

Social Justice and Capabilities of School Management Teams Towards Achieving Sustainable Development Goal 4 in Rural Schools

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Abstract. Despite extensive research and policies advocating for quality education globally, rural schools in South Africa continue to grapple with substantial challenges in achieving Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4. The School Management Teams (SMTs) are identified among the stakeholders who play a crucial role in addressing these challenges. However, few studies employ the social justice and capabilities lenses to understand SMTs' perspectives on the functioning of such schools towards achieving SDG 4. Yet, the quality of teaching and learning in such contexts partly depends on these Teams. Thus, limited knowledge of their voice limits their possible contributions to policy and practice. Drawing from the findings of a qualitative study that was conducted in Limpopo on supporting the 'progressed learners' in rural high schools, this paper contributes knowledge towards reducing this gap. Seven schools were conveniently sampled based on accessibility. In each of the sampled schools, the members of the SMT (principal, deputy principal, and department heads) were interviewed individually after the semi-structured interviews, and the data were analyzed thematically. The findings indicate that social justice challenges hinder the attainment of SDG 4 in rural schools. These schools face inequalities reflected in staff shortages, limited funding, poor infrastructure, and social issues, compounded by weak community involvement and top-down policies. Although the SMTs show capacity through collaboration, learner support, and innovative fundraising, their impact is limited by insufficient expertise, authority, and resources. Achieving SDG 4, therefore, requires addressing systemic inequalities and strengthening SMT capacity for sustainable, context-based solutions.

Keywords: social justice theory, capabilities approach, education and rurality, sustainable development goals, school management teams

Introduction

This paper considers the United Nations' (UN) call for the assurance of quality, equitable, lifelong, and inclusive education for all, as outlined in Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4, as a call for social justice. As such, the paper conceptualises the call for quality education in light of the conditions experienced in selected rural schools in South Africa. It employs the frameworks of social justice and the capabilities approach (CA) to analyse perspectives on achieving SDG 4 in these schools. In the paper, we regard these two theoretical lenses as useful in trying to answer the following two research questions:

1. How does social justice relate to the challenges hindering the attainment of SDG 4 in the rural schools?
2. What capabilities do School Management Teams (SMTs) have to address these challenges and promote sustainable development in schools?

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For alignment purposes, we begin the paper by outlining the notions of social justice and the CA, identifying their key underpinnings in relation to the topic of this paper. Thereafter, we present the paper's contextual background, a review of the literature on rurality and education in rural South Africa, and related contexts. This section also identifies the conditions of rurality in the context where the research from which this paper draws was conducted. This is followed by the methodology section, which outlines how we generated the data for this research. The findings are then presented, followed by the discussion, implications of findings and the conclusion.

Social justice and the capabilities approach: the analytical lens

This study adopts two theoretical frameworks, namely, social justice theory and the CA. One of the key scholars on the theorization of social justice is Nancy Fraser (2008). She identified two stands on justice, namely redistribution and recognition. Redistributive claims call for the just distribution of resources and for the recognition of differences. Fraser (2008:1) argues, "...we are effectively presented with what is constructed as an either/or choice: redistribution or recognition? class politics or identity politics? multiculturalism or social democracy?" She regards these as "false antitheses" because "Justice today requires redistribution and recognition". In recognition of the need to reconcile the two claims of justice, the CA is the most suitable framework.

The CA, also known as the human development approach, was developed by Amartya Sen in the 1980s as a framework for analyzing economic welfare in relation to dominant notions of rationality, utility, and well-being (van Staveren, 2015). Van Staveren (2015: 165) argues that the CA was developed as an alternative to the analysis of poverty, focusing on "What people are able to be or do, rather than what they have in terms of income or commodities". The main concern of this approach is access to basic needs, including "healthcare, education, participating in economic life and the autonomy in decision making" (Zheng & Walsham 2008: 224). As such, Robeyns (2021: 72) identifies that it assists any enquiry related to people's lives to ask relevant questions of what it is that the people concerned "are able to do and what lives they are able to lead".

In line with SDG 4, using the CA as a social justice lens helped us determine whether rural schools have the capacity to provide quality education to their learners. Zheng and Walsham (2008: 224) and Wilson-Strydom (2011) note that the main concern of the CA is identifying opportunities for people to live lives they can value. In this case, to provide quality, inclusive education and lifelong learning for all citizens. Thus, the key concepts of the CA are opportunities, functionings, capabilities, choices, values, quality of life, alternatives, and freedom of individuals in understanding social justice (Madikizela-Madiya, 2021). Basu and López-Calva (2011: 154) clarify the concept of functionings by using an example of goods: "[...] functioning is what a person manages to do or to be. A good can enable a functioning, but is distinct from it. A bicycle is an item, whereas being able to transport oneself rapidly to work (or, more importantly, to most people, away from work) is a function". The analysis of the call by SDG 4 should go beyond the presence of schools and teachers in rural areas to the identification of the functionings, capabilities, freedoms, and alternatives within schools.

Literature review

In preparation for our analysis, we review the literature and provide background for the research reported in this paper.

