes and recognises the innate social capital and indigenous knowledge systems already existing within every group or community (Hlalele, 2019). The term ‘appreciate’ is an economics concept referring to something increasing in value (Watkins, et al., 2011; Mashego et al., 2021).

Walker (2023, p. 30) describes one of the appreciative inquiry theoretical bases as: the “Life-Giving Properties of a Social System”, a notion that every social system has potential in the form of a set of properties that give and sustain its life. These properties can be seen as social potential or social capital. Hlalele (2019, p. 92) writes that “All communities (including rural ecologies) possess strong and diverse forms of capital that can be of benefit in addressing community challenges.”. All systems have capacity for self-renewal or self-correction, and this natural attribute should be recognised and appreciated by researchers and experts before they relegate communities to gloom and oblivion. All restoration strategies, goals, and practices should be focused on enhancing natural regeneration of an ecological community to regain its state of equilibrium. They have capacity for self-sustenance and self-perpetuation, though with some support but without absolute reliance on foreign intervention or dictatorship (Michaels et al., 2024).

Appreciative inquiry awakens us to appreciate and promote such social capital of communities (Pavez et al., 2021). Garret (2022) defines ‘appreciation’ as the feeling and expression of gratitude. It involves holding a favorable opinion, and having a full understanding of the importance of something. Appreciation “illuminate(s) strengths, to bring out the best in people, teams and organizations” (Whitney, 2008, p.14). The emphasis is on appreciating the strengths of individuals, organisations, and communities as Hlalele (2019) posits that everyone has some unique talent. Cooperrider et al. (2003, p. 20) put it simply as “The assumption of appreciative inquiry is simple: every organisation has something that works right – things that give it life when it is vital effective and successful.” Appreciation frees the mind from negative thinking and positions participants to embrace what is inherently good to recognise latent possibilities, opportunities, and skills that might be available for future use. (Garret, 2022). The primary function of a researcher, together

with the participants, is then to discover, highlight, and describe existing talents, and appreciate special gifts, innovation, or opportunities, however small, which may encourage participants' competencies and strengths for the organisation (Garret, 2022; Whitney et al., 2019; Bushe, 2012).

3.3.1.2 Applicability

Appreciative Inquiry, as a form of action research, carries designs that excite participants into action, inspire possibilities, and compel action (Grant & Humphries, 2006). One of the most important purposes of a theoretical framework is to provide a strategy for finding possible answers to new problems which have no existing or known solutions (Ravitch & Riggan, 2016; Ahmad et al., 2019). Garret (2022) notes that appreciative inquiry is a framework for strategising solutions for change. The strength of the appreciative inquiry as a theoretical framework is demonstrated in its cycle of phases known as 5D model of application. The appreciative inquiry was first founded only as a philosophy in 1987. It was a decade later in 1997 when Cooperrider and Diana Whitney developed the 4D model that became a method for practical operation and applicability for AI. Later on, a fifth phase called 'Define' was added. 'Define' assumes the first position in the 5D phases as it is designed to define and set up the scene (Cooperrider & Srivastva, 2017).

Appreciative inquiry connects the 5D method phases to the philosophy of social constructionist theory (Bushe, 2012; Whitney & Cooperrider, 2000). Bushe, (1999, p.61) calls it "a *theory* of organizing and *method* for changing social systems" (italics mine). Nearly two decades later, Dewar and MacBride, (2017) still concurred with the excellent pliability of AI, testifying that 'Appreciative inquiry has a unique focus on what is working well, understanding why these aspects work well and co-creating strategies to help these good practices happen more of the time. ...to celebrate and develop excellent human interaction that promotes dignity'.

The five phases of appreciative inquiry are very practical and prove and promote its applicability as the enabling framework. Starting with the choice of a topic that, according to Cooperrider et al. (2003), help to move the study in the direction it should go (Bushe, 2013). The Affirmative Topic Choice (ATC) articulates the elements of the study and completes the process of conceptualisation by the researcher (Cooperrider et al., 2003). The concepts of the elements (psychosocial support,

rurality, and the pandemic) are fully described, and represent the phenomenon, environment, and pandemic conditions.

3.3.1.3 Collaborative

Appreciative Inquiry was founded through a collaborative engagement of Cooperrider and Srivastva whose argument emanated from their emotional baggage from their past experiences (Bushe, 2012; Alvarez-Robinson 2024), but focused on what worked. Appreciative inquiry is a form of Participatory Action Research (PAR). However, it differs from Participatory Action Research in that, according to Garret (2022, p.105), “PAR looks for a problem and tries to fix it”, whereas appreciative inquiry endeavors to amplify the strengths and capitalise on the positive attributes already existing within individuals and the organization, needed for intervention and change (Boyd & Bright, 2007).

The basic assumptions upheld by PAR tenets support a mode for action research believed and promoted by community psychologists. Appreciative inquiry also subscribes to assets-based approaches (McArdle, 2024). Assets-based approaches, as derived from fundamentals of positive psychology, are essential for the conceptualisation of the human condition and actualisation of dreams of individuals as well as for the community or learning ecology (Boyd & Bright, 2007). It is also referred to as strength-based approach as it seeks to highlight and improve what is already working within the community or organisation (Calabrese et al., 2010). Principles or tenets handed down from PAR to AI are those of co-creation of knowledge, and collaborative creation of knowledge for social change.

Knowledge is created through engaging in cooperative processes. Such knowledge is based on the lived experiences of participants (Lewis et al., 2016). Moving from problem-orientation to an appreciative posture creates a mode for optimism in the face of adversity (Bushe, 2005). This appreciative attitude has great potential for positive transformation and change (Cooperrider & Srivastva, 2017). The common ground and belief is that this posture affirms the participants as co-researchers (May, 2020). Further, the constructionist background grounded appreciative inquiry as a theory of affirmation (Carter, 2006; Gergen, 2022). Garret (2022, p.105) notes PAR’s heavy

reliance on the “participation and dialogue among professionals and other individuals directly involved in groups or organizations in order to develop solutions that can be actively applied to real-life problems”. This pragmatic participation approach recognises the importance of collaboration as very important, not only in problem-solving, but also in enhancing creativity and design (Whitney et al., 2019). Democratic, non-bureaucratic, and non-hierarchical collaboration allows for all stakeholders to participate in the quest for innovative change. Engagement in the appreciative inquiry process encourages open-mindedness among the participants, which brings about innovation and strategies for problem-solving (Garret, 2022).

Collaborative problem-solving strategies view problems positively and approach challenges from a positive perspective of possibilities due to its nature of sourcing different ideas (Bushe, 2013; Holman, 2010). This allows input from different viewpoints. Armstrong et al. (2020) use such terms and phrases as ‘flipping’ and ‘realistic optimism’. Realistic optimism means that appreciative inquiry intentionally “focuses upon what we can control as an adaptive practice to manage stress and increase resilience”, p.36. Flipping has an idea of turning a page having gone through the information on the previous page, to use that information to make sense of the current page and ultimately, the full picture. Lewis (2016) refers to ‘the flip’ as an Appreciative Inquiry process working to turn a push motivation into a pull motivation. Problems may confront us but an appreciative strategic approach accentuates understanding and appreciation of the problem. Frustration, pain, and hopelessness may be acknowledged, and yet be collectively flipped to see beyond the frustration and to imagine what would be different (Lewis, 2016).

The appreciative inquiry facilitates increased interpersonal relationships through generative discussions around adversity, from a common problem to a common goal (Taylor & Seeman, 1999). Generative discussions help to reconstruct a problem and provide a new perspective away from deficit thinking. A new perspective brings new understanding and positive perspectives around adversity. This property of social optimism of the appreciative inquiry is inherent in social psychology (Whitney et al., 2019; Garret, 2022). Zhou and Zao (2020) found that when teachers received increased social support from one another, it helped them to build resilience and positive interpersonal relationships, which satisfied their need for belonging and relatedness. Whenever

these needs are satisfied, teachers open up and freely share their experiences and emotional feelings with others. (Liu et al., 2016).

Appreciative Inquiry tenets have a psychological positive psychology background (Cooperrider & Fry, 2020; Kessler, 2013). Positive psychology promotes and advocates mutual respect and affirmation of individuals so we can focus on people's positive attributes and strengths (Armstrong et al., 2020). Positive psychology also strives to promote people's attributes that encourage individuals and communities to focus on the positive (Filep & Laing, 2019). Part of focusing on the positive, enabled by the power of positive psychology, is expressing gratitude. Research by Divoll & Riberio (2024) found that expressing gratitude has a positive impact on physical as well as psychological well-being. Gratitude changes moods so that people imagine positive things and become creative instead of being critical. "People are empowered and encouraged to tap into their ability and the collective determination to imagine and create new and better communities" (Slavik, 2021, p. 29).

Positive psychology posits that "attitudes shape perceptions, which shape reality" (Rodgers & Fraser, 2003, p.3). Changed attitudes promote building of resilience and strength to navigate challenges and shape the future of individuals in groups, organisations and in communities (Waters et al., 2021). It is positive psychology that advocated for nomenclature change of calling 'people living with disability' instead of 'disabled people'. The idea is to see a person first, before you see a disability or to see the positive and refuse to be blinded or overshadowed by the negative (Kim, 2024). The appreciative inquiry "holds myriad potential benefits for individuals, communities, and macro systems to build resilience and promote growth during and after COVID-19" (Armstrong et al., 2020, p.38). Resilience was found to support positive mental health outcomes during the coronavirus pandemic (Hezel et al., 2022).

In alignment with positive psychology, Appreciative inquiry is based on the heliotropic principle (Whitney, 2008), that people and organisations naturally gravitate towards the positive forces and narratives that give them life and energy, hope and future, as well as growth and resilience (Cooperrider et al., 2023; Rodgers & Fraser, 2003). Practitioners of appreciative inquiry have found convincing results and effectiveness as a forum, not only for Organisational Development

(OD), but also for individuals, groups, and communities' progressive cultural change and progression in life (Cooperrider & Fry, 2020; Kessler, 2013). Appreciative inquiry presents itself as a conducive environment for change and edification, change in thinking, and status quo previously thought to be fixed (Bushe, 2013). It rattles the psychological inertia (resisting change) so that people can have new imaginations (Lewis, 2016). Inertia is a physics concept referring to an object resisting change in its state of motion or rest.

The propensity of a human being is to find someone or something to blame for whatever did not go right. My High school Principal used to say 'The longer is your blame list the smaller is your future'. Appreciative inquiry is a paradigm shift from blame to an appreciative mindset (Elliot, 1999). Whitney and Cooperrider (2000) refer to Appreciative inquiry as the methodology and experience of wholeness capable of turning "cynicism to collaboration". This predisposition provided by the appreciative inquiry promotes collaborative participation in a common course for achieving goals (Whitney & Cooperrider, 2000; McArdle, 2024).

Appreciative inquiry is a theoretical framework and philosophical thinking that can boost social emancipatory values needed to drive the provision of psychosocial support (Al-Sabbah, 2021). This framework provides, not only support for research design and methodology, but also correction of psychosocial derailment. The 5D iterative process in phases of Define, Discover, Dream, Design, and Destiny (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2005) is designed to engage participants through the inquiry for change. This process challenges and encourages the group to identify its core strengths. The newly discovered strengths and insights help the group to design formidable systems that can promote an effective and sustainable future for themselves (Calabrese et al., 2010). Appreciative inquiry consciously engages and takes participants through education of practically acquiring skill sets and strategies required for psychosocial support interventions (Cooperrider & Fry, 2020; Gonzalez et al., 1990).

3.3.1.4 Provocative

Provocative inquiry should create knowledge, models, and images that encourage and provoke participants to action (Cooperrider & Srivastva, 2017). It provokes participants to want to change

their thinking and actions. “Things that are provocative are, by definition, are generative – they provoke/generate thinking and action” (Bushe, 2013, p.11). It also provides requisite resources for empowering change initiatives (Zhou & Yao, 2020). I have already alluded to the fact that appreciative inquiry is participatory, and is a form of Action Research. Participants engaging in appreciative inquiry create knowledge and requisite skills within the context of their lived experiences. The appreciative inquiry process encourages the development of essential skills for coping with and navigating the adverse terrain. The provocative nature of appreciative inquiry provides a framework for strategies and pursuing goals (Lewis et al., 2008; Bushe, 2013). This, it does, by providing social support (emotional, instrumental, and information support) (Taylor & Seeman, 1999) for attaining necessary resources and strategic focus on ‘what works’ (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2007; Whitney et al., 2019).

Zhou and Yao (2020, p.6) assert that “these processes can increase an individual’s sense of control and thus decrease passivity and helplessness in the face of adversity, ultimately relieving psychological distress”. Appreciative inquiry is a framework raised to provoke thinking about new possibilities and to incite action, decrease passivity, and change negative feelings and beliefs of helplessness (Pillay, 2021; Reich et al., 2020). A sizable body of research (Lincoln, 2000) has found that negative aspects of social support from negative social interactions may bring a distinct dimension of negativity that harms psychological and mental health. Such negative social interactions may potentially have effects on psychological well-being than positive interactions.

3.3.2 The principles of appreciative inquiry

The rationale for using appreciative inquiry is to explore a phenomenon or measure psychosocial derailment of an emancipatory inquiry. As a theoretical framework, it guides the study and is a philosophy that can boost social emancipatory values needed to drive the provision of psychosocial support (Al-Sabbah, 2021). Appreciative inquiry is employed because of its ability to influence positive thinking and action. It does more than encourage people to be positive, and enables them to develop a positive attitude (Whitney et al., 2019). Appreciative inquiry is based on its tenets of finding and promoting the best and positive strength of human beings. People are social beings and, by nature, interdependent. They benefit and thrive in positive mutual relationships. The

exploration of the phenomenon of psychosocial support through the appreciative inquiry is deepened by the sound theory of AI. In this section, I discuss the psychological and social theories that influenced the founding of the AI (Whitney et al., 2019).

Appreciative inquiry was founded upon a solid theoretical foundation. It is as much a philosophy as it is a methodology. As a philosophy, appreciative inquiry recognises that human systems grow in the direction of what they study (Alvarez-Robinson et al., 2024). With many strands of collaborative social theories, there are opportunities to use elements of AI in most human interaction and meaning-making also provided by psychosocial support. (Whitney & Trosten-Bloom, 2019; Bushe, 2013). Human well-being, functioning, and interventions require that we continually sustain a way of life and create new realities. To create and sustain new realities or futures, participation in relationships is vital (Cooperrider & Fry, 2020).

Appreciative inquiry “builds relationships, enabling people to be known in relationship rather than in roles” (Whitney & Trosten-Bloom, 2010, p.19). I have already alluded to the positive psychology and social psychology being driving forces behind the evolution of the appreciative inquiry. I would like to refer to the contribution and influence of the theory of social constructionism in the genesis of the appreciative inquiry (Lewis, 2007). These theories are building blocks for the appreciative inquiry theory (Cooperrider & Fry, 2020). Appreciative inquiry methodology is adaptable and flexible. It being a strength-based theory promotes resilience and contributes to the development of positive professional identity (McArdle, 2024). Appreciative inquiry inherited the power to promote positive personal outlook, and derives from positive psychology.

3.3.2.1 Positive psychology

Positive psychology appeals to psychological science and is concerned with strengths rather than weaknesses, and represents a move away from deficit discourses (Slavik, 2021). The background of positive psychology made the founders of appreciative inquiry observe that people tend to gravitate towards positive energy (Cooperrider & Srivastva, 2017; Cooperrider, 1990). Appreciative inquiry discourses promote imaginations of positive and hopeful images. Positive

images develop the affirmative competence of large collectivities, such as groups, organisations, and communities as they affirm a positive future together (Cooperrider, 1990). Divoll and Riberio (2024) in their research, *'Applying brain research and positive psychology to promote the well-being of principals'* found that positive psychology can help school principals to develop positive mindset and reduce stress and promote well-being.

The future of well-being and development for teachers in rural learning ecologies is a psychological function. From the perspective of positive psychology, well-being is seen as a psychological process in which people deal with negative and positive emotions in the face of challenges and changes, cope with crises in a complex and changing environment, and strive for growth and development (Nong et al., 2022). According to Walker (2023), the theoretical bases of appreciative inquiry include 'Positive affect' which is the promotion of positive emotions. The impact of empowering is manifested in positive attributes of every individual in the group. Each positively motivated individual contributes to generative conversations and creativity.

3.3.3.2 Social constructionism

Appreciative inquiry is supported theoretically by the social constructionist theory which believes that people co-construct the organisations they belong to (Slavik, 2021). Social constructionism believes that phenomena are socially constructed, and that organisations and communities do not exist independently of our perceptions, thoughts, language, beliefs, and desires (Lweis et al., 2016). People create reality through social engagements. The perspective of the social constructionist theory is that conversations and dialogue open up the perspective of people so they can transcend the traditional thinking patterns and imagine a new reality. The social constructionist theory provides a framework and an environment in which people are able to contribute and to choose how they contribute (Whitney & Trosten-Bloom, 2019).

The theory encourages collective inquiry into 'the best what is' in order to imagine 'what could be' and to foster collective advocacy toward the design of an envisaged future for the organisation or community (Whitney & Cooperrider, 2000; Cooperrider & Fry, 2020; Akdere, 2005). Collective advocacy also focuses on conversations on positive perspectives and tries to avoid blame apportionment. The blame game shifts the focus so that parties spend time and energies on real

issues. It also intensifies antagonism whilst the problem is not attended to (Gergen, 2022). Antagonism works against the social constructionist theory belief that we only truly exist when we are in good relationships with others (Lewis et al., 2008).

Social constructionism is the notion that social systems have the ability to create and determine their own reality. The view of social constructionism that cognitive development of individuals takes place in a social context is motivation for the participants to engage in socio-cultural processes of communications (Alvarez-Robinson et al., 2024). These tenets overlap interwovenly with the principles of psychosocial support (Gergen & Gergen, 2008). Social constructionism believes that learning processes that involve peer interactions challenge people to think at a higher level and move forward to the next cognitive development and creativity (Gergen, 2022). That is how new knowledge and new reality is created and sustained (Cooperrider et al., 2003).

As a research design and method, appreciative inquiry guides the process of data generation in the real social context. Data generated in context can be juxtaposed, and integrated with established innovative indigenous knowledge such as communal psychosocial support as Ubuntu (Hlalele, 2019; Ang et al., 2020). Knowledge is co-constructed in subjective engagements. Lived experiences contribute to knowledge creation and such knowledge becomes an empowerment to foster change in the lives of individuals (Carlson, 1999; Mkhize, 2016). According to Gergen (2011), morality, emotion, knowledge and reason reside in relationships within a community and not in the individual mind.

That belief is in agreement with the tenets of social constructionism which has the fundamental conviction that challenges are not insurmountable. Social constructionism views a community as a social design where all people are given equal opportunity to contribute to the creation of reality through inquiry, communication, relationships, and structures that enable them to build their communities of psychosocial support (Whitney, 2008; McArdle, 2024). There will always be something positive to initiate and sustain a positive change if people work together in a supportive psychosocial domain (Lyons et al., 2016). These tenets of social constructionism also work in tandem with the critical paradigm (Aliyu et al., 2015).

The emancipatory tenets of the critical paradigm befittingly allow it to work together with the appreciative inquiry as the theoretical framework. Since the appreciative inquiry is a strong participatory theoretical framework, it agrees with the ontological belief of the critical paradigm that knowledge is co-created in a context because “People can design/ reconstruct their own world through action and critical reflection” (Aliyu et al., 2015, p.11). These theoretical agreements work in synergy as the enablers of research design and methodological process. In addition, the agreement with the strong participatory tenets of the appreciative inquiry, the critical paradigm ideally seeks to do away with the bureaucratic power of the researcher as the superior knower. “Appreciative Inquiry does not just build relationships, it also levels the playing field and builds bridges across boundaries of power and authority.” (Whitney & Trosten-Bloom, 2010, p.272). Moreover, it is designed and orientated to bring about change and transformation rather than merely exploring and leaving the status quo unchanged (Holman, 2010; Bushe, 2013).

The critical paradigm, as well as the appreciative inquiry, taps into the latent social potential of the community and invoke development of empowerment strategies and indigenous knowledge within communities (Scotland, 2012; Aliyu et al., 2015). Mashego et al. (2021, p.17250) define African Indigenous Knowledge Systems (AIKS) as “a synthesis of different disciplines and interconnecting epistemologies and value systems established by communities in ancestral lands that have developed paradigms and forms of life”. The appreciative inquiry supports the epistemological stance of the critical paradigm that knowledge is created through lived experience and that social relations influence such experiences. (Aliyu et al., 2015; Gergen & Gergen, 2008).

3.3.3 Conversations in an appreciative inquiry

Appreciative inquiry engages people in group conversations. AI inherited from social psychology the belief in and practice of conversation engagement for the purpose of generating new ideas and new possibilities. “Social psychology is the study of how human thought and self-awareness are social in origin and made possible by language and social interaction.” (Lewis et al., 2008, p.35). Appreciative Inquiry is a process of generative engagements. It is an inquiry that interrupts the status quo, bring positive change through creation of new awareness and new knowledge which bring about new possibilities for transformation (Gergen, 2011). A generative process produces

new ideas that people find compelling and want to act on, which is imperative for the success of transformation effort (Calabrese et al., 2010; Bushe & Marshak, 2014). It is a generative process that offers new possibilities.

Generativity is a process that helps people to see things from a new perspective and capacitates them to believe things that were initially not imagined as possible (Bushe, 2013). They begin to see new possibilities and believe in capabilities previously laid dormant or undiscovered (Ludema et al., 2006). Bushe (2013, p.29) refers to generativity as “the quest for new ideas, images, theories and models that liberate our collective aspirations, alter the social construction of reality and, in the process, make available decisions and actions that were not available or did not occur to us before”. New ideas are generated in the context of social construction with appreciation and regard of culture of positive thinking (Walker, 2023). Social construction engages people in generative conversation, brainstorming, dialogues and discussion to create new reality and perspective for fostering a new future for participants (Garret, 2022; Cooperrider, 1990; Alvarez-Robinson et al., 2024).

3.3.3.1 Generative conversations

Appreciative Inquiry founders and practitioners believe that organisations and communities are more of social constructs, and that they are created and recreated through conversations rather than through rigid rules or procedures (Van Brabant, 2015; Elliot, 1999; McLaren & Hawe, 2005). The generative properties of appreciative inquiry set it apart as a theoretical framework which is more than predictive but with generative capacity (Slavik, 2021; Bushe, 2013). “The language we use to describe reality helps to create that reality”, (Randolph, 2006, p.1084). Generativity gives appreciative inquiry a transformational change ability (Alvarez-Robinson et al., 2024). It is a synergistic process of interaction, a process whereby something more than the process itself is produced (Bushe & Paranjpey, 2015). “Generative theorizing is about developing knowledge that can help transform our social realities by challenging guiding assumptions and that what is taken for granted thereby providing new ideas or alternatives” (Grieten et al, 2018, p.11).

Generative conversations take the form of brainstorming, discussions, dialogues and debates that uncover and recreate social reality. Generative connections create an environment that is “energized, collaborative, voluntaristic and self-organizing”, p18. In the appreciative inquiry process, positive and hopeful ideas are generated through the conversations (Slavik, 2021).

Elementary stages of a research begin with conceptualisation of a topic or title. The topic is where the researcher reveals the idea as well as the purpose for the study. A good topic will initiate thinking and lead the way (Eklund et al., 2022). According to Bushe (2013), appreciative inquiry starts with a generative topic, which has power to strengthen imagination and create generative images. It is important to kick-start and boost the formation of generative images as early as the research title formulation stage. This sets the tone of positive thinking as early as possible. An affirmative research title allows the participants to look into themselves to find positive images to align with suggestive positive thinking (Bushe, 2013; Eklund et al., 2022).

The research title must be thoughtfully crafted to capture the gist and essence of the anticipated outcomes. Psychosocial support in the title is already a positive phenomenon that the study seeks to explore and highlight as such (Slavik, 202; Alvarez-Robinson et al., 2024). Out of all the negatives effects of the coronavirus pandemic as well as the adversities of the rural learning ecologies, the participants are encouraged to focus on the positive side of things and work towards rallying support for themselves and their colleagues towards the edification of the whole community. The focus on the positive is not blinkered. Whilst dwelling on the negative is not encouraged, robust generativity may allow visitation to the negative past with the aim of identifying what was missing and filling those gaps (Di Fabio & Svicher, 2024). Brainstorming and discussion allows for the creation and proliferation of ideas (Lewis et al., 2016). The negative items can also be useful as they provide a good picture of what needs to be changed. They can be reframed to feed into positive discourse (Bushe, 2013; Armstrong et al., 2020).

Teachers themselves are encouraged and empowered to effect changes to their rural learning ecologies, and by extension, to the society at large. The appreciative inquiry has strong transferability capabilities because it can change social discourse through generative conversations (Kessler, 2013). Images, cues and knowledge created during the appreciative inquiry process is sustainable and fit for giving meaning to the situation and for problem-solving. Such knowledge

feeds to the resilience and efficacy of the participants and community. The research title may also promote generativity as it gives the clue for people to recognise and think about things they never imagined (Bushe, 2013).

The type of questions asked should facilitate and provoke interest and energy to engage in generative conversations (Kessler, 2013; Bushe & Marshak, 2015). Generative questionings also give rise to generative conversations. Accordingly, generative questioning is used to provoke, influence, and reframe the thought patterns of individuals and open them to further reflection about their practices. Individuals and groups who participate in an appreciative inquiry process do not come out the same on the other side. Changed attitudes and thoughts inevitably lead to changed practices. Individuals emerge as changed and empowered with resilience. These generative properties build organisations and promote mutual support and interdependence of individuals in groups (Bushe & Marshak, 2016; Gergen, 2022).

Appreciative Inquiry is a good framework for doing research involving group participation, given its groups, organisation, and community participation principles (Whitney & Cooperrider, 2000). Appreciative inquiry supports participatory approaches and works well in different cultures, communities, and organisations. The appreciative inquiry would urge people to shun cultural practices and thinking that hinder change to the status quo (Holman, 2010). Culture is dynamic and adapts to the new ways of living. Generativity sponsored by appreciative inquiry provides new images that positively influence change of the culture of negative thinking, attitude, and the way of doing things, and promote culture of positive thinking and acting and progressive behaviour (Bushe, 2013).

This optimistic disposition and mindset is promoted through engaging in the 4D phases of appreciative inquiry. Participation in the 4D phases of appreciative inquiry encourages people to engage in collective positive thinking and collective efficacy. Cognitive change and the resulting belief in oneself bring about behavioural change (Bushe & Marshak, 2015; Holman, 2010). With these qualities, Appreciative inquiry advocates the empowerment of participants and the development of individuals, groups, and communities. A conducive environment that enables positive responses is provided where inter-subjective engagements are encouraged (Hlalele &

Mosia, 2020; Aldred, 2011). Inquiry is defined as “a quest for change and intervention” (Garret, 2022, p.106). This quest is driven by the nature of questions asked in a dialogue: not questions of a deficit nature but those that drive the enquiry for change (Bushe, 2012). Principles of appreciative inquiry provide for us an understanding of how the quest for change is driven as depicted in Table 3.1.

Table 3.1: The Principles of appreciative inquiry

Principle	Definition
The constructionist principle	Reality is socially constructed through language
The simultaneity principle	Change begins at the moment a question is asked
The poetic principle	Our choice of what we study determines what we discover
The anticipatory principle	Our image of the future shapes the present.
The positive principle	Positive questioning leads to positive change

Positive questioning motivates participants to selectively reflect on the positive aspects of their situations. The positive principle of appreciative inquiry says that positive questioning is part of what Lewis refers to as ‘feed-forward interview’. It reduces resistance, increases positive mood, increases creative ideas, and enhances self-efficacy (Lewis, 2016; Matthews, 2023) This creates a positive mood and encourages people to view with positive perception their working environment, and the way they relate professionally to one another. Focusing on such relationships is conducive to the development of positive work-related, organizational, and community identities. People feel part of the organisation and so easily align themselves and their actions to the common good (Lewis, 2016; Roberts & Ebejer, 2024).

This positive attitude contributes towards the attainment of the change they desire (Garret, 2022). Notice ‘they desire’ creates a sense of belonging and ownership where people do not feel as

alienated outsiders but part of the community or organisation. More than just an attitude, positive questioning urges them to reflect on their thinking and practices, and possibly change for the good of their workplace (Troxel, 2002; Lewis, 2016). Positive affirmation through positive questioning fostered by appreciative inquiry promotes greater appreciation of one another and appreciation of strengths existing within the ecosystem. Hlalele (2019, p. 92) posits that “AI involves the art and practice of asking questions that strengthen a system’s capacity to heighten positive potential.” Further, positive mood disposition has a positive effect on cognitive and social processes and adds up to effective psychosocial support. Positive potential means that effective psychosocial support should be inside-out rather than outside-in, meaning that it should build people from inside. Real change takes place on the inside (psychologically) before it manifests on the outside (socially). Psychosocial support is perceived before it can be received.

Through the principle of simultaneity, for example, appreciative inquiry contends that people gravitate towards what frequent questions suggest (Whitney & Trosten-Bloom, 2019). In fact, change begins the moment the question is asked. People discuss their challenges, which present as questions persistently asked or imposed about their situations. Appreciative inquiry, through its principle of anticipation, posits that human beings have an inherent tendency to hope for and dream of a better future, even from a position of a dire situation. This means that the good images people create and talk about the potential that can be released for creativity for change (Walker, 2023).

Hope, according to the principle of positivity, brings about excitement about the future, it is also referred to as heliotropic (helios means sun) (Whitney, 2008) meaning that: people and organisations naturally gravitate towards light or the positive forces and narratives that give them excitement, life, and energy (Kessler, 2013). Excitement is a good mood for creativity and hope (Whitney & Trosten-Bloom, 2019). Progressive thinking of the collective brings about new ideas (Slavik, 2021). According to (Cooperrider, 2015), a new idea is a powerful force for change. The constructionist principle posits that when people are together in groups, they share stories, and from such narratives and anecdotes come ideas that bring about passion for change (Hlalele, 2014; Kessler, 2013).

The participants become empowered through relationships of sharing and are encouraged to envision a better future for themselves and the community (Cooperrider & Fry, 2020; Akdere, 2005). Aldred (2011, p.65) asserts that "Appreciative Inquiry can empower individuals and even systems, encouraging self-reliance, and self-confidence." This, it does, by putting emphasis on methods that try to find answers to issues by asking questions that lead to positive, constructive responses (Whitney & Trosten-Bloom, 2019; Whitney & Cooperrider, (2011). Blame apportioning is discouraged, and participants are encouraged to identify, appreciate, and promote what is positive about the situations (Hlalele, 2014). They are mutually empowered to look within the groups and elsewhere to solve their problems themselves. That is endeavoring to discover and capitalising on the possibilities. According to constructionist thinking, people discover and generate new possibilities (Kessler, 2013; Walker, 2023). We emphasise "forms of inquiry and change that are generative: they help us discover what could be, rather than try to fix what is" (Akdere, 2005, p.1).

Influenced by positive psychology, appreciative inquiry intentionally strives to affirm and promote respect for people. The appreciative inquiry is affirmed and empowered by character and resilience building to encourage self-reliance, self-help, and confidence (Hlalele & Mosia, 2020; Koh & Owen, 2000). Boosted confidence mitigates against pessimism and psychological conditions such as depression and low self-esteem. The positive problem-solving attitudes espoused by appreciative inquiry help participants to develop and learn self-reliance. They gain self-confidence to unleash their social potential. The participants will then envision a better future for themselves and the community (Akdere, 2005; Bushe, 2012; Koh & Owen, 2000). Appreciative Inquiry was, not only used as a research framework, but also as a vehicle for collaboration during the coronavirus pandemic, to empower the participants and develop their learning ecologies. (Mapasela, et al., 2012; Cooperrider & Fry, 2020).

3.3.3.2 Brainstorming

Appreciative Inquiry encourages social engagement in a group ideation setting. Brainstorming is an idea-generating technique that translates individual ideas into group ideas (Henningsen & Henningsen, 2022). Brainstorming is a method whereby people in a group engagement contribute ideas about a topic. It is a problem-solving technique useful for generating and increasing the

quality and quantity of ideas (Slvik, 2021). As a creative thinking platform, brainstorming encourages participants to think deeply and creatively. However, all ideas are allowed and encouraged, and no idea is considered stupid as each idea can build up to something useful. Participants are allowed even to think aloud and complete each other's sentences and ideas. Allowing the free flow of ideas creates a larger pool of ideas from which constructive gems can be created.

Positive critique promotes the proliferation of ideas, not malicious vilification. According to Besnt (2016, p. 2), "The process of brainstorming, at its very heart, was meant to be a counterattack on negative conference thinking." Participants produce more creative ideas if they do not fear or anticipate any negative criticism or insensitive ridicule (Bushe, 2007; Slavik, 2021). The pool of ideas created ranges in a continuum from very useful to not so useful ideas, but all are encouraged as the continuous flow of ideas enhances creativity (Bushe, 2013). The founder of brainstorming, as recorded in the writings of Besant (2016) is Alex Osborn, who found it in 1953. His motto was: 'it is easier to tone down a wild idea than to think up a new one'.

People are encouraged not to limit their imagination but to let their minds out of the box or confinement of any kind. The human mind is capable of wild imaginations that produce images beyond the obvious (Bushe & Paranjpey, 2015). Brainstorming can generate great creativity for solving difficult or challenging problems. The results are most meaningful and fulfilling if the challenge is considered the most challenging. The major advantage of using brainstorming in an appreciative inquiry process is the increased production of ideas. Perhaps, the most important benefit is that the participants actively create the data and knowledge. People own and support what they create. This sense of ownership ensures effective implementation and sustenance of the results (Cooperrider, 1990; Bushe, 2013; Bushe & Paranjpey, 2015).

3.3.3.3 Dialogue and discussions

Moving further from brainstorming, where all ideas are entertained, dialogue and discussion tend to focus more on the quality of ideas. While dialogue gives some freedom to freely throw in ideas, such ideas are expected to be more creative and of better quality (Slavik, 2021). People are

encouraged to critique each other's ideas and give up their own views for others' better views. Different points of view deepen the exploration of the subject. Dialogue seems to be a foundation of creativity and generativity in conversations. "Generativity occurs when people collectively discover or create new things that they can use to positively alter their collective future" (Bushe, 2007, p.1).

Discussions allow people to support and substantiate their points which can be challenged for better clarity. This can easily escalate a discussion into a debate, as the speaker tries to put forward their idea and even lobby others for support. The assertiveness brought by the spirit of debate helps to build confidence and faith in what is said, which supports self and group efficacy (Bushe, 2013; Slavik, 2021; Cooperrider, 2015). The emphasis of the appreciative inquiry, according to Bushe (2007), is both positive and generative. This means that negative stories are allowed but should be handled in a way that promotes generativity.

3.3.3.4 Stories and anecdotes

Discussion engagements in the AIS begin with stories. Stories are a good starting point to initiate and sustain a progressive discussion. The story of one person triggers a thought, ideas, and images in others. It can provoke an emotion as it relates to some experience in their past. Stories are building blocks for creating conversations. Bushe (2013) put it simply saying, *The stories are there to create a collective experience that catalyzes a conversation*. The generative conversations are influenced by stories and narratives from the group members, including anecdotes of stories of people, not in the group but with known incidents of interests. All the stories support the transformative process of appreciative inquiry. People's narratives are transformed even through the newly established and newly strengthened relationships for ongoing support (Bushe, 2013; Bushe & Marshak, 2016).

It is a fact that stories have both negative and positive sides. Lewis (2016) refers to positive stories as enthusiasm stories. These are stories of when we were at our best. They are recalled and retold to trace the good practices and strengths that helped us to win. People are enthused by anecdotes of past successes. However, there are also bad stories as in the case of previously traumatised

participants. During the Discovery phase, people are allowed to let out any emotional steam bottled in bad experience stories. Stories are a means of off-loading hurt and allowing psychosocial support to start and complete a healing process (Slavik, 2021; Cooperrider, 2015). This is also where the story flipping power of the appreciative inquiry comes into effect (Lewis, 2016).

In her masterpiece, *engaging emergence: turning upheaval into opportunity*, Holman (2010) refers to 'stories of innovation'. Stories where individuals release and off-load their emotional and traumatic burdens in a caring environment. That caring environment is provided by psychosocial support. The environment is created where individuals in the positively charged support can relate stories even from their adverse lived experiences and circumstances. Anecdotes make up generative conversations that help individuals and the group summit participants to envision and identify positive images (Cooperrider, 1990). These positive images are building blocks for the imagined dream future (Conkright, 2011). This is a license for people to dream again regardless of present trying situations. This Appreciative inquiry process supports the therapeutic tenets of PSS to heal and gives hope for a better future. It is therapeutic to be in a group of people with similar stories, asking similar questions and hoping for a common goal or future (Bushe, 2013; Holman, 2010).

The appreciative inquiry principle most applicable in the discovery phase is Simultaneity. It conjectures that change begins at the instant the question is asked (Bushe & Marshak, 2015). That is part of what participants discover in the discovery phase. They are encouraged by the fortitude and resilience of people who withstood situations worse than theirs. Individuals are encouraged through the dream phase. They are allowed to see possibilities out of hopeless stories. They have freedom to dream (Whitney & Trosten-Bloom, 2010). Individuals and groups discover innovative ideas that no one could have thought about on their own without the nudging from others (Holman, 2010). They have a group's support, and they individually and collectively forge a better future in the design phase (Bushe, 2013). Holman (2010) refers to this as a process of differentiation, the emergent change process whereby images from stories are used to foster a future filled with hope for individuals (Calabrese et al., 2010; Bushe, 2013).

3.3.3.5 The positive core

Appreciative inquiry is about creating positive change (Armstrong et al., 2022). Emergent change processes require emergent change framework (Castillo & Barrameda, 2024). Traditionally organisations embark on strategic planning to find a way out of a challenge or to diagnose a point or cause of stagnation in an organisation. The top leadership would strategise using the SWOT (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, Threats) analysis tool for problem solving. The blueprint of solutions would then be cascaded down for all subordinates and stakeholders to comply. The problem with that approach is that, not everybody owns the results so they can be fully committed to implement.

