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RURAL SOUTH AFRICA: A THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVE**

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**ENHANCING SOCIAL SUPPORT NETWORKS ON TEACHER WELL-BEING IN  
RURAL SOUTH AFRICA: A THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVE**

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**Abstract**

*The South African rural teacher has to work under very harsh conditions, with a high level of stress, professional isolation, resource deficiencies, and institutional support, which adversely affect well-being and effectiveness. This paper attempts to understand how social support networks may promote teacher well-being in rural South Africa by drawing on an integration of Social Support Theory and Social Capital Theory. It studied bonding, bridging, and linking capital in terms of the provision of emotional, informational, instrumental, and appraisal support. Through this study, using a systematic analysis of the mechanism of social support, it was noted that the bonding capital facilitated through peer relationships and school-based support groups reduces stress and improves emotional resilience. Bridging capital, enabled through regional and national educational networks, widens access to resources and knowledge, while linking capital, established through partnerships with governmental and non-governmental organisations, addresses the critical resource constraints. The study concluded that such strengthening of these forms of social capital alleviates stress much more, enhances job satisfaction, and promotes professional growth, which in turn brings about improved teacher retention and educational outcomes. The recommendations include nurturing peer support groups, utilizing technology to connect rural teachers to larger networks, and also include*

*advocating for increased funding, besides forming strategic partnerships to ensure its sustainability.*

**Keywords:** Social Support, Network, Social Support, Social Capital, Teacher well-being

## **Introduction**

Teacher well-being is thought to be at the heart of quality education, job satisfaction, and teacher retention. However, it remains an issue of concern in South Africa, particularly in rural areas. Rural teachers face a plethora of challenges that put their well-being into question, including geographic isolation, inadequate access to professional development, and resource scarcity (Du Plessis, & Mestry, 2020). These are exacerbated by an underdeveloped infrastructure, chronic poverty, and weak institutional supporting systems that commonly undermine teacher morale, effectiveness, and long-term professional commitment. (Collie, et al., 2015).

Against this background, social support is increasingly considered to play an important role in promoting teacher well-being. Social Support Theory points out the buffering impact of emotional, informational, and practical assistance from social networks on the adverse outcomes of workplace stress and increases resilience to those negative effects (House, 1981). In the case of rural teachers, these networks maintained through family, colleagues, community members, and professional organizations provide much-needed support, decreasing the likelihood of burnout while improving job satisfaction (Kyriacou, 2001; Ackah-Jnr. Et al., 2022). On the other hand, Social Capital Theory emphasizes that trust, shared norms, and reciprocity form a firm basis for a community (Putnam, 2000). In the rural parts of South Africa, social capital may be one sustaining influence, given the closeness of most communal bonds. Being embedded in supportive networks, these teachers will thus develop an increased sense of belonging, professional satisfaction, and psychological well-being (Woolcock, 2001). These networks are crucial in overcoming resource constraints and reducing the isolation that often characterizes rural settings (Hlalele, 2014).

Despite these gains, South African rural teachers have some major obstacles in terms of being able to obtain social support. Geographic isolation and poor infrastructure restrict their access to peers and professional bodies, and community support systems are stretched by high levels of poverty (Spaull & Jansen, 2019). A general lack of mental health services adds to this issue, furthering the fact that most of these teachers have no vital resources to be able to deal with the psychological effects of stress and burnout (Ebersöhn & Ferreira, 2012).

These challenges make the strengthening of formal and informal social support networks urgent. The improvement of teacher working conditions, community engagement, and access to peer and professional support networks have been highlighted in the literature as key factors that have the potential to transform teacher well-being and improve educational outcomes (Wu, et al., 2025; Kimathi, & Bertram, 2019). This study has explored issues of social support networks for enhancing the well-being of rural teachers in South Africa and has sought to highlight ways a

social support network can be used in an attempt to enhance resilience, satisfaction, and retention in the teaching profession.

## **Research Objectives**

The objectives of this study are to:

1. To identify the challenges affecting teacher well-being in rural South Africa.
2. To examine the role of social support networks in enhancing teacher well-being.
3. To explore how community ties and social capital contribute to teacher resilience, job satisfaction, and professional fulfillment.
4. To assess the barriers to accessing social support networks among rural teachers.