Rural schools in South Africa

There is no doubt that the development of any nation is inextricably linked to the strength and integrity of its educational system, whether in rural or urban areas (Ayogu et al., 2025). The concern for Sumida and Kawata (2021) is the disparity in academic performance between students residing in rural areas and their urban counterparts. Rural regions in South Africa make up 31% of the nation's total land area. Access to education in these regions is hindered by inadequate road infrastructure and limited transportation options (Uleanya, 2024). The conditions of many rural schools are substandard, lacking essential facilities such as libraries, computer laboratories, and science labs. In South Africa, 72% of the rural student population is located in the Eastern Cape, KwaZulu-Natal, and Limpopo provinces (Uleanya, 2024). Despite improvements in matriculation (school-leaving) examination performance in recent years, these provinces ranked lowest among the nine provinces. In Sub-Saharan Africa, disparities in academic performance are likely due to students' families' socioeconomic status. For instance, rural areas have a poverty rate of 46%, compared to 18% in urban areas (Sumida & Kawata, 2021). Scholars such as Chinyoka and Naidu (2014) and Sumida (2017) have noted that students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds are more likely to encounter barriers to effective learning. In addition, families experiencing financial hardship often struggle to cover essential school-related expenses, such as meals, boarding, or uniforms.

Local and global policies advocating for quality education

The National Development Plan 2030 (NDP) of South Africa earmarked quality education for all as a crucial driver of socio-economic transformation and job creation (National Planning Commission, 2011). Furthermore, the African Union (2022) urged African nations to devote increased investment into quality education as it has the potential to foster human capital development (African Union, 2022). Scholarly literature (Masinire, 2020) supports the notion that sufficient resources are essential for achieving educational excellence. Nonetheless, rural schools across the country continue to grapple with challenges related to infrastructure and the essential educational resources needed to improve the quality of education (Ndofirepi & Masinire, 2021).

On the global stage, the UN has championed the notion of quality education as a fundamental human right (see United Nations, 2015). Local and global policies, such as the SDGs and the South African Schools Act, No. 84 of 1996, have advocated for improving access to and the quality of education systems (United Nations, 2015). Zooming in on the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, it seeks to ensure that no individual is left behind (United Nations, 2015) and outlines 17 interrelated SDGs. Among these, achieving quality education (SDG 4) remains an elusive target globally, especially in rural areas (Nhamo et al., 2024). SDG 4 comprises 10 specific targets and is evaluated through 11 indicators (Ayogu et al., 2025).

It is well-established that South Africa ranks among the most unequal countries globally. Even before the COVID-19 pandemic, the country had high unemployment and poverty rates (Maistry, 2022). The juxtaposition of wealth alongside chronic poverty is evident in the education sector (Maistry, 2022). Nakidien et al. (2021) go as far as to state that in South Africa, there are two distinct educational systems. One for the privileged and another for the marginalized. Ironically, the pandemic has drawn increased attention to the numerous schools that failed to meet essential sanitation and educational standards (Maistry, 2022). However, despite this unprecedented focus, the challenges and sustainability of schools in rural areas remain critical and unresolved. As a signatory to the UN SDGs, South Africa has pledged to work towards achieving these objectives. However, its actual capacity to meet these commitments, especially SDG 4 in rural areas, remains questionable (Maistry, 2022).

School management teams

An SMT is a collective of educators appointed by the School Governing Body in collaboration with the Department of Basic Education (DBE). They provide leadership and ensure the effective implementation of educational policies (Hlasa, 2022). Members of the SMT hold formal leadership roles, which include the principal, deputy principal, and heads of department. The DBE (2018) noted that effective leadership is a critical factor in the success of educational institutions. The leadership of the SMT plays a crucial role in improving school performance by effectively implementing policies (DBE, 2018).

According to Mphosi and Chauke (2025), one of the biggest challenges faced by the SMT in rural schools is limited resource availability. Regardless of the challenges, the leadership of SMTs is a crucial factor in improving learners' academic underperformance in rural schools and achieving SDG 4 (Sibuyi et al., 2024). However, Du Plessis (2020a) and Veit (2022) indicated that educational leaders in many South African rural schools often lack adequate preparation to respond effectively to the extreme challenges they face. Mphosi and Chauke (2025) noted a gap in the scholarly discourse regarding the specific challenges SMT face in navigating the terrain of rural schools and the strategies to overcome them. The aforementioned authors earmarked the rural context of the provinces of Limpopo and North West in South Africa as an ideal research setting. Against this backdrop, this paper aims to bring attention to the challenges rural schools face and report on the strategies the SMT members took towards improving the quality of education (SDG 4) in these areas.

Context of the research

This article is part of a larger study stemming from an engaged scholarship project entitled Supporting 'progressed' learners, 'at-risk' learners and teachers in schools in the Limpopo and Northwest provinces: A participatory action research project. The main aim of the engaged scholarship project was to provide support to progressing learners at seven rural schools in the Limpopo and Northwest provinces. The research team in this project adopted a whole-institution approach by conducting interviews with all stakeholders, such as progressed learners, their parents, their teachers, SMT members, curriculum advisors, and circuit managers. Despite the project's focus on progressed learners, the research team noted that quality education continues to elude all learners in the seven sampled schools. More specifically, even two and a half decades after the implementation of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and five years from the due date of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), rural areas in South Africa and countries globally still experience extreme inequality (SDG 10).