The traditional SWOT analysis tool identifies the problem and addresses it to maintain the status quo. However, appreciative inquiry is a framework for positive change. It is an inclusive strategic planning for organisational change that involves participants from all levels of an organisation (Lewis et al., 2008; Alvarez-Robinson et al., 2024). It uses a strategic framework called SOAR (Strengths, Opportunities, Aspirations, Results). It is “an innovative, strength-based approach to strategic planning that invites the whole system (stakeholders) into the process to propel an organisation forward to its most preferred future with measurable results.” (Lewis et al., 2008, p. 210). Unlike SWOT analysis which lacks capacity to motivate subordinates and only relies on top-down implementation approach, SOAR has the capacity to boost confidence through heightened positive appreciation of strengths within the organisation (Lewis, 2016). It produces sustained capacity for sustained performance. SOAR is a dynamic planning and performance strategy that creates a stakeholder-inclusive environment conducive for building positive psychological capital (Cole, & Stavros, 2019; Ravikumar, 2023).

The strengths and opportunities within an organisation represent its positive core. The positive core elevates people to a position of clear vision (aspirations), mission (strategies and actions) and goals (results) they desire for their future. The positive core also provides a strong basis for keeping the confidence (self-efficacy) and the required momentum (impetus) for driving and keeping focus on the results (Lewis et al., 2008). Momentum is a physics concept that explains how far a body will maintain its trajectory and speed relative to its mass (body content). Positive core will determine the stamina required to finish a course and it is directly proportional to the strengths of

the group or community. The path and momentum of SWOT strategic tool is confusing because it is a mixture of positive and negative constructs (figure 3.1).

Whitney and Trosten-Bloom, (2010) contend that change is not the primary goal but that change comes naturally as people focus on the positive potential and keep the momentum. “The ultimate paradox of Appreciative Inquiry is that it does not aim to change anything. It aims to uncover and bring forth existing strengths, hopes, and dreams—to identify and amplify the positive core of the organization. In this process, people and organizations are transformed.” (P.15). This means that results come naturally without a conscious struggle as we focus on the positive (Castillo & Barrameda, 2024). Below I created a diagram (figure 3.1) of my understanding of the comparison between SOAR and SWOT and the concept of momentum sustained.

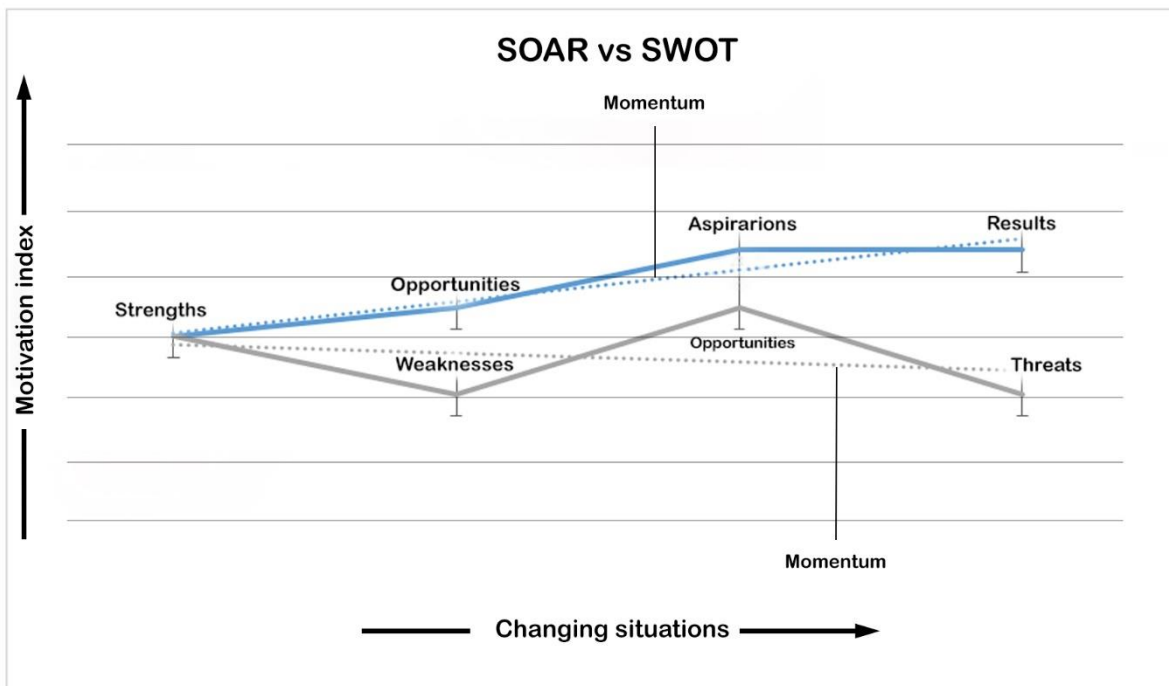


Figure 3.1: SOAR vs SWOT in sustaining the positive change momentum (created by TV Ndlovu)

3.3.4 The theoretical framework of psychosocial support principles (PSSP) and appreciative inquiry principles (AIS).

The PSSP will assist, collaborate, and form synergies with the appreciative inquiry principles (AIP). The integrative theoretical framework provides a powerful theoretical framework for this study. The following diagram depicts collaborative theoretical framework AIP and PSSP. It starts with PSSP providing psychosocial support to participants so they recover their strengths in terms of meaning-making, regaining hope, and getting resilience and confidence or self-efficacy. The recovered strengths then become part of the ‘positive core’ which the AIP will ‘discover’ and use to design and deliver a desired future of psychosocial support systems for participants and their learning ecologies.

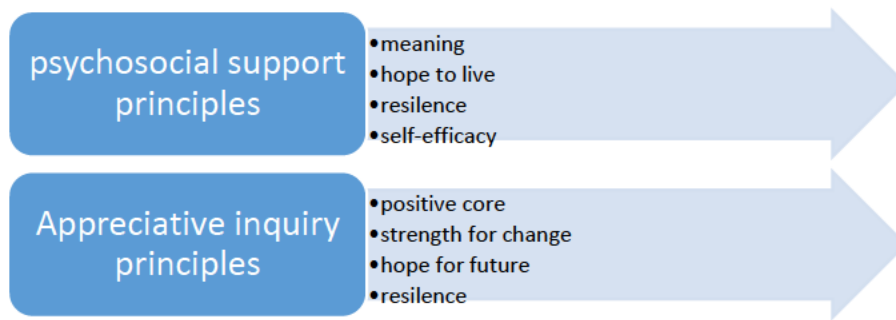


Figure 3.2: Diagrammatic presentation collaborative theoretical framework of AIP and PSSP

The appreciative inquiry focuses on unearthing the strengths and enhancing the positive core (McArdle, 2024). However, it may not be easy for traumatised people to immediately focus on the positive without necessary psychosocial support. Traumatized people may get stuck in the rut of fear and pessimism such that their conversation can be dominated by negative talk if not properly channeled. Lewis (2016) suggests an AI process which she refers to as ‘the flip’, which works as a pull rather than a push motivation. This AI process can work with PSS to pull victims out of a rut of fear, anxiety, and hopelessness, and to bring about a sense of safety, calm, and hope. PSS helps to bring about a sense of safety, calm, and hope (Duckers et al., 2017), which AI will accentuate as part of the positive core (Whitney et al., 2019) of renewal and restoration. PSS also encourages people to express gratitude, and find closure and forgiveness (Divoll & Riberio, 2024).

Forgiveness is necessary for shedding of guilt and blame in preparation for positive mind-set requisite for fruitful engagement in the appreciative inquiry process. Fruitful engagement in appreciative inquiry depends on good relations. Watkins et al. (2011, p.39) present one of KJ Gergen's social construction orientation principles to impress that "to sustain what is valuable or to create new futures requires participation in relationships, if we destroy or damage relations, we lose capacity to sustain a new way of life and to create new futures". This is the emphasis that forgiveness and renewal of mind, which are made possible through the appreciative inquiry, enable the very process of appreciative inquiry (Watkins et al., 2011).

3.3.5 Appreciative inquiry as a methodology for change

Appreciative inquiry provides a robust methodological process so that participants are actively involved in the data generation process. The iterative process of appreciative inquiry 5D phases of Define, Discover, Dream, Design, and Destiny (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2005) are designed to engage the participants in a process of rigorous participatory discourse and inquiry. This process is enacted iteratively beginning from individual interviews through to the appreciative inquiry Summit (AIS), which is the practical operation of the appreciative inquiry. This process challenges and encourages individuals as well as the whole group to identify their core strengths (Conkright, 2011). This is a platform intentionally created for the confluence of ideas rather than the propagation of conflicting thoughts.

Confluence is the orchestration of synergy of strengths (Springael, 2023). The newly discovered strengths and insights help the participants to design formidable psychosocial support systems that can promote an effective and sustainable future for themselves. Self-efficacy and community efficacy is required to achieve sustainability. Self-efficacy is one of the four psychosocial theories. It represents cognitive and psychological strength needed to support a positive outlook and well-being. It refers to people's beliefs in their capabilities to mobilise cognitive resources and execute the courses and recourses of actions needed to meet given situational demands (Bandura, 1986; Gonzalez et al., 1990).

Therefore, appreciative inquiry will consciously engage and empower participants through to acquire strengths, skills sets, and strategies required for psychosocial support interventions and

growth (Cooperrider & Fry, 2020; Gonzalez et al., 1990). I have established in the literature review that the first and most important aspect of psychosocial support interventions is counselling for 'meaning making'. The Summit process is the vehicle for making meaning through rich narratives and discussions (Whitney & Cooperider, 2000). The participatory nature of appreciative inquiry encourages participants to collaborate with community organisations and take an active role in communication and co-creation of meaning (Yudarwati, 2019).

The skills and strengths acquired through engagement in the appreciative inquiry process do not only empower the individuals, but also the group. Participants are expected to come out of the summit charged and empowered to disrupt and possibly change the status quo of the whole learning ecology (Holman, 2010). It is human nature to adapt and quickly try to establish new normality even embracing unhealthy normality. Appreciative inquiry is provocative and disruptive to the status quo (Bushe, 2012). It rattles the comfortable zone to disrupt conformability to dysfunctionality. Change is not comfortable and brings about growth and the greatest growth takes place in discomfort. Appreciative inquiry has sound philosophical basis and is not superficial. It is a profound catalyst for change. Philosophically, appreciative inquiry draws from the Socratic concept of *episteme*, or knowledge embedded in the active accomplishment of a goal, with *techne* representing the craft-like ability to make or perform (Gergen, 2015).

Appreciative inquiry is a suitable theoretical framework and research design but also as a philosophy that can boost social emancipatory values needed to drive the provision of psychosocial support (Al-Sabbah, 2021). Appreciative inquiry, as a holistic theoretical framework, promises vast potential benefits for teachers in rural learning ecologies to build resilience and promote psychological well-being during and after the coronavirus pandemic (Armstrong et al., 2020).

The psychosocial support principles sum up the context and function of psychosocial support. They provide essential context conducive to promoting psychosocial well-being, as well as preventing and treating psychological disorders that usually manifest even years after a crisis or disaster (Kim et al., 2020). It is envisaged that the psychological derailments due to the coronavirus pandemic in the lives of teachers will be re-aligned and even changed for the better. Appreciative inquiry provides a framework for psychosocial support domain for psychosocial support principles

to effect supportive function (Barker-Davies et al., 2020). Practical details of appreciative inquiry as a methodology are given in chapter four.

3.4 Chapter synthesis.

In conclusion, for the optimal results in psychosocial support provision, it is important to frame the study project within theories that enhance and support both theory and practice. I have already mentioned the fact that this is a critical research, meaning that it must not leave the status quo unchanged, but must come up with emancipatory solutions. The theoretical framework is useful in providing an objective description of a phenomenon (what it looks like). Moreover, the theoretical framework may require further enhancement to produce practical engagements for change. It is for that reason I took a decision to integrate theories to benefit from both.

Appreciative Inquiry (AI) is a strength-based philosophy and methodology theory for research that is appreciative in nature, rather than problem-oriented. It is a paradigm shift and culture change from the mentality of waiting for someone to do everything for us. Appreciative inquiry is a radical participatory methodology as it invites, encourages, and considers an abundance of diverse voices to be expressed and heard. Diverse voices engage in generative conversations among the participants to give rise, not only to authentic data generation, but also to the co-creation of the envisaged future of the learning ecology or village. The robust and synergic exchange of experiences and information becomes a great platform for knowledge creation and enriched learning.

Appreciative inquiry is a whole system of positive change through a phased process that is designed to take the learning ecology toward its maximum potential for its members and stakeholders. It is an invitation and empowerment for participants to discover what works and gives life for themselves and their learning ecology. It is an opportunity and liberty for participants to dream of what might be possible and achieved if their potential is unleashed and their cherished values and ethics are enacted. The proposed enactment is an opportunity for the members of a learning ecology to engage with one another in meaningful ways to foster new formidable relationships. So that their interactions, conversations, anecdotes, and stories become springboards to thrust them into an envisaged future.

Appreciative inquiry embraces, supports, and enhances psychological as well as social dynamics of human functioning, with a purposeful intent to promote the positive attributes and enhance supportive social elements that help human beings to function optimally. It is a versatile theoretical framework as it works well with other theories. As a theoretical framework, it robustly opens up an enabling environment for the phenomenon to be fully explored. Psychosocial support has also been defined using the appreciative inquiry. Moreover, the theoretical principles of psychosocial support provide conducive psychosocial support domain for appreciative inquiry to cultivate positive thinking and mind-set change. It is not naturally easy for victims of a disaster to focus on the positive and on their strength without motivation and therapeutic power of psychosocial support.

CHAPTER FOUR

4. DATA GENERATION

4.1 Introduction

In qualitative research, methodology is a process of generating empirical data in an iterative algorithm of systematical stages (Leigh- Osroosh, 2021). Descriptive phenomenology is intended to describe the structural core of psychological processes necessary for the phenomenon under study (Subasinghe & Pathirana, 2022). The strategic steps form a lined up of actions sequentially done to facilitate data generation and analysis up to the complete distillation of findings. It is an inquiry for understanding the phenomenon being studied and for generating it as knowledge (Aspers & Corte (2019). Ataro, (2020, p. 20) says “methodology is the strategy, plan of action, process or design lying behind the choice and use of particular methods and linking the choice and use of the methods to the desired outcomes”. Chapter four discusses the approach, the paradigm, the research design, the methodology, data generation, and data analysis of the study.

4.2 The Paradigm

A paradigm is a set of beliefs and views about particular problems, how they exist, and notions on how such problems may be investigated and possibly solved. Aliyu et al. (2015, p.2) see it as a “worldview that defines for its holder, the nature of the “world”, the individual’s place in it, and the range of possible relationships to that world and its parts”. We can say a paradigm is a set of beliefs that undergird actions taken in a research and influences the researcher’s relationships in the research process. It has important significance regarding decisions made in the research process (Kamal, 2019; Aliyu et al., 2015).

Research is about finding answers about life in one area or segment of life. These segments of life together contribute to the whole puzzle of life in different ways of being, knowing, and relating to the world. The paradigms provide our inquiry about life with theoretical framings of interconnectedness of all human and nonhuman existence. This points to the inter-dependence of

the human species in their ecological existence, and that human ecological existence is not confined to physical nature but also encompasses spiritual, psychological, and political dimensions (Kayumova & Dou, 2022). This study on the psychosocial support for teachers in rural learning ecologies during the coronavirus employed the critical paradigm to tap into all these dimensions of human ecological existence (Aliyu et al., 2015).

4.2.2 The Critical Paradigm

The critical paradigm is inspired by Marxist thinking (Rodríguez, 2021). It concerns itself with social justice issues and the interpretation of social issues with a view to emancipating the oppressed (Scotland, 2012). It specifically looks for power imbalances, exploitation of the vulnerable, and violation of rights (Grant & Hampries, 2006). The Marxist ideology seeks to highlight the inequality in society, especially on the economic policies and political ideologies that give one group, the bourgeoisie, unfair advantage over the workers. The bourgeoisie had access to modern equipment and tools to make their work easy and quick, whereas workers were subjected to heavy and inhumane labour (Tasci, 2021). Marx envisaged a critical theory that would contribute to the abolishment of all conditions which created and supported enslavement and humiliation of man.

Marxism believes that capitalism is the root and veritable consequences of inequality, especially inequalities in the socio-economic structure. Marxism fights to find answers for the poor and the powerless. Although this ideology of communism has (arguably) not shown much success in administration of economies in many countries, it has made a huge contribution in creating awareness of the plight of the disenfranchised (Tasci, 2021). The Marxist ideology in its modified form is adopted as the ideological premise of the Critical Paradigm. It was modified by the Frankfurt thinkers, to keep its emancipatory properties without the dogmatic Marxist radicalism (Rodríguez, 2021). This positions the Critical Paradigm as the paradigm of choice for doing research and for seeking empowerment for the participants. This it does without being overly obsessed with blaming the authorities but focuses on empowering people to create a new desired future for themselves (Marx, 2000).

This position of the critical paradigm makes it to work in tandem with the appreciative inquiry theoretical framework. Appreciative inquiry is by nature a strong participatory theoretical framework and the active enabler of a methodological process. ‘Critical’ has a connotation of taking cognisance of, and being sensitive to, multiple constructions of identities and relations, including power relations in a research process (Grant & Humphries, 2006). In agreement with strong participatory tenets, the critical paradigm ideally seeks to do away with bureaucratic power of the researcher as the superior knower. Moreover, it is designed and orientated to bring about change and transformation rather than merely explore and leave the status quo unchanged (Armstrong et al., 2020).

Within the critical paradigm, there is development of empowerment strategies and rekindling of latent skills and talents within individuals, groups, and communities (Scotland, 2012). A research project informed by the critical paradigm brings about critical awareness about participants' situations, but also the participants gain a better understanding and awareness of their circumstances (Hammersley, 2017; Wahyuni, 2012). The research partly becomes a means of raising awareness of participants' own potential and ability to change their situation. They start to believe that they can mobilise resources necessary for taking action, directing, and explaining how things could be (Asghar, 2013; Creswell & Poth, 2017). Paradigms influence the thinking and practice of the researcher through the research dimensions of ontology, epistemology, axiology, and methodology (Hammersley, 2017; Aspers & Corte, 2019).

4.2.2.1 *Ontology*

Ontology is an assumption we make about the nature of the reality. It is about the nature of what exists and what truth is. It is the reality of “truth and being” of what exists and what is there to be known. Constructivists believe that reality can be created, and regard knowledge as a product of subjective interaction. This ontological stance allows the researcher access to the research context to gain a deeper understanding of the issues or phenomena in the social context (Wahyuni, 2012). In the Critical Paradigm, the researcher assumes a subjective role and, together with the participants, makes use of their lived experiences to make meaning of a phenomenon (Aliyu, 2015; Rosida et al., 2023).

The Critical Paradigm promotes advocacy and capacity-building for participants not only to understand but to deal with their situation (Olle, 2018). In this study, I investigated the true nature and reality of psychosocial support. I had to immerse myself into the context get the true nature of the psychosocial support as practically given and experienced by the participants. This affords the opportunity to see if the theoretical definitions are practical (Zallesa & Akbarsyah, 2023).

4.2.2.2 *Epistemology*

Epistemology is the credence of how to investigate reality or how knowledge is found. It pertains to the nature of knowledge (or what is known), its forms, and how knowledge can be acquired, created, and communicated (Creswell & Poth, 2017). Epistemology also deals with the relationship between the researcher and the participants, as well as what is to be known (phenomenon) (Hammersley, 2017). The epistemological stance of the critical paradigm is that knowledge is intersubjective and is constructed by people in a social context (Scotland, 2012). The privilege and possible superiority complex of the researcher is kept in check so that it does not stifle the voice and significance of the participants in creating understanding and producing knowledge for action (Scotland, 2012). Therefore, due consideration, respect and acknowledgement of the participants' cultural practices and influences in the creation of knowledge is important. (Mihas, 2019; Khanlou & Wray, 2014).

The generation, understanding, and interpretation of knowledge in the critical paradigm is through intersubjective relationships and engagement. The participants actively contribute to the creation of awareness about the phenomenon. They imagine the best that could be (Wahyuni, 2012; Creswell, 2014; Cooperrider & Whitney, 2007). The juxtaposition and fusion of the critical paradigm and appreciative inquiry represent a formidable paradigm shift from traditional worldview and theoretical framework with a "habit of seeking and finding the generative rather than the destructive (critical) image." (Watkins & Cooperrider, 2000, p.1). Cooperrider et al. 2003, p. X111) refer to appreciative inquiry as a powerful positive revolution for change.

AI, with its psychological background, goes beyond awareness, but its end goal is intervention and change, a property it can borrow from the critical paradigm (Whitney & Cooperrider, 2011; Bushe,

2012). The critical paradigm worked together with appreciative inquiry as theories demonstrating the benefits of collaboration in a seamless merger of beliefs for the creation of new identity and reality (Khatri, 2020). Zallesa and Akbarsyah (2023, p.22) sees epistemology as “The object of epistemological study is to question how something comes about, how do we know it, how do we differentiate it from others, so with regard to the situation and conditions of space and time regarding something”.

In the study of psychosocial support for teachers in rural learning ecologies during the coronavirus, our epistemological objective is to investigate if psychosocial support really mitigates against disposing factors for mental health vulnerability and deterioration. The questions are: How does it come about (what are the factors leading to) that teachers’ mental health and well-being were impacted negatively by the advent of the coronavirus (situation and conditions of space and time)? Through the constructionist principle of appreciative inquiry, the data generation and interpretation took place in context and the knowledge is co-constructed (Rosida et al., 2023).

4.2.2.3 *Axiology*

Axiology investigates the value of something. It is also known as value theory. It questions the value of something we study and establishes the need for it to be given recognition (Rosida et al 2023). Is it of any useful gain or benefit to study something and how knowledge gained from such a study is going to benefit individuals and the society (Zallesa & Akbarsyah, 2023). Some writers choose to fuse the axiology and methodology of the study. The all-important role played by axiology in making decisions on methodology aspects such as the design to map the research methods (instruments etc.) to use in the research integrated in the methodology (Rosida et al., 2023). If that route is taken, there must still be a way of answering the philosophical questions about ascertaining the value of a phenomenon being studied.

The axiological decisions also bear an ethical dimension, e.g., when it comes to participation selection. Upholding respect for the participants’ rights to choose to be interviewed and treated with dignity can also enhance rigour and trustworthiness of the study. Axiology explains or

justifies the value of something being studied, to say did it matter to study it? What is its value, significance, and impact to the life of an individual as well to the society at large that matter most? A parallel example is acquiring education that is highly valued because of its end results to empower and grow an individual (intrinsic value). Education is even of greater value to the society (extrinsic value) as it benefits and empower many more (Zallesa & Akbarsyah, 2023; Edelheim, 2014). Axiology helps the researcher to keep focus, direction, and emphasis on what (phenomenon) is being studied, and how (methodology) it is studied so the study can fully fathom what it sets out to achieve. Focus should be to give answers to the research questions and to answer the life questions of the society at large. The paradigm through the axiology, not only provides a philosophical dimension, but also ensures the integrity of the research by influencing the methodology (Guraya 2023; Zallesa & Akbarsyah, 2023).

4.2.2.4 *Methodology*

Methodology is the analytical study of different methods used in research. It discusses methods used. Whereas epistemology asks what is knowledge, methodology deals with how valid knowledge can be acquired (Aliyu et al., 2015). Positivists use instruments such as thermometers, microscope etc. to directly obtain scientific data, post-positivists need to develop procedures to measure unobservable constructs and phenomena such as attitudes, emotions, abilities, and other psychological constructs and personality traits. It is not possible to directly measure such constructs as in scientific investigations (Ataro, 2020).

This is a qualitative phenomenological study. The strategic steps form a sequence leading to data generation and analysis until the delineation of findings. It is an inquiry for understanding of phenomenon being studied and subsequently generating knowledge. Phenomenology refers “to a general first-person description of human experience” (Aliyu et al., 2015, p. 22). Ataro, (2020, p. 20) says “methodology is the strategy, plan of action, process or design lying behind the choice and use of particular methods and linking the choice and use of the methods to the desired outcomes”. In critical paradigm, the researcher assumes the role of a facilitator. The facilitator brings the awareness of the phenomenon and encourages the participants to commit to participate

in dialogical engagements. This is theory interwovenness which ensures synergy and coherence of the study (Aspers & Corte, 2019).

4.3 Research design

The decisions taken around the research design determine whether the study will be successfully steered to produce credible results and create knowledge (Guraya et al., 2023). The research design adopted for this study is the appreciative inquiry. The appreciative inquiry process is positioned to engage descriptive phenomenological design to explore lived experiences to get a description or interpretation of the meaning of the phenomenon (Padilla-Díaz, 2015; Castillo & Barrameda, 2024). Phenomenological design is applicable in qualitative investigations and serves to describe the depth of human content manifested through complex functioning and dynamisms (Padilla-Díaz, 2015). It is a situational study of a phenomenon (Skea, & Cert, 2016). Historically, phenomenology stems from philosophical thinking and writings of German mathematician Edmund Husted (1859-1938) who introduced a mathematical concept of bracketing, whereby the researcher minuses their influence in data generation process (Gergen, 2014).

This philosophical tenet synchronises the participatory tenets of the critical paradigm that seek to do away with bureaucratic power of the researcher as the superior knower. This positions phenomenology as a theory about the design or procedures of research and bring a philosophical dimension. (Lichtman, 2013; Creswell & Poth, 2016). Appreciative inquiry is a subjective research design that allows the researcher to facilitate the AIS without a superiority complex (Gergen, 2014). Phenomenologists believe that understanding others' experiences cannot be done from a distance but requires the researcher's subjective involvement. Such researchers draw closer to the participants (not just subjects) and immerse themselves in their environment (Gergen, 2014). This is in harmony with the process engagements of the appreciative inquiry. Phenomenology is based on the principle that solutions to problems can be found and situations improved through description and analysis of a situation. It is naturalistic as it endeavours to get the data without manipulation or disturbance of the ecology (Zadok-Gurman et al., 2021; Ataro, 2020).

Through the appreciative inquiry process, the study investigates the reality and quality of the phenomenon of psychosocial support and its complexities, from creating meaning and understanding of the situation to restoring well-being and functionality after the disaster (Padilla-Díaz, 2015; Subasinghe & Pathirana, 2022). For this study, a decision is taken to integrate the phenomenological design into the process of appreciative inquiry to direct focus to exhaustive description of the phenomenon of psychosocial support. In this phenomenological design, the participants are engaged in generative discussions guided by the appreciative inquiry design and process (Castillo & Barrameda, 2024). The appreciative inquiry promotes positive self-interrogation, and generative thinking by asking open-ended qualitative questions designed to initiate generative conversations. Based on appreciative inquiry principles, the participants are challenged to work towards collaborative initiatives for new possibilities in well-being and functioning (Bushe & Marshak, 2016; Whitney & Cooperrider, 2000).

Descriptive phenomenological study supports the establishment of trustworthiness of the study by providing a scientific vigour. This it does by encouraging that the researcher puts aside their preconceived ideas through a concept of bracketing briefly cited above. Bracketing is a scientific/mathematical concept of using brackets in which numbers outside the bracket do not act or influence numbers inside the bracket $A(B+C)$. This is done to avoid any potential undue influence by the researcher or by existing conditions (Subasinghe & Pathirana, 2022). In addition to full description of the phenomenon and validation by participants to ensure trustworthiness, Colaizzi's (1978) descriptive phenomenological seven-step method for data analysis adds to the vigour of the study (Morrow et al., 2015).

As a qualitative research, descriptive phenomenological design emphasizes the process of finding out how things happen in contextual settings. That is what the AI ensures. Qualitative research is mainly about finding out what people make of their situations, and relies mostly on the thoughts, feelings, beliefs, and attitudes of people. The researcher makes inductive reasoning from people's own interpretation of their circumstances (Koh & Owen, 2000). "The power of qualitative research is that meaning and theories are derived from the individuals who lived the experiences" (Prosek & Gibson, 2021, p. 167).

All these qualities of phenomenological design mean that, when investigating phenomena, the phenomenologist does not attribute preconceived meaning to a phenomenon, but studies a phenomenon as it reveals itself. This synchronises with the dialogic constructive principle of appreciative inquiry (Bushe & Marshak, 2015). Van Manen (2017, p.776) suggests a few generic questions that are hallmarks of a phenomenological study. These are: "What is this lived experience like?" "What is it like to experience this phenomenon or event?" "How do we understand or become aware of the primal meaning(s) of this experience?" Asking positive questions leads people to think positive and constructive thoughts (Bushe, 2013). Appreciative inquiry believes that asking positive questions advances the creativity of the human spirit (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2001).

In a self-organising way, participants, individually and collectively, construct and forge a way forward to a desirable future (Cooperrider & Sekerka, 2006). Participants in phenomenological design gain heightened awareness and improvement in knowledge as they engage in a study (Koh & Owen, 2000; Nassaji, 2015; Zadok-Gurman et al., 2021). The appreciative inquiry has strong philosophical beliefs and is a paradigm shifter from traditional ways of research design and methodology. The phenomenological study design within the appreciative inquiry is well-positioned and creates the synergy capable of steering the processes of this study, allowing for in-depth and saturated data generation (Ataro, 2020). The desired end result was not limited to publishing findings, but teachers in rural learning ecologies co-created their formidable mutual psychosocial support system (Watkins & Cooperrider, 2000).

The created ideas form an integral part of the data, discovering and exposing psychosocial support strengths and systems available. These ideas feed into the building blocks to create a future of strong psychosocial support systems for teachers in rural learning ecologies. (Cooperrider & Sekerka, 2006; Ataro, 2020). The participants were re-convened after three months to assess the sustainability and efficacy of psychosocial initiatives, whereby the participants were asked to complete a questionnaire. The questionnaire assessed their psychosocial achievements after completing the appreciative 4D cycle inquiry process. To evaluate their feeling and awareness of the psychosocial support systems gained in terms of relationships, resources, capabilities, and resilience gained, the questionnaire had items designed to test the participants' efficacy (belief that

they can carry through their dreams to realise their destiny) concerning psychosocial support systems for supporting well-being and improving mental health for teachers.

Do participants show positive attitude in approaching or dealing with disaster situations on any potentially traumatic challenge? Do they realise their potential, strengths, and gained resilience in dealing with future similar situations? Do they demonstrate the ability to tap into gained access to the available assets in the form of psychosocial support systems for teachers in their learning ecology? It was hoped that participants would be capacitated to promote positive generative thinking to produce ideas for mutual psychosocial support and collaborative problem-solving skills (Bushe & Marshak, 2016).

4.4 Research Design and Methodology

Qualitative research approach is the process of generating empirical data through a process involving discursive and strategic stages. The strategic steps are relayed until the generation of the data, which is distilled for findings about the phenomenon (Aspers & Corte, 2019). A qualitative approach allows for in-depth probing through open-ended questions and generative discussions for data generation. Appreciative inquiry is adopted to direct this qualitative study process because of its strength-based approach and practical application. Appreciative inquiry process provides a strategically unique and practical support of the methodology in that it engages participants as active co-creators of data. The inter-subjective involvement of participants allows them to fully participate in recreating their world and shape their future (Bushe & Marshak, 2016).

The study adopted descriptive phenomenological analysis (Eatough & Smith, 2017; Ataro, 2020). It is an analysis used to describe the experiences within relationships with others, and to analyse the generative conversations from participants' engagement in interviews and appreciative inquiries. The exploration and understanding of phenomenon is done by analysing generative conversations in social context as represented by the summit participants (Creswell & Poth, 2017). The engagement in the summit unfolded in an open-ended fashion, without the researcher trying

to influence preconceived expectations and biases (Creswell, 2015; Cooperrider & Whitney, 2007).

4.4.1 Data Generation Methods

Qualitative research generates, integrates, and presents data from different sources of to support evidence (Aspers & Corte, 2019). There is a difference between data generation and data gathering. Data gathering is not subjective in nature because the researcher is detached and can be discrete from the research setting. However, *data generation is a subjective* process whereby the researcher is intersubjectively involved and participates in the inquiry and sometimes, implementation of results (Coghlan 2019; Uher, 2019). Appreciative inquiry (AI) is a strength-based philosophy and methodology for research and organisational development (OD) that is appreciative rather than problem-oriented. It is a paradigm shift and culture change from the mentality of waiting for someone to do everything for us.

Appreciative inquiry is a participatory methodology as it invites, encourages, and considers diverse voices to be expressed, heard, and appreciated. Brainstorming allows many ideas to be produced through engagement in generative conversations among the participants that give rise to authentic data generation for research and the co-creation of the envisaged future of the learning ecology or village. The robust and synergic exchange of experiences and information becomes a great platform for knowledge creation, enriched learning, and an atmosphere conducive for implementation of action research results (Aliyu et al., 2015).

AI is an invitation and empowerment for participants to discover what works and gives life for them and their learning ecology (Whitney et al., 2019). The participants get freedom to imagine what might be possible and achieved if their potential is unleashed and their cherished values and ethics are enacted. The proposed enactment is an opportunity for the participants to engage with one another in meaningful ways and to foster new formidable relationships. Their interactions, conversations, anecdotes, and stories become springboards to thrust them to an envisaged future (Bushe & Marshak, 2015). This AI process takes place through various forms of engagement with

the participants comprising teachers and education officials from various rural schools and district offices as part of the rural learning ecologies (Hlalele & Mosia, 2020).

The researcher and the participants together explore and gain information and knowledge as they engage the issues. They are encouraged to think about possibilities and actions to change their situation for a desired future. The instruments of data generation *were* made possible through discussions at the summit as directed by the appreciative inquiry data generation methods. The summit was established to initiate and facilitate engagements, guided by AI's framework of appreciating and sharing each other's insights and talents as revealed in the narration of their experiences (Dal Corso et al., 2021). Generative conversations create data through brainstorming, discussions, and dialogues (Bushe & Marshak, 2015; Slavik, 2021).

Data generation is the process of 'meaning-making' as the discussions are a quest of trying to understand what was happening during the experiences. Data is organically generated as people come together to share their experiences and stories. Positively framed stories and anecdotes inspire positive change to be experienced and carried by participants back into the learning ecology, and carries rich information and data. This meaning-making process ultimately leads to an understanding and appreciation of the positive core discussed in chapter three. The learning ecology has a positive core (Lewis, et al., 2016). Understanding and appreciation provide further information that is processed into data required to answer research questions and ultimately, solve future problems. Stories and anecdotes awaken us to the strengths we have as we listen and see opportunities that already existed but were not recognised before (Yudarwati, 2019). Positive core may also include the ability to recognise external resources that can be rallied to form part of collaborative initiatives (Lewis et al., 2016).

4.4.1.1 *The data generation process*

Part of the data generation process in an appreciative inquiry is enactment in 4D cycle to find the positive core. The participants engaged in generative conversations through the 4D iterative cycle of Appreciative inquiry design. This AI process helps us to discover our positive core (figure 4.1). After the affirmative topic choice has been selected, the AI process follows the following phases, known as the 4-D cycle (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2005).

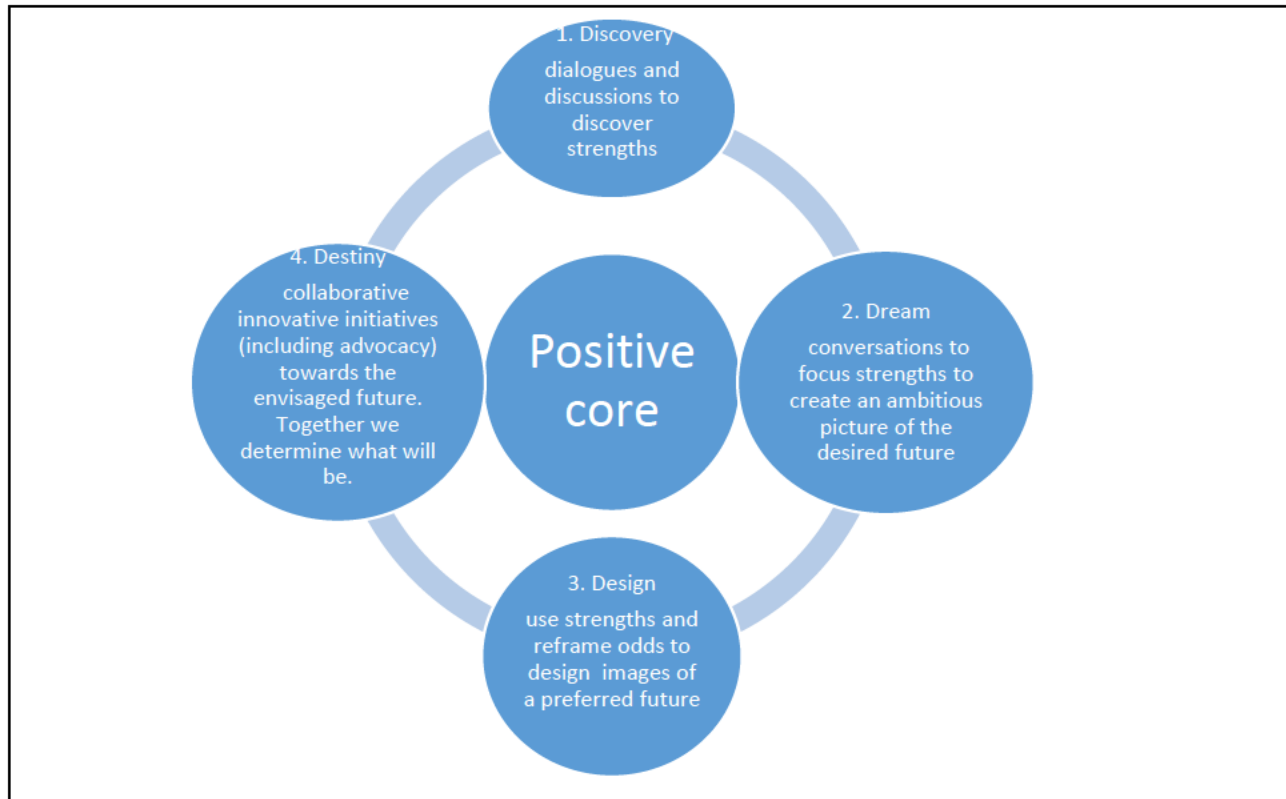


Figure 4.1 The positive core is the centripetal force towards which all the 4D engagements contribute.

4.4.1.2 The appreciative inquiry Summit

Central to the philosophy and practice of AI is the appreciative inquiry Summit (AIS). AIS is the modus operandi of the practical operation of the appreciative inquiry. Its methodology that has the power to change “tension turn to enthusiasm, cynicism to collaboration and apathy to inspired action” (Cooperrider & Whitney, 1999). An AI Summit is the intervention of choice when the task requires high levels of participation and cooperation. The ratio of monologue (facilitation) to dialogue (discussions) during a Summit is about 10 % facilitation to 90% discussions among participants. Everyone who attends comes with equal voice.