What prompted the researchers to undertake this study was a statement made by one school principal. He stated that "passing grade 12 in rural schools is like climbing Mount Everest without equipment". Challenges such as inadequate departmental support, insufficient community cohesion, insufficient resources, insufficient funding, and a shortage of staff (SDG 4, target 4.A) plague rural schools. The researchers question whether SDG 4 and its targets will ever be achieved in these marginalized communities. Some schools the researchers visited lacked flushable toilets and had damaged roofs (SDG 4, target 4.8). Learners must walk long distances to reach the school (SDG 4, target 4.1), and gender disparities (SDG 5 and SDG 4, target 4.5) are undoubtedly compounded in such environments.

Methodology

This paper is based on a larger Participatory Action Research project that explored support mechanisms for progressed learners and learners at risk of progression in seven rural

South African schools. The study was conducted in two provinces: North West (Maamusa circuit) and Limpopo (Bahananwa circuit).

Research Sites and Participants

The study was carried out in seven public schools: five located in the Bahananwa circuit and two in the Maamusa circuit. A total of 99 participants were involved in the broader project, including circuit advisors, SMTs, teachers, learners, and parents. For the purposes of this paper, only data generated from SMT members were used. SMT participants included school principals, deputy principals, teacher representatives, and parent representatives. These participants were purposively selected based on their leadership roles and direct involvement in decision-making processes affecting learner progression and support.

Data Collection Procedures

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with SMT members across the seven participating schools. An interview guide was developed to address the two research questions mentioned earlier. Each interview was conducted in a face-to-face setting at the respective schools, lasted approximately 45–60 minutes, and was audio-recorded with participant consent. Field notes were also taken to capture contextual details and non-verbal cues. Interviews were conducted in English and, where necessary, supplemented with local languages to ensure clarity and inclusivity. To enable replication, the interview protocol included pre-defined open-ended questions aligned with the study objectives, probing strategies to elicit detailed responses and procedures for recording and transcription. All interviews were transcribed verbatim prior to analysis.

Data Analysis

Guided by a systematic process, the collected data were analysed using thematic analysis. This involved familiarization with the data through repeated reading of the interview transcripts. Thereafter, meaningful segments of data were identified and assigned initial codes. These codes were then grouped into broader themes, which were subsequently reviewed and refined to ensure coherence and relevance. The final stage involved interpreting the themes in relation to the research questions guiding the study. Although the original project did not explicitly focus on sustainability, the analysis revealed recurring themes related to quality education. These themes informed the focus of this paper.

Data Availability

The dataset generated and analysed during this study is not currently available in a public repository due to ethical and confidentiality constraints such as the inclusion of identifiable school-level information and sensitive participant perspectives. However, anonymized excerpts of the data are included within the article to support transparency. Subject to institutional approval and data-sharing agreements, researchers interested in accessing limited anonymized data for academic purposes may contact the corresponding author.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical clearance for the study was obtained from the institution's Ethics Review Committee (ERC) prior to data collection. Permission to conduct the research was also secured from provincial education authorities and participating schools. All participants provided informed consent before participating in the study. They were assured of voluntary participation, the right to withdraw at any time, confidentiality, anonymity in reporting, and secure data storage. As per the ethical clearance requirements, the identities of participants and schools were

anonymized. Audio recordings and transcripts were stored on password-protected devices accessible only to the research team.

Results

The following section is divided into two main parts in order to answer the two research questions of this study. The first part elaborates on the challenges hindering the attainment of SDG 4 in rural areas. The second part explores the strategies the SMT employs to shift rural schools onto a sustainable path.

Challenges hindering the attainment of Sustainable Development Goal 4 in rural areas

The statement made by one of the participants, *“To pass in grade 12 for learners in these schools (rural schools). It’s like climbing Mount Everest with no equipment,”* depicts the magnitude of challenges faced by rural learners in completing secondary education successfully. The metaphor captures the steep difficulty of the task and the lack of adequate support structures and resources necessary for success. Beyond material deficits, the quote also reflects the psychological toll of educational exclusion. The SMT perceives achieving academic success as a journey that will require resilience and perseverance.

From a social justice perspective, the “lack of equipment” symbolizes the unequal distribution of educational resources and opportunities between rural and urban schools, which is an example of redistributive injustice. When viewed through the CA, the challenges rural learners face illustrate the deprivation of key capabilities, those that allow learners to “be and do” what they value. Although learners have access to education, their freedom to achieve educational success is questionable. In this case, the daily struggles of rural learners limit their substantive freedoms. Rural learners have limited opportunities to achieve valuable functionings, such as receiving a quality education, completing schooling, and pursuing further studies.

Table 1 below presents the key challenges hindering the attainment of SDG 4 in rural areas. The key findings, the social justice perspective, and the capability approach perspective are discussed.

Table 1 Summary of Challenges Affecting Rural Schools Through a Social Justice and Capability Approach Lens

Key Findings	Social Justice Perspective	Capability Approach Perspective
Rural learners face severe barriers to academic success due to inadequate support and limited resources.	Unequal distribution of educational opportunities reflects redistributive injustice.	Learners’ freedoms to achieve valued educational outcomes are constrained.
Poor infrastructure, overcrowding, and limited funding undermine quality education.	Schools with the greatest needs receive insufficient support.	Limited resources reduce schools’ ability to support learner achievement.
Teacher allocation based on enrolment disadvantages rural schools, resulting in multi-grade teaching and fewer subject specialists.	Policies reproduce structural inequalities and marginalize rural schools.	Learners have limited access to quality teaching and academic support.

Low enrolment reduces schools' fundraising capacity and ability to appoint extra educators.	Rural schools experience both resource deprivation and lack of policy recognition.	Schools struggle to convert limited resources into meaningful educational opportunities.
Teachers are often required to teach subjects outside their specialization, affecting instructional quality.	Reflects inequitable staffing and disregard for teachers' professional expertise.	Learners are deprived of consistent and high-quality learning opportunities.
Unreliable internet connectivity and unfulfilled departmental promises hinder digital learning.	Rural schools are excluded from equitable technological support.	Learners lack digital capabilities necessary for modern education.
Weak implementation of external support programmes leaves schools vulnerable to social problems.	Unequal access to support services reflects redistributive and recognition injustice.	Social problems undermine learners' ability to succeed academically.
Lack of scholar transport forces learners to travel long and unsafe distances to school.	Unequal transport provision disadvantages certain rural schools.	Learners' access to education is restricted, despite their efforts to attend school.
Government interventions are often impractical because they ignore local conditions and community voices.	Top-down policymaking reflects recognition of injustice.	Poorly designed interventions fail to enhance learners' educational freedoms.
Labour migration and socio-economic pressures weaken parental participation and community support.	Rural family realities are insufficiently recognized in educational policies.	Weak support systems limit learners' educational opportunities and choices.
Lack of supervision at home contributes to poor homework completion and learner misconduct.	Educational inequalities are linked to broader socio-economic conditions.	Limited home support constrains learners' educational capabilities and outcomes.

The sections below provide a detailed discussion of the key findings depicted in Table 1.

Infrastructure and finances

The issues of funding and infrastructure emerged as challenges in the SMTs' narratives. One respondent observed, *"If only the government would assist us in terms of infrastructure and finances. I think it would solve some, maybe all, of the challenges that we are experiencing."* His quote pointed out how inadequate infrastructure such as dilapidated buildings, overcrowded classrooms, and the absence of basic facilities such as libraries or laboratories, restricts quality education for all.

Financial inequities further exacerbate these difficulties. As one participant noted, *"In terms of the money, it is like there are schools that they (the DBE) support, but some schools have lost funding."* Another SMT member added, *"We are receiving a small amount of money from the department."* The quotes reflect the reality that SMT members in rural schools often operate with minimal budgets, making it unlikely they can sustain a meaningful quality education for all. SMTs recognize that without urgent interventions to address financial constraints, many of the challenges they face will persist, perpetuating cycles of educational disadvantage.

The SMTs' testimonies reveal that resource allocation within the education system fails to meet the redistributive principle of justice, which holds that those most in need should receive proportionally greater support.

Learner and staff shortages

Another critical challenge highlighted by SMT members is the staffing shortage in rural schools. One participant explained, *“The challenge is that since we are a small number of learners, it leads to a smaller number of educators. I think if we can have enough educators who can take care of all the grades, we can solve some of the issues.”* There is a link between school enrolment figures and teacher allocation, which tends to disadvantage rural schools with smaller learner populations. The practice of allocating educators based on learner numbers results in multi-grade teaching and the absence of specialist subject teachers.

Another respondent reflected this reality by noting, *“The only solution that we have at the institution is to raise the number of learners, and then we will have more educators.”* For SMTs in rural schools, the challenge is two-fold. On the one hand, they need to manage the available staff optimally. On the other hand, SMTs must work within a system that structurally disadvantages them. Their suggested solution, raising learner numbers, acknowledges that their only leverage lies in adapting to state policy rather than reshaping it.

The teacher allocation policy, which ties staffing levels to learner enrolment rather than educational need, reproduces a structural injustice that denies rural learners equal access to quality teaching. For learners, limited teacher availability results in fewer opportunities for quality learning and insufficient academic support.

Staffing and low learner enrolments are challenges closely linked with financial constraints in rural contexts. As one SMT member explained, *“Appointing an additional educator will need to be funded by the School Governing Body (SBG). We do not have fundraising projects. Unfortunately, the challenge that we have is the number of learners that we have. This leads to a smaller amount (of money) that will be raised.”* Rural schools are allocated fewer teachers due to low enrolment, and they lack the financial capacity to independently appoint additional staff. The small learner population limits the revenue that can be generated through fees or community-driven initiatives, which ties schools into a cycle of resource scarcity.