All stakeholders attend the summit and are put together to engage in discussions without any superiority or inferiority complex. Without prejudice and without blame apportioning.

The AI Summit is a full voice and high participation process useful in many organisational and social engagement and development applications. It has been used for work ethics enhancement, capacity building, revitalisation of committees' commitment, intervention and motivation, psychosocial support after a traumatic event, conflict resolution engagement etc. It can be used to foster union-management cooperation, parent-teacher involvement, school-community collaborations, school-business partnership etc. AI Summit integrates multiple change initiatives and is known for good results in sustainable change and commitment. It is a method for initiating positive change by involving the entire ecological system or organisation in the process for change.

4.4.2 Selection of Participants

The appreciative inquiry method provides an opportunity for participants to be a part of the inquiry, actively generating data and creating new knowledge and not just objects of research. Participants in phenomenological research are usually selected according to purposive sampling. Purposive sampling refers to specific criteria that must be met by the participants to qualify for selection (Padilla-Díaz, 2015). The participants were purposively selected because of their first-hand experience working in education, especially during the coronavirus pandemic and in rural learning ecologies (Noon, 2018; Subasinghe & Pathiranage, 2022).

In the appreciative inquiry, the selection of participants involves holding a summit. A group comprising 16 teachers and education officials (including principals or members of SMT, members of School-Based Support Team (SBST), members of District Based Support Teams (DBST), and other teachers, preferably Life Orientation teachers, from selected rural schools in KwaZulu-Natal. This was to make sure that the selected participants representing most hierarchy tiers in the department to achieve data saturation (Theofanidis & Fountouki, 2018; Palinkas et al., 2015; Forero et al., 2018).

Life Orientation teachers, over and above other participants, are expected to answer for psychological well-being and level of motivation of learners over and above the delivery of the subject content. They may possess skill sets that can help to promote effective dialogue. They may also have experience in coordinating group work and facilitating generative conversations. All

selected participants experienced personal-psychological challenges during the pandemic. Participants all work in rural learning ecologies (Omodan, 2020). The researcher identified himself with the group and worked with them in an appreciative inquiry project to appraise and appreciate the impact of the coronavirus on their psychosocial well-being and their work (Thomas et al., 2021). Together, they developed potential solutions intended for the empowerment and capacity building of individuals and for the group, as well as their respective learning ecologies (Aldred, 2011).

4.4.3 Data analysis

The data corpus generated from interviews and generative conversations of the summit were analysed using Colaizzi's (1978) descriptive phenomenological method for data analysis (annexure 4). It is a seven-step of distillation that provides rigorous thematic analysis for an adequate description of the phenomenon (Morrow et al., 2015; Ataro, 2020). This process involves the description, verification, and refining of the emerging codes. Patterns will be identified as they emerge from the data generated (Chang & Wang, 2021; Skea & Cert, 2016).

4.4.4 Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness is enhanced and maintained by the application of “four-dimension criteria to assess rigour of qualitative research” (Forero et al., 2018): credibility, dependability, conformability, and transferability will be applied to ensure the trustworthiness of the study results (Subasinghe & Pathirana, 2022; Fuchs, 2023).

4.4.4.1 The credibility of the study

The credibility of this study is ensured by such elements as the selection of participants, the data gathering methods used as well as full description of the natural context. I will identify with the setting in order to familiarise myself with study context. It was also important for me to get acquainted with the participants by holding an induction meeting with the summit group before

the actual summit. The explanation and signing of consent forms helped the team to get to know one another. The participants needed to familiarise themselves with one another as well as with the study setting. Each participant was given Interview Protocol questions so they could familiarise themselves with it, and see if they were comfortable with the personal questions asked, including background information (Forero et al., 2018).

The credibility of data was enhanced by adopting data source triangulation and the triangulation of data generation methods, thereby providing a confluence of evidence (Bowen, 2009). There was triangulation of individual interviews as well as group summit engagements, as indicated in the sampling section above. The data generation methods yielded the data corpus large enough to allow saturation (Ataro, 2020). The summary of the findings was sent to the participants to confirm if the results were a true reflection of what transpired during the data generation processes in which they participated (Subasinghe & Pathirana, 2022).

4.4.4.2 The transferability of the study

The research contexts in this study were fully described, in terms of sampling, sample size, data collection procedure, and social context, to enhance transferability. Selection of participants was done in manner that ensured representativeness. Sampling and sample size included teaching staff, school management team members, and office-based officials who had a direct interest or responsibility in the provision of psychosocial support for teachers. This representativeness is important for showing comparative analysis across the education sector. Transferability boosts confidence to apply the results to other similar contexts. (Palinkas et al., 2015; Forero et al., 2018).

4.4.4.3 The dependability of the study

The seven-step process of data analysis of the descriptive phenomenological study design, together with the thematic analysis method, ensured rigorous analysis of qualitative data. This, it does, by ensuring a “concise description of the phenomenon under study” (Subasinghe & Pathirana, 2022, p.166). Moreover, the data and the data analysis were validated by the participants as

authentic, as they were part of creating it and to verify it as a reflection of their shared experience. This enhanced the dependability of the study as the data would be deemed authentic. Purposive selection of participants also added to the authenticity of the study. Participants were drawn from teachers or education officials in rural learning ecologies.

This sampling process also ensured large data required to achieve data saturation for exhaustive distillation (Ataro, 2020). According to Watts & Finkenstaedt-Quinn (2021), dependability and reliability are both concerned with the quality and consistency of the research process. Dependability is improved by monitoring the process followed from research design to findings, whether it meets the criteria of a rigorous methodological process. The triangulation of data ensured strengthens trustworthiness. Trustworthiness can be enhanced through all parts of the study especially from data generation and in data analysis (Ataro, 2020). Efforts will be made to minimise any individual participant or the researcher's bias in collecting and interpreting the data to ensure evaluative validity (Creswell & Poth, 2016).

4.4.4.4 The conformability of the study

Conformability is assured when all the participants fully participate in identifying and agreeing on themes found in the data corpus. Themes were discussed as they arose. This ensured all group members reached consensus on the final themes identified and used. In phenomenological design, such as carried out in this study, the researcher returns to the participants for their verification of results. This enhances the trustworthiness of the inquiry (Gay, 2012; Wahyuni, 2012; Dennis, 2018; Morrow et al., 2015).

4.4.5 Limitations of the Study

Limitations are variables or elements and conditions of the study that a researcher may have no control over. The limitations of the study are declared. These limitations may include the context of the study, sampling, and the number of participants. Limitations are elements and conditions of the study which a researcher has no control over. The study is confined to the rural learning

ecologies in the KZN province, yet the literature review draws similarities and inferences from contexts outside those boundaries.

Sampling and the number of participants need to be strategic to address things such as language barriers, to encourage free engagement of all participants without feelings of inferiority or superiority (Creswell & Poth, 2016). While the researcher tried to cede control, it was difficult to limit the researcher's influence during the facilitated group discussions (Palinkas et al., 2015; Forero et al, 2018). Bushe (2012, p.10) argues that “‘objective’ research is not possible and that all social research is inherently biased by the positioning of the researcher.”

Notwithstanding the differences in terms of perspectives and experiences and perspectives between the participants and the researcher, but there was no language barrier. It is therefore anticipated that negligible information was lost during conversations (Hammersley, 2017). The researcher took time to familiarise with the participants before the facilitation of group activities so that a cordial rapport is achieved. Given that the study was limited to only sixteen participants in rural settings, it might raise concerns about the generalisability of the results (Silverman, 2019). However, purposeful sampling ensured greater trustworthiness so that results could be applied in similar settings (Palinkas et al, 2015). Therefore, the generalisability concern was partially waived by the fact that each participant came from either a district office or represented a different school with different dynamics.

Triangulation of data generation methods to reduced possible biases that could be possible if a single data generation method was used (Bans-Akutey & Tiimub, 2021). A small sample of participants from a similar cultural background may also cause concerns about the generalisability of findings (Silverman, 2011; Theofanidis & Fountouki, 2018). The study took place when the coronavirus pandemic had loosened its grip or subsided. This means that some psychological healing might have taken place due to the passage of time. Although the study was designed around the coronavirus, the implications and the findings may transcend those time boundaries because of the emancipatory nature of the study.

4.4.6 Delimitations of the Study

I determined and declared the boundaries of the study to achieve its goals (Jorgensen, 2015). The goals of the appreciative inquiry under the Critical Paradigm are more than exploratory, and are emancipatory. Unlike in the case of limitations, the researcher has control over the delimitations as they are set purposively to achieve desired goals. Declaring delimitations and assumptions is important to improve the quality of the findings and the interpretation of the evidence presented (Thomas, 2015). Theofanidis and Fountouki (2018, p.157) say “delimitations are mainly concerned with the study’s theoretical background, objectives, research questions, variables under study and study sample.” The boundaries of this research design include many aspects, including the boundaries suggested by the research design, which is based on the principles of AI.

4.4.7 Ethical Considerations

Ethical clearance was obtained from the UKZN Research Office, ethical clearance approval number HSSREC/0000/6116/23, (annexure 12). Permission to conduct the research was sought from all gatekeepers, including the Department of Basic Education and the School Management (annexure). Informed consent forms were given and signed by all participants to confirm their willingness to participate was voluntary (Elkayal et al., 2020). Participants’ rights, beliefs, ethnic cultures, beliefs, and traditions were respected in that all questions were sensitive to their beliefs and traditional way of life.

All participants were informed that they had a right to withdraw from the study at any stage if they felt uncomfortable. Participants’ privacy was protected, and their real names were not used. Interview questions were made sensitive to privacy issues, and the researcher refrained from soliciting graphic details of violence and/or abuse. Data remained confidential and was not shared with anybody except the supervisor. Data was not made available to, or discussed with, anyone except the researcher’s supervisor. Pseudonyms were used for the participants and participating schools (Creswell & Poth, 2017; TrFuchs, 2023).

Fuchs (2023, p.5129) admonitions that “No specific application of methodology and method may start before making sure that ethics, reflexivity and quality assurance have been given thought”. I abided by the code of conduct of the American Psychology Association (APA). APA (2017, p. 3) spells out general principles required to ensure ethical conduct by the researcher, namely:

Beneficence and Non-maleficence, Fidelity and Responsibility, Integrity, Justice and Respect for People’s Rights and Dignity. Over and above the rigorous ethical protocols demanded by the UKZN Research Office, this study took into cognisance and adhered to the above general principles by ensuring ethical conduct in dealing with participants as well as acknowledging sources of other authors’ work.

4.4.8. Chapter synthesis

This methodology boasts the formidable and synergic juxtaposition of powerful theories of emancipation. The research design (qualitative descriptive phenomenological) and the paradigm (critical paradigm) worked together with the theoretical framework of appreciative inquiry. An appreciative inquiry process, through the generative engagements in appreciative inquiry summit, produced a rich and deep corpus. An equally powerful descriptive phenomenological reduction analysis put the generated data into themes that were building blocks for hope and efficacy for the participants. The methodology included a discussion of the research design and the paradigm of the study that were crucial for me as the researcher. These provided the lens for me to recognise the emerging themes to concisely describe, and fully understand the phenomenon. The ontology helped to exhaustively define the phenomenon to better determine how the phenomenon in question looked like, and criteria for identifying various characteristics that define the nature of existence or non-existence of the object or phenomenon (Aliyu, 2015).

In this study, the psychosocial support was adequately described. The context of the study was also well defined. Epistemology deals with the way we find knowledge. The methods employed in data generation methods were guided by the theoretical framework and skillfully integrated into the process of the appreciative inquiry. Axiology deals helps to facilitate the definition of the

phenomenon as well as the participants' understanding of the value of the same. The value of the phenomenon and its potential usefulness to individuals.

Trustworthiness and selection of participants increased the generalisability of results. Participants were selected for their relevance to the study as well as their availability. This helped the study to answer the research questions and foster the solutions for future issues or situations of a similar nature. There was adequate description of the research design and the steps were purposefully discussed. The appreciative inquiry process provides strategically unique support of the methodology as it engages participants as active co-creators of data and knowledge. The intersubjective involvement of participants allows them full participation in the recreation of their world. Generating data with the full engagement of participants in the social context allowed for authentic generation of non-manipulated data (Bushe & Marshak, 2016).

In a qualitative study, data analysis is not complete without the researcher's in-depth sense-making and interpretation of results as a response to the topic, the objectives, the research questions, and the research design (including the theoretical framework and the paradigm) of the study. The researcher's ability to interpret the results of the study required more than what the participants made known in response to the questions, but also the ability to interpret the surrounding circumstances and situations. This is why all elements of the study, including the literature review, contributed to a balanced and holistic understanding of a phenomenon and the situation under which it occurs. The prevalence of the pandemic and the conditions of rurality were extensively researched and described from literature review through to methodology. Understanding a situation deepens the meaning and understanding which both work towards meaningful results that provide authentic solutions to problems investigated.

The researcher should have the subjective ability to understand how participants' behaviour helps to define their situation, over and above their verbal communication. The participants' behaviour also reveals a lot about how they understand the situation, because social situations are created through the actions that make them up. So, in making sense of the situations people face, we engage in theoretical reasoning (argument and discourse), assisted by theories that provided methods for sense-making in a practical way. As social scientists, we are interested in solving social problems

and use methodological strategies for addressing issues practically (Asghar, 2013). I endeavored to demonstrate that the synthesis of each element of methodology is necessary to achieve credible and generalisable research results (Briesch et al., 2014).

CHAPTER FIVE

5. DATA PRESENTATION AND ANALYSIS

5.1. Participants' selection and composition

The three tiers of provincial education management included officials from the district office, the circuit, school management team members, as well as post level one teachers as per the sampling structure:

5.1.1 District office:

5.1.1.1 Office for employee health & wellness under HR directorate

5.1.1.2 Office for teacher development

5.1.1.3 Special Needs Education Services (SNES)

5.1.2. Circuit office: Teacher Motivation Committee

5.1.3. Schools:

5.1.3.1 School Management Teams (SMT)

5.1.3.2 School Based Teacher Support Teams

5.1.3.3 Post level one teachers, including LO teachers

5.2. Introduction and background information

Teachers drawn from four schools in KwaZulu-Natal, Pinetown district, Molweni circuit took part in the AIS. A four-day summit was held at one venue. I formally introduced myself to the participants and thanked them for participating in the study, although they had previously met with me at recruitment and plenary engagements. I facilitated the summit sessions. The participants were given documents to orient them to the process of appreciative inquiry. The documents had questions taken from the interview protocol (annexure 1). The interview protocol questions were in two parts: part A on background information and part B on 5D appreciative inquiry engagement process. The participants responded to the questions individually in writing before they came to the summit.

5.3. Data presentation and processing

Participants interviewed each other in pairs and then later took part in the summit's generative conversations as per the Appreciative Inquiry data generation process. The 5D (including Define) process was adopted. The interview questions for individuals, extracted from the interview, were sent to the participants a week before the summit. The interview protocol was answered in writing by all participants before the four-day AI Summit. Research has found that writing about positive experiences induces happiness in the brain and enhances well-being for participants (Divoll & Riberio (2024)). The interview protocol questions were set in line with 5D phases of appreciative inquiry enactment.

5.3.1. Define phase: *baseline assessment of the situation*

The Define phase was designed to serve as the baseline assessment of the situation. Participants answered questions about how they experienced working in the circumstances surrounding the coronavirus pandemic. They answered questions and later shared their anecdotal stories and experiences in a discussion group. The data generation grid (Annexure 3) provides appreciative inquiry guidelines for data generation.

All participants said they were either directly or indirectly affected by the coronavirus. All, to different extents, testified to the fact that the experience was very stressful. Some were infected and fell sick, like myself. Some lost their family members, neighbours, acquaintances, and colleagues. Most participants reported high levels of stress. The common sources of stress and anxiety emanated from frustrations and fear of the future. They worried about safety of their learners and colleagues and safety of their family. They constantly kept checking on each other's well-being through telephones and other social media platforms.:

Participant 3 put it thus:

“It was scary, we thought it was the end of the earth life. The COVID-19 pandemic affected every sphere of our lives and education included. My husband was sick with COVID-19 and it was so stressful trying to nurse him yet so scared of being infected myself. I was so frustrated. It felt so embarrassing having to approach him wearing a mask and hand

gloves. It was a matter of 'till death do us part' but I was also thinking about children if both of us were to die. When schools were eventually opened, the same kind of frustration reigned as we had to deal with learners. Learners would come to me and hug me as usual. I couldn't stop them because I know that some of them needed my show of love and support expressed in that way. But so frustrating, at the back of my mind I am thinking what if I infected them and they in turn infect their parents or grandparents. Social distancing in classroom was also impossible. The class was still big for effective social distancing, even when it was half as they attended in rotation. Children being children did not keep the masks on at all times.

The coronavirus brought a real scare for everyone, especially teachers who were faced with so many challenges and decisions to make at the same time. They had to make management decisions and improvise where they could. Participant 3 put it as: *"It was so hard because we had shortage of PPEs. There was a shortage of water so that we had to bring water from home. Cleaning material and sanitisers were not delivered on time."* Participant 5 remarked that: *"Working experience during the coronavirus pandemic was traumatising. We lost the habits of sitting together during lunch, sharing objects and meet-ups for staff meetings was broken."* Participant 6 also concurred saying: *"The lockdown was traumatizing. It also intensified fear and you couldn't think properly."*

Some aspects of their work demands added to the fear for personal safety and that of colleagues and family. New work dynamics became significant disposing factor for stress and anxiety. Teachers were subjected to unfamiliar ways of working under extremely trying conditions and shortage of PPEs. The rotation system in learner attendance, high rate of learner absenteeism as parents withheld them in fear, teacher absenteeism because of sickness or malingering also made the work environment untenable. Participant 1 put it thus: *"I have been stressed by overwork. Learners were rotating so we had to repeat each and every lesson to help different groups, and it was hard because we had a shortage of PPEs. I had fear of transmitting the disease to family members"*.

There were also unscrupulous and opportunistic people who took advantage of the situation for self-aggrandizement benefits. Participant 7 put it this way:

It has been a very frustrating experience. We were scared for our lives and there were so many unverified solutions/ information. It also looked like the government hired corrupt and/ or incompetent suppliers for PPEs, sanitisers, and cleaning material because these supplies were never on time and they were of poor quality. These unethical service providers put their lives in danger as some diluted sanitizers and brought substandard masks. We had fear and much concern for our lives and of our children. There was shortage of masks and teachers had to provide for themselves. Masks were uncomfortable and physically damaging in face and eyes. They made it difficult to breath, especially for asthma and sinus patients. Under the state of lockdown, you can't think properly. There was lack of information from authorities and so mass media fed us fake news that escalated fear and misinformation.

Apart from the fear and misinformation, there was stigmatisation of those infected. Participant 5 lamented that: *One of my colleagues was sick and the next day she was exposed on social media anonymously.* Notwithstanding the proliferation of fake news and misinformation with malicious intent, participants reported that social media played a huge role in bringing positive and useful information. It was a resourceful and sometimes reliable and affordable platform for communication during the isolation. People shared vital information about the virus. They shared jokes and idle stories to pacify their fears, to ease the effect of the virus and disease, as well as to diffuse the melancholic atmosphere of death. Indigenous knowledge was also invoked and shared to the benefit of many. It comprised psychosocial support for emotional pacification, spiritual edification, and medicinal heritage. Participant 5 noted that:

As staff, we supported our colleagues telephonically and through WhatsApp groups, motivated them not to lose hope, even shared bible verses, a well as sharing indigenous natural herbs such as umhlonyane.

All participants testified to receiving much social support from the local spiritual leaders, especially pastors. Umhlonyane, was found to be very much effective against the disease, and spiritual psychosocial support was explored as part of what was working.

Participant 9 gave a brief background on the composition and mandate of the EHW office:

Employee health and wellness strategic framework for public servants' policy, has four pillars (1) Wellness management (2) Health and productivity management (for incapacity leave, absenteeism and diseases), (3) HIV and STI management (for awareness, screening and condoms distribution), and that is where we can lot in coronavirus. (4) Safety, health and quality risk management (as department we are struggling to implement services under pillar 4 because there no health management officers or risk management officers employed in the department of education). The programs used to be reactive rather than proactive. But now, there is improvement since we now go out to schools and do awareness programs and activities designed to equip employees with knowledge and skills so they can deal with their personal or work-related problems. These programs include psychological (including mental health), spiritual and financial wellness programs. The challenge is that I am the only Health and Wellness practitioner in the whole district catering for over 500 schools.

The define phase shows that people were engulfed in trauma. This psychological state paralyses mental faculties from thinking positively. There were, however, positive attributes that helped them to survive addressed in the following phases.

5.3.2. Discovery: *exploring what was working*

Appreciative Inquiry is a form of action research that seeks to change the status quo through the process of discovery, understanding, and fostering of innovative future (Walker, 2023). We discover the best in us as we establish understanding of the present so we can use that understanding to unlock our potential and gain new strength. This phase was designed to make the participants understand and make meaning of the frustrating and traumatising situation, and become resolute and emerge with more positive attitude and outlook to life. The Discovery phase found that psychosocial support was needed to pacify the effects of the pandemic, facilitate awareness and discovery of positive strengths, and awaken their social potential to deal with such situations.

The discovery phase did well to unearth and unleash the participants' potential to discover strengths needed to foster possibilities. This phase also highlighted what was working in the midst of the pandemic. Interpretation begins during the deliberations in the summit together with the participants. Participants are not mere informers to supply raw data and leave it to the researcher to interpret without their input. At the discovery phase, the participants reflected and pondered on what kept them going. The creation of knowledge starts here. This process immediately processes data into knowledge and skills needed to change the status quo (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2007).

The first interview question under the sub-topic 'discovery' was: What do you like about your career and teaching profession? This question was intended to awaken the dormant professional dreams that people originally had when they chose teaching as a profession. It is possible that the chronic challenges may dull the original dreams and passions of a person. Some retrospective stock-taking may help an individual to revive their dream. A rekindled dream becomes a propelling force to the future. Participant 6 stressed her love for the profession:

I love sharing what I know with my learners, I love teaching them values and morals about life. I also enjoy encouraging and motivating them. I encourage and nurture them to do their best, bringing out the greatness in them and to reach their goals.

These are the original dreams and passions teachers had: to empower learners through knowledge impartation; to encourage learners, motivate, and nurture them to be their best; to bring out the greatness in learners. There is God-given 'best' in every individual. Participant 2 reiterated the importance of motivating and encouraging, adding that: *"I love to see the product of my work as my learner's progress in life, I also like to do transformation on them, lastly, I also learn from them."* Participant 4 answered the question saying: *"I think what I like the most about my career is to see my students succeed in life. I also learn from them, so there is an opportunity of life-long learning."*

Desire is an emotional force. The desire to uplift others is an inner strength that propels someone to provide psychosocial support to others for them to succeed. Life-long learning sounds like a resolve and motivation to fight against stagnation in life. It is also a recognition that one needs to be first developed before they can develop others. In the participant's answer, we see a significant

and humble admission that learners can teach a teacher something. It accentuates the point that everyone can contribute to uplifting others. This is mutual upliftment and edification without any superiority or inferiority complex.

Participant 5 also mentioned the importance of and privilege of life-long learning that the teaching profession gives, and added the continual *transformation* through improved *dedication*. The idea of transformation implies continual growth. This means that our talents become better with life-learning. Dedication in what one ensures transformation in thought, attitude, and acquisition of new insights. Participant 5 said: *“I like to associate myself with different people sharing ideas in order to come up with brilliant ideas.”* Participant 6 also concurred saying: *“The lockdown was traumatising, it also intensified fear and you couldn’t think properly.”*

During the coronavirus pandemic, isolation was mentioned as one of the most devastating mental health predisposing factors. People could not associate and share experiences and ideas on a face-to-face basis. Human beings are by nature social beings; hence, any isolation predisposes them to mental disorders. Conversely, people with depressive disorders isolate themselves. Participant 5 likened it to South African apartheid ‘house arrest’ detention that *“would drive you crazy”*. House arrest was a weapon designed to break a person mentally and spiritually. In the same effect the lockdown during the coronavirus pandemic impacted on individual’s mental health, inducing fear-filled thoughts which paralysed human functioning.

On what he likes most about his career, Participant 7 indicated that: *“Changing lives, life-long learning, love-giving, passion expression, love & compassion. It provides employment for me and I contribute in lifting the community.”* This expression is loaded with life-giving words. Love, passion, and compassion are positive concepts and synonymous with giving psychosocial support. Love is a universal God-given virtue that brings people together and help each other without finding fault. The Bible teaches that love covers a multitude of sins or shortcomings.

People who are most welcoming and helpful usually have love for God and for humanity. They are generous without expecting anything in return. Psychosocial support provision is a philanthropic service. Participant 7 mentioned ‘passion’, a virtue of strength and determination to

do good. Compassion carries with it virtues like sympathy (heartfelt feeling for person in bad situation) and empathy (feeling with them and even trying to put yourself in their shoes). These virtues create a conducive for psychosocial support provisions. It is interesting that she also mentioned that the career offers job security for her and that is what she would like to see for her learners. Job security is a vital point for the marginalised rural community. It mitigates against poverty prevailing in rural societies.

Appreciative inquiry summit engaged participants in a robust generative discussion about their traumatic experiences. Looking back to appreciate what assisted them to pull through was clearly a sigh of relief for them, a time for free talk and laughter as they reminisced with appreciation, what they went through and how scary it was. Narrating their stories was therapeutic. Participant 2 remarked saying “*Uyazi selaphekile emoyeni nasemphefumulweni*” (You know, we have been healed emotionally and spiritually). Principles of psychosocial support emerged as essential pillars that participants relied on to survive. Participant 5 said that: “*It was very important for educators to receive all the support they could get*”. Participant 8 added that:

The community worked collaboratively with the institution. Even NGO/NPO assistance was provided, by helping vulnerable families/ learners with psychosocial support in terms of food parcels, clothing, sanitary towels for girl learners, uplifting the communities by offering the jobs and ‘art and culture’ (musical and dance performances).

In the literature review, it emerged that “music therapy supports the health and flourishing of individuals and groups” (Carey, 2021, p. 150).

The next question under the discovery phase was: What is the most significant contribution made by the education fraternity to the community? This question was set to re-conscientise the participants about the importance of their role as education practitioners and activists.

Participant 3 said: *education contributes by teaching the nation about issues of daily living, such as health education, crime awareness, teenage pregnancy, and to organise the community to work together in order to find common solutions to benefit all of them.*

Life and livelihood should be sustained by health education, crime awareness and prevention strategies, and by finding solutions to a myriad of social ills such as drug abuse, teenage pregnancy, gender based violence, etc.

According to Participant 7: “*Education can help the community to adapt to change.*” Adapting to change is very important for the community to progress with changing times. Community can be educated about allowing culture to evolve. Such progressive thinking can help to educate people about safer ways of practicing circumcision. Literature reviewed indicated that teachers suffer trauma when learners die at circumcision schools. Participant 6 also elaborated on the *Progression of knowledge*.

Communities have existing and recognised indigenous knowledges that sustain the way of life of every society. Yet, like culture, indigenous knowledge should not be static but respond to progressive growth demands. According to participant 4, education contributes to the community by: *improving the standard of living and help to overcome poverty*. Rural South Africa still languishes in abject poverty. The three most prevalent social ills in South Africa: poverty, unemployment, and inequality, are most prevalent in rural communities. Education has undoubtedly made a significant contribution to mitigate these social ills. Hence, communities can do better to support education, and this cannot be done without supporting teachers. Communities can ensure psychosocial support for teachers by, for example, ensuring their safety in schools. There is need to ensure safety against drug peddling in schools, and safety by preventing crime in schools. Parents can also support teachers by administering discipline on their children. Literature notes that teachers have become victims of assault by ill-disciplined learners (Dahill-Brown & Lavery, 2023).

The next question of discovery sought to highlight positive trends, events, and developments that contributed to the future of the learning ecology. Participant 6 highlighted the introduction and participation of NGOs in supporting education and schools. She made mention of one NGO which assists under privileged learners in their community to shape their future. This organisation assists learners from disadvantaged families to access opportunities even in tertiary education. Participant 5 mentioned that:

A few positive developments that have taken place and contributed to shaping the future of our community. In recent past years, there has been infrastructure developments taking place, in our community such that we can now refer to our village as semi-rural. The main road is now tarred, there is reliable transport to town, there are community clinics, There

is running water infrastructure, though taps are usually dry. There is electricity, though tariffs are too high for many unemployed. There are network pylons built for internet connection and they are talking about building a shopping centre so that our youth can get some jobs. The taxi operators are against building of a shopping centre because they benefit from charging exorbitant fares going to town. We have NGOs trying to assist the community, but with limited success because of lack infrastructure.

This infrastructure development brings with it many opportunities for teacher. They can now drive on a tarred road so their cars can have some longevity that saves on unnecessary repairs. They can now use flushing toilets and eradicate pit latrines which have always been a constant source of fear and stress as well as a degradation of their dignity and self-esteem. Availability of community clinics means that health practitioners can now visit schools with health education and hygiene services. Electricity means that schools can now have science and computer laboratories which NGOs were willing to donate but could not because of lack of supportive infrastructure.

The next question on discovering what was working was: What strengths kept you going during the coronavirus pandemic?

Participant 5 responded by saying:

Mutual support contributed most to effect positive impacts of our efforts. We contributed food items, financial support, as well as clothing to orphans of the coronavirus. Through our spirit of ubuntu, we provided izipheko (food provisions) and ukuxhasa (voluntarism), which made a huge difference to bereaved families. We supported each other using WhatsApp groups. We were given messages about the lockdown regulations which we followed and respected. The natural herbs such as umhlonyane cured us. We stuck to our healthy diet. We believed in God to give us hope and church members contributed a lot.

It is remarkable that people looked into what they had. They realised that support was mutual among them. They appealed to what they had at their disposal. The use of WhatsApp groups afforded a platform to receive support and useful information from authorities. Ubuntu is more than remote sympathy. It is a meaningful and practical psychosocial support where people care even by volunteering and physically showing up to support. The indigenous knowledge provided

natural herbs like umhlonyane and many others which were widely used to mitigate flu symptoms associated with the coronavirus, and to heal coronavirus patients in rural communities of KwaZulu-Natal (Mashego et al., 2021). Zondi and Ehaine (2022, p. 66) found that:

Ethnomedicinal plants have a lot to offer in treating COVID-19 and another infectious diseases. Herbal traditional medicines have (also) been used in China since the first days of the COVID-19 outbreak. Indeed, these traditional medicines were shown to result in the recovery of 90 percent of the 214 patients treated.

On what strengths kept them going, Participant 2 said:

We had to stay positive at all times. We kept the hope that one day things will change. Faith, prayers, and church leaders contributed a lot. Hygiene skills and mutual support improved-Mourning together even by showing sympathy using other means as gatherings were not allowed.

Staying positive is not easy in the face of adversity and uncertainty. It was encouraging to hear that hope for the status quo to change still existed even during the hard times. Faith in God provided a spiritual anchor and pillar for people to pin their hopes on. Participant 5 said they were kept going by being given relevant information to counter all the fear-inducing fake news or misinformation. These included the “*President’s speeches, messages from department of health, local pastors, close friends and family support and guidance.*” Communication or information provision is one of essential psychosocial support principles. It was evident that participants realised many psychosocial support principles that kept them going during the coronavirus pandemic. All these, however insignificant, built resilience that can be used for the future.

The next phase (in the 5D) is the dream phase which entrenches new discoveries that inform the dreaming process. Collaboration came up strongly as a positive theme during the discovery phase. To the question: Who helped or contributed to alleviate the situation, Participant 8 responded by saying: “*Oneness and cooperation amongst stakeholders. Even parents stepped up their commitments to their children’s education. Participant 5 testified that: “they were willing to collect their learners’ school work on daily basis when their children got sick and could not come to school”*”

5.3.3. Dream: *finding, reinforcing, and projecting what works*

In this phase, the participants are encouraged to imagine a future when people of their school and learning ecology experience and do exceptional things for the good of the teachers. This is an opportunity and freedom for participants to dream about vibrant psychosocial support for the teaching fraternity and for a future with a vibrant learning ecology working to incubate new strengths, talents, and skills through the emancipating power of education (Castillo & Barrameda, 2024).

Brainstorming: participants engaged in robust brainstorming sessions. The sessions were facilitated using questions in the interview protocol to initiate discussions. These questions guided and encouraged generativity and positive thinking. Positive thinking allows for wild dreaming. The participants learn to believe that anything is possible and there is nothing we cannot achieve using our inner strengths and God-given talents practiced into new life skills. A skill is the ability to internalise knowledge and perform intuitively without active involvement of cognitive faculties. One just knows what to do without referring to rules and procedures. A good example is driving a car effortlessly. The idea is to focus on what works, to consider with heightened appreciation the small lessons we learn through experience. Experience teaches us intuition, the knowledge of the mind, more than it does the intellect. The experience drops a skill into the subconscious mind to be unleashed on demand. The psychosocial support helps us to recognise our inner strength and develop resilience needed to navigate next experience or challenge.

In addition to the recorded conversations, the participants wrote possible answers and cues gleaned from the discussions. This confluence of data generation facilitated the reinforcement of ideas as well as learning from those ideas. Progressively, the information was processed into knowledge. The positive gems collated fed into the design phase of the process in a progressive snow-bowling fashion. The projection of what works directs the focus and design to a positive future outcome. The first question to provoke dreaming was: What exciting future can you imagine for teachers' psychosocial support in your learning ecology? Participant 6 thought that an ideal future for teachers' psychosocial support was when: "*schools and education authorities stay prepared before emergency can happen.*"

This point was taken further at the summit and an analogy was made of a first aid kit, a fire extinguisher, and a car spare wheel which need to be in place before the emergency happens. The same is true of psychosocial support principles. Psychosocial support principles are, not only fire extinguishers, but also preventative in that they can help avoid mental health issues before they start. Many so-called emergencies do not qualify to be called emergencies. They are manifestations of poor planning, ignored signs, and poor or mismanagement at some point, leading to psychosocial crisis.

Before we dream of a dynamic or formidable psychosocial support system to mitigate effects of disaster, we need to dream about effective preventative measures to curb the occurrence of disasters. Even if the disaster happens anyway, the impact would be minimised if there is good planning and management of resources beforehand. The principles of psychosocial support have an element of provision of basic aid, which is supply of food items. Moreover, psychosocial support provides Psychological First Aid (PFA) which starts and finishes psychological healing after the trauma. Therefore, a well-planned psychosocial support intervention begins with PFA which starts with giving of information and basic aids.

Participant 7 said: *“in future, we hope that the government will give adequate support to the educators.* Participant 3 envisaged a future when: *“the support structure such as clean drinking water, working toilets and electricity. We can also benefit from having teaching and learning materials.”* Participant 2: *“dreams about a future when learners will be educated and that leads to the whole community being educated.”* The education of the whole community and society is the ultimate goal and mandate of education. This mandate is every teacher’s and government’s in fighting social ills like poverty and inequality.

The next dreaming question concerns leadership skills that can support and drive the dreams for the envisaged exciting future for teachers’ psychosocial support and mental health wellness. Participant 2 thought that: *“good leadership skills would be shown in provision all learning materials and necessities like PPE.”*

Leadership will be seen in support, understanding, and caring. Participant 7 asserted that: *“good leadership is showing responsibility, i.e. educators doing good even if there is no one monitoring*

him or her.” Participant 6 believed that: “*good leadership must provide contingency for emergencies.*” Contingency for emergencies implies that leaders need to have good strategic planning which can respond to any kind of eventualities. Good planning for unforeseen eventualities can be seen in the analogy of building a house. The house plan and its execution must assume that there will be storms. No one runs to put a roof because it has started to rain.

The next question on dream phase is: What psychosocial support systems and structures are most encouraging for you? According to participant 4, the psychosocial support system that is most encouraging is: “*the one that educators form for themselves such as bereavement committee, which aim at supporting the educator going through the difficult time.*”

The last question on the dream phase was: What are you proudest recollections of having helped your school/ community to achieve? Participant 7 indicated that: “*I am proud of myself because I have helped the school to instil discipline to learners.*” Learner ill-discipline was found to be one of the sources of stress and a disposing factor for teacher mental health problems.

5.3.4. Design: Reflecting on ideas to inform design elements

The group listened to individual stories, experiences, and anecdotes and engaged in constructive group discussions. A brainstorming session deliberated on the gains emanating from the group discussions. These gains are gems of fortitude and resilience that can be used to inform design elements for the desired future. This phase of the IA seeks to direct the focus to a future outcome. It is interesting that data interpretation is done through the input of all participants during the brainstorming sessions. Aliyu et al. (2015, p.22) asserts that phenomenology is best understood through “a general first-person description of human experience.” It therefore, means that the first-person interpretation is the most accurate.

The process of sifting admissible ideas afforded the participants an opportunity to interrogate, test for relevance, and interpret. Inquiries like: What psychosocial support does an idea bring? How does it enhance understanding and meaning-making of the situation? and What implications for future fortitude and resilience does it bring? The beauty of the appreciative inquiry is that, when the propensity to finding faults is suppressed, positive thinking takes precedence. Innovative ideas

came out of the data corpus from the individual interviews to summit discussions. Bushe (2007, p. 30) refers to appreciative inquiry as “the quest for new ideas, images, theories and models that liberate our collective aspirations, alter the social construction of reality and, in the process, make available decisions and actions that were not available or did not occur to us before.” This kind of positive thinking and positive engagement creates an appreciative domain for changing the status quo.

5.3.5. Deploy/Delivery/Destiny: *Action learning*

This is the phase of action learning that was intended to help participants “cultivate relationships, foster community resources, and translate learning into their interactions with their families and community” (Buitrago et al., 2024, p.10). This phase was initially called Destiny but not all AI projects arrive at a distinctive destination. Hence, progressively Delivery and Deploy stages were introduced. Delivery has a connotation of taking answers to the future. Deploy would mean tasking for a specific function towards the realisation of certain goals. This would help to ensure, or at least support, the sustainability of results if they are not seen as a destination (Watkins et al., 2011).