Rural SMTs are operating within a system that limits their ability to convert available resources into quality education. Their predicament highlights the intersection of *redistribution* and *recognition*. While they lack adequate resources, they are also denied visibility and voice in shaping the policies that govern resource allocation.

Curriculum delivery challenges

In alignment with staff shortages, SMT members were concerned about a mismatch between teacher specialization and subject allocation. One participant shared, *“I am teaching Maths Literacy and Life Orientation and FET, but there are those who are teaching more than two subjects that they are not specialists in.”* Staffing shortages limit the number of teachers and compromise the quality of instruction, forcing educators to teach outside their areas of expertise. While teachers may be dedicated and adaptable, the lack of subject specialists reduces the depth of learning. For learners, this translates into inconsistent teaching quality, which is likely to contribute to inadequate academic performance.

From a social justice perspective, this situation exemplifies a combination of *redistributive* and *recognition* injustices. Redistributive injustice is evident in the inequitable allocation of teaching staff. Rural schools, despite experiencing greater challenges, receive fewer teachers and specialists than urban schools. Recognition injustices arise when the professional expertise of teachers is undervalued, forcing them into roles for which they are inadequately trained and disregarding their professional well-being.

Digital divide and broken promises of support

Technology and connectivity also emerged as pressing concerns for SMT members. One participant stated, *“The school has Wi-Fi, but it is not functioning well. When they (the Department of Education) say they are going to fix it, they never come.”* The fragility of digital infrastructure in rural schools is a concern because even when connectivity is technically available, it is often unreliable and unusable. Inconsistent Wi-Fi access limits learners' opportunities to engage with digital learning platforms, online resources, and assessment tools. The frustration expressed by SMTs also reflects broader accountability issues, as departmental commitments to fix or support schools are often not fulfilled. In practice, SMTs are caught in a double bind as they are expected to implement modern, technology-supported teaching, yet they lack the infrastructure and support to do so effectively.

From a redistributive justice perspective, the inadequate digital infrastructure reflects systemic inequities in resource allocation. Rural schools are deprived of technological tools. The lack of reliable technology constitutes a form of capability deprivation, as it prevents learners from achieving educational *functionings* that depend on digital access, such as researching information. SMTs experience marginalization when departmental commitments to fixing infrastructure are not fulfilled, which points to recognition injustice. It is important to note that the SMTs do have the capability to seek alternative solutions, such as using offline resources or community support. Their agency is constrained by an over-reliance on the Department of Education for infrastructure support and funding.

Social challenges

SMT members were concerned that social issues such as substance abuse disrupt learning. One participant reflected, *“Even though the problem of the use of drugs in schools is a common problem, they (some schools in the area) have partnered with the South African Police Services, and they have adopted the schools. Some of those partnerships are functional, but the police did not come and support our school.”* While initiatives exist on paper to address social challenges, the actual implementation is questionable. Partnerships with the South African Police Services are welcomed and have the potential to provide schools with external support in addressing substance abuse amongst learners. However, the lack of implementation undermines the practice's effectiveness (redistributive injustice). For some schools, SAPS adoption is functional and beneficial, but for others, it remains symbolic, leaving SMTs without real support to tackle pervasive social challenges (recognition injustice). When learners are exposed to drugs within or around school environments, their ability to concentrate, achieve academically, and remain in school (*functionings*) is compromised.

Mobility and access

Access to schooling is further constrained by inequities in learner transport provision. As one SMT member explained, *“They made sure that there is scholar transport that comes and fetches learners from the area. Our learners do not have scholar transport. Instead, there is a bus that comes and picks up learners from these regions to boost schools on the other side.”* While the Department of Education provides scholar transport for certain schools, other institutions are bypassed. As a result, learners are left without safe or reliable means of travel (redistribution injustice). Recognition injustice is evident in the fact that buses are allocated to support neighboring schools and not others, creating a sense of neglect and perpetuating uneven development among rural schools within the same region. For many rural learners, long walking distances and unsafe travel routes are major deterrents to attendance and academic performance. Learner enrolments may decline as families opt for schools that provide transport, further compounding the staffing and funding challenges already identified by SMT members. It is

important to note that learners who do not have transport to school still choose (capabilities) to walk to school to access education (functionings).

Misalignment between government interventions and local realities

The issue of learner transport also reveals how policy solutions can be poorly aligned with the lived realities of rural communities. One participant recalled, *“Some years back, I think it was 2019 or 2020, when we were making that application for scholar transport. They provided us with bicycles. So, these learners must ride bikes to come to school. This is the unfortunate part. On these thick sandy roads, you cannot ride bicycles, because they are broken. They said they don’t have the budget to do that, things like that (provide scholar transport). It didn’t work. Sometimes, the government people will sit there in their big chairs and think they (rural communities) need this. They don’t come to people to ask what they need, and that is why it did not work.”*

Although the government acknowledges transport challenges, the interventions it provides do not always reflect this recognition, as they are impractical and fail to account for local realities. Social justice requires acknowledging and valuing the voices and experiences of marginalized groups. The provision of bicycles instead of buses reveals a top-down approach to policymaking. Solutions are designed without meaningful consultation with school communities, resulting in wasted resources and unmet needs. Transport solutions that are not context-sensitive leave rural learners still struggling with unsafe or impractical school journeys.