5.4. Data analysis

Data analysis in appreciative inquiry is a process of carefully gleaning and harvesting meaning, understanding, as well knowledge created among the people. Appreciative inquiry and social constructionism “direct our attention to such human resources as imagination, story-telling, emotional capacity and responsiveness to the environment” (Lewis et al., 2016, p. 32). It is for that reason the AI Summit accentuates story-telling and narrative forms of expressing ideas that incite collective thinking and imagination, rather than searching for facts and pieces of information that are discrete from subjective cognition and feelings. Subjectivity implies that both the researcher and the participants bring their expertise and experience into the interpretation “to co-produce understanding” (Simpson, 2023, p.134).

Data is generated in context and interpretation of data begins among the participants in a summit where the researcher can confirm authenticity and bracket possible bias. The researcher later goes deeper in interpretation and analysis, given more learned discernment ability and educated proficiency. Praveena and Sasikumar, (2021, p.914) posit that “Intuiting occurs when researchers remain open to the meanings attribute to the phenomena by those who have experienced it.” AI further mandates and provides an opportunity to return for collective authentication and confirming of results at the end. “Meaning is made among people, not among facts and data”. (Whitney & Cooperrider, 2000, p.10).

This data analysis process employs the Claizzi’s descriptive phenomenological method for thematic analysis. Step 2 of that descriptive phenomenological method for data analysis recommends identification of significant statements/ key words that have direct relevance to the phenomenon of psychosocial support. The following table categorises these statements into disposing factors and protective (preventive/ mitigation) factors. The first column is for disposing factors followed by the psychological effects caused by the disposing factors. Similarly, the third column represents the protective factors followed by the effects of psychosocial support mitigations.

Table 5.1 The disposing factors vs protective factors impacting mental health wellness for teachers during the coronavirus pandemic.

Disposing factors	Psychological Effects	Protective factors	PSS effects
Disaster, pandemic, trauma, isolation, hopelessness.	Fear, anxiety, stress, depression, mental health issues, PTSD, GAD, despair, loss of functioning, sickness, death,	PSSP, hope, resilience	Mental health wellness, capacity building, resilience, fortitude, hope, courage
Stagnation, job demands	Lack of generativity, burnout, Depression	Transformation, life-long learning, job resources	Adaptation to change

Under-development	Loss of efficacy, lack of progress	Self-development, Community–development	Self-actualisation, self and community efficacy, progress
Lack of operational and leadership and crisis management skills	low Self-esteem, poor decision making	Upskilling or skills gaps filling for individuals, organisations	Confidence, capacity building, improved relations, sense of direction
Poor planning, poor supply and management of resources	Despondency	Strategic planning, provision of resources,	Cheerfulness, hope, enthusiasm, goal-focus, motivation
Socioeconomic factors	Poverty, poor health services, sickness, poor education. social injustice	Advocacy	Services delivery, empowerment, prosperity

5.4.2. *Clustering of themes*

Step 4 of Colaizzi’s framework is about clustering themes and step 5 is about developing an exhaustive description, that is, writing a full and inclusive description of the phenomenon. Main themes or subthemes can both be found in one or more of the 4D phases. The themes or subthemes do not necessarily have to be positive strengths. Negative themes and subthemes also provide essential information that should inform what should be. The themes and subthemes that emerge in two phases represent a connection between phases or overlapping phases like the discovery (largely negative) and dream (largely positive) phases. This reflexivity guards against discarding important themes because they are deemed irrelevant to a particular phase. Instead, it encourages viewing disposing factors as potential material upon which new dreams can be imagined and built.

Main themes produce subthemes, e.g. Trauma as a disposing factor (main theme) produces psychological and social effects (subthemes), which when are processed through psychosocial support (main theme) which produces resilience (subtheme). Protective factors can either prevent

or mitigate (appease)/ resolve the situation. However, disposing factors can be both triggers and maintainers of psychological effects. They cause the onset of psychosocial issues and if they persist, they maintain the condition. The longer a psychological issue remains unresolved the greater the chances of it to escalate to deeper problems like disorders, and the more difficult it is to solve. Themes are clustered into two categories; disposing factors and protective factors, for better description and analysis.

5.4.2.1. Disposing factors

The phenomenology of this study is Psychosocial support. Psychosocial support is studied and investigated in relation to the conditions brought by the coronavirus pandemic. The main themes identified in data constellations synchronise and confirm the expectations as created in the literature review. They are: disaster, pandemic, trauma, isolation, stagnation, job demands, underdevelopment, lack of operational and leadership skills, poor supply and management of resources, and socioeconomic factors.

5.4.2.1.1 Disaster

Disaster is a major disposing factor for mental health disturbances leading to normal functioning impairment. Natural (floods and pandemics) and man-made (wars and fires) disasters are ruthlessly plaguing communities more frequently. The United Nations International Strategy for Disaster Reduction (UN-IDSR, 2002) defines disaster as a serious disruption of the functioning of a community or a society causing widespread human, material, economic or environmental losses which exceed the ability of the affected community or society to cope using its own resources". These circumstances impact negatively on the individuals, family, and community well-being (Kim, 2024; Leppold, & Reifels, 2024). Dodge et al., (2012) define well-being as "the balance point between an individual's psychological, social and physical resource pool and the psychological, social and physical challenges faced".

The literature review found and reported on disruptive recent disasters that caused harm to rural communities. Among them were the floods in the province of KwaZulu-Natal. Notwithstanding

the immense damage on agricultural land and compromised food security, these disasters affected schooling in a significant way. Teachers were psychologically disturbed by these disasters. According to Makwana (2019), apart from affecting economic and social life, disasters affect individuals and communities by inducing mental disturbances like anxiety, depression, and PTSD. The coronavirus pandemic has been a global disaster of humongous magnitude (Leppold, & Reifels, 2024).

5.4.2.1.2 Pandemic

The coronavirus pandemic was a major disposing factor for a number of psychological issues. These issues present as themes or subthemes identified as direct effects, as well as causes of further complaints and interruption in normal human functioning. The pandemic loomed large as a disposing factor theme in the literature review, as well as in the data presentation. Participants expressed the feelings and understanding (or lack thereof) of the overwhelming situation. Participant 3 said:

“It was scary. We thought it was the end of the earth life. The COVID-19 pandemic affected every sphere of our lives and education included. Frustration reigned as we had to deal with learners. Learners would come to me and hug me as usual. I couldn’t stop them because I know that some of them needed my show of love and support expressed in that way, and it could be the only love and affirmation they ever get. But so frustrating, at the back of my mind, I am thinking what if I infected them and they in turn infect their parents or grandparents.”

Participant 8 added that: *“It was very challenging, frightening at the beginning.”* All participants reported that they were either directly or indirectly affected by the pandemic. Many were infected and fell sick to the point of death like me. Many lost their jobs and livelihoods like me. Many lost their loved ones, friends, neighbours, church members, and colleagues, me included. People could not attend burial services and that had a huge psychological impact as they could not find closure. Frustration reigned as one had to decide to properly mourn the deceased or look out for one’s safety. A vehement and cruel violation of human culture and normality reigned.

There was so much frustration between giving love, support and care with the social distancing required. Participant 3 lamented the fact that their situation did not make it easy for social distancing: *“It was hard. Practising social distancing was hard because of the (large numbers of) learners in our classrooms.”* This was an overwhelming and abnormal situation defying human normality of behaviour and functioning. Frustration is a psychological phenomenon that paralyses the ability to think and make decisions. Participant 7 put it this way: *“It has been a very frustrating experience; we were scared for our lives and there were so many unverified solutions/ information. You did not know what to think.”*

It is clear that the pandemic wreaked havoc in peoples’ lives. People lost their psychological compass as was found in the review of literature. The literature reviews also revealed that, during the coronavirus pandemic, the problem of teacher retention was also increased due to increased rate of attrition (Coberly, 2023; White, 2024). The coronavirus also became a catalyst for other comorbid diseases that caused the death of many teachers and further aggravated scarcity of teachers in the rural areas.

5.4.2.1.3 Trauma

Trauma is defined as an event one experiences as harmful or life threatening. It has lasting adverse effects on one’s mental, physical, emotional, social, or spiritual well-being. It represents an individual’s perceptual discrepancy between threatening factors and individual’s coping abilities in a situation. The individual’s perception of context and reality is altered by an exaggerated threat which further alters vigilance and control. Loss of control then leads to anxiety, depersonalisation and dissociation (Sar & Ozturk, 2013). Trauma, as a phenomenon, can be resolved through the psychosocial process of meaning making and caring. Participants described their experience of the coronavirus pandemic as traumatic. Participant 5 testified that: *“Working experience during the coronavirus pandemic was traumatising. We lost the habits of sitting together during lunch, sharing objects and meet-ups for staff meetings was broken.”*

Loss of habit is synonymous to loss of control. The process of regaining control of the situation and self-regulation becomes vital. Whenever the process is enacted it also assists in developing

resilience. I define resilience as an enabling factor a person gains after a hard situation (an intuitive lesson from a school of hard knocks). Others, including Lim and Won (2024) define it as the process of effectively negotiating, adapting to, or managing significant sources of stress or trauma to regain control of the situation. This makes resilience beneficial for instilling stability (James et al., 2023). Psychosocial support ensures that trauma survivors gain something positive out of a situation that would only be deemed as negative and catastrophic. People need support to create resilience, and resilience becomes a protective factor once created.

Data points to teachers being traumatised by the pandemic, more specifically during the lockdown. Participant 6 testified that the situation was traumatic saying: *“The lockdown was traumatising, it also intensified fear and you couldn’t think properly.”*. This means that teachers’ mental well-being was not at its best when the pandemic appeared on the scene. Data also revealed that teachers are traumatised in many ways. Teachers are traumatised by pregnant learners giving birth in classrooms. They are traumatised by effects of social media, violence in schools, the effects of climate change in schools, and pandemics. All of these had not yet surfaced in 1996 when the SA Schools Act was enacted. The compounding challenges call for drastic measures to combat them.

5.4.2.1.4 Isolation

From reviewing literature, it emerged that the lockdown measures by governments done in a desperate move to curb the spread of the virus (Brooks et al., 2024), were made into law, which negatively affected schooling and brought mental health consequences for teachers (Wang, 2024). These laws of isolation and confinement during the lockdown created more health concerns for teachers, including psychological and physical issues. Teachers reportedly experienced somatic difficulties due to increased frequency screen time and lack of physical exercise. Lockdown meant reduced leisure activities which is not good for mental health (Molebatsi et al., 2021).

They reported feeling stressed, depressed, and anxious due to having to spend more time online doing schoolwork. Isolation negatively impacted mental health and reduced emotional well-being of teachers, causing depression to many. Many were financially depressed due to less economic activity. “Depression among teachers can also significantly impact their health,

productivity, and function” (Agyapong et al., 2022, p. 2). Under stressful conditions of lockdown and isolation, people cannot freely use their thinking abilities without being distracted by thoughts of anxiety that affect their emotional judgement (Sung, 2022; Aliakbari et al., 2020). Churches were under lockdown regulations, which meant that spiritual counselling was not available for church goers. Burke (2013, p.177) asserts that, “Positive religious coping may buffer a person against the effects of negative life events.”.

5.4.2.1.5 Stagnation

Stagnation is the lack of progress. A person finds nothing exciting about what they are doing and they feel like they are stuck in a rut. They lack enthusiasm to take action about their situation. They are caught in a cycle of daily routine of activities that no longer bring any growth or excitement. The psychological effects of stagnation include lack of efficacy (belief) that they can accomplish anything or can change their lives. They rely on external sources to change their situation without their corroborative efforts. When the hopes they pin on external sources are disappointed, they become stressed and their low-self-esteem drives them to depression.

We found in literature that people suffering from stagnation show signs of learned helplessness, which may lead to tendencies of procrastination and marginal self-consciousness, and unsatisfactory self-organisation and career responsibilities (Mitina et al., 2022). Learned helplessness is one of the four theories of psychosocial support. Due to repeated failures and adverse experiences, people who resort to learned helplessness come to a generalisation that their situation cannot be changed. They believe their situation is out of control and that none of their efforts can bring any change.

A question was asked in the interview protocol about what participants liked most about their career and teaching profession, and what encouraged them to become teachers. This question was intended to jog their initial career ambitions. Though a question about burnout was not directly asked, the issue of burnout came in the literature review as well as during AIS discussions as one of phenomenal result stagnation. Teacher workload has been found to be the source of stress and

burnout. Moreover when schools reopened after the high wave of the pandemic had subsided, teachers had to teach platoon classes because of social distancing regulations (Wang, 2024).

Participants complained about the doubled workload, with participant 4 saying: “*we had to teach the same thing twice.*” Social distancing in classroom was also impossible. *The class was still big for effective social distancing, even when it was (split in) half as they attended in rotation.* They said the smallest class was 60 and the biggest was 105 learners in primary schools. According to (Agyapong et al., 2022, p.1), “stress occurs when a person perceives an external demand as exceeding their capability to deal with it”. Burnout results from stress of not coping with work demands. Burnout caused by stagnation leads to lack of capacity to self-regulate, and can lead to emotional exhaustion and emotional responses which, over time, may lead to the onset of depressive symptoms (Reich, et al., 2020; Sánchez-Pujalte et al., 2023).

The burnout undermines self-efficacy, which is an essential belief in their ability to help learners learn and believe in themselves as life-long learners, and upgrade themselves as professionals (Pressley, 2021). Self-efficacy can mobilise cognitive and psychological strength. It refers to people's beliefs in their capabilities to mobilise cognitive resources and execute the courses and recourses of actions needed to meet given situational demands (Bandura, 1986; Gonzalez et al., 1990). Participants responded to, and discussed the question: Why do you think it is important to keep teachers motivated? Participant 8 answered that “*Teachers work in challenging spaces and deal with fragile/delicate young people, they need a positive state of mind for them to cope with contextual variables that impinge on their daily activities.*” Self-efficacy has more precision and focus than the traits of self-esteem and self-confidence.

Self-efficacy “predicts the initiation, persistence, and maintenance of behaviour in the face of obstacles” (Carleton et al., 2018, p.187). Self-efficacy can be changed or enhanced through motivation and by pulling together cognitive resources. The cognitive resources are the skills that one acquires and perfects as personal efficacy to produce and regulate events in their lives. As much as burnout is a result of not coping with contextual variables of work that impact on their career, burnout also leads to poor coping with daily duties (Padmanabhanunni et al., 2023). It is a vicious cycle. Psychosocial support principles provide coping mechanisms and strategies to break

and resolve such psychological stalemate. The coping strategies include: seeking social support, confronting, distancing, self-control, accepting responsibility, escape avoidance, problem solving, and positive reappraisal. These constructs essentially cover either side of the ‘Fight or flight’ recourses.

The significant thing about the psychosocial coping strategies is that they are not based on fear-driven decision-making, but focus on positive actions like seeking (social support, information and knowledge) to make informed and learned decisions, rather than flight or escape. Positive actions like accepting responsibility may include appraisal of own ability to cope. The nature of knowledge and knowledge acquisition is such that it is progressive, and therefore, education as a vehicle of knowledge should be continually evolving. This continual growth also applies to teachers as agents of education. According to participant 3: *education contributes to the community by improving the standard of living and help to reduce poverty*. For education and its agents to effect improvement on the communities, progression is inevitable. Participant 2 responded to the question what they liked about their career as a teacher, by mentioning ‘*progression of knowledge*’ as a fulfilling reward.

This ideal dream becomes a disposing factor for burnout. Teachers’ “sense of personal accomplishment” (Padmanabhanunni et al, 2023, p.122) suffers a great deal due to a high number of school dropouts and high number of post matric school leavers who are neither in training nor in employment, but roaming the streets and getting involved in drug abuse and crime. Participants agreed that education should be allowed and empowered to transform the community. Under achievement of educational goals is travesty to social justice envisaged in Constitution of the Republic of South Africa (Act 108 of 1996).

5.4.2.1.6 *Job demands*

The teaching profession is categorised as one of the most stressful occupations. Teachers say there is less recognition of their contribution and less acknowledgement of their challenges and lack of support from other stakeholders (Robinson et al., 2023). Low job satisfaction stems from low salaries that are not commensurate with the job demands. The coronavirus compounded teacher

problems and aggravated the already abnormally high stress levels, particularly for teachers in rural learning ecologies. Participants lamented the large classes even when they were halved during the coronavirus. Their job demands doubled as they had to teach platoon classes, meaning teaching the same thing twice. Repeating the same thing over and over again is also a cause for burnout. Teachers also complained about large volumes of paperwork which could be done by clerical staff instead. Nevertheless, teachers appreciated the introduction of computers for their admin work, though some had little knowledge about operating a computer. This called for more training in computers which, they unfortunately, viewed as another job demand.

The department can start by looking into teacher workload. Participants discussed this workload and complained that their job demands were more than the job resources provided. Resources in question included human resources in the form of more teachers, assistant teachers, and other support staff like cleaners. These are disposing factors for burnout and feelings of non-accomplishment leading to a sense of feeling unvalued. Teachers called for “a collaborative and consultative communication line between government and the educational community when developing and implementing strategies during the pandemic and beyond” (Armijos et al., 2023, p. 34). In such consultative platforms, both parties can dialogue and address the pressures of job demands and the importance of supply of job resources (Wang, 2024).

5.4.2.1.7 Under-development

Development is synonymous with growing and progression and these terms suggest continuity. Development is a process without limits. A question was asked in the interview if teachers felt that they received adequate training to enable them to face challenges presented by the pandemic, and if they thought they you needed further training/ workshop to enhance their effectiveness. Most participants responded that they felt they were not adequately prepared in terms of training, and that they had not received any in-service training to prepare them for any disaster management. Participant 8, who has been a principal for eleven years, said, “*not at all, one felt inadequate and ill-equipped.*” When asked whether they needed further training/workshops to enhance their effectiveness, he answered: “*Yes, it was critical that I get capacitated.*”

Disaster preparedness on the part of teachers could have facilitated the development of their personal and communal resilience required to bounce back to normality and prepared for future disasters. Fu and Zhang (2024, p.3) posit that there is a need for the “formulation of disaster education policies and their practical Implementation” to recognise teachers as key agents in disaster education and management. This assumes that “the necessary training, resources, and emotional support to fulfill this role effectively” is first provided to teachers to support their resilience, well-being, and self-efficacy. Participant 9, who is an EHW officer stationed at the district office, also said:

I personally feel that my training did not prepare me adequately because when COVID-19 started I was so scared and confused like other people. I also went through trauma and anxiety, even though I was expected to counsel and support my colleagues. What made things worse, was that I did not have enough information about the virus.

Lack of relevant capacitation or under-development was not limited to the agents of education. The momentous devastation that the pandemic wrought in rural learning ecologies was compounded by structural rural under-development. Participants lamented the lack of crucial infrastructure in their schools and communities to support their war against the pandemic. Apart from physical impediments, poor infrastructure also affected teachers psychologically. Research (Agyapong et al., 2022) found that workplace environment improvements positively correlate with reduction of burnout and can prevent adverse mental health outcomes. Water provision and proper ablution facilities were identified among the basic commodities that would better their situation.

Participant 1 said: “*It was so hard because we had shortage of PPEs. There was a shortage of water so that we had to bring water from home. Cleaning material and sanitisers were not delivered on time*”. It is encouraging that, in this particular community, some progress has been made in terms of infrastructure development.

A few positive developments that have taken place and contributed to shaping the future of our community. In recent past years, there has been infrastructure developments taking place in our community such that we can now refer to our village as semi-rural. There is now running water infrastructure, though taps are usually dry, there is electricity, though tariffs are too high for many unemployed.

These few developments boost the efficacy (belief) of the community and hope for a future to work for and towards. The thought of the future always carries a notion of growth and development. It is interesting that the participants dreamt about a developed community. It is also noted that they had good ideas on how to get to their envisaged future, starting from self-development for self-actualisation (Maslow, 1943), to imparting knowledge to learners, all the way to the edification of the community at large. Notwithstanding the under-development reality still prevailing, they appreciated every small improvement in their community, from rural to now ‘semi-rural’.

5.4.2.1.8 Lack of operational and leadership skills

Leadership skills include strategic planning and unambiguous communication of the plan, and decision making on the best options to implement, provision of resources, and management of resources (human, time and material) (Alvarez-Robinson et al., 2024). Human resource management is not done in the same way as that of material resources. The difference is that humans are involved and actively contribute from planning to implementation. Disasters and pandemics will always expose the lack in leadership skills. Many emergencies can be prevented by proper planning and putting contingency plans in place. Participant 1 said: *Cleaning material and sanitisers were not delivered on time.*” which suggest poor planning. Participant 6 suggested that: *good leadership must provide contingency for emergencies*”. When asked the question: ‘Do you regard provision of resources as good leadership in school, circuit, district and community? Please explain,’ participant 2 answered: *“resources provision enhances efficacy and lessen the load on the shoulders of employees.”*

Part of human resource management is for the manager to show that they care and understand what people are going through. Participants discussed the point about leadership and provision. They were not satisfied that the authorities provided good leadership. For participant 3 it: *“seemed the government hired corrupt and/ or incompetent suppliers for PPEs, sanitisers and cleaning material because these supplies were never on time and they were of poor quality.”* The leaders were exposed on time management and provision of quality supplies (McKay et al., 2024). There

was also lack of monitoring as a leadership skill. These leadership gaps or sloppiness were disposing factors for teachers' psychological mental health and emotional challenges.

A further question on leadership was: 'What steps can be taken to enhance leadership skills (such as (e.g. decision making, good life choices, interpersonal relations etc.) for teachers?' Participant 8 responded saying: "*provide sufficient information during novice teacher induction workshops.*" Provision of information is part of psychosocial support principles. Psychosocial support can be preventative and proactively provide information even at the induction level so that teachers are not overwhelmed in times of need. Discussing disposing factors helped to get a full view of the circumstances during the coronavirus. We now have researched information on how the disposing factors for mental health and psychological ills caused a great deal of vulnerability for teachers. These findings are corroborated by the work of scholars reviewed (Miconi et al., 2024).

5.4.2.1.9 Socioeconomic Factors

The socioeconomic standing of a community is a distinctive determinant of social progression, stagnation or deterioration. Many social ills of a community can be directly or indirectly linked to the economic status of that community. Problems of school dropouts, teenage pregnancy, school violence, school leavers with unsatisfactory results and youth unemployment are most prevalent in low economic status communities. Notwithstanding the fact that socioeconomic hardship is a common denominator in urban and rural settings, it is more intense in rural areas due to structural marginalisation. It came out in the literature, including (Yu & Xianzhong, 2024; Welsh, 2024) and others that socioeconomic factors contributed to social ills prevalent in society.

Participants reported that due to existing social norms and better social cohesion still prevailing in their rural community, drug peddling, drug abuse, and related crime statistics were lower than urban figures (except for racially/land motivated and stock theft in farming communities). Subdued crime in rural areas shows that a community can be poor materially but rich in psychological capital and social capital. For Cooperrider and Fry (2020, p.270), social capital can be views as "social and cultural assets, technical and economic ones, psychological and spiritual strengths, ecological strengths of nature, and the strengths of moral models". Social capital has cultural assets

such as moral models, social norms, and trust as its elements. Such social attributes are still in good supply (though declining) in rural communities, partly due to Ubuntu still being practiced, and because of traditional culture and sense of being a community.

A sense of being a community promotes trust. According to Primadata et al., (2023, p.459), “Trust is the only thing that will keep a community, group or organization alive”. Within the radius of trust, communities have varying inventories of social capital, which determines how far moral standards of cooperation, honesty in performing duties, solidarity, and a sense of justice are applicable. These community attributes help to speed up the return to normality after a disaster as we have heard from participants’ accounts in this project. Ubuntu can be understood as what Skea and Cert, (2016, p.1144) refer to as “a human trait, a moral imperative, an affect, an interpersonal relationship”. It also espouses cordial relationships and support based on mutual trust, mutual esteem, and appreciation.

Social capital can also be viewed as a glue or a unifying ingredient of social cohesion of a community. Social justice is defined as a democratic process ensuring equitable participation equally involving all citizens, collaboratively advancing and empowering them to shape their society to become inclusive (Marco-Bujosa et al., 2024). The principles of collaboration and participation are cornerstones for community health promotion strategies like fighting crime. (Kreuter & Lezin, 2002). Social cohesion is the promoter of social justice, democracy and the world peace (Divoll & Riberio, 2024; McArdle, 2024). Both PSS principles and AI individually and together as synergic allies (theoretical framework) are well-placed to promote trust and appreciation. When we practice empathy, we build trust and positive relationships (Darling-Hammond et al., 2024).

It is also interesting to note that there are poor communities between rural and urban. These are high-density-populated underserviced informal settlements and townships where crime is very high because of bankruptcy in social capital, and lack of a sense of community. Participants resolved to engage in different forms of advocacy to raise awareness about the socioeconomic issues in their community. Socioeconomic issues cannot be fully addressed without attending to causal factors. These causal factors include provision of education responsive to requisite skills,

issues of crime to attract investment and infrastructure development to support economic growth. The government should also provide land and farming skills for unemployed youth in rural learning ecologies (Makridis & Wu, 2021).

5.4.2.2. Protective factors

Appreciative inquiry seeks to engage participants in positive generative conversations without prejudice or blame apportioning. The coronavirus pandemic exposed the leadership skills gaps on the part of the authorities. As much as we look at the deficiencies to see what needs to change, the focus is on what was working or assisting to improve the situation. Teachers reported experiencing psychological distress including excessive stress, anxiety, mental fatigue, burnout symptoms and depression (Ran et al., 2024). The data shows that teachers in rural learning ecologies were severely put under siege by the coronavirus pandemic. It is interesting though to observe that protective factors kept them empowered to defy the odds, kept them going and saved them from tipping over to deep ends of psychological disorders. Participants testified that participating in the appreciative inquiry wrought psychological and emotional healing, even participant 2 saying: “*Uyazi selaphekile emoyeni nasemphefumulweni*” (*You know, we have been healed emotionally and spiritually*). Teachers would be further empowered as they acquire leadership skills to manage themselves, resources, and circumstances well.

The appreciative inquiry seeks to change the status quo, and to achieve that dream, AI strategies will be employed to develop teachers’ leadership skills to plan strategically and amplify the good practices that sustained them during desperate times, and in the process, fully unleash and enhance their social potential. At the summit, we co-created some understanding on what worked well. Though communication with the higher offices was inadequate, communication among themselves kept them going. A question was asked, ‘How would you help enhance leadership skills (such as planning for the future, managing resources, communication, etc.) for teachers? Participant 8 suggested “*we should: engage in discussion forums and capacity-building workshops.*” That is what the ongoing process of the appreciative inquiry does. Figures 5.1 below, show deliberations that where of protective factors were produced.

5.4.2.2.1 Hope

Hope provides enthusiasm for goal setting and fighting for those goals. Individuals maintain optimism by maintaining a motivated spirit and having positive beliefs (efficacy) about reaching the target goals (Kardas et al., 2019). A study (Piret & Boivin, 2021) was done to investigate the correlation between the phenomenon of hope and psychological distress. A negative correlation was found between hope and psychological distress. The same study found that hope prevailed and manifested differently according to family dynamics. On gender, females showed less hope than their male counterparts. This could be attributed to the high prevalence of Gender Based Violence (GBV) so rampant in modern society. Hope was higher among youth compared to older people. It could be that older people have more experience and resilience accumulated over the years to shield them from more psychological distress. Older people may have heard shared stories about previous pandemics. They have resilient hope that this too will pass and is not the end of the world (Piret & Boivin, 2021).

Married couples exhibited more hope than unmarried and divorced individuals. Maybe, divorce-related trauma left them vulnerable to losing hope in people and life. Participants from core family set-up showed more hope stability than those from joint family structures. The education level of participants showed that a lower education level positively correlated with lower hope. This is an affirmation that education is a vehicle for holistic personal development, psychological fortitude, and emotional maturity. Lastly and most interestingly was found that hope was higher among rural dwellers as opposed to urban counterparts. Rural hardships have exposed rural dwellers to a myriad of trying circumstances and times. They have built more resilience, fortitude, and audacity to believe. Belief needs to have an object or deity to pin hope on. Participants in this study all testified how hope carried them, and faith in God. Participants testified that *“As staff, we supported our colleagues and we believed in God to give us hope, and church members contributed a lot.”*

5.4.2.2.3 Life-long learning

The level of high education attainment was found a protective factor in the previous section of hope. This landmark finding leads us to life-long learning as a protective factor that countered

stagnation and burnout among teachers during the coronavirus. Mental strength and spiritual fortitude (Zhang et al., 2021) helped individuals to choose to live and be lively. Participants also testified to life-long learning as a protective factor against despair in life, even in the face of adversity as during the coronavirus pandemic. Participant 4 said: *“I think what I like the most about my career is to see my students succeed in life. I also learn from them, so there is an opportunity for life-long learning.”* Life-long can help to create and sustain hope so that teachers do not fall into deep depression. It is a way to channel anger, frustration, and disappointment into fruitful use. Keeping focus on positive signs and activities like reading positive material to keep a positive attitude is advised.

Participants testified to the fact that reading is a good life-long learning practice that gave them hope and purpose. Life-long learning is a protective factor, not only against psychological distress and mental decay, but also for self-efficacy. Reading is not a panacea for all mental problems but can yield some positive benefits mentally and psychologically. Resilience is also created through reading as it is a mental exercise. It yields more information and knowledge but more mental fitness and fortitude. Therefore, we can conclude that more positive information, more knowledge, and better education to provide more wisdom for psychosocial support, and give hope for previously traumatised individuals. “Resilience has also been associated with other important factors that moderate the stress effect” (Padmanabhanunni et al., 2023, p.123). Apart from giving hope, reason, and purpose for life-long learning, is a chance to change attitudes and perspectives to life. It gives mental fitness, strength, and maturity which assists in decision-making and making informed and learned choices. Learned choices save time and other resources. Learned choices save us from pain, guilt, and disappointment due to bad choices.

Participants declared that education to them was not just for job security but a calling for: *“Changing lives, life-long learning, love giving, passion expression, love & compassion.”* Life-long learning is predisposition and opportunity to change lives; yours and those of others. Resilience is a good attribute that comes out of a bad experience. It is a great life-long teacher of intuition so that a person knows what to do without any reference to rules and standing procedures. The example is that you can perfectly drive a car applying all the rules by heart and without remembering them by head. One other novel example representing pockets of resilience during

the coronavirus is heightened hygiene awareness. Love and compassion do not require any rules to give them. One just gives love intuitively as the power of love dictates.

Life-long learning opens an individual's adaptation to change. It can be likened to what Armstrong et al. (2022) refer to as reframing of problems into new possibilities and opportunities. Participant 7 thought "*education can help the community to adapt to change*. It has been long established here and as a standing psychological fact that anxiety is a deleterious psychological phenomenon. However, it is the amount of anxiety that makes it bad or good. Long ago I found out and I assured my students that some anxiety is required during the examination to jog your cognitive faculties to release cognitive adrenalin. They learned how to channel anxiety, manage it properly. Anxiety can and should be managed because it operates on a continuum. There is a threshold it should not pass to be of benefit. A good measure can help jog the memory but if allowed to escalate, it can cross the Rubicon where it shuts down the memory.

Padmanabhanunni et al. (2022) define anxiety as "an adaptive response to threat that can prompt adaptive threat-mitigating cognitive appraisals and behaviours aimed at protecting the individual from harm." An individual who is flexible to change suffers less trauma than a rigid and stereotyped person. Flexibility is the ability to bend without breaking (mentally, culturally, and otherwise) to fit into change and make the best of every situation. Zadok-Gurman et al. (2021) define resilience as the process of *adapting well* in the face of stress, adversity, trauma, tragedy, and threats.

Literature defines resilience as a process of effectively negotiating, *adapting* to, or managing significant sources of stress or trauma to regain control of the situation to instill stability after the crisis (James et al., 2023). Resilience and adaptation exhibit rebounding and can work miracles to re-install stability. Lim and Won (2024, p.3) define resilience as "absorptive capacity, adaptive capacity, and transformative capacity". Participants were asked the question, 'What has your working experience during the coronavirus pandemic been like? They agreed with participant 8 that: "*It was very challenging, frightening at the beginning, but later one adjusted and adapted to the demands of the situation.*"

5.4.2.2.4 *Psychosocial support principles*

It emerged in the data that all participants were directly or indirectly impacted by the pandemic. The following questions were asked in the interview protocol: ‘Were you or any of your colleagues directly or indirectly affected by the effects of the coronavirus? What were the things that helped to mitigate for you?’ Participants responded by agreeing that some lost family members and friends, colleagues, and neighbors. Participants demonstrated that psychosocial support principles helped them to navigate turbulent tides of the coronavirus. Much has been said in this project about the psychosocial support principles playing a major role as protective factors against mental health deterioration and psychological distress effects. It has been comprehensively established in the literature review that psychosocial support represents the relationship, influence, and interaction between the psychological dimension (emotional, cognitive, and spiritual) and social dimension (interpersonal relationships and social environment) of a person's life. Psychosocial support is a continuing process of addressing mental, emotional, social, spiritual, and physical needs (Mapasela et al., 2012).

These definitions imply and assume the creation of a supportive context both psychologically and socially, and corroborate with the contextual experiences of the participants. The supportive context can be best understood through the principles of psychosocial support and the *provision of information and basic aid*. Provision of information and basic aid pertains to getting adequate information to the affected people about the landscape of the disaster and those affected. It also includes providing basic supplies such as food to the victims. Participants needed information to make sense of the situation. The authorities desperately scrambled to bring informative updates as they continued to research about the virus.

Participants confirmed the psychosocial support principle that access to relevant information improved their coping strategies. The participants’ experiences confirmed what the literature review unearthed about the provision of information being part of psychosocial support. Provision of information is part of PFA. One of the objectives of this study was ‘To explore and understand the nature and impact of psychosocial support for teachers in rural learning ecologies during the coronavirus pandemic’. Provision of relevant information is a good start to making sense of the

nature and impact of the pandemic, and understanding of psychosocial support. Participants indicated that there was lack of information from authorities and so mass media fed us fake news that escalated fear and misinformation. It was frustrating when information was not forthcoming.

The information gap left by authentic sources invited the unfortunate avalanche of *'fake news that escalated fear and misinformation.'* Fake news and misinformation can be extremely dangerous. Even a reckless joke on social media that infected people should drink sanitiser to kill the virus from inside could be taken seriously by unknowing victims. Fauci and Folkers (2023, p. 423) note that: "Misinformation and disinformation are the enemies of public health and pandemic control". Lack of relevant information leaves an information void that can be taken up by the unscrupulous fake news peddling. Information gaps cause speculations that can exacerbate fear, anxiety (loss of control), and depression (Dubey, 2020). The resulting frustration and confusion caused emotional disturbances such as feelings of anger. Frustration is not good for emotional stability and keeping hope. Proper dissemination of useful information under the psychosocial domain can create hope for better future. Anger, fear, and frustration dominated when participants were not receiving credible information.

The South African government, through its Department of Treasury, approved a Special COVID-19 Social Relief of Distress (SRD) grant of R350 per month for unemployed citizens. This government's aid was much welcome by participants as a practical psychosocial support intervention. It provided some relief in the face of prevailing high unemployment rate which was exacerbated by more lay-off during the pandemic (Westvik, 2024). Social Relief of Distress (SRD) grant also provides some relief to working teachers who have many extended family members looking up to them. Participants also appreciated the benevolent support of the NGOs. Participant 3 testified that: *"The community worked collaboratively with the institution. Even NGO/NPO assistance was provided, by helping vulnerable families/ learners with psychosocial support in terms of food parcels, clothing, sanitary towels for girl learners, uplifting the communities by offering jobs."*

This psychosocial support was welcomed by teachers. It came handy at the time when school feeding schemes had been halted to maintain social distances regulations. Another psychosocial

support principle is *promoting a sense of safety, calmness, self-and community efficacy, connectedness to others, and hope*. These five essential elements of psychosocial support principles prevailed for individuals and community-based support. Mapasela et al. (2012) assert that psychosocial support involves creating an environment conducive to teaching and learning, including the safety of educators and learners. The coronavirus pandemic attacked safety from another unexpected angle. Community efficacy and hope manifested as some safety protocols that were prescribed and provided.

Safety protocols gave teachers a sense of safety and hope that the authorities had the situation under control. It is for this reason that teachers became worried when equipment like PPEs and commodities like water were in short supply. The president of South Africa regularly addressed ‘family meetings’ to give updates and to instill calm. Participants testified to the need for connectedness to their family, friends, and colleagues provided by WhatsApp and other social media platforms. Social media provides communication platforms for checking on each other virtually. All these efforts were appreciated and accepted as social acknowledgment.

Participants also experienced this study as fitting in the category of social acknowledgement of psychosocial support provision. Social acknowledgment (one of psychosocial principles) received positive reactions from the participants. They testified that even the community appreciated being acknowledged in the heat of the pandemic. They testified that it was therapeutic. It gave them confidence and trust that they could provide useful information and be part of creating new knowledge and hope. A question was asked in the discovery phase: ‘What difference were you, as an individual or together as a collective, able to make? Participant 7 responded that: “*confidence and trust that we could continue to work despite the presence of the virus.*” That is acceptance of reality. Whitney and Trosten-Bloom (2010) assert that through Appreciative Inquiry, the freedom to know and be known in relationship liberates people’s energy, ideas, and personal and organisational power. “Such liberatory inquiry is also accompanied by numerous creative efforts to employ constructionism for healing purposes” (p.180).

I deliberated on social acknowledgment as part of healing provided by psychosocial support efforts through social structures such as NGOs and churches. Communal mourning was an aspect of social

acknowledgement that brought psychosocial healing for the contrite heart. In African culture communal mourning is a long-standing practice that is mandated by traditional laws and is enforced by *izinduna*. It says that the whole community must mourn if there is death in any one of the homesteads (Buqa, 2024).

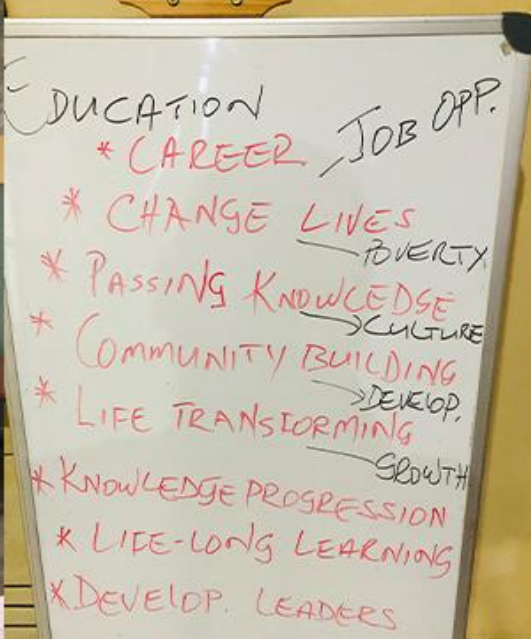
Other members of the community show empathy and respect by suspending other celebrations for the mourning period. They voluntarily sent *izipheko* (food parcels) to the bereaved family and visit them (*ukubhonga emswaneni*) regularly to offer their condolences and prayers. During the pandemic, families were not allowed *ukuyobhonga emswaneni*, but they could still send messages and *izipheko*. This traditional practice is an indigenous social acknowledgement (of a victim's experience of positive reactions from the society that show appreciation) that make the bereaved family feel honoured and cared for. These indigenous practices provide a wealth of psychosocial support embedded within the community (Tsabedze, 2023).

5.5 Chapter synthesis

Data presentation revealed the extent of the impact of the coronavirus pandemic on the lives, livelihood, and psychosocial well-being of teachers, especially in rural learning ecologies. The phenomenon of psychosocial support is studied and investigated in relation to the conditions brought by the coronavirus pandemic. Data shows that psychosocial support, as manifested in individuals and communities, has made a considerable difference in terms of the prevention and mitigation of the crisis. Further, engaging in appreciative inquiry showed an interchanging manifestation of disposing factors (for psychosocial crisis and resulting psychological derailment) and protective factors (to promote positive core and create resilience for mental health and well-being).

The main themes identified in data constellations synchronise and confirm the expectations as created in the literature review. There are disposing factors and protective factors. Disposing factors are disaster, pandemic, trauma, isolation, stagnation, job demands, under-development, lack of operational and leadership skills, poor supply and management of resources, and socioeconomic factors. The protective factors that surfaced prominently in the data corpus were

hope, life-long learning, and psychosocial support principles. Fig 5.1 shows some of protective factors as were highlighted by participants. I endeavoured to analyse the data as generated through the interviews and AIS with background and reference to literature review findings. The findings are discussed in greater detail in chapter six.



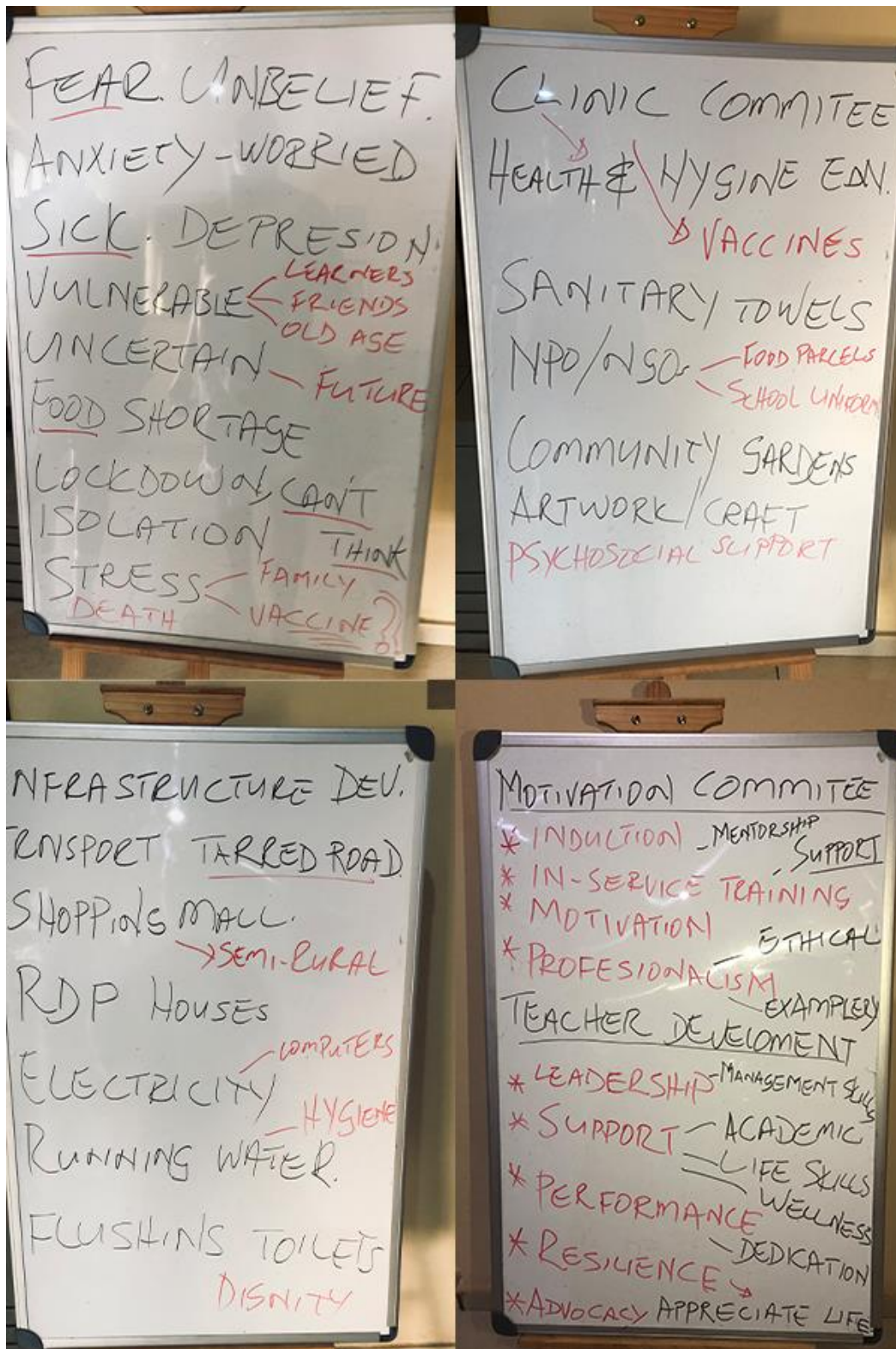


Figure 5.1 Selected AIS pictures showing protective factors.

CHAPTER SIX

6. DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

6.1 Introduction

The themes that emerged in Chapter Five assisted in the consolidation of findings. The main themes are *disposing factors* and *protective factors*. Themes were found in the phases of the appreciative inquiry, which further assisted in the generation of data. Findings adequately addressed the objectives of the study by answering of research questions. The objectives of the study and the research questions are captured next

6.1.1 Objectives and Research Questions

6.1.1.1 Objectives

- To explore and understand the nature and impact of psychosocial support for teachers in rural learning ecologies during the coronavirus pandemic.
- To explore how the understanding of the psychosocial support systems can shape teachers' perspective and future.
- To understand why psychosocial support for teachers in rural learning ecologies during the coronavirus pandemic may be achieved.

6.1.1.1 Research Questions

- What is the teachers' understanding of psychosocial support for teachers in rural learning ecologies during the coronavirus pandemic?
- How can an understanding of the psychosocial support for teachers in rural learning ecologies during the coronavirus pandemic change teachers' perspective and future?
- Why must psychosocial support for teachers in rural learning ecologies during the coronavirus pandemic be shaped in particular ways?

The crux of this study is to address these objectives by answering the research questions. Findings are discussed under the subtopics:

- *Impact of the coronavirus pandemic: define to discovery,*
- *Psychosocial support became vital: discovery to dream,*

- *Advocacy: dream to design, and*
- *The road map to destiny.*

6.2. The impact of the coronavirus pandemic: *define to discovery*

What is the teachers' understanding of psychosocial support for teachers in rural learning ecologies during the coronavirus pandemic?

In an attempt to answer the question, it was prudent to retrospectively look at what the study has found to be the prevalence and extent of impact of the pandemic on the life and functioning of the teachers (Leppold, & Reifels, 2024). The study found that during the coronavirus, teachers were adversely affected psychologically. Their mental health wellness, personal well-being and livelihood, and professional functioning were significantly impacted. The findings clearly show that teachers were highly impacted by the pandemic (Wills & van der Berg, 2024). Teachers feared being infected, and they were infected. Teachers became sick and some succumbed to the disease. Their family members, friends, and colleagues feared, got infected, fell sick, and some died. Employers took advantage of the newly found hybrid teaching to lay off contract workers as online teaching required fewer teachers (Almusharraf & Bailey, 2021; Westvik, 2024).

The literature reviews also harmonised with generated data that clearly demonstrated that teachers in rural learning ecologies were hugely impacted psychologically and socially (Wills & van der Berg, 2024). Teachers suffered severe stress that resulted in various psychological pathologies and affected their mental health wellness and their productivity and functioning (Leppold, & Reifels, 2024). Literature shows that the impact of the coronavirus pandemic on the functioning of teachers was enormous, and it caused high levels of psychological distress. The teaching profession is considered one stressful occupation in the world (Hadi et al., 2009; Du Plessis & Mestry, 2019). The coronavirus undoubtedly aggravated teachers' normal stress, due to the challenges facing teachers in rural learning ecologies.

Research reported high levels of anxiety and depression among frontline workers and teachers (Santomauro, et al., 2021; Huang et al., 2020). First, it was the fear of becoming infected, sick,

and possibly dying. The secondary psychological distress was due to the isolation effects of the lockdown. Thirdly, over and above the psychological stress, the lockdown became a physical barrier to education making it nearly impossible to execute their professional functions (Padmanabhanunni et al., 2022). Burnout also resulted from platoon classes which were still large after splitting. Burnout compromised teachers' self-efficacy or belief in their ability to properly guide learners to upgrade themselves professionally as life-long learners (Darling-Hammond et al., 2024). Loss of self-efficacy results in less cognitive flair and psychological strength (Pressley, 2021).

Fear gripped teachers (Díez González et al., 2024). Beyond the fear of the disease, new fear of the unknown future was experienced. Findings show that help for teachers was vital. Disaster was found to be a disposing factor for psychological issues. Recovery from disaster-related psychological effects can be effectively addressed by a combination of individuals' internal and external resources (Henriques et al., 2024). Mkwana (2019) says: the “most affected individuals recover with time, with the help of effective post-intervention techniques and their individual strengths” It is interesting that much help came from within teachers themselves as well as from their community. Participants mentioned engagement in ‘arts and culture’ as a therapeutic coping mechanism (Waters et al., 2022). Indigenous knowledge and practices came to the rescue. Some relied on, and were actually cured by, indigenous medicines like *umhlonyane* and other traditional herbs, while western medical science could not find a cure for the virus (Ang et al., 2020).

The WHO defines traditional medicine as ‘the sum total of the knowledge, skills, and practices based on the theories, beliefs, and experiences indigenous to different cultures, whether explicable or not, used in the maintenance of health as well as in the prevention, diagnosis, improvement, or treatment of physical and mental illness or maintain well-being’ (Che et al., 2024). It is also defined as complementary and herbal medicines (Saruchera & Xaba, 2024). A traditional herb called *umhlonyane* was praised by the participants who used it as a very effective remedy for the treatment of respiratory complications and common flues and colds associated with the coronavirus (Kamoka & Elengoe, 2024).

In conclusion, the lived experiences during the pandemic provided an understanding and appreciation of the extent of the impact of the virus on their lives. It also provided an understanding and realisation that there was a treasure of knowledge, wisdom, talents, and strengths in mutual psychosocial support.

6.3. Psychosocial support became vital: *Discovery to dream*

How can teachers' understanding of the psychosocial support for teachers in rural learning ecologies during the coronavirus pandemic change their perspective and future?

Understanding the dynamics of psychosocial support provision can be a way of making sense of a disastrous situation. Maxwell et al. (2020) describe the 'hermeneutic' process: an 'ongoing process of development. Düwell (2024, p.1) refers to hermeneutic as "the capacity of humans to judge which makes 'reflective knowledge' possible" and further asserts that such knowledge brings us to an orientation in life and for the future. The principles of psychosocial support provide a domain for sense-making and recreating meaning. This meaning-making is made possible through the framework of psychosocial support principles and the iterative processes of AI. This framework for understanding of psychosocial support can change teachers' perspectives of their future.

As soon as the disaster strikes, people immediately realise that the situational demands exceed their resources and they look up for help. Such a situation brings about confusion. Psychosocial support principles become essential for mitigation and sense-making. The way people receive and perceive psychosocial support determines if they will allow the PSS principles, through the process of appreciative inquiry to reframe their attitude for positive change and gaining resilience required for future situations (Armstrong et al., 2022). The phases of AI from discovery to dream revealed that the much-needed psychosocial support was not adequately provided for teachers in rural learning ecologies, by the authorities. Somerville and Farner (2012) explain the process of 'renegotiating' within the framework of 'reinterpretation'. It is to be open-minded and realistic in assessing the situation rather than to be unreasonably critical. Such disposition allows self-change before expecting others to change. Teachers accepted that as much as they expected their

immediate managers to provide them with psychosocial support, they also suffered fear, anxiety, and uncertainty. They were also affected and overwhelmed.

The government conceded that it was caught off guard yet it made attempts at rescuing or alleviating the situation. It provided some psychosocial support initiatives like providing information, calming fears, and providing marginal financial aid. Government also provided a sense of safety, declaring state of emergency measures like lockdown, making wearing of masks mandatory, recommending regular washing of hands, and supplying sanitisers and other PPEs. Notwithstanding the shortage and mismanagement of these supplies, the efforts were noted and could be improved in the future given the gained experience. These dynamics surrounding psychosocial support provision provided some form of meaning-making and understanding of the situation and became a basis for strategising a way forward (Blecher et al., 2021; Kim et al., 2024).

Findings further showed that rural structural marginalisation impeded teachers' access to much help and psychosocial support. Participants lamented the infrastructure under-development. However, they appreciated that there had been some improvements in the recent past in terms of electricity installations and water infrastructure provision, although taps were always dry. The department yielded to the pressure from education lobby groups for eradication of pit toilets and built water-operated toilets in this rural learning ecology, though water availability was still a challenge (Midzi et al., 2024). The main road was now tarred and the transportation system had improved. Participants welcomed the efforts and now called their community 'semi-rural'

Findings reveal that what kept teachers holding on and having hope to move forward was the support that came from their social potential. Social capital includes cultural assets such as moral models, social norms, and trust as its constituencies (Yang et al., 2024; Makridis & Wu, 2021). Social capital also produces elements of psychological capital (including hope, confidence, and resilience (Kreuter & Lezin, 2002). Psychological capital can be defined by what Lewis (2016, p. 230) refers to as "our key psychological states that enhance resilience and performance at work: hope, optimism, self-efficacy or confidence, and resilience." Lewis further asserts that PsyCap has proven to be a predictor of performance, satisfaction, and absenteeism rates (ibid)". Resilience produces more resilience. These definitions provide a basis for fully defining psychosocial support.

Studies by Turliuc and Candel, (2022) and those of other scholars (Yang et al, 2024) show that psychological capital positively impacts mental health and well-being (Flesia et al., 2023; Ravikumar, 2023).

Hlalele (2019) helped us with the recognition of innate social capital or indigenous knowledge already existing within every group or community (p. 92). “All communities (including rural ecologies) possess strong and diverse forms of capital that can be of benefit in addressing community challenges”. This fundamental recognition is reiterated by Walker (2023) who fuses it into one of the theoretical bases of appreciative inquiry as a “Life-Giving Properties of a Social System” (p.30). This gives the notion that every social system contains potential in the form of a set of properties that give and sustain life. These properties can be seen as social potential or social capital. Mutual support among colleagues, family support, spiritual counselling (Vincent, 2023), NGO benevolent support, philanthropic gestures towards the marginalised, community collaboration, are all meant for community cohesion (Ang et al., 2020).

Communal mourning offered desperately needed social acknowledgment (Kumwendo, 2024), which is the third pillar of psychosocial support principles. Teachers found that their communities have psychosocial support pillars in and among them, especially from significant others. Mutual psychosocial support became very useful. They discovered their inner strengths and latent skills that they collaboratively exploited to counter the effects of the coronavirus pandemic. (Buqa, 2024). Ubuntu is such collaborative psychosocial support. It is not just a social acknowledgement phenomenon; it is a virtue of interdependence. People do not merely acknowledge but they empathise with the affected. ‘*It is being there for each other*’, participant 4.

Family members, community members, NGOs, and churches became useful resources for psychosocial support. Teachers tapped into the spiritual realm and trusted God for their salvation. “Positive religious coping may buffer a person against the effects of negative life events (Burke, 2013, p.177). The Holy Bible teaches that: *The lovers of God may suffer adversity and stumble seven times, but they will continue to rise over and over again* (The Bible, The Passion Translation (TPT), Proverbs 24v 16). It is words like these that, when people embrace and believe, a new hope is birthed in their hearts (Vincent, 2023; Shannonhouse et al., 2024).

Whilst teachers appreciate the discovery of their strengths and honour the creator of their universe, there is much enablement that still rests with the authorities who receive their votes and taxes. They resolved to lobby their superiors at work to provide necessary resources and adequate tools to support their work. They believe that adequate provision of such support goes a long way in assisting them to achieve the mental health well-being, functionality, and productivity they are dreaming about.

Appreciative inquiry, as a type of action research, engaged teachers through phases of designing an envisaged future. Following engagements in open-ended questions and the AIS, they felt healed and ready to take on future challenges. The AI's principle of simultaneity says that people gravitate towards what questions suggest. This principle says that change (in thinking, perspective, and attitude) begins the moment a question is asked. Teachers committed to taking all requisite steps as agents of change, to change the status quo for themselves and the entire learning ecology.

We can say that their understanding of psychosocial support can change their perspective from that of focusing on finding the shortcomings of others. External resources can go so far but people need to learn to utilise their strengths for sustainable coping. In the data analysis section, I referred to the analogy of 'flight or fight' or "flight/fight/freeze response" (Lewis, 2016, p.226), which is described as the product of negative emotions that work to eliminate the need to think in threat situations. Psychosocial support can take the form of external support when our thoughts have been frozen by fear. I further differentiated between internal and external resources for responding to traumatic situations. The positive psychosocial coping strategies would be those that are not based on fear-driven decision-making, but that focus on positive actions making informed and learned decisions.

The effects of positive psychosocial coping strategies produce positive emotions, and "when we are feeling good, we are, in broad terms: more sociable, more creative, more able to deal with complexity, able to think faster, more flexible in our thinking, more motivated and tenacious, have greater verbal fluency and are generally able to think better" (Lewis, 2016, p. 226) and elicit positive actions. Positive actions mean fighting while taking responsibility. Responsibility may

include appraisal of own resources and abilities necessary to escape or cope. Gori et al. (2021) take the ‘flight or fight’ analogy further by describing what they call ‘passive aggression’ and ‘avoidance coping’. ‘Passive aggression’ is the disaster response which is mainly characterised by resistance or resentment towards the authorities. It has the idea of always petitioning for demands and presenting grievances while shifting responsibility. In their passivity, they expect spoon-feeding type of support.

People who adopt ‘passive aggression’ as a coping mechanism have a propensity to lay blame on others, and to find solace in pitiful remarks. They have a victim mentality that is psychosocially counter-productive and produces disappointments, and anger, which may lead to more stress, anxiety, and depression. ‘Passive aggression’ can be juxtaposed with ‘avoidance coping’, which is a way of dealing with difficulties by utilising inner abilities and resources to escape or avoid the situation or its effects. In the literature review, I found that appreciative inquiry represents concepts of *episteme*, or knowledge embedded in the active accomplishment of a goal, and *techno* representation of a craft-like ability to make or perform (Gergen, 2015). These properties of ‘active accomplishment of a goal’ and craft-like ability to perform bring a dimension of how the synergy of the critical paradigm and the appreciative inquiry positions people to create knowledge and skills for active coping.

Correct perspective positively perceives psychosocial support as including actively making efforts. External resources are useful and constitute protective factors against psychological distress and mental health wellness. However, they should be met with positive internal resources. This understanding of psychosocial support is positive and can help to reduce the perception of threat as not exceeding the available resources to overcome it. Although much reporting was done on the prevalence and impact of the coronavirus in literature, not much research has been done on psychosocial support for teachers (Wills & van der Berg, 2024).

This study investigated the phenomenon of psychosocial support. The definition together with the principles psychosocial support were used as criterion to see if was provided or not. The participants overwhelmingly appreciated the idea of providing them with psychosocial support, thought not directly, but by the way of providing information and engagement in creation of

knowledge. Knowledge has power to illuminate understanding, meaning-making and ability to recognize solutions. Through the power of appreciative inquiry, the study also alerted teachers to their social capital to highlight and amplify the inner strengths that kept them going during hard times. They learned that resilience is not a charm or magic that works automatically but they need to tap into its power through positive thinking. The critical paradigm empowered them to understand their situation, to fully describe the psychosocial support they need in all its forms, to recognise what they needed to change their situation, to co-create knowledge and skills for the world they want, and to demand psychosocial support to monitor and evaluate their progress towards their emancipation and sustainable livelihood.

6.3.1 The four theories of psychosocial support

The four theories of psychosocial support are: self-efficacy, stress and coping, learned helplessness, and social support. They contribute to psychosocial well-being and sustainable livelihood. They empower people to find answers for themselves by focusing on “what works” and what gives life to a group or community (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2007, p.102). Appreciative inquiry provides a paradigm change from a deficit problem-solving model towards a strengths-based approach with strategic planning and strategic change (Slavik, 2021; Alvarez-Robinson et al., 2024). AI change is supported by PSS through the four theories of psychosocial support: self-efficacy, social support theories, stress and coping, and learned helplessness (Darling-Hammond et al., 2024).

6.3.1.1 Self-efficacy

Self-efficacy can be changed or enhanced through motivation, emancipatory actions, and resources that the critical paradigm makes possible through psychosocial support. Part of those resources can be skills that one can acquire to enhance their efficacy to produce and regulate events in their lives (Bandura, 1982). Self-efficacy can be enhanced by setting short-term achievable clear, specific, and realistic goals. Realistic goals show that they can be achieved (Darling-Hammond et al., 2024). The notion of attainable and realistic goals motivates people because they are within reach. Small little changes are manageable and encourage self-efficacy (Lewis, 2016). Specific

goals provide clear directions on what is to be achieved. Psychosocial intervention can make a positive impact on a person's behaviour and enhance confidence to support change (Carleton et al., 2018; Gonzalez et al., 2019).

6.3.1.2 Stress and coping

Chapter three posits that the 'stress and coping' theory effects can be appraised relatively from person to person and according to differing situations. The coping strategies include the concept of 'confronting'. Confronting refers to taking action to address a distressing situation. Part of a psychosocial crisis is to engage in progressive advocacy. Another coping strategy is accepting responsibility. Accepting responsibility may entail positive appraisal of the situation. Positive appraisal can be a process of weighing own resources against the challenge. The demands of the situation would then determine further actions to be taken (Carleton et al., 2018; Huang et al., 2020).

6.3.1.3 learned helplessness

Learned helplessness is the direct opposite of self-efficacy in terms of beliefs. Because of repeated failures and adverse experiences, people who resort to learned helplessness believe and come to a generalisation that their situation cannot be changed (Gurefe & Bakalim, 2018). PSSP and AIP work together with the critical paradigm to change the mindset from believing in inherent failure to gaining new hope for the future. A new perspective empowers a person to see that they have powers and a choice to determine if the contingent response to an eventful situation is located and dependent on internal personal attributes or external global factors. We have already mentioned that, where a situation is beyond an individual or community, help should come from outside. If help from outside is not forthcoming, then people should call for help using all means to draw attention to their predicament. That is advocacy (Prihadi et al., 2019; Gonzalez et al., 1990).

6.4 Advocacy: *dream to design*

Why must psychosocial support for teachers in rural learning ecologies during the coronavirus pandemic be shaped in particular ways?

Psychosocial support needs to be designed in a particular way to address specific social and psychological needs. Psychosocial support for a special professional group like teachers requires a long-term commitment because it has a bearing on the delivery of education. Unlike short-term psychosocial intervention for victims of shack fires, theirs has global ramifications as education is a pillar of social justice and world peace. Furthermore, their psychosocial support cannot be designed and effectively executed without their input, involvement, and contribution (Kramer et al., 2022).

I established in chapter three that the significance and purpose of the theoretical framework is enablement of a strategy for finding answers to new problems (Ravitch & Riggan, 2016; Ahmad et al., 2019). Psychosocial support principles provide a framework for the application of intervention strategies. Garret (2022) notes that the appreciative inquiry is a framework that is good for strategising solutions for change. The strength of the appreciative inquiry is demonstrated in its cycle of phases known as 5D model of application. The transition from AI dream phase to design phase is very important as it is at the phase where aspirations are given meaning in practical terms. Transition from theory to practice is very crucial (Lewis, 2016). This is corroborated by Kirkbride et al. (2024, p.60) when discussing psychosocial support dynamics, accentuating the importance of the “ability to translate the acquired knowledge into effective clinical targets to prevent or alleviate symptoms of mental distress”.

I delved into a discussion comparing ‘passive aggression’ and ‘avoidance coping’. ‘Avoidance coping’ has the idea of participants being involved in ‘active accomplishment of a goal’. The difference between fight and flight is that in fleeing, the candidate does nothing except running. Whereas, a fighter needs to devise a strategy, assess their fighting resources against the adversary, and have the courage to face the challenge head-on. People may have to in-source some support from friends, family, and allies. Avoidance carries a connotation of prevention (Kramer et al., 2022).

Prevention means that certain steps need to be taken to stop the recurrence or lessen the extent of devastation (Powell & Knox, 2024).

We cannot stop disasters and adversities from happening (Leppold & Reifels, 2024). We are told that climate change disasters will increase both in frequency and intensity, and set to affect citizens of low socioeconomic areas more severely (Lankes et al., 2024). We can build and fortify our infrastructure to withstand or allow minimal damage, if at all, to property and prevent loss of lives (Kappler et al., 2024). Diagne et al. (2023, p. 613) admonish that it is “necessary to anticipate and prepare populations for various shocks or unavoidable developments, whether they take the form of an endemic or epidemic health crisis, the environmental consequences of climate change”. Part of strategising is reframing the odds so that all things work together for creation of the positive core (figure 4.1). It may take collaborative advocacy to achieve some changes beyond the capacity of our positive core.

It has been said in this study and elsewhere, that the coronavirus pandemic was a disaster that caught everyone ‘off guard’. Further, it is a finding that its impact was worsened by poor infrastructure, lack of leadership, and lack of resources. These deficiencies were largely attributed to a lack of service delivery on the part of the authorities, in particular education authorities. There is a need for socio-ecological transformation to enable education, in a supportive socio-physical learning environment, to integrate resources (human, curricula, and material) for the advancement of education (Dlamini & Zulu, 2024).

Education service delivery is a contribution to world peace that depends on the achievement of global sustainable development goals (Hepburn et al., 2024), especially SDG4.7 goals for quality education (Holst et al., 2024; Reimers, 2024). Teachers accept their responsibilities to improve their knowledge base and skills for enriched curriculum expertise (Mapasela et al., 2012), but they also demand support from other stakeholders, especially the government (Maistry, 2022). Teachers resolved to engage in advocacy for transformative service delivery purposely geared to improve infrastructure in their rural learning ecologies (Kramer et al., 20220).

It is important to place advocacy in correct perspective to understand the balance in responsibility sharing. Beaumont (2019, p.41) defines advocacy as “a set of actions targeted to support a particular outcome or policy” There are public amenities that can only be provided by the authorities though citizens still carry responsibilities by way of paying taxes and advocating for the proper usage of government funds. Citizens have constitutional rights to have adequate infrastructure properly maintained. Participants in this study resolved to speak up for the infrastructural improvement of their community (Sparre, 2024).

The community in this learning ecology needs roads (only the main road is tarred), sturdy bridges, continually running water, affordable electricity, reliable internet connectivity, and provision of online learning devices. They also need contingency planning for emergency services on demand. Ambulances, fire engines, and police should always be on standby alert. Rural learning ecologies struggle to access emergent services. They also believe that increased political will and activity can help to amplify the community petitions for infrastructure development (Shava & Ndebele, 2023).

Teachers plan to engage and appeal to all political formations and traditional leaders with due respect, without fear, without blame, and without dogma. They intend to hold political parties responsible so that they do not only come to the community during voting time to solicit votes and make empty promises. They plan to organise themselves, starting from this group of participants and expanding their influence. According to WHO (2004), mental health promotions are socio-political matters and they include providing and improving resources that support education. These activities can be achieved through integrated stakeholder participation. They are the functions and responsibilities of governments, business sector, and NGOs (Mapasela et al., 2012; Holst et al., 2024).

The critical paradigm principle and beliefs are applied in this study to promote advocacy and capacity-building for participants. People are awakened to fully understand their rights, strengths, and opportunities to deal with situations affecting them individually and as a community. In addition, the juxtaposition of this paradigm against the appreciative inquiry as a strength-based

theoretical framework, provides a formidable theoretical synergy for advocacy and capacity building.

Armstrong et al. (2020) assert that ‘Appreciative Inquiry (AI) is a well-documented approach to helping individuals and systems move from a deficit-based paradigm to a strengths-based perspective’. This implies that the attitudes and perspectives of participants need to change. This strength-based approach teaches people new strategies to acquire new knowledge or augment their set of skills and talents required to create new or adaptive coping existence from a reality previously altered by adverse circumstances. Psychosocial support theory and principles corroborate with appreciative inquiry in rallying psychological (intrinsic) and social (extrinsic) resources requisite for healing from traumatic situations.

The critical paradigm gives due consideration to the reality of cultural and indigenous knowledge systems as tried-and-tested ways of doing things and solving problems. Since the appreciative inquiry is a strong participatory theoretical framework (together with the practical PSS principles), it agrees with the ontological belief of the critical paradigm that knowledge exists because it is co-created in a context. ‘People can design/ reconstruct their own world through (involved) action and critical reflection’ (Aliyu et al., 2015). ‘Involved action’ is commensurate with the notion of ‘avoidance coping’ which is a way of dealing with difficulties by making efforts utilising inner abilities and resources to escape or avoid the situation or its effects. The ‘critical reflection’ gives more thought and appraisal to actions being taken.

The axiological function of the critical paradigm- is to appraise and monitor the motives of actions taken. This is meant to critically weigh actions for appropriateness in terms of value, significance, and impact to the lives of individuals and the community. For example, according to community participation in governance principles, teachers have a right to attend a budget meeting of their municipal council to approve the actions to be taken (Marston et al., 2020). Teachers are made aware of such responsibilities through AIS engagements. The appreciative inquiry, through its constructionist principle, the data generation, interpretation, and co-creation of knowledge took place in the context of the AIS. This framework corroborates with and supports the

epistemological stance of the critical paradigm that knowledge is co-created through lived experiences, and that social relations influence those experiences (Aliyu et al., 2015).

Apart from active advocacy, participants also took responsibility for their personal upskilling and development. This is also in agreement with what was established in the literature review, that psychosocial support works better if recipients are actively involved rather than when they are spoon-fed. Teachers resolved to augment their acquired resilience by improving their leadership skills for better understanding and management of disasters, and any other situation that might seek to disrupt their well-being or stability of their ecology (Leppold, & Reifels, 2024). They acknowledge they need better skills for knowledgeable crisis management, learned decision-making, skillful management of resources, better communication skills, and continual implementation and management functions such as adherence to hygiene protocols. These represent resilient leadership skills (Powell & Knox, 2024).

Resilient gains manifest in a variety of ways. The example is gains in hygiene education. Other diseases like flu were effectively curbed and drastically reduced during the winter season due to hygiene protocols prescribed for the coronavirus pandemic (Kong et al., 2020). Participants assertively said: *'we stuck to our healthy diet'*, a positive gain that should take the community's healthy awareness and status forward. Such resilient discoveries need to be amplified, encouraged, and enhanced as gains brought by the new normal. Teachers are also well-positioned as educators to impart new knowledge and life skills to their learners who would, in turn, cascade them to their families and the wider community and society (Holst et al., 2024). This was their new resolve: to teach for life rather than for grades only. Appreciative inquiry does not yield only results and findings, but also discoveries for improved life and livelihood for the whole community.

Teachers also resolved to embrace life-long learning to strengthen their knowledge base and cognitive resilience. As life-long learning was found to be a protective factor against effects of burnout and stagnation, they now make it their new determination and motivation to fight against passivity through life-long learning and *'progression of knowledge'*. It is also a sound recognition and noble admission that one needs to be first developed before they are able to develop others. Teachers also admit to desisting from sluggish acceptance of transformations and changes brought

by the Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR). They need 4IR for accelerated learning and adaptation to using online teaching and learning (Shava & Ndebele, 2023).

4IR is defined as ‘the advent of cyber-physical systems involving entirely new capabilities for people and machines’ (Mhlanga & Moloji, 2020). These capabilities depend on the technologies and infrastructure that have introduced new methods of teaching and learning. Mhlanga and Moloji (2020, p.2) further draw from The World Economic Forum (WEF) to predict that an estimated “65% of children entering primary schools today will end up working in entirely new occupations or jobs that do not exist now”. These predictions suggest to teachers that they need to think ahead about embracing the innovations of 4IR in education. The implication is that new job skill set, reliant on 4IR technologies (Reimers, 2024) will be in demand in the near future, and that future starts now (Yende, 2021).

Graduates who are not technologically skilled find themselves obsolete and add to the dire statistics of unemployed graduates roaming the streets and languishing in the prisons of South Africa. Failure of education to solve unemployment and the crime remains a low point for teachers, leading to a low “sense of personal accomplishment” for them (Padmanabhanunni et al., 2023, p.122). Teachers accept the reality that change is inevitable and that it is upon them now. They also accept the responsibility to develop themselves as professionals (Abedi & Ametepey, 2024). However, Heystek and Terhoven, (2015) note that “teachers must have a high level of motivation before they will be persuaded to move out of their comfort zones.” This is especially true for teachers from low-socioeconomic areas where there are many disposing factors to low morale.

Motivation can help teachers to regroup their strength and continue with sustained “collective confidence” (Cooperider & Fry, 2020, p.266) in upholding work ethics despite structural hardships aggravated by the coronavirus pandemic. Moreover, professional development demands many requirements and commodities such as time and financial commitments. Nevertheless, teachers need to be motivated to participate in professional development (Darling-Hammond et al., 2024). The appreciative inquiry has realised effective results as a development forum for change in thinking, attitude, and the status quo. This is the way psychosocial support for teachers must be shaped (McKay et al., 2024).

6.5. The roadmap to destiny: *the envisaged future*

The 5D version of this appreciative inquiry concludes with the ‘destiny’ phase. ‘Destiny’ is designed to chart the way forward to the future. It is interesting to note that the future is a moving destination, and so the elements for designing the future need to be continuously mobile and revolving. Perhaps, it is for this reason that the destiny phase has been called the ‘deploy’ phase (Watkins et al., 2011). Deploy has a connotation of committing to work as opposed to destiny (arriving) or delivery (completed). Change and future always point ahead, and we need to work continuously for change (Lilja, 2024). The envisaged future for psychological and social well-being is envisioned and designed through the appreciative inquiry (Alvarez-Robinson et al., 2024). Other researchers’ findings and predictions in the literature corroborated with participants’ dreams and designs as a generated through engagements in interviews and the AIS (García, 2024).

Appreciative inquiry has power to flip conversation discourse from a deficit mind-set to a strength-based one for positive decision-making and action (Armstrong et al., 2020). The 5D phased engagement is a practical process of changing from what the situation is, to what it can be. I have seen participants flipping their thought patterns from being negative, sad, grumpy, disappointed, and hopeless when they started with ‘define’ phase, to a completely different mindset when they exit at the destiny phase (Matthews, 2023). They now felt healed, reinvigorated, motivated, hopeful, and positive about life. It was not that they had arrived, but they had certainly departed (Armstrong et al., 2020).

Positive questions help to redirect the conversations from thinking that every support is external, to looking inward and recognise inner strengths and resources (Watkins et al., 2011; Lewis, 2016). To look at what they might have before outside help comes, positive questions elicited responses like: “*We stuck to our healthy diets*” Participant 5; “*We had to stay positive at all times*”; Participant 2; “*As staff, we supported our colleagues telephonically and through WhatsApp groups motivated them not to lose hope, even shared bible verses as well as sharing indigenous natural herbs such as umhlonyane*” Participant 4; “*We kept the hope that one day things will change*” Participant 2; “*in future we hope that the government will give adequate support to the educators*”, Participant 7; “*We can also benefit from having teaching and learning materials*” Participant 3; “*form and*

participate in small groups /committees that deal specifically with employee challenges ... engage in discussion forums” Participant 8. To the question: Reflect on successful ways teachers are currently engaged in improving their mental health well-being’ Participant 8 responded: physical exercise. Positive questioning unearthed words like ‘we’; we had to; as staff; we kept the hope; in future we hope; we can also benefit; participate in small groups etc.

Table 6.1 depicts small changes that can take place within the community before they look for help that only external resources can supply. These positive attitudes suggest that psychosocial support can be rallied, coordinated, and realized, utilising their social capital (Yang et al., 2024; Makridis & Wu, 2021). The rest can be achieved (also with their active involvement) in strategies and collaborations with outside help. This mindset makes advocacy initiatives easy. I have noticed that even the government is attracted to communities with a positive mindset to challenges. It quickly starts getting involved to make examples of them (or to steal the credit).

Table 6.1 Results of positive attitude towards challenges.

Deficit/ challenge	Positive small changes/ resources	Positive action	Results/Envisaged benefits
Lack of information	WhatsApp messages engage in discussion forums.	Check on friends, colleagues, share relevant information	Get useful information, and helpful ideas, reduce anxiety
Fear and anxiety, stress, despair	support group, stay positive, manage stress	Encourage/motivate one another, join/form support groups,	Encouragement, mutual support, psychological wellness, resilience, hope
Socioeconomic challenges	Social Capital, stokvel groups, vegetable gardens,	Get involved	Enhanced social capital, healthy food, less crime

Lack of support, loneliness	Friends, family, colleagues, Mutual support	Form relationships and networks,	Comfort, satisfies need for belonging
Lack of resources	Appreciate little available resources	Manage well, maximise little available and share	Appreciate and use inner strengths
Sickness	Bible verses, Indigenous herbs	Sharing, healthy diet, physical exercise	Healing, improved immune system
Death	Burial societies, bereavement committees, church, spiritual support	Communal mourning, comfort the bereaved, Ubuntu, spiritual counselling	Acknowledgement, solace, emotional and spiritual healing, well-being, normal functioning.

The process of appreciative inquiry assisted me together with the participants: firstly, to fully understand what was going on in the individuals' cognition and behaviour as responses to trauma wrought by the pandemic; secondly, to appraise their level of hope and efficacy to pursue their dreams; thirdly, to support them, individually and collectively to design suitable support and interventions for the regaining of strength, restoring of confidence to live, having a sense of accomplishment in their careers, and achieving in life; and lastly, for them to deliver or pursue a better future by empowering, not only themselves as individuals, but also their families, the community, and the entire society through the emancipating power of education. Emancipation needs to start with the teachers if they are going to liberate the community through education (Castillo & Barrameda, 2024).