Role of families, community involvement, and learner support

A further challenge identified by SMTs concerns limited parental involvement and weak community participation in the schooling process. As one participant explained, *“It is one of the greatest problems around here when we do find that parents are not concerned about the education criteria. You see, when we call parents’ meetings, very few come to the parents’ meeting. And most parents are working very hard. Some of these learners are staying alone, with their siblings, or with their grandparents. Their real parents are not around; they are working on farms.”*

Parental absence, often due to socio-economic necessity such as farm labor or migration for work, leaves learners under the care of grandparents, extended family, or, in some cases, without adult supervision. This weakens the home–school partnership that is essential for reinforcing learning and discipline. The lived realities of families are overlooked by policymakers and school authorities, which constitutes a form of recognition injustice. SMTs are left to mediate (capabilities) the gap between policy expectations and learners’ home circumstances. This is a responsibility for which they are neither fully resourced nor empowered.

One respondent also reflected on community disengagement in developmental initiatives, noting, *“But like in 2022 and 2023, we introduced the garden there, and the people who participated were only teachers and learners; the SGB didn’t come.”* This illustrates the difficulty of mobilizing the SGB and broader community stakeholders in school projects. The lack of active participation compounds the strain on teachers and SMTs, who must carry the full weight of instructional and developmental responsibilities. The consequence is a fragile support system in which schools operate in relative isolation from the community structures meant to sustain them.

These dynamics also manifest in learners’ behavior and performance. As the SMT highlighted, *“These learners are staying with aunts, they are staying with their grandmothers, who, on a daily basis, for the ten weeks, we are dealing with the misconduct of not completing school homework and assignments.”* Without consistent parental oversight, learners often struggle to complete homework and take ownership of their studies. This limits their

capabilities, opportunities, and choices. Achieving inclusive and quality education is not limited to resources. A strong social and familial support system is also essential. The SMT narratives show that education in rural contexts cannot be separated from the socio-economic realities of families.

Strategies to shift rural schools on a sustainable path

In addition to identifying challenges threatening SDG 4 in rural schools, SMT members also articulated strategies (capabilities) they believe could strengthen school performance and empower their institutions.

Table 2 below depicts the key strategies SMTs employ to shift rural schools onto a more sustainable path. The key findings, the social justice perspective, and the capability approach perspective are explained.

Table 2 Strategies Employed to Shift Rural Schools on a More Sustainable Path

Key Findings	Social Justice Perspective	Capability Approach Perspective
SMTs promote regular communication and collective problem-solving among teachers to strengthen support systems and address challenges collaboratively.	Teachers' experiences and expertise are acknowledged through inclusive dialogue and shared decision-making (recognition justice).	Collaboration strengthens educators' capabilities to manage challenges and improve school performance.
Schools use awards and recognition systems to encourage learner participation and academic achievement.	Recognition of learner achievement promotes dignity, inclusion, and motivation.	Positive reinforcement enhances learners' confidence, aspirations, and educational freedoms.
SMTs seek stronger partnerships with local businesses and communities to supplement school resources and support.	Shared responsibility between schools, communities, and stakeholders promotes greater inclusion and participation.	Partnerships expand opportunities and resources that support meaningful educational outcomes.
Schools explore alternative income-generating activities, such as establishing school-based businesses, to address financial shortages.	Local economic participation contributes to recognition justice and community involvement.	SMTs demonstrate agency and resourcefulness in creating sustainable funding opportunities.
SMTs express confidence in their schools' ability to improve despite resource limitations, citing improved learner performance as evidence.	Emphasizes resilience and challenges deficit perceptions of rural schools.	Demonstrates how determination and agency can support improved educational functionings.
SMTs acknowledge the need for assistance from government, NGOs, and researchers to address systemic challenges effectively.	Highlights the need for greater institutional support and inclusion of rural schools in development initiatives.	Capacity-building can strengthen SMTs' abilities to implement sustainable solutions and expand institutional capabilities.

The sections below provide a detailed discussion of the key findings depicted in Table 2.

Collaboration

One SMT member emphasized the importance of strengthening collegial communication and collaboration among educators, stating: *"I would make sure I establish a constant contact with all educators (also on a one-on-one basis), so we can meet at certain*

intervals to discuss the challenging aspects and effect solutions.” By promoting ongoing dialogue, SMT members aim to create platforms for support and collective problem-solving. These efforts aim to expand educators' capabilities to perform effectively and navigate systemic challenges (functionings). In terms of recognition justice, regular dialogue and problem-solving initiatives signal that teachers' perspectives, expertise, and challenges are acknowledged.