6.5.1. Teacher wellness and motivation

We have fully established the impact of the coronavirus pandemic in the lives of all citizens. The teaching profession has also been found to be one of the most affected, ruthlessly aggravating their (arguably) most stressful job, the world over (Wills & van der Berg, 2024). Psychosocial support for teachers should be provided from many angles, and sources given diverse disposing factors

waring against their wellbeing. The Department of Basic Education (DBE), under its Human Resource directorate, has an office of Employee Wellness Programme (EWP) located at the district office. This office, according to Participant 9 who runs the office, is mandated to see to the wellness of teachers. Like many HR departments, even in the private corporate sector, their primary existence is to improve employee wellness for improving work productivity. According to Lu et al. (2023), employees' well-being or wellness (EW) refers to the overall quality assessment of employees' job experiences, job satisfaction, and functions. Employee wellness consists of three domains: psychological, physical, and social. There has been a long-standing accusation from the unions directed at the employers, that they put profits before the people's lives and mandate (Lu et al., 2023; Nyfoudi et al., 2024).

A question was posed to participant 9 about the department providing the wellness program for the purpose of safeguarding performance and production rather than the interest of improving employee wellness. She explained at length that they are for the employees first, adding that most of their clients are self-referrals rather than the supervisors referring them because of poor performance reasons. The good thing is that a person is motivated at the end of it all regardless of the motive of the motivator. And that motivation, for the purpose of this study, can contribute as a psychosocial support protective factor. So appreciative inquiry has taught us to harvest anything positive and strength-giving without being obsessed with prejudice (Bushe, 2013).

Participant 9 gave a brief background on the composition and mandate of this office which I recorded with permission and later transcribed:

Employee health and wellness strategic framework for public servant's policy, has four pillars: Wellness management, Health and productivity management (for incapacity leave, absenteeism, and diseases), HIV and STI management (for awareness, screening, and condoms distribution), and that is where we can lot in Covid19, Safety, health and quality risk management (as department we are struggling to implement services under this fourth pillar because there no health management officers or risk management officers employed in the department of education).

“The programs used to be reactive rather than proactive. But now there is improvement since we now go out to schools and do awareness programmes and activities designed to equip employees with knowledge and skills so they can deal with their personal or work-related problems. These programmes include psychological (including mental health), spiritual, and financial wellness programs. The challenge is that I am the only Health and Wellness practitioner in the whole district catering for over 500 schools”

EWP goals for teacher wellness represent holistic psychosocial support for teachers. The most important application is that of being a preventive psychosocial support. Participant 9 celebrated the fact that their program was now proactive rather than reactive as it used to be. This should position them for teacher empowerment as they work to motivate them to have awareness and take care and responsibility of their well-being.

Participants alluded to the fact that such activities as physical exercise and participation in small groups/committees yielded positive results for their mental health well-being and motivation. In the literature, Aughterson et al. (2024) suggested what they called mechanisms of action which engage community groups' support for enhanced psychosocial well-being and wellness, which were found to yield results such as: “increased social connectedness, heightened self-esteem, increased patient activation, greater optimism, and improvement in health-related behaviours.” (p3). The community participation groups can include engaging in music or community choir, physical exercise teams, arts and culture groups, sports teams, reading clubs, and gardening societies. These mechanisms impact the psychological, social, and behavioural dimensions (Aughterson et al., 2024; Kim et al., 2024). The Maslow hierarchy can be used as a reference framework for motivation towards well-being, which promotes psychological and social wellness (Waters et al., 2022).

Maslow's (1943) hierarchy of needs (Table 6.2) depicts the needs that must first be met before the higher needs are pursued. The motivation process must address certain needs, like the need to support basic life or physiological needs before higher goals can be attempted, let alone achieved. It seems that teacher wellness can be achieved through motivation as individuals need to attain some level of motivation before embarking on certain steps for wellness. A trivial example is that

you need motivation to engage in physical exercise before you get fit and well. Maslow’s hierarchy can be used as a framework for the provision of health and wellness for teachers. Teachers need motivation as a psychosocial support protective factor and a pillar for support towards holistic wellness and achievement (McKay et al., 2024).

Table 6.2. Maslow hierarchy of needs and care

Self-actualisation	Morality, creativity, spontaneity, problem-solving, lack of prejudice. Acceptance of facts.
Esteem	Self-esteem, confidence, achievement, respect for others
Love/ belonging	Friendship, family, sexual intimacy
Safety	Security of body, employment, resources, morality, the family, health, prosperity
Physiological	Breathing, food, water, sex, sleep, homeostasis, excretion

Ihensekien and Joel (2023) define motivation as a driving force that enhances the achievement of both personal and organizational goals. Motivation has ‘motive’ as its root. That suggests that it must be originating from the inside of a person. At the same time, a motive is a thought that can remain a thought unless acted upon by external forces. Scholars (Ihensekien & Joel, 2023, p.34) observe that “motivation is an internal drive that is also driven by environmental factors...the internal and external forces that arouse enthusiasm, desire, purpose, and persistence to pursue a certain course of action.” I interpret these assertions to conjecture my own understanding and definition. I see motivation as the process of psychologically influencing the motives of a person, with the purpose of moving them from disgruntlement to satisfaction that inspires actions to achieve more satisfaction, which Maslow calls self-actualisation. Psychosocial support through motivation improves wellness and human behaviour in relation to their functioning and work capacity (Aughterson et al., 2024). Such psychosocial support also improves their psychological, social, health, and economic well-being (McKay et al., 2024; Leppold, & Reifels, 2024).

6.5.2 Teacher motivation and professional development

The case of professional development in the teaching fraternity has not been given the attention and seriousness it deserves. The integral part of *becoming* a teacher starts after graduation but, unfortunately, that is when education training institutions leave them to fend for themselves. Employers are not prioritising induction courses and ongoing in-service training. A small percentage of self-motivated teachers enroll for higher diplomas, but others think that they have arrived. Teachers need to be told: that the diploma is just the beginning; that if they passed their diploma by 50% margin, that is an indication that they left behind half of what they were supposed to know; and that teaching is a knowledge-based profession which means you cannot give learners what you do not have (Darling-Hammond et al., 2024; Mutesasira & Marongwe, 2024).

This deficiency in subject content and delivery inevitably leads to low self-esteem and lack of confidence, which are disposing factors for more psychosocial variables. I found, through the literature review, that the teacher exodus problems are compounded in rural learning ecologies as teachers flee rural hardships (Green & Reid, 2021) and limited career development opportunities. As a result, there are always less experienced teachers in rural learning ecologies. Lu et al., (2023, p.11) assert that "an individual's perception of career development significantly influences job burnout. In other words, perceived limited career growth prospects or lack of advancement opportunities, is likely to contribute to higher levels of job burnout and lower levels of well-being". Not only are learners deprived of experienced teacher expertise, but also novice teachers face trying conditions with less psychosocial support and guidance from veterans (Anderson, 2022).

I have alluded to the fact that teachers are indispensable agents of change in the transformation and delivery of education. Of all the resources essential for the realisation of the education mandate, teachers are at the center. We cannot over-emphasise the importance of a conducive teaching and learning environment for providing basic human needs like running water and sanitation as well as safety (Midzi et al., 2024). We can even add teaching and learning support material, electricity and internet connection. However, teachers are indispensable in the provision of quality education (Waters et al., 2022; Tang & Zhu, 2024).

That being the case, it follows that all stakeholders need to contribute to teachers' well-being (Waters et al., 2022). We need to show them due appreciation. Such acknowledgment can help to motivate teachers. The coronavirus pandemic brought with it a myriad of psychologically depressing disposing factors. Teaching being a challenging and emotionally exhausting occupation requires that teachers' motivation be supported on a continual basis. In the face of all the risk factors, teachers cannot do without support and motivation. Motivation is important for the maintenance of confidence and focus on the job. Besides the psychosocial support targeted at motivating and improving self-esteem for teachers, professional development has been found to improve intrinsic motivation and confidence for teachers (Mutesasira & Marongwe, 2024).

The literature reviewed pointed to the importance of collaborative efforts to support ongoing teacher professional development. Engelbrecht et al. (2017, p.16) emphasised the importance of focused and supportive "collaboration between teacher education institutions, provincial departments of education, and local schools in the development of well-structured teacher education programs, the development of effective multi-professional support on district levels that can further develop the capacity". Capacity-building for teachers can be achieved through collaborative provision of psychosocial support. Capacity development is a very important element in supporting teachers to cope with their stressful job (Shakimova et al., 2024).

In the rationale for the study, I alluded to the desperate need for Life Orientation teachers to get more purposeful training in the area of Guidance and Counselling to learners, and informed advice to other teachers. Psychosocial support plays a crucial role in providing motivation. When teachers feel acknowledged, supported, developed, and empowered, they become motivated and increase confidence in providing counselling and guidance to learners, even psychosocial support to other teachers. Ten writers from three universities in Indonesia collaborated to initiate a programme for empowering teachers with psychosocial training called 'Disaster Preparedness through Psychosocial Training' (Annexure3) (Handaka et al., 2022).

We recently had a visiting professor at UKZN School of Education from Poland who delivered a very informative and insightful lecture on the topic: 'Models of professional development for pre-service teachers in Poland'. Their university has a running program dedicated to following up on

newly graduated teachers. The programme assesses these novice teachers and develops special programmes to fill in the gaps found. They retrain them and provide psychosocial support, fill in subject content gaps, and teach leadership skills (Darling-Hammond et al., 2024; McKay et al., 2024). According to Mallarangan et al. (2024, 450), “a teacher is considered professional if he possesses the skills and information necessary to grasp the subject matter being taught, such as knowing the subject matter and its substance and continuously developing his scientific insight as an educator”. Lack of professional development is a disposing factor for psychological instability.

Teacher training institutions are commended for the proliferation of research and publications about the state of teachers and education, though it seems that their involvement is only academic. Maybe, they could do well by providing some post-graduation support to teachers. Other professions like psychologists are offered internship programmes where students start working while attached to the training institution for at least a year before they take their board exams leading to professional registration. Attorneys also serve as interns before they write professional board exams. However, teachers are registered by SACE without any form of professional development and post-training support and assessment of their readiness and they are thrown into the deep end to learning swimming for survival.

I have already alluded to the of lack of knowledge in the content of a subject as a consequence disposing factor for teachers’ lack of confidence and anxiety. Over and above subject content, novice teachers need to be trained to be trauma-prepared, especially as disasters are occurring more frequently as climate change is upon us (Leppold, & Reifels, 2024). Education scholars are already suggesting developing and inclusion into the curriculum of teacher education program ‘trauma-informed practices’ programs (Hoppey et al., 2021).

Such courses could address their emotional development and mental health needs, and prepare them for challenges ahead. They also develop and use ‘self-care modules’ to appraise student teachers’ mental health needs, and well-being. Moreover, student teachers can come out of the university armed with knowledge to teach learners and the community about such issues as climate change (Fu & Zhang, 2024). It is an opinion of many scholars like Everth and Bright (2023, p.20) that “Education can become a catalyst for positive change to move society towards potential

climate-friendly futures. To do so, the generation of agency within educational institutions to change societal attitudes, behaviours and expectations is paramount”. In rural and farming communities, a school can organise a residents’/parents’ workshop to teach them a few things and responsibilities about global warming and climate change (Okoronkwo et al., 2024).

The South African DBE has a number of good policies and programs that are meant for teacher development. However, these policies do not develop teachers as intended due to various reasons. The first reason is the lack of the capacity to implement. Participant 9 lamented the fact that: *Pillar 4 is Safety, health, and quality risk management (as a department we are struggling to implement services under pillar 4 because there are no health management officers or risk management officers employed in the Department of Education).*

After the dawn of a new dispensation in South Africa, new hopes were created for the reformed education system. The SA Schools Act, No.84 of 1996 (1996, p.5) preamble statement stresses that South Africa “requires a new national system for schools which will redress past injustices in educational provision, provide an education of progressively high quality for all learners and in so doing lay a strong foundation for the development of all our people’s talents and capabilities, advance the democratic transformation of society, combat racism and sexism and all other forms of unfair discrimination and intolerance, contribute to the eradication of poverty and the economic well-being of society, protect and advance our diverse cultures and languages, uphold the rights of all learners, parents and educators”.

According to the participants of this study, the department is not doing due diligence in keeping up with this SA Schools Act ideal. The labour unions are not doing much either in lobbying for service delivery in this area, sometimes protecting their political parties in parliament at the expense of teachers and the learning ecology (Mahome et al., 2024). Some teacher unions reportedly unscrupulously exploit the loopholes in the act to benefit themselves. Participants in this study have expressed utter disgust at the way some teacher unions and some parents have hijacked the SA Schools Act for their selfish gains when it comes to recruitment of teachers and principals (Ajani & Gamede, 2021).

The other policy that was meant for professional development is the Integrated Quality Management Systems (IQMS). The IQMS was intended to develop teachers' capacity in many areas including leadership and management. It is partly implemented but not satisfactorily. The fact that it is designed to be implemented at school level makes it easy for the department to incorporate it into school strategic planning with minimal or no extra manpower and funding from the department. However, teachers have been reluctant to participate, even though the department incentivises them by giving a 1% pay progression if they meet certain professional developmental goals (Nhlumayo, 2020; Mutesasira & Marongwe, 2024).

There is a need to motivate teachers by other means that can appeal to their conscience (intrinsic motivation) rather than monetary incentives that defeat the whole purpose of motivation and development. The third snag hindering the implementation of IQMS is over-politicisation of the school environment by unions, casting doubt on the genuine intentions of IQMS. However, when teachers have been motivated and given appropriate reason to get developed, they will override all the impediments. Dedicated psychosocial support and motivation can get teachers to implement IQMS (Nhlumayo, 2020). Conversely, IQMS can provide meaningful psychosocial support to teachers (Mahome et al., 2024). Dedicated explanation of the purpose of the IQMS can get teachers empowered and motivated to face disastrous challenges. Nhlumayo (2024, p.145) posits that school-based teacher professional development (SBTPD) needs to be understood and conceptualised differently by all stakeholders, if schools are to respond positively to unprecedented crises such as COVID-19.

In their research based on the appreciative inquiry, Mchunu and Steyn (2017) found and exposed the best reasons for engagement in IQMS. They found that teachers appreciated and accepted the role of IQMS such as to “promote accountability and quality education in schools” (p. 9322). Accountability and quality in education works in favour of psychosocial support for teachers. They also found that teachers appreciated its (IQMS) role in the identification of strengths and weaknesses to promote collaboration and teamwork to enhance strengths and address weaknesses (Mchunu & Steyn, 2017). Development goals in the IQMS include development in leadership and management skills. Lack of leadership skills and under-development have been found in this study to be disposing factors for loss of efficacy and lack of progress, all of which contribute to

demotivation, low morale, burnout, and more psychological issues (Nhlumayo, 2020; McKay et al., 2024).

This importance of professional development and capacity building was aptly corroborated by Nakidien et al. (2021) drawing on the framework of action for the implementation of SDG4 for promotion of life-long learning opportunities for teachers, which pronounced that: “teachers and educators should be empowered, adequately recruited and remunerated, motivated, professionally qualified, and supported within well-resourced, efficient and effectively governed systems” (UNESCO, 2016). These prestigious ideals are a moving target and can hardly be realised by 2030 (Rappleye et al., 2024). I have alluded to the fact that any teacher development will start by motivation (Nhlumayo, 2020). Nyfoudi et al. (2023) regard employee motivation and coaching as driving forces for workforce team success. Good motivation is that which inspires teachers to change their attitude and accept their calling as noble.

Teachers need to realise their importance and the need for their contribution to the holistic development of their communities (Abera, 2023). Developing communities is a contribution towards the realisation of SDG4 goals for social justice and world peace sustainability (Malik et al., 2023). (UNESCO, 2020). The noble calling for teachers is stressed in SDG4(f): “strengthening the ways education contributes to peace, responsible citizenship, sustainable development and intercultural dialogue”. Teachers prove their responsible citizenship when they educate and promote responsible citizenry (Castillo & Barrameda, 2024; Russell-Bennett et al., 2024).

Apart from being a source of motivation for teachers, these goals provide a foundation for teacher development policies as well as a boost for policy advocacy by teachers whenever stakeholders drag their feet (Kramer et al., 2022). These goals remain the responsibility of all stakeholders in education, as they cut across all sectors, including the business sector which is the main beneficiary in terms of skilled workforce produced, but are reluctant to get meaningfully involved. The private business sector would rather invest in the Johannesburg Stock Exchange rather than in agriculture for rural development and in industries to create employment for the poor (Ducastel, A., & Anseeuw, 2020; Mthiyane et al., 2022).

Governments have a responsibility to come up with economic policies locally suitable and culturally appreciative for them to enforce (Zalk, 2021). They should follow up with policies with practical measures and strategies for implementation. Teacher education institutions should refer to these goals in their curriculum designs and implementation for teacher training (Myeni, 2024). I believe that if teachers are brought to a conscious appreciation of these goals, they can be motivated to demand stakeholder involvement in their professional development (Maistry, 2022; Rappleye et al., 2024). In addition, teachers need to know their rights to be supported and adequately resourced to deliver on this mandate of education. “In an Appreciative Inquiry, people are invited to act on behalf of the things that passionately inspire them—the things that they know will make a difference in their organization and in the world. They are called to act in the service of the organization with support from others at all levels of the organization” (Whitney & Trosten-Bloom, 2010, p.279).

Participants in this study have resolved to embark on robust advocacy to demand among other things, the provision of tools of trade, proper infrastructure, proper training, and empowerment in leadership and management skills. Improved management skills have been found in this study to contribute to effective management of traumatic situations like the coronavirus pandemic. However, teacher development should not be limited to survival skills, but also to a long-term sustainable development for the nation and the world (Nhlumayo, 2024). As part of their destiny, teachers demand progressive leadership to make possible inclusive convergence and confluence of ideas from all levels of stakeholders and community (McKay et al., 2024). This means that leaders should work diligently to implement policies, throughout the education system, that support teachers and their work (Somerville & Farner, 2012; Castillo & Barrameda, 2024).

Teachers need to fight for their rights to work in a conducive environment, and under ‘efficient and effectively governed systems’ (Maistry, 2022). In the study, advocacy came up as an important recourse in response to teacher under-development. Teacher advocacy lacks if teachers are not brought to full awareness of their noble role such as stated in Sustainable Development Goal Target 4c that ‘teachers are a fundamental condition for guaranteeing quality education’ (UNESCO, 2020; Reimers, 2024). In the literature review, we learned about self-efficacy that it “predicts the initiation, persistence, and maintenance of behaviour in the face of obstacles” (Carleton et al.,

2018, p.187), and that it can be changed or enhanced through motivation (Maistry, 2022; Hepburn et al., 2024).

Nakidien et al. (2021) accentuates the importance of teachers' beliefs in themselves and what they do, to be acknowledged so that programs to empower and help them to keep up self-efficacy can be developed, put in place, and fully implemented. Self-efficacy is the people's beliefs in their capabilities to mobilise the motivation and cognitive resources, and execute the courses and recourses of actions needed to meet given situational demands (Bandura, 1986; Gonzalez et al., 1990). We also learned that self-efficacy (confidence) can be changed and can be enhanced through motivation and by acquiring of life skills (Namome et al., 2021).

6.6. Chapter synthesis

Participants' accounts and the literature review confirm that the coronavirus caused a psychosocial crisis for teachers. Data analysis also confirmed what came out of the literature review that the provision of psychosocial support was critically inadequate, However, data shows that, whenever it was available, it was effective in mitigating against the adverse effects of the coronavirus for teachers. More than mitigation, prevention was found to be important, but was still missing. The culture of helping one another to reduce vulnerability to mental health disposing factors was found to be a strong pillar that kept participants going and still hoping. The process of appreciative inquiry was instrumental in unveiling and bringing forth the positive core. AI process works as 'the flip' process which works as a pull motivation rather than a push motivation. The AI process can work with PSS to pull victims out of the rut of fear, anxiety, hopelessness to bring about a sense of safety, calm and hope, which AI accentuated as part of the positive core. The PSS also lifted people from a position of grudge, grief, and guilt and set them on a path of renewal and restoration. PSS also encouraged people to express gratitude, find closure and forgiveness (Divoll & Riberio, 2024). Part of the positive core was found to be a virtue of Ubuntu.

Ubuntu definition received enrichment and augmentation from the principle of psychosocial support 'social acknowledgement'. More than a sympathy and caring for fellow human beings, it also encompasses empathic and collaborative psychosocial support. Ubuntu means to be there for

one another showing increased and present compassion. For a bereaved family, Ubuntu is shown by *ukubhonga emswaneni*. Ubuntu was shown here to be that pillar of caring as participants were caring for one another as humans, upholding both compassion and dignity for fellow human beings. The culture of helping enacted through the appreciative inquiry created and nurtured a psychosocial support environment conducive to increasing knowledge production, self-reliance, and mutual-resourcefulness for teachers' mental health wellness and sustenance.

In the phase 'define to discovery', we found the impact of the coronavirus pandemic and discovered strengths that make up the positive core for individuals and the whole group or community. Data generated and knowledge created helped our meaning making and understanding of psychosocial support, and answered the first objective/ question of the study: What is the teachers' understanding of their psychosocial support during the coronavirus pandemic? In the phases band 'discovery to dream', we discovered that psychosocial support was vital. Participants' understanding and embracing of psychosocial support principles changed their future perspectives. This helped me to answer the objective/question: How do teachers' understanding of the psychosocial support for teachers in rural learning ecologies during the coronavirus pandemic change their perspective and future?

In the phase band 'dream to design', 'advocacy' came up prominently as a particular way of rallying and shaping psychosocial support for teachers. This answered the objective/ question: 'Why must psychosocial support for teachers in rural learning ecologies during the coronavirus pandemic be shaped in particular ways?' The appreciative inquiry process landed us on the 'road map to destiny' which helped us to map a way forward to the envisaged future of psychosocial support for teachers. The synergy of integrative AI and PSS theoretical framework provided strategies for finding possible answers to new problems, and also charted a way forward as it created resilience for bouncing forward. Psychosocial support principles provide a framework for the application of intervention strategies whereas the appreciative inquiry is a framework for strategising solutions for change.

The conclusion is that psychosocial support for teachers is a major protective and mediating factor against the disposing factors brought by the disastrous coronavirus pandemic. Teachers are not helpless victims but possess strengths, talents, and skills. They resolve to enhance their social potential using external collaborative support from other stakeholders. Collaboration came up strongly as a psychosocial support factor playing a unifying role among stakeholders. Support from many stakeholders must include the provision and promotion of well-being, motivation, and professional development.

The power of appreciative inquiry came through strongly as a theoretical framework and a study design. While PSSP was useful in flipping emotions, AIP was instrumental in changing attitudes to embrace a positive mindset. Participants actively participated and charted a way forward to the desired and envisaged future of psychosocial well-being for teachers in rural learning ecologies. Findings from the accounts and further engagements of participants, confirm what the literature revealed and predicted for this study, that psychosocial support for teachers in rural learning ecologies can be enhanced in many ways from appreciating existing strengths to lobbying for more accountability on the part of authorities.

CHAPTER SEVEN

7. SUMMARY OF THE STUDY

7.1 Introduction

This chapter presents the summary of the study. It reflects on, and consolidates the findings, and comprehensively answers the research questions. The implications and significance of concepts constituting the research topic ‘Psychosocial support for teachers in rural learning ecology during the coronavirus’ are revisited to examine their unique contribution to the study. Such concepts as psychosocial, support, rurality, ecology, coronavirus, and appreciative inquiry form building blocks for the study. A good amount of attention is given to the concept of psychosocial support as the main phenomenon of the study. Psychosocial support has been found to influence the creation of psychosocial resilience. Resilience has prevailed as the next prominent phenomenon appearing in individual and community resilience (Fu & Zhang, 2024).

Social capital includes community resilience and community resources (Buitrago et al., 2024). Resilient communities withstand and recover quicker, economically and socially, from the effects of a disaster than less resilient ones. Socially, resilient communities demonstrate stronger social cohesion and trust among community members, which unites them for more collaborative and efficient response to crises (Suleimany et al., 2022). Psychosocial support is also instrumental in creating protective factors such as hope, which is an important element of psychological capital, together with confidence and resilience. The powerful role of the integrated theoretical framework as well as the emancipating critical paradigm is also discussed in the summary of the study (Kreuter & Lezin, 2002; Lewis, 2016; Turliuc & Candel, 2022; Yang et al, 2024).

7.2 Summary

Psychosocial support has the function of helping people to make meaning of their situation and get new perspective and understanding. The social constructionist view posits that “irreconcilable grief can be treated through renegotiation of meaning” (Gergen & Gergen, p.180). I have argued that psychosocial support is not a one-size-fits-all type of support. Different people need different support according to their situational needs. That implies that psychosocial support for teachers

has to be achieved in certain way. We also learned that psychosocial support is very wide-ranging in the lives of people, and it meets them wherever they are, from providing aid like food parcels, to overcoming psychological distress, to helping to cope with loss, and even finding closure after bereavement. It is, not only meant for disaster victims, but also a way of life that supports and sustains the ecosystem of human habitat, reaching to all aspects of human well-being, livelihood, and functioning (Chkhani et al., 2024; Buckley et al., 2024).

The virtue of psychosocial support is that it restores people to where they were before and takes them further in life. Engagements in the dynamics and theoretical principles of psychosocial support led to discovery of ‘psychological resilience’, which is bouncing forward and bouncing beyond. After the psychological distresses and social derailments, psychosocial support empowers people with virtues and attributes like resilience to recognise and coordinate their internal strengths and talents. Resilience is the ability to rekindle and organise latent potential to build fortitude for future challenges. McArthur-Blair and Cockell (2018) also describe appreciative resilience as “aims to sustain leaders as hope blooms, as despair visits and as forgiveness opens their hearts.” Appreciative resilience is a moving goal we are continually journeying towards, without arriving, as situations and events keep happening but we are becoming stronger for next the challenge.



Figure 7.1. incremental growth of resilience through challenges

Psychosocial support can rally community resilience and community efficacy for collective confidence, hope, and belief that they can still face and conquer to future (McArdle, 2024). This makes psychosocial support an empowerment rather than a spoon-feeding scheme. It supports people as they strive to stand on their feet. Empowered people empower others for the edification of the whole community, society, and the world (Ndasauka, 2024).

Psychosocial support is a double-edged sword. As you help others, you also get stronger and more edified. The far-reaching miracle of psychosocial support is that its help does not have to be directed at you to get comfort and healing. We all have felt sad watching the devastation of a mega natural disaster in a far country. We have all uttered words of advocacy with righteous anger from our living rooms when help was not reaching victims of a disaster. As we start seeing and observing philanthropic humanitarian aid and benevolent aid finally reaching those people, we somewhat get comforted from our sadness, and our anger gets appeased as justice prevails.

Psychosocial support helps people to see the better side of things and to harvest resilience and hope from adversity. Inter-subjectivity in this type of research project means that the researcher gets immersed in their situation, not only through emotional involvement and investment, but also when the psychosocial support runs its course. We together get empowered to reframe and channel anger and disappointment into fruitful use (Flesia et al., 2023; Soto, 2023). The participants said they were healed in soul and spirit. It was therapeutic. We came out motivated and invigorated ready to face the future and to design and create it. I hope the readers will notice the abundance of knowledge created in this project.

The impact of the coronavirus was far-reaching in a negative way. The impact was unprecedented in all aspects and sectors of life, starting with the health sector in the frontline of fighting the disease, with nurses and doctors dying in shocking numbers. Medical science scrambled tirelessly to find remedies, cures, and vaccines. The education sector was also hugely affected (Beames et al., 2021). The closing down of schools disrupted the whole education system (Wills & van der Berg, 2024). Parents sat at home with their children not going to school and not thinking about the future as they were facing death. They did not know how to explain to their children and they “*did not know what to think*”, Participant 7.

Livelihoods were disrupted. People lost jobs. People went on a frenzy of panic shopping, buying food, and medicinal remedies. It was chaotic. It was a psychosocial crisis on a large scale. People needed information and assurance that life would continue. They all suffered some measure of psychological derailment and malfunction. Psychosocial support became vital, was needed by all, and was hard to come by except through mutual support i.e. victim comforting victim all in the

same sinking boat. The teaching profession is a stressful occupation in the world and the stress was worse for people in rural learning ecologies. Teachers in those contexts were severely impacted psychologically and socially. Teachers suffered severe stress resulting in various psychological pathologies that affected their mental health and functioning. The impact of the coronavirus pandemic on the functioning of teachers was enormous and it caused high levels of psychological distress. Teachers have attachment to the children they teach and their jobs involve emotional investment (Leppold, & Reifels, 2024).

The rural learning ecologies experienced compounded challenges because of structural marginalisation. Their vulnerability was made worse by poor education and health infrastructure. Fauci and Folkers (2023, p. 423) assert that one of the lessons to be learnt for future preparedness is that “long-standing systemic health and social inequities that drive pandemic-related disparities must be Addressed”. Lasater et al. (2022, p.45) adds that “Governments should build resilient health systems”. One of the many lessons gained from the pandemic is that we should stay prepared for any eventualities. Countries that are prone to disasters such as earthquakes build their houses to withstand such disasters should they occur. They always have emergency services ready and alert for any eventualities (Kappler et al., 2024).

Kim et al. (2022) suggest that governments should protect communities, not only by legislating protective laws like the coronavirus lockdown, but also by putting in place preventative initiatives informed by holistic development plans. “Psychosocial crisis prevention and intervention models should be urgently developed by the government, health care personnel and other stakeholders” (Dubey, 2020, p.784). More than mitigation, prevention is important. Public health teaches us that vaccines are important for prevention of infectious diseases but more important are the environmental developments that prevent viruses and diseases from existing or at least thriving (Montero et al., 2024). McKay et al. (2024) suggest that the entire psychosocial support spectrum, including community health and well-being should be treated as a ‘social contract’ by the governments.

Teachers resolved to lobby for practical initiatives and informative strategies that can be implemented for the protection and sustenance of teachers’ mental health well-being. The

governments should consider teachers' voices and progressive research when developing and implementing policies, initiatives, and strategies for improving work conditions and mental health as part of its social contract. The World Health Organisation defines wellbeing as "a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity in which every individual realises his or her own potential, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and is able to make a contribution to her or his community," (WHO, 2016, p.1; Beusaert et al., 2023).

Teachers could not get together to share experiences and ideas. Human beings are, by nature, associable beings. Hence, any isolation is a causality factor for psychological disequilibrium associated with mental disorders. Conversely, people with depressive disorders isolate themselves. One participant likened it to South African apartheid 'house arrest' detention that "would drive you crazy". House arrest was a weapon designed to break a person emotionally, mentally, and spiritually. The lockdown impacted on individual's mental health, inducing fear-filled thoughts which paralysed human functioning (Leppold, & Reifels, 2024).

Psychosocial support became the only psychological safety net that made a real difference for those who got it for their mental health. However, not all would-be beneficiaries came across any or adequate help they needed, and they had to deal with thoughts of how to manage their lives going forward and make on-the-spot survival decisions. They could choose feelings of shame, disappointment, and anger; or choose to encourage themselves and be hopeful. This crossroad is a litmus test for emotional resilience.

I understand emotional resilience as the ability to flip from negative emotions into positive ones. You can dwell on the emotion of sadness because you do not have money for petrol, or you can be grateful that you have a car. You can languish in negative thoughts about what you lost, or you can start expressing gratitude to God that you are alive and still have hope (Flesia et al., 2023). Gratitude is a conducive emotion for mental health. It has been found to have positive effects on brain chemistry that boosts the immune system; induces happiness; and improves relationships, functionality, and productivity (Armstrong et al., 2020). Emotional intelligence can also be seen

as determined resistance to yield to negative emotions. Mastering emotional intelligence can be a sign of emotional maturity which is good for mental health (Rao et al., 2024).

WHO (2004, p. 26) describes mental health as “each person’s ability to deal with thoughts and feelings, the management of life, and emotional resilience.” I define psychosocial support as the strength-regaining process that works to fix psychological derailment that could result in mental health issues after a traumatic experience. The psychosocial support principles sum up the context and domain of functioning of psychosocial support. They provide essential context conducive to promoting psychosocial well-being, and preventing and even treating psychological disorders like PTSD, GAD and others which may onset after a disaster (James et al, 2023; Kim et al., 2020).

Post Covid Syndrome (PCS) lingers on months after physical recovery (Ida et al., 2024). Psychological scars may still be lying low hindering normal functioning. Syndrome is loosely defined as persistent symptoms. Lingering functional impact, poor quality of life, and slow return to normalcy are some of the post-covid syndrome factors (Mutesasira & Marongwe, 2024). Psychosocial support provides preventative measures for individuals from falling into depression as well as Chronic Fatigue Syndrome (CFS), scientifically called *Myalgic encephalomyelitis* (Seifart, 2023; Wong & Weitzer, 2021). CFS is associated with ‘Long Covid’ (Ramers et al., 2024, p.1) or lingering coronavirus symptoms associated with ‘pandemic fatigue’ (Ushe, 2024, p.38).

Psychosocial support goes beyond prevention, and facilitates recovery from psychosocial crisis to psychological adaptation. It further promotes Post-traumatic Growth (PTG) for individuals (Kim et al., 2024). It has been established in the literature review and data generation that psychosocial impact still manifests in lingering stress and depression among teachers (Reutter et al., 2024). Yet “It is too soon to comprehensively measure the long-run impact” on educational attainment, labor market consequences, and economic setback (Ager et al., 2024, p.13). This statement necessitates strategies for ongoing psychosocial support leading to psychological adaptation and PTG (Kim et al., 2024).

Psychosocial support changes course that would otherwise reach PTSD to (PTG) (Waters, 2022; Noriega et al., (2023). Liu et al. (2024) define PTG as “positive psychological change that occurs following a struggle with highly challenging life circumstances” (p2). PTG is a positive trajectory to psychosocial well-being that can be achieved through engagement in psychosocial support principles, illustrated in diagram 7.2 below:

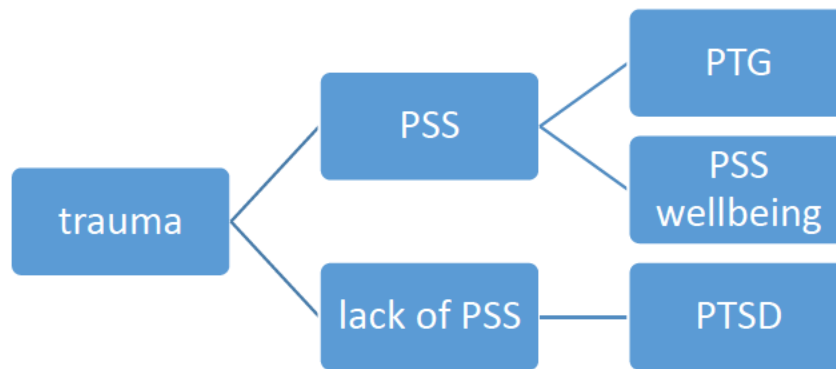


Figure 7.2: Effect of PSS

PTG may be conceptualised as a cognitive adaptive process among those who experience traumatic stress in response to a disaster, in terms of a positive reinterpretation and positive reframing of the negative experience. PTG is a powerful strength that changes a perception and attitude to life in five dimensions (annexure 8).

The second psychosocial support principle is promoting a sense of safety, calmness, self-and community efficacy, connectedness to others, and hope. People had to struggle to keep hope alive. They used telephone and WhatsApp group messages to stay connected and support each other. They relied on and used Bible verses to encourage each other, and spiritual leaders gave them messages of support and hope to anchor their faith on God and assure them that God was still in control. This kept them going. Spirituality was infused as part of this community culture. People had to stay positive at all times, and keep the hope that one day things would change. Faith, prayers, and church leaders contributed much according to Participant 2. Faith needs to have an object or deity to pin hope on. The positive information dissemination and pronouncement of safety protocols gave citizens a sense of safety and hope that the authorities had the situation under control (Buitrago et al., 2024).

It is a finding in this study that the higher the level of education, the higher the hope people had. Education and life-long learning give hope, reason, and purpose for living. Education and knowledge facilitate change in attitudes and perspectives to life. They give mental fitness, strength, and maturity that assist in decision-making and learned choices. Learned choices save time and other resources. Learned choices save us from pain, guilt, and disappointment due to bad choices. Knowledge and better education provide psychosocial support restoration and for future hope (Barker-Davies et al., 2020; Kim et al., 2020).

Findings also reveal that what kept teachers holding on and having hope to move forward was the support that came from their social potential or social capital (Aughterson et al., 2024). Social potential is what Walker (2023, p.30) refers to as “Life-Giving Properties of a Social System”. These life-giving properties or attributes include innate skills and undocumented indigenous system resources, and knowledge that grows and sustains the community (Lampropoulos et al., 2023). Growth and sustainability promote community resilience after traumatic events (Hsin-Hung Lin et al., 2024). It is the social cohesion that keeps the ecosystem alive. I summarise social capital as the sum total of actual or potential resources (norms, values, skills, resilience, and trust) and the capacity of individuals to cooperatively coordinate, manage, and command those resources. (Armstrong et al., (2020) refers to social potential as ‘group traits such as civic virtues’) through

the network links based on their relationships and membership of that community (Kreuter & Lezin, 2002).

Life giving attributes and virtue of a community, such as Ubuntu, will naturally enhance social cohesion. Social cohesion can be conceptualised as having the opposite notion to that of the ‘survival of the fittest’ for keeping the balance in the ecosystem in the animal kingdom or community. Keeping interdependence is the essence of survival, sustainability, and continuation of human ecological system. Interdependence supports social cohesion and has the notion of mutual support and a connotation of accommodating others. It represents helping one another for the survival of all. Social cohesion is stronger in rural communities due to strong interdependence and a sense of community that exists. Urban communities are more characterised by independence where individuals mind their own business without a sense of community (Hlalele & Mosia, 2020 Primadata et al., 2023).

A well-functioning community naturally incubates and produces healthy and well-functioning individuals. In economic terms, ‘capital’ denotes an investment intended for productivity and growth. Social capital invests virtues for growth, productivity, and functioning of individuals in an ecology. An ecology sustains and is sustained by living organisms in that ecology. The sense of belonging (cognition) to a supporting and caring community is an important protective factor for individuals during difficult times. This was evident in how traditions like communal mourning (Buqa, 2024) were such vital protective factors in mitigating the scathing bereavement during the coronavirus pandemic (Fang & Comery, 2024). These mutual supports and collaborations are also initiated and sustained through the human virtue of Ubuntu (empathy, compassion, and care) (Chokhani et al., 2024).

Ubuntu also espouses cordial relationships and support based on mutual esteem and appreciation between teachers, school management, and parents. It embodies powers of therapeutic intervention (Epstein, 2018). These are inner strengths that form psychosocial support pillars for the community. Inner strengths represent intra (individual) as well as inter (communal) strengths. Again the total is greater than the sum of its parts. The result is a formidable synergy of community strength to withstand hardships (Fu & Zhang, 2024). This strength flips any challenge to the

community into resilience which represents more strength stored for future challenges. Community resilience is the reservoir of strength from which teachers can draw strength to continue and utilise in their learning ecology as recycled innovation (McArdle, 2024). “The psychosocial support helps us to recognise our inner strength and harvest resilience needed to navigate next experience or challenge” (Bhadra, 2022, p.20). One novel example representing pockets of resilience gleaned during the coronavirus is the heightened hygiene awareness (Fang & Comery, 2024).

Psychosocial refers to both the psychological and social dimensions of a person’s life. The intersection between social capital and psychological capital is that the former can produce the latter in individuals using its resources like resilience (Lewis, 2016; Yang et al., 2024). Authors (Luthans et al., 2010; Menculini et al., 2021; Ravikumar, 2023) define psychological capital as an individual’s positive psychological state of development that is characterised by “having confidence (self-efficacy) to take on and put in the necessary effort to succeed at challenging tasks; making a positive attribution (optimism) about succeeding now and in the future; persevering toward goals and, when necessary, redirecting paths to goals (hope) in order to succeed; and when beset by problems and adversity, sustaining and bouncing back and even beyond (resilience) to attain success” (Menculini et al., 2021, p.2).

Resilience is called bouncing beyond. Earlier in chapter three under principles of psychosocial support, I discussed psychosocial resilience which is ‘bouncing forward’. Psychological resilience has the same origin of positive psychology as appreciative inquiry (Lewis, 2016). It is the mental strength that keeps individuals standing with marginal or without external support. It is the fortitude that helps individuals to develop strength and coping strategies to evolve. Psychosocial resilience helps to shield individuals from disposing factors of psychological issues that may arise due to exposure to traumatic situations. Resilience in this study is a protective factor or mitigating factor that helped to buffer against various deleterious psychological issues due to traumatic experiences. Resilience keeps these learning ecologies going and producing good results against all odds. That is bouncing forward.

It is important to heed other elements of an ecology, other than the continuous struggle for survival. These elements are interdependence, mutual support, and adaptation or adjustment to cope (Greenfield et al., 2021). The United Nations International Strategy for Disaster Reduction (UN-IDSR, 2002) defines disaster as “a serious disruption of the functioning of a community or a society causing widespread human, material, economic or environmental losses which exceed the ability of the affected community or society to cope using its own resources”. Resilience represents empowerment and strengthening of own resources in preparation for coping in future disasters (Kappler et al., 2024). WHO defines resilience as the capacity to cope with adversity and to avoid breakdown when confronted by stressors, and differs from person to person. The psychosocial domain of resilience and coping can create hope for better future expectancy.

At the beginning, I presented a definition of the term psychosocial as being made up of two terms or dimensions: psychological and social (Ibrahim, 2021). But having done much reading and gone through different versions of interpretations and applications, I matured in my reflections and came to the illuminating realisation that psychosocial cannot be defined in a linear mathematical expression like psycho plus social equals psychosocial. Psychosocial is a synergy. The total is greater than the sum of its components. It is like the Biblical expression: ‘one chases a thousand but two chase ten thousand’. That is why a telephone call means more than the actual words that are said in that conversation. A food parcel has both physiological and psychological benefits for the victim. One piece of information does, not only bring information on what to do, but also doubles up as a safety provision that brings about calmness in the middle of the storm. We can deduce that psychosocial support is more of what people perceive than what they receive. The same can be said about other principles of psychosocial support such as acknowledgment.

The critical paradigm’s ontological stance is that the researcher respectfully gains access to the research context to gain a deeper understanding of the issues in the social context. The deeper understanding of the phenomenon psychosocial support I gained is that psychosocial support is more than a psychological briefing after a traumatic disaster. It is more than PFA or a counselling session face-to-face with a psychologist. It is all that and more. The social context as its domain allows it to reach deeper psychologically, socially, and spiritually.

The social and spiritual dimensions make it to culturally embedded and therefore, naturally continuous and sustainable. I learned that a psychosocial facilitator or a lay counsellor does not have to be affiliated to a particular spiritual deity or formation, but can give space to the counselee to express themselves in their spirituality and get spiritual enrichment, edification, and freedom. The epistemology under the critical paradigm respects and gives due consideration and acknowledgment to the participants' cultural practices and influences the creation of knowledge (Mihas, 2019). The way participants expressed therapeutic healing made me realise the deep psychological hurt the coronavirus had done in the lives of teachers in rural learning ecologies. I believe there are many teachers in rural learning ecologies and everywhere else who are under psychological siege and still harboring deep hurt and never had any form of counselling or deeper reaching psychosocial support.

Sustained and continual psychosocial support for teachers in rural learning ecologies beyond the pandemic is still needed. Notwithstanding the far-reaching potential of research of this type to influence policy at the national level, the impact of the delivery of psychosocial help needed to support teachers and education must be felt at a local level. Counselling and psychosocial programs need to be started at all tier levels of provincial education system: school, circuit, and district levels, and made to reach every teacher. Existing programs and policies in the Department of Education are enough for the implementation of psychosocial support for sustainable quality education, only if there can be diligent implementation and monitoring at “all levels of education systems (e.g., policy, organisations and learning networks, specific learning environments and situations)” (Holst et al., 2024, p.4).

The DBSTs at the district level are represented by three different offices of psychological services: SNES, EHW and Teacher Development office. Special Needs Education Services (SNES) office at the district office is operating on skeletal staff largely constituted by interns. There is a social worker intern who is also utilised as an admin clerk. There are many unfilled posts including that of a Chief Education Specialist (CES) currently being acted by the psychologist who should be paying full attention to actual counselling activities rather than administration. This leaves them no time for strategic planning and further training and development. Continuous training and development is important for their own team capacity building, as well as for teachers. They only

attend to trauma debriefing emergencies. Shakimova et al., (2024, p.8) found in their study that “teacher professional development and training that incorporates resilience strategies can effectively help reduce teacher job-related stress and promote resilience, especially among female teachers”.

The Employee Health & Wellness (EHW) office under Human Resource directorate also operates in a seriously under-resourced office, with only one Employee Health & Wellness Practitioner who caters for more than 500 schools. Their scope includes, according to Participant 9, “coordinating and implementing programmes and workshops that are aimed to equip employees with skills, knowledge, strategies that help them to address their personal or work-related problems e.g. Wellness and health awareness, Employee Health and Wellness Advocacy, Financial literacy, SARS, GEPF, National Credit Regulator and Consumer Rights, Trauma debriefing, Men’s and Women’s health awareness programmes and Sports Day events.” This is good on paper, but what can one person do to more than 500 schools and more than 20 000 employees. Occupational Health and Safety Act 85 of 1993 amended as Occupational Health and Safety Amendment Act 181 of 1993 mandated the regulation of the appointment and functions of health and safety representatives.

These officials at the district also needed psychosocial support to support their own psychological empowerment and refilling. These issues of being expected to do miracles without necessary resources are psychologically taxing for them. Working with psychologically and emotionally distressed people is psychologically and emotionally draining for counselling professionals, especially since they get so little done. They become emotionally exhausted without being properly replenished (Bragin, 2020). These officials also need to be properly capacitated in terms of appropriate training. Participant 9 lamented the fact that they did not have proper training yet they were required to render counselling services to other employees. We have seen, in the case of teachers, that being required to perform without necessary skills becomes a disposing factor for lack of confidence, lack of self-efficacy, and burnout.

White Paper 6 (DoE, 2001) envisaged the establishment of SBSTs and DBSTs comprising psychologists and counsellors (Makhalemele, & Nel, 2021). The functions of the DBST are meant

to promote school operational, organisational and specialised support such as psychosocial support learners and teachers. School Based Support Teams (SBST) have the duty to support teachers at the school level (Makhalemele & Payne-van Staden, 2018). The provision of educational psychologists and school counsellors' key strategic position envisaged was to provide counselling in schools. This task is now in the hands of teachers to provide mental health support for learners and for each other, since the governments do not provide these services. This situation brings much pressure and psychological distress for teachers (Nhlumayo, 2024).

The department at the district level can start by reminding itself of its mandate for schools' psychological services, revisiting its vision, looking into its staffing needs and doing an aggressive strategic management plan for implementation, monitoring, and evaluation. The district needs to start reviving and re-training DBSTs and following up with the school-based teacher support teams or SBSTs that are already in place in the majority of the schools. However, all the participants in this study responded that they never received any form psychosocial support or counselling during and after the pandemic. The circuit office can see to the implementation with the school principals providing supervision at the school level. The SBSTs need to be given proper training, renewed motivation, recognition, and a space to operate (Nhlumayo, 2024).

Training will also serve as psychosocial support for the teams as well as capacity building to enable them to offer further psychosocial support for staff as lay counsellors. Many schools have these teams in place but they are just as a token of compliance. School-based participants in this study, a majority of whom were purposely sampled as members of SBSTs, all indicated willingness to be trained as lay counsellors. Members of the SBSTs need to have adequate mental health literacy to enable them to recognise and understand mental health issues so they can organise requisite psychosocial support or suggest appropriate referrals through the school principal (Ely, 2017; Nhlumayo, 2024). Such literacy could provide much-needed information at the school level. As part of mental health literacy, teachers need to know a suitable professional to consult or refer a colleague seeking health & wellness help. As a Life Orientation teacher and Student Counsellor, I have had teachers seeking advice and desperate for psychosocial support. One other powerful protective factor against stagnation, burnout, and loss of hope that surfaced large in the data corpus is the provision of professional development (Shakimova et al., 2024).

The teaching profession demands life-long learning attitude on part of teachers. They should take teaching as a forever-becoming profession with continual professional development something to consider and embrace. Provision of professional development is lacking because it has not been taken seriously by both teachers and the Education Department. We have seen how good the policies and laws on teacher professional development are, yet lacking implementation. One example of such laws is Continuous Professional Teacher Development (CPTD) of SACE. SACE developed a professional development points schedule for CPTD which is not known at the schools' level. Data has also shown that there is lack of professional development for teachers in rural learning ecologies, yet scholars accentuate that “Psychosocial support through enactment in professional development can buffer the effects of job demands and promote career growth, work autonomy and professional efficacy” (Waters et al., 2022, p. 766).

There is no collaborative support for teachers between the teacher professional bodies and the teacher training institutions. Teacher training institutions are commended for the proliferation of research and publications about the state of teachers and education, though it would seem that their involvement is only academic (Myeni, 2024). Maybe they could do well to provide some post-graduation support to teachers. Other professions like psychologists are offered mandatory internship programmes whereby students start working whilst attached to their training institutions for at least a year before they take their board exams leading to professional registration. They have to work another year of community service where they are allocated to rural communities where they are needed most for an additional year. Attorneys also serve as interns before they write professional board exams. However, teachers are registered by SACE without any form of professional development or mentorship and post-training assessment of their readiness, and they are thrown into the deep end without any support.

Education and teachers' mandate is far-reaching. It starts in the classroom and extends to impact the community, the whole society, and the world development. SDG4 for promotion of life-long learning opportunities for teachers pronounced that: “teachers and educators should be empowered, adequately recruited and remunerated, motivated, professionally qualified, and supported within well-resourced, efficient and effectively governed systems” (UNESCO, 2016). Teachers need to realise their importance and the need for their crucial contribution to the holistic

development of their communities as a contribution towards realisation of SDG4 goals for social justice and world peace sustainability (Maistry, 2022; UNESCO, 2020).

The engagement in AIS showed that psychosocial intervention cannot be completed without advocacy for basic service delivery from authorities, (annexure 7). Teachers resolved to engage in advocacy to inspire positive changes in attitude, responsibility, and accountability. Advocacy does not have to be dramatic actions involving hurling insults at the authorities. It can be seen as cheering-on, and cheering-on is an athletic term which does not mean that a runner is idle but that they can do more or more is expected of them. Advocacy needs to be carefully strategised to yield desired results, because it is not aimed at exposing failures but at raising awareness in a nudging rather than nagging fashion (Kramer et al., 2022).

Nudging is gentle elbowing to remind people, respectfully yet assertively, of their responsibilities whereas nagging can invoke negative feelings and defensive mechanisms on the part of authorities. Purposefully directed advocacy should be driven by righteous anger rather than malicious anger and hatred. This critical paradigm is advocacy without arrogance or radical dogmatism (Rodríguez, 2021). Advocacy can be self-directed to teachers themselves for self-introspection and self-motivation, meaning they should remind themselves, even their formations like unions, to reinvigorate their consciences, purposes, and goals and how they pursue them.

We can achieve great results without being radical but assertive. Lewis (2016) wrote:

Change is so often thought of as a big bang event in organizations, yet it can equally well be seen as the culmination of lots of small shifts in behaviour, lots of micro-moments where something different happens. Recognizing micro-moments as opportunities either to reinforce the status quo or to create change by saying or doing something different increases the opportunities available for achieving change.

A question was asked in the interviews: ‘What small changes could we make right now that would encourage more teachers to get involved with improving their mental wellbeing?’ Participant 8 responded: ‘*advocacy and sharing relevant information*’. This means that advocacy can be the

sum total of small changes like sharing of information to raise awareness, or pointing people to the right direction. However, there are significant changes that need to take place at the district. This also emphasizes the importance of collaboration. Participants in this study hailed the importance of collaboration. Psychosocial support for teachers cannot be designed and effectively executed without their input, involvement, and contribution.

Further it is a finding that the extent of the impact of the pandemic was assisted by poor infrastructure, lack of leadership, maladministration, and lack of resources. These deficiencies are deemed to have been largely attributed to the lack of service delivery on the part of the authorities. Teachers resolved to engage in advocacy for transformative service delivery purposely geared to improve infrastructure in their rural learning ecologies. The rural communities have been marginalised in all aspects of life and livelihood for too long. Hynes et al. (2020, p. 179) advocated that one of the “strategies and policies to increase resilience” is to “design systems, including infrastructure, supply chains, economic, financial, and public health systems, to be resilient, i.e., recoverable and adaptable”. A collaboration of all government departments can do well to deliver integrated denominations of services, especially as a means towards recovery after the pandemic. I have said much about the education department, but its efforts in providing psychosocial support in rural learning ecologies should be supported by other departments including Health, Social Development, Transport, and others.

Teachers need supporting infrastructure like tarred roads, sturdy bridges, continually running water, affordable electricity, and educationally focused tools and resources pliable in this age of 4IR. They need computers, reliable internet connectivity, and provision of learning online devices for learners. According to the research (Mahaye, 2020), the South African education system was the fourth most affected by the coronavirus. This was partly due to schools’ infrastructure backwardness. The same research also produced a finding pointing to the lack of technology required for e-learning, even more so in rural learning ecologies.

More research (Pozo et al., 2021) found that teachers were poorly prepared to use Information and Communication Technologies (ITC) in their teaching, wherever such was available. Integration of ICT into teaching and learning was already long overdue for rural learning ecologies. This lack of

teacher expertise also points to the lagging behind in terms of teacher in-service training and continual upgrading in rural learning ecologies. One of many things that separated the 1918 influenza pandemic and the 2019 coronavirus pandemic is the ability to switch to online teaching and learning, yet it is very unlikely that our rural schools will be fully capable of using online teaching by 2030 (Aruleba & Jere, 2022; Ager et al., 2024).

One gain for teachers during the coronavirus is that communities were willing to listen to their voices. Their plight of working under difficult conditions was broadcasted in mainstream and social media. Parents were awakened to the reality that they could not do without their teachers. Some tried home schooling and they appreciated what teachers are faced with on a daily basis. Parents had no answers to the new social-educational challenges and left everything up to teachers (Gumapac et al., 2021). “Appreciative Inquiry affords people the opportunity to be heard. By setting the stage for the freedom to be heard, it opens doors for people who had felt ignored, without a voice to offer information, ideas, and innovations” (Whitney & Trosten-Bloom, (2010, p. 274).

Teachers plan to take advantage of the new awareness and the newly found freedom to be heard, and to amplify their voices on socio-political issues affecting their profession. Teachers need to keep up this momentum of society awareness about their role and challenges. They are overwhelmed and vulnerable to emotional strain and exhaustion (Mellins & Malee, 2013). Teachers also have the right to join organised labour unions and they intend to lobby them to give them value for money for their membership fees. Kramer et al. (2022) contend that the solidarity of teachers as part of a union or other organised labour formation is crucial, and can contribute immensely to moving toward shared goals and creating change for the profession.

Teachers noted the need for them to add their voices against fake news and misinformation in society. Notwithstanding the freedom of speech, fake news was not only misleading but also unpalatable and gruesome. Teachers, as certified educators, should lobby the government to put in place stringent policies and legislations to curb the relentless avalanche and bombardment of fake news, especially in the education sector as the source of creation and custodian of knowledge. Our cultural custodians also need to be sensitised to misinformation dissemination that corrupt our

languages thereby distorting our culture that is the core of our existence as people and communities.

7.3 Contribution of the study

This study has made a significant contribution to the body of knowledge. There is a wholesome contribution in augmenting the understanding of concepts such as psychosocial support, rurality, and ecology. There has not been much research done on the importance and contribution of psychosocial support as an integral psychological-derailment intervention strategy and promoter of psychological well-being for individuals and communities, especially after disasters. Apart from few studies depicting psychosocial support as a supporter of chronic medical patients, there is not much investigation around it in preventing escalation to psychological disorders such as PTSD, GAD, and others, of traumatised individuals. Even after the coronavirus pandemic, many studies confined themselves to journalistic reporting instead of finding scientific solutions to psychosocial crises and restoration of well-being and functioning.

7.3.1 Contribution to theory

7.3.1.1 The integrative theory of PSS and AI

Appreciative inquiry was first contemplated for this study. However, after extensive reading on the principles and application of appreciative inquiry, I came to a realisation that it would be difficult for traumatised participants to readily engage and focus on positive discourses without prior psychosocial intervention. So, to avoid conjecture of findings, I formed a theoretical framework perfectly pliable for yielding credible results in a study like this, seeking to change the status quo. There was amalgamation or integration of two theories with the aim of obtaining maximum collaboration and synergy for best theory and practice output (Tellings, 2011).

This is an integration of AI (strength-based theory) and the theory of psychosocial support (Strength regaining process). The two theories have similar domains of strength yet with different operational expositions: one of innate strength discovery (AI) and the other of lost strength recovery (PSS) (Tellings, 2001). McArthur-Blair and Cockell, (2018) refer to such theory

integration as “dynamic interweaving of the philosophy, and process of the appreciative inquiry with the deep exploration of hope, despair and forgiveness” (p3). Psychosocial support principles (PSSP) provide a framework and domain not only to explore but also to expropriate hope and cultivate resilience.

7.3.2 Contribution to methodology

One of the reasons for the lack of deep academic and investigative research that can contribute meaningfully to the body of knowledge is the traditional research methodologies that keep researchers stuck in a mediocratic rut of superficial reporting. This study is largely based on appreciative inquiry, which is a powerful theory with unique ability as a research design, theoretical framework, and methodology. AI practically leads and directs the data generation process through its 5D process as well as appreciative summit. This is a process of data generation where knowledge is created, skills developed, and people empowered. That is what sets it apart from data collection. Appreciative inquiry principles define an unconventional method of data generation, processing, and interpretation. It is a methodology that extracts information or data and equips participants with practical knowledge for future use in similar situations. The participants even contribute to data interpretation and are also accorded an opportunity to view and authenticate data veracity before it is published.

7.3.3 Contribution to practice

Disasters and pandemics have recently become so prevalent and frequent due to many factors like climate change. These developments demand upscaling of research practice by researchers in psychosocial crisis prevention and mitigation. Psychosocial support presents a dedicated and effective practice in the correction of psychological derailment. The extensive description and scope of application of psychosocial support in this study suggests that, unlike other psychological intervention models, it can be made available to all community members and can be accessed through many resources available in communities. Provision of psychosocial support does not necessarily require high-level training, yet yields effective results in prevention and mitigating psychological issues. Community attributes such as Ubuntu are available in every community as its positive core and supportive strength. Further, the principles of psychosocial support cover a

wide scope of human needs and functioning as it encompasses psychological, social, and spiritual needs.

7.4 My doctoral learning journey

My doctoral learning journey has been both challenging and rewarding. As alluded in the rationale section in chapter one, I started this journey at a very difficult time when I was sick and traumatised by the coronavirus disease and psychosocial consequences. I had just lost my job and was hopeless. I managed by the grace of God to channel my feelings and emotions to positive use. I am glad I did. As this study was about psychosocial support for teachers in rural learning ecologies, it fitted my situation in every respect. I gained much in terms of my own therapeutic journey, resilience, and posttraumatic growth. Participants were also changed and empowered. It was especially rewarding to see them come out of their melancholic cocoons to hear them say *'we have been healed emotionally and spiritually'*. That is the power of psychosocial support even without the engagement of a counselling expert. It was just people coming together to talk about their circumstances in an appreciative inquiry summit, without prejudice and without superiority or inferiority complex.

I have learned much about the phenomenon of psychosocial support and a bit about scientific research and academic writing. Though I feel so much fulfilled and accomplished, I feel there is much more to explore. I still have that 'not yet arrived' feeling I felt when I finished my first degree. Despite the exhaustion from this project, I feel like I have just wetted my academic and research appetite. Psychosocial support is a journey in itself. It is a psychological healing from dire despair to positive feeling, well-being, and functioning. It is not possible to study objectively without engaging in its process. The use of the appreciative inquiry suggested from the beginning that this project was not going to be a common exploration and reporting of already expected rhetoric findings. Past traumatic experiences of the participants necessitated the use of PSSP as part of the theoretical framework. It was very rewarding to venture into developing a pragmatic theory that suited the exploration of the phenomenon of psychosocial support.

The integrative theory of PSSP and AI was born. The change from the interpretive paradigm was another landmark along the journey. Just by looking at PSSP empowerment tenets as well as the

phases and principles of AI, it became necessary to employ the emancipating power of the critical paradigm. The critical paradigm was instrumental in fully describing the phenomenon of psychosocial support, enabling the creation of knowledge, and empowering advocacy as part of the complex set of findings for the study. There are many other proud moments of achievements, like my imaginative creation of the SWOT vs SOAR diagrammatic representation of sustaining positive change momentum (figure 3.1). I never thought studying psychosocial support would include community development and organisational leadership development. Thanks to my ever-demanding, ever-pushing supervisor who does not tolerate mediocre, I achieved my goals. The study is confined to the rural learning ecologies in the KZN province, yet the literature review draws similarities and inferences from contexts outside those boundaries.

7.5 Limitations of the study

While the researcher tried to cede control, it was difficult to limit the researcher's influence during the facilitated group discussions. Bushe (2012, p.10) argues that “‘objective’ research is not possible and that all social research is inherently biased by the positioning of the researcher.”

Notwithstanding the differences in terms of perspectives and experiences and perspectives between the participants and the researcher, but there was no language barrier. It is therefore anticipated that negligible information was lost during conversations. The researcher took time to familiarise with the participants before the facilitation of group activities so that a cordial rapport is achieved. Given that the study was limited to only sixteen participants in rural settings, it might raise concerns about the generalisability of the results. However, purposeful sampling ensured greater trustworthiness so that results could be applied in similar settings. Therefore, the generalisability concern was partially waived by the fact that each participant came from either a district office or represented a different school with different dynamics.

7.6 Chapter synthesis

I fully defined every concept in the topic: *Psychosocial support for teachers in rural learning ecology during the coronavirus*: psychosocial, support, rurality, ecology, coronavirus, appreciative

and inquiry. Such in-depth descriptions of concepts used in the topic assisted me to justify the choice of the topic. In an appreciative inquiry, the choice of a generative topic is important. According to Bushe (2013), a generative topic has power to strengthen imagination and create generative images. Early introduction and explanation of the topic to the participants facilitated the process of flipping from negative to positive thinking. Soon after the adoption and embracing of positive thinking, the tone of the discourse changes. It is not that we completely shun the negative, but we reframe it.

The negative discourse with blame propensity or dysfunctional attitude is reframed as wishes at least. The example is that of Participant 7 saying “*in future we hope that the government will give adequate support to the educators.*” This statement is full of hope and not despair. Participant 2 also uttered a statement signaling flipping or departure from despair to hope, even not yet arrived: “*We kept the hope that one day, things will change*”.

Generative topic encourages generativity which in turn assist in discovery of the positive core.

The appreciative inquiry design was able to deploy the phenomenological design to steer the processes of this study to achieve a full and in-depth description of the phenomenon. Through such enablement, saturated data was generated. The participatory tenets of the appreciative inquiry assisted the critical paradigm in defining (ontology), investigating (epistemology), and exposing the values (axiology) of phenomena. The critical paradigm corroborated with the appreciative inquiry constructionist principle which says that words create worlds, and that the world consists of relationships that we co-create, depicted in (Figure 7.4).

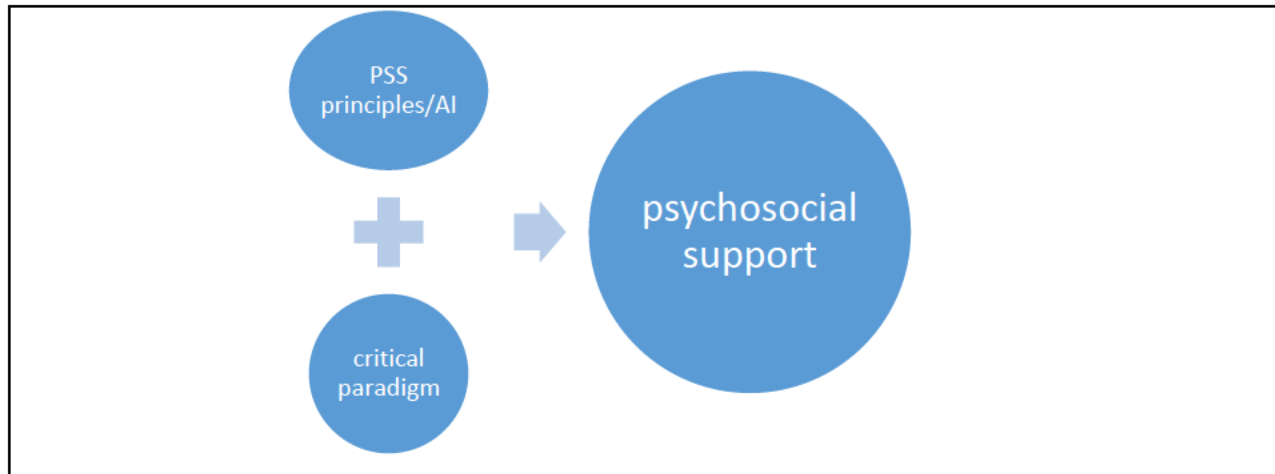


Figure: 7.4 Collaboration of the framework and the paradigm in description of the phenomenon

The critical paradigm exposed many would-be inconspicuous phenomena as disposing factors or protective factors. Resilience is one such phenomenon. You cannot fully describe psychosocial support, psychosocial variables, psychosocial factors, psychological resilience, psychosocial domain, and emotional resilience, without defining resilience. Resilience forms part of co-created knowledge in this project as its meaning and application were augmented. It has been described as strength for the future, a mitigating/protective factor, producing good results, empowerment, capacity to cope, a process of adapting well, and a reservoir of strength.

Resilience is a good attribute that comes out of a bad experience. It is a great life-long teacher of intuition. I also view resilience as the strength of the mind. Without getting carried away into philosophical discourse, which this study is not about, I also believe that instinct and intuition play significant roles in forming emergent decisions. I submit that instinct is an innate intuitive power that cannot be improved upon, but can be empowered through acquiring of skills, for individuals to make better decisions informed by experience. I understand experience and its resultant knowledge as power that can create resilience to benefit intuitive learning. Resilience is not magical; it comes in as we flip to positive thinking. We have to choose to tap into its strength and use it to flip from a bad experience to the positive side of things. The enabling power of appreciative inquiry made it both a theoretical and methodological framework and design. It is uniquely suitable as a theory for investing in human phenomena.

Studying human phenomena is different from observing an occurrence of some natural or chemical phenomenon because human beings are dynamic, given their cognitive, spiritual, and emotional demeanors. Cooperider and Fry (2020, p.266) say that “human systems are not inert machines or mechanistic ‘problems-to-be-solved’, but ‘universes of strengths.” This notion is corroborated by Lewis et al. (2016) accentuating that organisations are made up of human beings and not machines, and that we should treat organisations as living human systems to achieve effective organisational change (Medvedeva & Umpleby, 2024).

The poetic principle of the appreciative inquiry states that people, like pieces of art, should be viewed with open-mindedness for interpretation, learning and inspiration (Meier & Geldenhuys 2017). Human beings also need to be treated with due respect and with ethical considerations so as not to degrade them but to ‘develop excellent human interaction that promotes dignity’. Appreciative inquiry has the potential to develop relationships that benefit people as well as their community as living ecologies. Indeed “the scope of applications utilizing Appreciative Inquiry signals its potential not as a silver bullet for solving the world’s ills but as a healthier, more generative framework for developing relationships that make community meaningful” (Conkright, 2011, p. 33).

The critical paradigm played a pivotal role in describing psychosocial support. Appreciative inquiry played an important role in supporting and creating a psychosocial base and framework for positive change. The poetic principle states that reality is created in the moment and there are multiple realities created as people design and create their world (Meier & Geldenhuys 2017). This corroborates the ontological stance of the critical paradigm. The emancipatory tenets of the critical paradigm allow it to work in tune with appreciative inquiry as the theoretical framework.

Through its ‘heliotropic principle’, the appreciative inquiry was able to move mindsets from the propensity of finding and magnifying the faults of others. The concept of mindset change is referred to by Armstrong et al. (2020, p.16) as “increasing curiosity and removing judgment”. Heliotropic principle says that people gravitate towards the light and images that promise affirming life and people. Organisations and communities can envision themselves in a better future, and have the ability to self-organise and evolve into better social systems (Bushe, 1999). Nel (2020)

posits that self-organised communities engage stakeholders in an asset-based community-led development. This implies that ‘self-organisation’ is not self-isolation, but the ability to put an organised front capable of using collaborative strengths and resources such as ubuntu, to maximize its capacity (Hlatshwayo et al., 2020).

Through the ‘principle of simultaneity’, appreciative inquiry contends that people gravitate towards what frequent questions suggest, and change begins the moment the question is asked. Therefore, positive questions assisted in changing negative mindsets as the participants initially wanted to blame everything on the authorities. “*Protest is the only language they understand*”, Participant 6. Not only do positive questions change the attitudes, they also facilitate the creation of new knowledge (Armstrong et al., 2020). Asset-based communities understand that the war is not against people, but for system transformation (Nel, 2020).

Appreciative inquiry, through its ‘anticipatory principle’ posits that human beings have an inherent tendency to hope for and dream of a better future, even from a position of a dire situation. The principle of positivity brings about excitement about the future. Excitement is a good mood for creativity and hope (Kessler, 2013). There is hope for teachers in rural learning ecologies after the coronavirus, that can be achieved through enactment in the appreciative inquiry process. I have alluded to the mutual support and collaborations initiated and sustained by human strengths and attributes such as Ubuntu (Hlatshwayo et al., 2020). Ubuntu came up strongly in the data corpus as an integral constituent of positive core. Appreciative inquiry encourages collaborative efforts people make to support one another as individuals, organisations, and communities (James et al, 2023; Barker-Davies et al., 2020).

According to Bushe (1999, p.66) appreciative inquiry “refers to both a search for knowledge and a theory of intentional collective action.” With my personal first-hand experience on the topic *psychosocial support for teachers in rural learning ecologies during the coronavirus*, I could have done a rich auto ethnography, but I chose to do appreciative inquiry for the reasons of emancipation of other teachers, who might have undergone similar predicaments like me, or worse if they lost loved ones. Some kept their jobs but I did not. The critical paradigm helped me to co-create understanding and reality together with the participants as co-survivors and co-researchers.

Understanding and reality brought us to the realisation and conclusion that emancipation of teachers in rural learning ecologies requires and takes inner resources and resilience, and cannot be completed without resolute advocacy.

The appreciative inquiry proved to be a positively oriented method that created a new reality (Lewis,2016). It was my first time facilitating the AIS yet its practical applicability assisted me in gaining confidence. Participants were initially reluctant to focus on the positive side of things. They were actually convinced that there was nothing positive that could come out of their horrific experiences and predicaments. They were willing to talk about what the education authorities were failing to do. Through appreciative inquiry engagements, their attitudes changed, and the vexed emotional demeanors were replaced by smiles and excitement about the prospects of a positive future. The AIS showed real change in attitudes. Participants offloaded their psychological baggage and laughed about their experiences. They were not promised a better future, but their positive thinking rekindled their inner power to face the future. Healing was taking place.

The power of appreciative inquiry in influencing a positive mindset comes from Positive Psychology, defined by Armstrong et al. (2020, p.20) as “the study of thriving and flourishing at the subjective level, as well as the group level. It explores positive individual traits such as interpersonal skill, perseverance, and future-mindedness, and group traits such as civic virtues, moving toward better citizenship, responsibility, nurturing and civility among other aspects”. More scholars, including (Lewis et al., 2016), in the field of positive psychology reiterate that "attitudes shape perceptions, which shape reality” (Rodgers & Fraser, 2003, p.3).

Appreciative inquiry derived the heliotropic principle from positive psychology: that people and organisations naturally gravitate towards the positive forces and narratives that give them life and energy, hope and future, as well as resilience and growth (Cooperrider et al., 2023). From the perspective of positive psychology, well-being is seen as a psychological process in which people deal with negative and positive emotions in the face of challenges and changes; cope with crises in a complex and changing environment; and strive for growth and development (Nong et al., 2022).

I presented psychosocial support as more sustainable than trauma briefing or even PFA, which takes a victim a bit further than trauma briefing, but is by no means an un-ending spoon-feeding. One definition said it is a strength-regaining process, and processes are meant to support some kind of growth out of some dependency or besiegement. (Yıldırım & Tanrıverdi, 2021). Support means to lend a hand to help someone to stand. As a verb, support means to carry the weight for someone or help them carry their weight. Support is not the main character but assists the main character. As a noun, Collins English Dictionary (2014) defines support (in medical terms) as ‘an appliance worn to ease the strain on an injured bodily structure or part’. Such support is worn for a limited time until natural healing is completed to prevent further injury that might aggravate the first and even further prolong the prognosis.

I remarked in the previous chapter that phase ‘destiny’ can also be referred to as ‘deploy’, which implies commissioning to work (Watkins et al., 2011). Somerville and Farner (2012) mention what they call ‘Action-oriented improvisation’. Action-orientated improvisation is when the goal pursued in the destiny phase is a specific tangible change agreed upon by key decision-makers or a consensus of those involved. An improvisation is reflected in many continuous, sometimes disparate changes that are linked to deeper fundamental change(s). Psychosocial support, change, and growth are continuous phenomena (Somerville & Farner, 2012).

7.7 Recommendations

Through this study, I realised that psychosocial support is a matter that cannot be ignored in the teaching and learning situation. When I finished my master’s degree thesis which was about psychosocial support for learners, I made a recommendation that it would be interesting to do a study on psychosocial support for teachers. The necessity for psychosocial support provision for teachers requires dedicated advocacy. Teachers and other public servants can benefit from dedicated psychosocial support. Moreover, advocacy would gain more impetus if it were coming from more public sectors, including health. It would solicit more responsible and positive responses from the government. It would also empower public servants, and motivate them to renew their calling and professional pledges, especially if it is done at a large scale using the power of appreciative inquiry.

Public servants are exposed to enormous amounts of stress, leading to poor mental health and burnout. Burnout is a major contributory factor to low self-efficacy and poor service. Service delivery and customer care in South Africa rates amongst the worst in the world (Maistry, 2022). I recommend a study in psychosocial support to foster strong collaborations between government departments, between departments and workers, and between the local governments and community leaders, for meaningful community participation. It would be interesting to put the critical paradigm to action to instill patriotism. Psychosocial support is a formidable force with multidisciplinary dynamism that can co-create functional communities and better societies for the good of humanity.

7.8 Conclusion

Engaging in the appreciative inquiry summit (AIS) revealed that psychosocial support for teachers in rural learning ecologies during the coronavirus was not readily available. Yet, it was very helpful in mitigating psychosocial crises whenever corroborated. AIS also facilitated the discovery of the positive core or a constellation of strengths that can fuel what works. This is the process meant to discover, highlight, and describe existing talents, and appreciate special gifts of innovation opportunities, however small. These may encourage participants' competencies and strengths to promote 'what works' in an organisation or community. It involves finding what works well when we are at our best as individuals or community (Bushe, 2012). What works will then be packaged into our strength reservoir as fuel to facilitate change in us and our environment. These are the strengths that form our positive core. Positive core can be small manageable resources, skills, traits, attributes, or strong points that can be put to action to yield significant change results (Armstrong et al., 2020).

Change does not always have to be the opposite but can enhance what works. Positive core can be likened to what Primadata et al. (2023, p.459) refer to as 'trust' being a reservoir of "inventories of social capital". If 'trust' is the bank of moral strengths for social capital, then, 'positive core' is the bank of motivation and innovative strengths for positive change (Castillo & Barrameda, 2024). This discovery of the positive core is a paradigm shifter from traditional methods of strategic planning and problem solving such as SWOT analysis which look for problems to modern methods (Lewis, 2016).

The main phenomenon in this study is psychosocial support. I have dedicated effort to describing it fully to understand its dynamics and impact on the lives of post-traumatised teachers. Thorough investigation led to the understanding that provision of psychosocial support takes collaboration of all stakeholders, and that blame apportioning does not help. It takes collaboration and many other factors that define the psychosocial domain, including the environment. The environmental factors of the psychological domain will either promote or undermine the psychosocial support efforts. The psychosocial domain also works to support change in emotions, self-cognition, and interpersonal relationships with friends, family, and colleagues (Park et al., 2023).