Motivation

Another SMT strategy involves recognizing and motivating learners through awards: *“We award the best learners.”* Positive reinforcement can cultivate a culture of achievement and encourage learners to remain engaged in their studies. In contexts where learners are demotivated by poverty, limited resources, and a lack of parental involvement, recognition serves as an important psychological tool. By celebrating academic excellence, schools aim to foster healthy competition and signal that success is valued and attainable. Such recognition justice has the potential to enhance learners' substantive freedoms.

SMT members do not merely view themselves as passive victims of systemic inequities, but as active agents who employ their capabilities to seek context-sensitive interventions. Strengthening communication among educators and motivating learners through recognition are low-cost, high-impact strategies that reflect SMTs' resourcefulness in rural contexts.

Strengthening Community and Business Partnerships

Another strategy proposed by SMT members is the need for stronger community and business partnerships to support schools. One participant explained, *“We need to think about how we can partner with the community. We need to bring in the business people around the school to see how those people can support the school. We need to think about what they have, and what they don't have, because the school is not the department's responsibility alone; it is the community that can support the schools, and if that comes from the principal, they will say that the principal wants. The department must come and talk to people around about what they can do to assist, and then it becomes a stronger partnership.”*

From a CA perspective, sustainable school improvement cannot rely solely on government resources. Instead, SMTs see potential in leveraging local networks of business owners, community leaders, and households to supplement funding. In turn, this has the potential to enhance learners' opportunities to engage fully in education, pursue meaningful functionings, and overcome barriers created by insufficient government provision.

Innovative fundraising

A further solution raised by SMTs involves creative approaches to fundraising and income generation within the school setting. As one member suggested: *“We have thought of maybe inviting someone who is business-minded in the village to open a spaza shop inside the school, so that can be a way of fundraising.”* This strategy reflects the implementation of capabilities and functionings through the resourcefulness and adaptive thinking of SMTs operating under severe financial constraints. With limited departmental funding due to the small learner population, SMTs recognize the need to generate alternative revenue streams. The school is contributing to recognition justice, and this could create a sustainable fundraising mechanism that benefits the school and the local economy. Such a strategy would enable the school to receive a small but regular income that could be reinvested into educational needs.

Harnessing potential

Amid funding shortages, inadequate staffing, and poor infrastructure, SMT members expressed strong belief in their schools. One participant reflected: *“We have 170 learners; it is a small school in a deep rural area, but we have the potential to become what we want to*

become. There is nothing as powerful as an idea, so yes, we do have limited resources, but we have the potential to become. The fact that we have moved from 60% per cent of to 92% (pass rate in matric) means we have the potential."

The speaker draws attention to the measurable academic improvement (from 60% to 92%), which serves as evidence that progress is possible through determination (capabilities and functionings). The invocation of the phrase *"there is nothing as powerful as an idea"* emphasizes that willpower can, in part, compensate for systemic limitations.

External expertise

An important theme emerging from the interviews is the SMTs' recognition of their limited agency in addressing deep-rooted challenges and their willingness to seek support from external actors. One participant reflected: *"I was thinking, because we have identified the problem and then we gave you the problem, maybe you were here to give us the solution."*

Although SMT members are skilled at identifying and articulating their schools' challenges, they often lack the resources, technical expertise, or authority to implement large-scale solutions. In some cases, SMT members are problem identifiers rather than empowered problem-solvers. They are dependent on external intervention from the government, NGOs, or researchers. In other words, they are not making use of their full capabilities and functionings. There is a need for capacity-building initiatives that equip SMTs to diagnose challenges and implement sustainable strategies.

Discussion

In response to the first research question, the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa (see Republic of South Africa, 1996a) and the South African Schools Act (see Republic of South Africa, 1996b) state that all learners in South Africa are entitled to access quality education. However, redistributive and recognition injustices persist, as this principle remains unfulfilled in rural educational settings, where schools are plagued by challenges (Du Plessis & Mestry, 2019) that limit learners' opportunities and functionings.

In this study, the first challenge was the staff shortages in schools. The challenge is closely linked to low student enrolment numbers and inadequate allocation of educational resources (redistribution injustice). In this regard, a recent study by Siwali (2025) found that budget cuts have led to staff shortages and currently affect 70% of schools in South Africa. Similarly, Du Plessis and Mestry (2019) revealed that provincial governments face financial limitations that hinder their ability to allocate sufficient financial and human resources to rural schools. Limited financial resources negatively influence the opportunities and functionings of learners as the quality and availability of educational resources that schools can obtain is hindered (Gaddah, Munro & Quartey, 2016). The second challenge facing rural schools is financial constraints, as they lack the capacity to secure the funding needed to hire additional staff. According to Sebidi (2025), SGB members in rural schools are expected to lead fundraising projects. However, in many cases, they lack the expertise to effectively manage school resources or pursue alternative funding sources. According to Shikalepo (2020), the initiatives undertaken by SMTs and SGBs to raise funds in rural schools fell short of their objectives.