The appreciative inquiry has a corroborative power and framework that incubates psychosocial domain function and forms a symbiotic synergy to support change in the mindset and promote innovative strengths. The appreciative inquiry framework reframes negative attitudes to create a space to support the principles of psychosocial support to mitigate psychological effects and build capacity to achieve self-awareness. Psychosocial support empowers individuals to apply ‘cognitive reframing’ (Zadok-Gurman et al., 2021). Cognitive reframing is gaining meaning of a situation through a changed attitude and changed interpretation of the situation. The interpretation after the changed attitude can be called reinterpretation (Somerville & Farner, 2012) because interpretation is relative to the state of mind. A person’s perception provides a point of reference for interpretation.

Collaboration may imply that in some instances, psychosocial support is not given on a silver platter, but is worked together with the would-be beneficiaries. Therefore, beneficiaries should not be seen as helpless recipients or victims, nor should they be exonerated of their responsibilities. Both psychosocial support principles and appreciative inquiry principles do not condone passivity and helplessness. Notwithstanding the requisite structural infrastructure provision that must create the space and domain needed for psychosocial support provision, psychosocial support is not meant to be a perpetual spoon-feeding scheme, but an empowerment to help people to stand on their feet and eventually run on their own. It discourages victim mentality.

Beneficiaries of support should be assisted while making efforts, utilising their inner (natural) abilities and resources to escape or avoid the situation or its effects. Consider psychosocial support

given by fans to a marathon runner: a piece of an orange, a bottle of water, a smile and a cheering applaud. Any support that goes beyond that (in terms of duration and provision) is based on a certain type of sustainable relationship. Psychosocial support is sometimes used interchangeably with psychosocial intervention. Intervention is for a limited period, to break the circle of a bad situation. Counselling can be a form of intervention, like in a marriage situation, but it must stop at a certain point for a relationship to continue on its resources.

Psychosocial support can be provided for a short term as the instantaneous trauma briefing, a medium term support or intervention until a person stand on their own feet or a long-term sustainable mutual and collaborative support based on continual relationships as friends, family, colleagues, or based on Ubuntu as communal and societal ecological support. The government should also provide psychosocial support at different levels. It should have adequate contingency support plan ready for emergent needs such as disaster management; sustained support like provision of basic needs like water; and holistic infrastructure development for future needs like building roads, schools, clinics, and housing. While emergent needs must be ready for unforeseen eventualities, the unforeseen should be anticipated as inevitable given the frequency of disasters; man-made and natural, in recent years. Infrastructure development must respond adequately to future needs as demanded by projected population growth. Participant 6 believes that: *good leadership must provide contingency for emergencies.*

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Annexure 1 (Interview Protocol)

AIS is a mini-conference that brings together a wide-range of

internal and external stakeholders to participate equally in:

- (1) Reaffirming the strengths and identity of a learning ecology or an organisation,
- (2) Exploring opportunities for positive change,

(3) Generating specific ideas about how to enhance health and wellbeing, and

(4) Implementing ideas for sustainable positive change to rally psychosocial support and promotion of health and well-being. (Cooperrider & Whitney, 1999).

Day One – Discovery phase

The focus of this phase is the discovery of many aspects. This is the phase of identifying/discovering the 'best of what is' and 'what works through dialogue so as to highlight the strengths of the past and the present, and to identify areas to be improved. We highlight the special features that describe and promote its “positive change core.” (Cooperrider & Whitney, 1999).

Key question: What are the appreciative, positive attributes and strengths that helped you to pull through the tough experiences?

We focus on describing:

- Who are we, individually and collectively?
- What resources do we bring to mitigate the psychosocial challenges we face?
- What are our core competencies in terms of mutual support?
- What hopes and dreams do we have for the future?
- What are the most hopeful global and local developments/trends impacting us at this time?
- What ways can we imagine going forward together?
- How can we assist our district office to know and to address our psychosocial needs?

Discovery phase activities include:

- Setting the group - brief introduction to the context and purpose of the meeting.
- Appreciative Interviews - all participants engage in one-on-one interviews organised around the topics of the meeting.
- Commissions groups - recollection of stories and best practices discovered during the interview process to discover ‘who are we at our best’?

- Positive core map – commissions groups to process the stories to illustrate all the strengths, resources, capabilities, competencies, positive hopes, and feelings, relationships, alliances, collaborations etc. of the learning ecology.
- Continuity search - commissions groups to process gained information into knowledge and skills to create learning ecology, education sector, and community timelines in order to identify factors that have sustained the learning ecology over time and are desirable for the future.

Day Two – Dream phase

The second day is a day of envisioning the greatest *potential* we may have to impact and effect positive influence on our learning ecology. Generative dialogues are encouraged and continue. To that end, questions that stimulate the imagining and dreaming process are asked. Brainstorming is used to allow the proliferation of many ideas.

Key questions to stimulate envisioning of dreams: What goals do you have as a team? What opportunities do you think you have as a team?

Example stimulators are: *Imagine you are sleeping and dreaming. In your dream a traumatic film-like scenario similar to the situations that play out in a pandemic like the coronavirus. Imagine your group is tasked with the responsibility of providing psychosocial support to your colleagues who were affected in one way or another during the height of the pandemic. You, as a group, are expected to positively induce hope that you and your colleagues and the entire learning ecology (a catchment or village or community of schools in part of the district) will come out stronger and more resilient. What psychosocial support have you always wished and dreamed would be ideal to have in place as a contingency to alleviate or mitigate against traumatic effects brought by the pandemic? What characteristics and skills should your group possess in order to provide psychosocial support in the learning ecology?*

Imagine during the height of the coronavirus pandemic, this group has just been commissioned to provide psychosocial support to teachers in your learning ecology. You are told that you can win an award for outstanding social responsibility. What would it take to ensure you win the award? What words do you think will be said by the official presenting the award? What do you think the

recipients of your psychosocial support would say in appreciation of your group? What would teacher unions say?

Commissions into small groups: These are brainstorming sessions to produce many ideas. All ideas are welcome; no idea is stupid.

- Sharing of Dreams – commission group discussions of dreams collected during the previous phases.
- Making Dreams alive - commission groups discuss specific, tangible examples of their dream and create.
- Creativity - symbolic presentations.
- Enacting the Dreams - group presentations of dramatic dream enactments to the main group.

Day Three – Design phase

In day three, participants focus on crafting a learning ecology in which the ‘positive change core’ is confidently active in all of the strategies, processes, systems, and decisions. Collaborations are explored and encouraged. Provocative propositions are put forward, debated and tested whether they pass the litmus test as constructive statements of affirmative design. Such statements, stated in the present tense, must have provocative power to stretch participants to dream and be inspired to take action and commit to implement them.

Key question: What key strategies do you think can assist in achieving the dreams of the learning ecology?

Design phase activities- include best ideas from the dream phase selected.

- Creation of the Design Architecture for the learning ecology – the main group identifies design architecture elements required to build psychosocial support for teachers in the learning ecology.
- Crafting of Provocative Propositions for each Design Element – commission groups draft provocative propositions and affirmative design statements incorporating the positive change core.

- Selection of High Impact Design Elements for the learning ecology – the summit draws on deliberations and dreams to select high-impact design elements.

Day IV – Destiny phase

Key question: What would it take for your group to successfully implement your designed dreams and to sustain the impact you envisage?

The final day is a culmination of the past three days of discovery, dream, and design phases. It is a provocation to the action phase. At this stage, the summit participants embark on the details of implementation of what will be done! The summit demonstrates and drives the initiatives and commitment to action.

Destiny phase actions include:

- Generation of possible actions – Commission groups brainstorm possible actions and share with the main group.
- Selection of inspired actions – individuals pronounce their commitment for action to the main group and specify support needed.

Emergent Task Groups Established – local groups meet to plan future cooperation and support in contingent task undertakings

Define: (To appreciate, evaluate the present situation and also to define the envisaged future).

The define phase is designed to serve as an introductory phase whereby the researcher together with the participants appraise the situation. AI seeks to direct the focus to a future outcome from the beginning of engagement. To that end the affirmative topic that support the purpose is adopted. A statement of envisaged future is formulated in the topic, yet with adequate openness and broadness to allow for input of more ideas to be added along the way. The outcome is positively phrased in a way that suggests positive benefits for all participants. In alignment with the generative the topic is phrased such that it gets people excited and talking about the issues. The idea is to suggest and promote proliferation of positive ideas.

Questions:

1. What has your working experience during the coronavirus pandemic been like?
2. Would you say that such experience has broadened your understanding of your work dynamics?
3. Would you like to share one or two of your experiences of working during this time?
4. Were you or any of your colleagues directly or indirectly affected by the effects of the coronavirus?
5. Did you receive any psychosocial support, and if so, from where?
6. In your opinion, is your school in a position to provide such support?
7. What are the strengths you think your school possesses to support the teachers?
8. Would you say your training as a teacher prepared you adequately prepared you for the challenges you have experienced?
9. Do you think you needed further training to be able to do your work better?
10. Have you received any in-service training, and if so, from where?
11. What kind of other support services would you need to improve your situation?
12. Do you think schools in your community are providing psychosocial support for teachers?
13. Does your institution enjoy the support of this community? Please explain.
14. How do you think the relationship between your school and the community can be improved?
15. Can you reflect on positive incidents of community support your institution received from this community?
16. What are your strong points or attributes you think were at your disposal and which helped to mitigate against the effects of coronavirus?
17. What are the strengths available in your learning ecology that you think can help the teachers?
18. Can you describe the kind of psychosocial support that helped?
19. Would you say that there are healthy relationships and collaborations amongst the stakeholders?
If so, what do you think can be done to enhance such relationships and collaborations?
20. How would you describe the kind of support you received from:
 - 20.1 School management
 - 20.2 Other teachers

20.3 Parents/ Guardians

20.4 Government services

Discovery: *Further focusing on strengths, talents and skills to explore what was working*

This phase is about discovering our key strengths and appreciating what was working that help to build resilience. We are uncovering our unique qualities including leadership qualities and talents, the passion we once had for the profession, values, purpose and reasons for continuing in profession and life (Lewis et al., 2008).

Questions:

1. What do you like most about your career/ profession?
2. What encouraged you to follow your profession?
3. What leadership qualities did your best school teacher possess?
4. Which leadership qualities do you think contributes in shaping your profession?
5. What positive trends, events, and developments you think are contributing to shaping the future of your profession?
6. What do you regard as your significant contribution to education fraternity?
7. What do you regard as your significant contribution to this community/ society?
8. During the coronavirus pandemic:
9. Please describe your experience in your career in line of function, your life, the lives of your colleagues and lives of learners and teachers during the pandemic.
10. What are strengths that kept you and everyone going?
11. Who helped to alleviate the situation?
12. What else contributed in alleviating the situation?
13. Which of your strengths and talents became prominent and helpful?
14. What knowledge and skills assisted you to cope and help others?
15. What contributed most to effect positive impacts of your efforts?
16. What difference you as an individual or together as a collective were able to make?
17. What did you learn about collaborative support in times of hardship?

Dream: *Refining, reinforcing, and projecting what works*

In this phase the participants are encouraged to imagine a future when people of their learning ecology will experience and do exceptional things for the good of the community. This is an opportunity and freedom for participants to dream about vibrant psychosocial support initiatives in the education fraternity and a future vibrant learning ecology working to incubate new strengths, talents and skills through the emancipating power education. “The dream phase is highly practical as it is grounded in the organisations’ history. It is also generative as it seeks to explore potential” (Lewis et al 2008, p.55).

Questions:

1. What exciting future you can imagine for the teaching profession?
2. Why do you think good leadership qualities are important for managing issues affecting the profession?
3. What exciting future can you imagine for teacher’s psychosocial support in your school, circuit, district and community?
4. How can the discovered strengths be enhanced?
5. What relationships and collaborations you found useful?
6. How can those relationships and collaborations be enhanced?
7. How are the small differences you were able to do that can be improved?
8. What do you regard as good leadership (e.g. provision of working tools) in school, circuit, district and community?
9. What do you think is sustaining dedicated leadership in organizing psychosocial support for teachers?
10. What psychosocial support systems and structures are most encouraging for you?
11. What are you most proud of, having helped your school /district/ community achieved?
12. How are the individual and corporate contributions can be highlighted and promoted?

Design: *Reflecting on ideas to inform design elements*

The dream phase gave participants liberty to imagine and dream about practical ideas relevant to their profession and psychosocial support. Dreaming improves generativity and production of positive ideas. Design phase connects the activities of the previous phases, collating and

consolidating the ideas. Participants move to agree on an envisaged future and the actions needed to achieve it. Drawing from previous activities, a summit work to consolidate themes to produce a “high-level plan” (Lewis et al., 2008, p.59) written as provocative statements charting a way forward. In this phase we revisit the previous phases for cues design. We go through individual stories, experiences, and anecdotes and discussions to glean for gems we can harvest and use for building our desired future. These are the gems representing individual and collective strength and resilience which we can use to foster a desired future in mental health wellness.

Some questions to facilitate consolidation of ideas:

1. What are practical teacher engagement that can have the most impact on improving the mental health wellbeing of teachers?
2. What are activities that teachers can be engaged in to improve their mental health wellbeing?
3. What initiatives stand out as being exceptionally important in encouraging collaboration of stakeholders in providing psychosocial support for teachers?
4. What steps can be taken to enhance leadership skills for teachers?

Delivery/ Destiny: *Action learning*

Destiny is the stage of celebrating action learning we have achieved from the previous phases. Provocative design statements are used to inform planning for actions to be taken. The high-level design is implemented to generate specific actions to take to achieve the desired future.

Some questions to facilitate planning:

1. What small changes could we make right now that would really encourage more teachers to get involved with improving their mental wellbeing?
2. How can we get involved in providing psychosocial support for teachers?
3. How can we help to enhance leadership skills for teachers?
4. In what specific ways can we contribute to realizing psychosocial support and sustainable mental health wellbeing for teachers?

Appreciative inquiry summit

AIS is a mini-conference that brings together a wide-range of internal and external stakeholders to participate equally in:

- (1) Reaffirming the strengths and identity of a learning ecology or an organisation,
- (2) Exploring opportunities for positive change,
- (3) Generating specific ideas about how to enhance health and wellbeing, and
- (4) Implementation of ideas for sustainable positive change to rally psychosocial support and promotion of health and wellbeing. (Cooperrider & Whitney, 1999).

Day One – Discovery phase

The focus of this phase is on the discovery of many aspects. This is the phase of identifying/discovering of 'best of what is' and 'what works through dialogue so as to highlight the strengths of the past and the present and to identify areas to be improved. We highlight the special features that describe and promote “positive change core.” (Cooperrider & Whitney, 1999).

Key question: What are the appreciative, positive, attributes and strengths that helped you to pull through the tough experiences?

We focus on describing:

- Who are we, individually and collectively?
- What resources do we bring to mitigate against the psychosocial challenges we face?
- What are our core competencies in terms of mutual support?
- What hopes and dreams do we have for the future?
- What are the most hopeful global and local developments/trends impacting us at this time?
- What ways can we imagine going forward together?
- How can we assist our district office to know and to address our psychosocial needs?

Discovery phase activities include:

- Setting the group - brief introduction to the context and purpose of the meeting.
- Appreciative Interviews - all participants engage in one on one interviews organized around the topics of the meeting.

- Commissions groups - recollection of highlight stories and best practices discovered during the interview process to discover ‘who are we at our best’?
- Positive core map – commissions groups process the stories to illustrate all of the strengths, resources, capabilities, competencies, positive hopes and feelings, relationships, alliances, collaborations etc. of the learning ecology.
- Continuity search - commissions groups process gained information into knowledge and skills to create learning ecology, education sector and community time lines in order to identify factors that have sustained the learning ecology overtime and are desirable for the future.

Day Two – **Dream phase**

The second day is a day of envisioning the greatest *potential* we may have to impact and to effect positive influence to our learning ecology. Generative dialogues are encouraged and continue. To that end questions that stimulate imagining and dreaming process are asked. Brainstorming is used to allow proliferation of many ideas.

Key questions to stimulate envisioning of dreams: What goals do you have as a team? What opportunities do you think you have as a team?

Example stimulators are: *Imagine you are sleeping and dreaming. In your dream a traumatic film-like scenario similar to the situations that play out in a pandemic like the coronavirus. Imagine your group is tasked with responsibility to provide psychosocial support to your colleagues who were affected one way or another during the height of the pandemic. You as a group are expected to positively induce hope that you and your colleagues and the entire learning ecology (a catchment or village or community of schools in part of the district) will come out stronger and more resilient the other side. What psychosocial support you have always wished and dreamed it would be ideal to have in place as contingency to alleviate or mitigate against traumatic effects brought by the pandemic? What characteristics, recourses and skills should your group possess in order to be able to provide psychosocial support in the learning ecology?*

Imagine during the height of the coronavirus pandemic this group has just been commissioned to provide psychosocial support to teachers in your learning ecology. You are told that you can win an award for outstanding social responsibility. What would it take to ensure you win the award? What words you think will be said by the official presenting the award? What do you think the

recipients of your psychosocial support would say in appreciation of your group? What would teacher unions say?

Commissions into small groups: These are brainstorming sessions to produce quantity of ideas. All ideas are welcome; no idea is stupid!

- Sharing of Dreams – commission group discussions of dreams collected during the previous phases.
- Making Dreams alive - commission groups discuss specific, tangible examples of their dream and create.
- Creativity - symbolic presentations.
- Enacting the Dreams - group presentations of dramatic dream enactments to the main group.

Day Three – **Design phase**

During day three participants focus on crafting a learning ecology in which the ‘positive change core’ is confidently active in all of the strategies, processes, systems, and decisions. Collaborations are explored and encouraged. Provocative propositions are put forward and debated and tested whether they pass the litmus test as constructive statements of affirmative design. Such statements, stated in present tense, must have provocative power to stretch participants to dream and be inspired to take action and commitment to implement them.

Key question: What are key strategies you think can assist in achieving the dreams of the learning ecology?

Design phase activities include: Best ideas from dream phase are selected.

- Creation of the Design Architecture for the learning ecology – the main group identifies design architecture elements required to build psychosocial support for teachers in the learning ecology.
- Crafting of Provocative Propositions for each Design Element – commissions groups draft provocative propositions affirmative design statements incorporating the positive change core.

- Selection of High Impact Design Elements for the learning ecology – the summit draws on deliberations and dreams to select high impact design elements.

Day IV – **Destiny phase**

What would it take for your group to successfully implement your designed dreams and to sustain the impact you envisage?

The final day is a culmination of the past three days of discovery, dream and design phases. It is a provocation to action phase. At this stage the summit participants get to embark on the details of implementation of what will be done! The summit demonstrates and drives the initiatives and commitment to action.

Destiny phase actions include:

- Generation of Possible Actions – commissions groups brainstorm possible actions and share with the main group.
- Selection of Inspired Actions – individuals pronounce their commitment for action to the main group and specify support needed.

Emergent Task Groups Established – local groups meet to plan future cooperation and support in contingent tasks undertakings.

Annexure 2 (5D Generative engagement)

The 5D algorithmic steps are:

Phase	Generative engagement
Define	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Baseline assessment interviews (To appreciate and evaluate the situation) • The affirmative topic that supports the purpose is adopted. • A statement of envisaged future is formulated. • Alignment with the generative topic.

Discovery	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Inquire into the best achievements of the past and the present. • Choose the positive as the focus of Inquiry. • Anecdotal stories to unearth positive gems that can be enhanced to feed into dreams.
Dream	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Inquire into the best of the past and the present. • Choose the positive as the focus of Inquiry. • Unearth positive gems from anecdotal stories that can be enhanced to feed into dreams.
Design	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Create a compelling, memorable, and ambitious picture of the desired future. • Locate themes that appear in stories and select topics for further Inquiry. • Discuss stimulating ideas feeding into strategic opportunities to design the dream future.
Destiny/ Delivery/ Deploy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mutual support and collaboration by participants produce innovative ways and a common purpose to work towards the envisaged future.

Annexure 3 (Data production instrument)

Table 3.2. The 5D appreciative inquiry data Production grid

Phases of AI	Description	Appreciative Inquiry principle(s)	Activities/methods
Define	Describe the purpose, content, and what needs to be achieved together. Clarifying the goal and focus of the Inquiry to the participants	Constructionist – Reality is co-created through conversations. Using the power of discourses to Construct a better future.	Group ground-breaking meeting. Baseline appraisal of the PSS state of teachers.

Discovery	This is the phase of identifying/discovering of 'best of what is' and 'what works through dialogue so as to highlight the strengths of the past and the present and to identify areas to be improved.	Simultaneity – change begins at the instant the question is asked	Generative conversations: Stories and anecdotes. Group discussions.
Dream	Dreaming and analysing the dream. Participants discuss stimulating ideas feeding into strategic opportunities about the future they desire for their learning ecology. They imagine 'what could be for the future of the learning ecology.	Poetic – schools and learning ecologies are endless sources of learning and growth. What we choose to study makes a difference and influences our future life trajectory.	Brainstorming: generating and increasing the quality and quantity of ideas
Design	Designing the role each participant can play to contribute to achieving envisaged future goals for the school Participants are asked to identify, based on their personal design elements necessary to co-construct 'what should be their most desired future.	Anticipatory - People move in the direction of images they see in their future. The more positive and hopeful the imagined future image, the more positive the present-day action	Reflecting on ideas to inform design elements

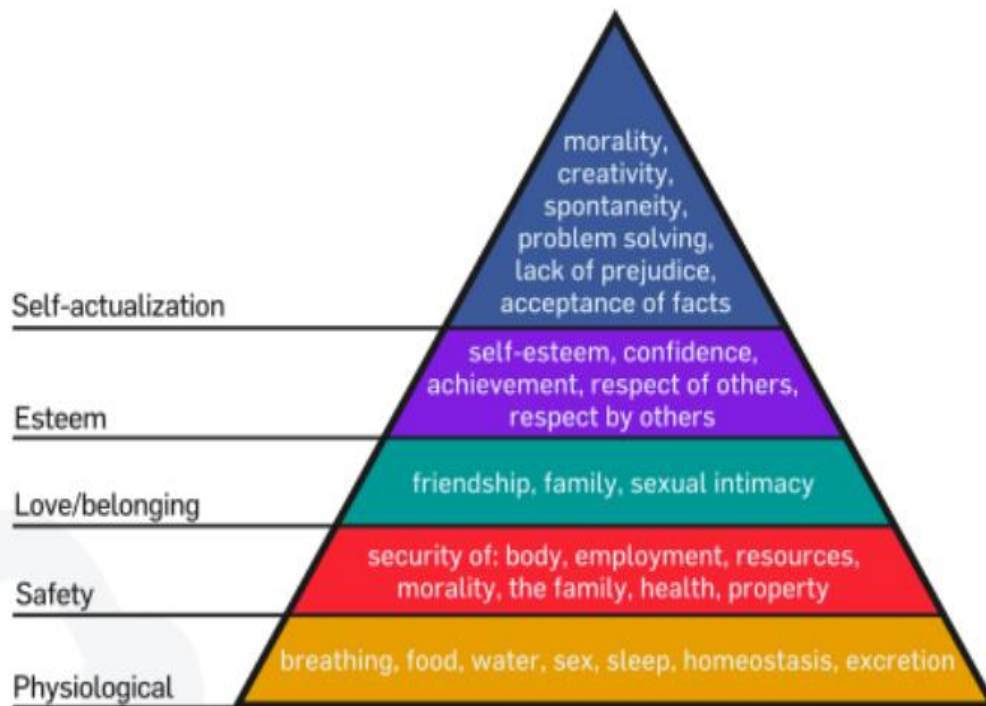
Annexure 4. (Data analysis instrument)

Steps in Colaizzi's descriptive phenomenological method for data analysis

Step	Description
1. Familiarisation	Familiarising with data by reading through several times
2. Identifying significant Statements	The researcher identifies all statements in the accounts that are of direct relevance to the phenomenon under investigation

3. Formulating meanings	Identifying relevant meanings from the statements. Reflexively bracketing researcher's own pre-supposition
4. Clustering themes	Clustering of themes that are common. Again bracketing pre-suppositions to avoid any potential influence of existing theory.
5. Developing an exhaustive description	Writing a full and inclusive description of the phenomenon, incorporating all the themes produced in step 4.
6. Producing the fundamental Structure	The researcher condenses the exhaustive description down to a short, dense statement that captures just those aspects deemed to be essential to the structure of the phenomenon.
7. Seeking verification of the Fundamental structure	The researcher returns the fundamental structure statement to all participants (or sometimes a subsample in larger studies) to ask whether it captures their experience. He or she may go back and modify earlier steps in the analysis in the light of this feedback

Annexure 5 (Maslow's hierarchy of needs)



Maslow's hierarchy of needs.

Annexure 6 (Psychosocial training curriculum)

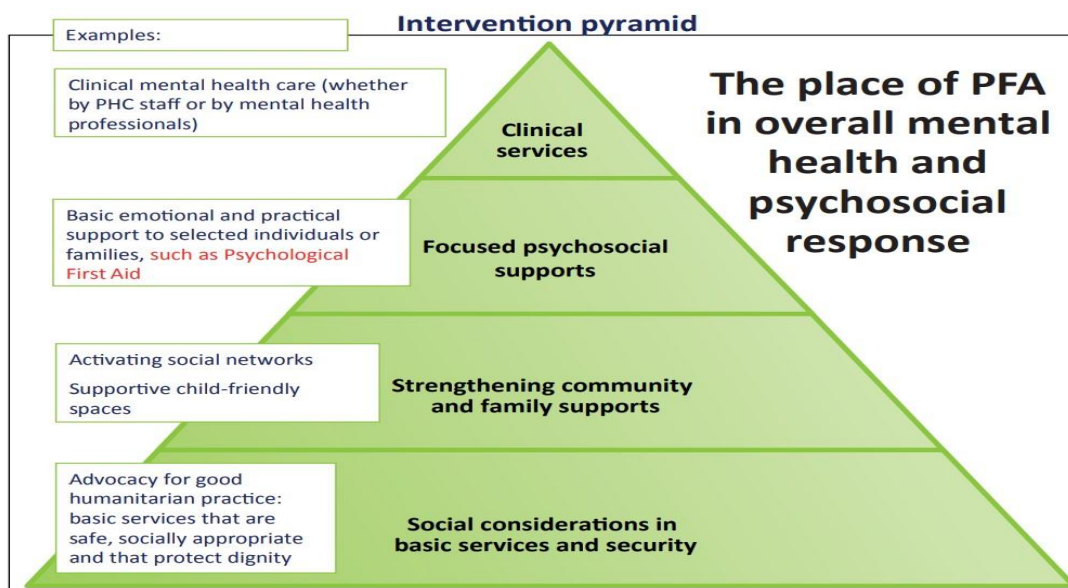
Increasing Guidance and Counseling Teacher Capacity in Disaster Preparedness through Psychosocial Training Curriculum.

Curriculum Material

1. Psychosocial understanding

2. Psychosocial legal basis
3. Psychosocial impact after disaster and social welfare
4. Psychosocial well-being and the pyramid of psychosocial interventions
5. Definition of psychosocial support services
6. Stages of psychosocial support services
7. Assessment of psychosocial support services
8. Example of a case study of psychosocial services in Central Sulawesi after the 2018 earthquake and tsunami
9. Individual and group assignments

Annexure 7 (advocacy in psychosocial intervention)



Annexure 7 Psychosocial intervention should end with advocacy. Adapted from Sijbrandij et al., (2020).

Annexure 8 (Dimensions of PTG)

Box 7. 5: Dimensions of PTG, adopted from: Menculini et al., 2021

- changes in how people relate with others (i.e., an increased willingness to express emotions or even accepting more likely help from others);
- recognition of new possibilities (i.e., seen as an increased attitude to take new paths in life and redefine priorities);
- a sense of greater personal strength (i.e., improved sense of self-efficacy, strength, and self-confidence);
- changes toward spirituality (i.e., religious beliefs, spiritual matters, and existential/philosophical questions); and
- greater appreciation of life (i.e., considering meaning and worth in life's little things).

Annexure 9 (institutional permission)

UKZN HUMANITIES AND SOCIAL SCIENCES RESEARCH ETHICS COMMITTEE
(HSSREC)

Permission to conduct Research at your Institution

To whom it may concern

Dear Sir / Madam

My name is Thembinkosi Victor Ndlovu. I am a PhD student at the University of KwaZulu-Natal. My thesis topic is: Psychosocial Support for Teachers in rural and semi-rural Learning Ecologies during the Coronavirus Pandemic.

The purpose of this letter is to ask for a permission and informed consent to conduct a research at your institution. I will not have any contact with learners, the study will generate data by interviewing educators. The daily programs of your institution will not be interrupted. The

interviews will be conducted at the educators' convenient times. The assurance is hereby given that the identity of all participants will be protected. The data will be treated confidentially.

I trust that you will find this request in order.

Further information can be obtained from my supervisor Prof Hlalele tel.: 031 260 3858

Human & Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee office Tel: 031 2603587/8350/4557

My contact: Victor Ndlovu: [REDACTED] tel.: [REDACTED].

I

Capacity.....

Hereby give consent to Victor Ndlovu a PhD student at UKZN to conduct the research in our institution.

Signed:.....

Annexure 10 (Informed consent)

**UKZN HUMANITIES AND SOCIAL SCIENCES RESEARCH ETHICS COMMITTEE
(HSSREC)**

INFORMED CONSENT

Information Sheet and Consent to Participate in Research

Date...../...../.....

Good day

My name is Thembinkosi Victor Ndlovu. I am a PhD student in the Discipline of Educational Psychology, School of Education at the University of KwaZulu Natal, supervised by Professor DJ Hlalele.

You are being invited to consider participating in a study that involves research on psychosocial support for teachers during the coronavirus pandemic. The aim and purpose of this research is to find out the extent and impact of the pandemic in the psychosocial lives of teachers and also if they receive psychosocial support and intervention. The study is expected to enroll sixteen

participants comprising of teachers and education officials (including principals or members of SMT, members of School Based Support Team (SBST), members of District Support Teams. The will take at five rural schools in KZN and also at the District Office.

The study will involve: The formation of a focus group which will hold a summit. During the summit the participants will engage in conversations and story-telling about the lived experiences during the pandemic. These engagements more than the purposed of data generation, will provide understanding how health & wellness and psychosocial support for teachers during such traumatic events as the coronavirus pandemic may be rallied and achieved. The duration of your participation if you choose to enroll and remain in the study is expected to be four summits (day meetings). Each summit will take about two hours per day. The study is not funded.

The study may invoke emotional discomfort as the participants remember traumatic experiences. A psychologist will be on stand-by for consultation if needed. There is no other potential risks anticipated and there are no compensations involved. We hope that the study will create future psychosocial skills as a benefit for participants to rally psychosocial teams to mitigate future traumatic events of similar nature.

This study has been ethically reviewed and approved by the UKZN Humanities and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee (approval number HSSREC/00006116/2023).

In the event of any problems or concerns/questions you may contact the researcher at (provide contact details) or the UKZN Humanities & Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee, contact details as follows:

HUMANITIES & SOCIAL SCIENCES RESEARCH ETHICS ADMINISTRATION

Research Office, Westville Campus

Govan Mbeki Building.

KwaZulu-Natal, SOUTH AFRICA

Tel: 27 31 2604557- Fax: 27 31 2604609

Email: HSSREC@ukzn.ac.za

Participation in this research is entirely voluntary. Withdrawal of participation at any point will have no adverse consequences for participants, and so in the event of refusal/withdrawal of participation the participants will not incur penalty or loss of treatment or other benefit to which they are normally entitled. A participant may be politely asked to leave the meeting and their participation terminated if they constantly exhibit disruptive behaviour in a meeting/ summit.

There are no incentives or reimbursements for participating in the study. Also there are no costs expected to be incurred by participants as a result of participation in the study. Steps will be taken to protect confidentiality of personal/clinical information, such information will be anonymously

used and only for the purpose of the study and will not be divulged anywhere else. Your views in this interview will be presented anonymously. Neither your name nor identity will be disclosed in any form in the study. The recordings as well as other items associated with the interview will be held in a password-protected file accessible only to myself and my supervisors. After a period of 5 years, in line with the rules of the university, it will be disposed by shredding and burning.

CONSENT

I..... have been informed about the study entitled *Psychosocial support for teachers in rural learning ecologies during the coronavirus pandemic*: by Thembinkosi Ndlovu

I understand the purpose and procedures of the study. I have been given an opportunity to answer questions about the study and have had answers to my satisfaction.

I declare that my participation in this study is entirely voluntary and that I may withdraw at any time without affecting any of the benefits that I usually am entitled to.

I have been informed about any available compensation or medical treatment if injury occurs to me as a result of study-related procedures.

If I have any further questions/concerns or queries related to the study I understand that I may contact the researcher or the supervisor at (School of Education College of Humanities UKZN, Edgewood Campus:

Email: 217079314@stu.ukzn.ac.za

Cell no. [REDACTED]

Supervisor: Prof DJ Hlalele

Email: Hlaleled@ukzn.ac.za

Tel: 031 260 3858

If I have any questions or concerns about my rights as a study participant, or if I am concerned about an aspect of the study or the researchers then I may contact:

HUMANITIES & SOCIAL SCIENCES RESEARCH ETHICS ADMINISTRATION

Research Office, Westville Campus

Govan Mbeki Building.

KwaZulu-Natal, SOUTH AFRICA
Tel: 27 31 2604557 - Fax: 27 31 2604609
Email: HSSREC@ukzn.ac.za

Additional consent, where applicable

I hereby provide consent to:

Audio-record my interview / focus group discussion	YES / NO
Video-record my interview / focus group discussion	YES / NO
Use of my photographs for research purposes	YES / NO

Signature of Participant

Date-----

Signature of Witness

Date-----

Signature of Translator
(Where applicable)

Date-----

Annexure 11 (Gatekeepers, DoE approval)



KWAZULU-NATAL PROVINCE
EDUCATION
REPUBLIC OF SOUTH AFRICA

OFFICE OF THE HEAD OF DEPARTMENT

Private Bag X9137, PIETERMARITZBURG, 3200
Anton Lembede Building, 247 Burger Street, Pietermaritzburg, 3201
Tel: 033 392 1063

Email: Phindile.duma@kzndoe.gov.za

Enquiries: Phindile Duma

Ref.:2/4/8/69

Mr TV Ndlovu
PO Box 2358
New Germany
PINETOWN
3620


Dear Mr Ndlovu

PERMISSION TO CONDUCT RESEARCH IN THE KZN DoE INSTITUTIONS

Your application to conduct research entitled: **“PSYCHOSOCIAL SUPPORT FOR TEACHERS IN RURAL LEARNING ECOLOGIES DURING THE CORONAVIRUS PANDEMIC: AN APPRECIATIVE INQUIRY”**, in the KwaZulu-Natal Department of Education Institutions has been approved. The conditions of the approval are as follows:

1. The researcher will make all the arrangements concerning the research and interviews.
2. The researcher must ensure that Educator and learning programmes are not interrupted.
3. Interviews are not conducted during the time of writing examinations in schools.
4. Learners, Educators, Schools and Institutions are not identifiable in any way from the results of the research.
5. A copy of this letter is submitted to District Managers, Principals and Heads of Institutions where the Intended research and interviews are to be conducted.
6. The period of investigation is limited to the period from 27 June 2023 to 31 July 2026.
7. Your research and interviews will be limited to the schools you have proposed and approved by the Head of Department. Please note that Principals, Educators, Departmental Officials and Learners are under no obligation to participate or assist you in your investigation.
8. Should you wish to extend the period of your survey at the school(s), please contact Miss Phindile Duma at the contact numbers above.
9. Upon completion of the research, a brief summary of the findings, recommendations or a full report/dissertation/thesis must be submitted to the research office of the Department. Please address it to The Office of the HOD, Private Bag X9137, Pietermaritzburg, 3200.
10. Please note that your research and interviews will be limited to schools and institutions in KwaZulu-Natal Department of Education.

PINETOWN DISTRICT



Mr. C. N. Ngwenya
Head of Department: Education
Date: 28 June 2023

GROWING KWAZULU-NATAL TOGETHER

Annexure 12 (HSSREC Approval)



05 June 2024

Thembinkosi Victor Ndlovu (217079314)
School Of Education
Edgewood Campus

Dear TV Ndlovu,

Protocol reference number: HSSREC/00006116/2023

Project title: Psychosocial support for teachers in rural learning ecologies during the coronavirus pandemic: an Appreciative Inquiry

Amended title: Psychosocial support for teachers in rural learning ecologies during the coronavirus pandemic.

Degree: PhD

Approval Notification – Amendment Application

This letter serves to notify you that your application and request for an amendment received on 09 May 2024 has now been approved as follows:

- Change in title

Any alterations to the approved research protocol i.e. Questionnaire/Interview Schedule, Informed Consent Form; Title of the Project, Location of the Study must be reviewed and approved through an amendment /modification prior to its implementation. In case you have further queries, please quote the above reference number.

PLEASE NOTE: Research data should be securely stored in the discipline/department for a period of 5 years.

HSSREC is registered with the South African National Health Research Ethics Council (REC-040414-040).

Best wishes for the successful completion of your research protocol.

Yours faithfully



.....
Professor Dipane Hlalele (Chair)

/dd

Humanities & Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee
UKZN Research Ethics Office Westville Campus, Govan Mbeki Building
Postal Address: Private Bag X54001, Durban 4000
Tel: +27 31 260 8350 / 4557 / 3887
Website: <http://research.ukzn.ac.za/Research-Ethics/>

Founding Campuses: Edgewood Howard College Medical School Pietermaritzburg Westville

INSPIRING GREATNESS

Annexure 13 (Language editing certificate)



Dr Jabulani Sibanda
 Senior Lecturer: English Education
 School of Education
 Tel: (053) 491-0142
 Email: Jabulani.Sibanda@spu.ac.za
 Alternate e-mail: jabusbnd@gmail.com
 Website: www.spu.ac.za
 Cell: [REDACTED]

10 June 2024

LANGUAGE EDITING CERTIFICATE			
LANGUAGE EDITING DECLARATION	I confirm that I have proofread and edited the Thesis detailed below, using the Windows 'Tracking' System to reflect my comments and suggested corrections for the author(s) to action.		
DETAILS OF WORK COMPLETED	Language Editing		
	Document Type: PhD Thesis Title: 'Psychosocial support for teachers in rural learning ecologies during the coronavirus pandemic'		
CLIENT'S DETAILS	Author: Thembinkosi Victor Ndlovu Student No: 217079314 Affiliation: UKZN		
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