The SMTs indicated that there is a mismatch between teacher qualifications and the subjects they are assigned to teach (redistributive injustice), which accounts for the third challenge. Teachers are required to teach multiple subjects without sufficient training (recognition injustice), leading to overburdened educators and inconsistent teaching quality. According to Lombo and Subban (2024), these factors lead to diminished learner underachievement and discipline issues.

The fourth challenge is dissatisfaction with unreliable Wi-Fi infrastructure (redistributive injustice), which hinders students' opportunities and functionings. The challenge negatively impacts their engagement with digital learning platforms and teachers' access to professional development resources. This challenge was a concern for Ajani and Dlomo (2025) because the integration of ICT in rural educational institutions has the potential to improve the effectiveness of school management and promote quality education (redistribution justice).

The fifth challenge is grounded in social issues, such as substance abuse (recognition justice) and inadequate learner transport (redistribution injustice). Mokwena and Setshego (2021) warned that substance abuse amongst rural learners is on the rise and is likely to lead to discipline issues. As per transport services, access for disadvantaged students residing more than 5 kilometers from their schools, particularly in remote or rural areas, is available in certain educational institutions (Department of Transport, 2015). Nevertheless, interview participants indicated that many students attending their schools are often required to walk distances exceeding 10 kilometers. South Africa's rural areas are marked by insufficient transportation infrastructure and lengthy travel routes that traverse poorly maintained roads (Duri, McKay & Gunter, 2025).

The sixth challenge is the government's top-down approach (recognition injustice) to policymaking. As a result, impractical solutions, such as providing learners with bicycles instead of adequate transport (redistribution injustice), failed to address the realities of rural communities. The last challenge is rooted in limited parental involvement and weak community engagement, further hindering educational outcomes. Similarly, Shikalepo (2020) reported that many parents in rural areas face challenges that hinder their ability or willingness to invest in their children's education.

As per research question 2, the findings revealed that effective collaboration and communication among educators are critical for addressing challenges and facilitating professional development within schools. The National Education Evaluation & Development Unit (2017), in partnership with the DBE, observed that high-achieving educational institutions recognize that teacher collaboration (recognition justice) is crucial for facilitating change that extends beyond individual classrooms. In turn, this has the potential to positively contribute to the capabilities and functionings of learners. They recommended that teachers engage in joint planning, peer observation, team teaching, interdisciplinary collaboration, and the sharing of ideas and best practices. The SMT employs recognition and motivation strategies to cultivate a culture of achievement among learners. For Jin, Auyeung, and Chevalier (2020), external rewards and recognition have the potential to reinforce positive behaviors among students.

According to Buys, Du Plessis, and Mestry (2020), public schools are compelled (opportunities, functionings, and capabilities) to adopt an entrepreneurial position in supplementing insufficient funding from the state. Principals and SGBs should adopt an entrepreneurial position in managing schools' finances. As a result, the SMT identified establishing community and business partnerships (recognition justice) as an essential strategy to supplement governmental resources and support. Innovative fundraising strategies, such as the creation of a spaza shop, pointed out that the SMT is resourceful in generating alternative revenue streams despite financial constraints. However, Buys, Du Plessis, and Mestry (2020) warned that not all schools have facilities available for rent. A strategy not pointed out by the SMT was to request donations from individuals and companies (Du Plessis, 2020b). Despite their innovative strategies, there is limited capacity to implement them independently and effectively. Therefore, one participant was willing to seek assistance from external entities. Although SMT members can identify and articulate the challenges confronting their schools, they sometimes lack the technical knowledge and authority to implement sustainable solutions. As a result, SMT members were deemed not to be employing their full capabilities and functions in taking action. Instead, they were identified as problem identifiers instead of

empowered problem-solvers. Donaldson and Weiner (2017) noted that educational improvement is complex, context-dependent, and continuous. In fact, SMTs should not expect rapid changes, as they may yield negative consequences, often leading to unsustainable, short-term solutions.

The discussion acknowledges potential shortcomings and limitations of the study, such as its contextual focus on selected rural schools and reliance on SMT perspectives. Although the findings are useful in many contexts, the findings cannot be generalized into other contexts. The study recommends further research on contextually responsive interventions and sustainable capacity building of SMTs.

Conclusions

Social justice is closely tied to the challenges hindering the attainment of SDG 4 in rural schools. Redistributive and recognition injustices persist despite policy commitments to equitable education. These injustices are evident in staff shortages, inadequate funding, mismatches between teacher qualifications and subjects taught, poor ICT infrastructure, and social issues such as substance abuse and lack of learner transport. Furthermore, top-down policymaking and limited parental involvement further marginalize rural communities.

Regardless of the challenges, SMTs demonstrate capabilities such as fostering teacher collaboration, promoting professional development, motivating learners, and pursuing innovative fundraising initiatives. However, their impact is constrained by limited technical expertise, insufficient authority, and resource shortages, which often position them as problem identifiers rather than fully empowered agents of sustainable change. Achieving SDG 4 in rural contexts is two-fold. On the one hand, it requires addressing systemic injustices in rural communities. On the other hand, there is a need to strengthen the SMTs' capacity to implement contextually relevant and sustainable solutions.

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