## **Empirical Evidence**

Omodan (2022) investigated the challenges faced by South African pre-service teachers during teaching practice in rural communities, using a qualitative approach with a decolonial perspective and transformative paradigm. Ten pre-service teachers were selected via the snowballing method and reflected on their experiences. Thematic analysis revealed that rural schools face significant challenges, including a lack of basic amenities, teaching aids, and physical resources. Additionally, language of instruction posed difficulties for rural students, and absenteeism and truancy were prevalent. The study concluded that addressing these challenges requires a decolonial and transformative effort to improve rural schools and communities.

Asoba (2020) investigated the challenges contributing to stress among primary school teachers in a rural municipality in Eastern Cape. Using a quantitative approach with a survey design, data were collected via questionnaires from 48 teachers across ten primary schools and analyzed with SPSS. The findings identified ill-disciplined learners as a primary stressor for teachers. The study recommended training school disciplinary committees in effective disciplinary measures to address learner indiscipline and promote commitment.

Mohan and Sharma (2024) explored the relationship between social support and the psychological well-being of secondary school teachers. The study involved 100 teachers from various schools in Noida, Uttar Pradesh. Two standardized tools were used: the Social Support Scale by Adul Raffie Naik and S.M. Khan to assess social support, and the Psychological Well-being Scale by Sisodia and Pooja Chaudhary to measure psychological well-being. The findings revealed a positive correlation between social support and teachers' psychological well-being, emphasizing the importance of social support in enhancing the mental health of secondary school educators.

Li et al. (2022) investigated the mechanisms through which social support influences teachers' mental health literacy, using a survey of 573 teachers. The results indicated that social support

impacts teachers' mental health literacy through two separate effects: life satisfaction and coping tendency. Additionally, a chain mediation effect was observed, where both life satisfaction and coping tendency mediated the relationship between social support and mental health literacy. However, the direct effect of social support on mental health literacy was not significant. The study suggests that mental health literacy programs for teachers should not only provide social support but also focus on improving coping tendencies and life satisfaction.

In their 2018 study, Edinger and Edinger explore how social capital, teacher efficacy, and organizational support contribute to teacher job satisfaction. They highlight that teachers worldwide experience significant dissatisfaction with their jobs and have higher turnover rates compared to other professions. Using a sample of 122 elementary school teachers, the study found that teachers' positions within their school's trust network and the density of their academic advice network were predictive of job satisfaction. Furthermore, teacher efficacy was found to mediate the relationship between trust and academic advice relationships and job satisfaction, while perceived organizational support strengthened the link between teacher efficacy and job satisfaction. The study's findings offer valuable insights into the relationships between social capital, teacher efficacy, and job satisfaction.

In their 2022 study, Gearhart et al. investigated the barriers and facilitators that affect teachers' engagement in both formal and informal stress management interventions. They also explored the desired resources across various socioecological levels. Thirty-two teachers participated in four focus groups, and the data were analyzed using inductive thematic analysis. The study identified several key themes, including personal barriers (e.g., guilt over prioritizing self-care), environmental barriers (e.g., mixed messages about self-care), and the need for improved campus resources (e.g., scheduled opportunities to destress). The researchers recommended promoting self-care messages from peers and administrators, making campus- and district-level changes to eliminate logistical barriers to stress management, and fostering increased connectedness within the campus community to support teachers' well-being.

Diba et al. (2023) investigate the support system provided by the Department of Education in South Africa's Free State Province, focusing on rural schools. The study involved a purposive sample of eight teachers (80% female, aged 26 to 55 years) in rural settings. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and thematically analyzed using open coding. Findings reveal that improving teacher performance requires enhanced teacher development programs, particularly in areas such as instructional leadership, curriculum delivery, and resource provision. Teachers emphasized the need for materials that would help them fulfill their duties effectively. The study also highlights the importance of a collaborative approach between the District Support Team and teachers, where planning is informed by teachers' specific needs and contextual concerns.

Kwatubana (2024) examines factors that teachers and school management team members perceive as key to enhancing teacher well-being in rural schools, with a particular focus on the

principal's role in promoting well-being. The study involved a stratified sample of school managers and teachers from a rural high school in the Mopani district of Limpopo Province, conducting fourteen semi-structured interviews with seven teachers. The study identified four key enablers of teacher well-being: strong principal-teacher relationships, disengagement from work through socializing, adaptability, and a green school physical environment. The findings also emphasized the principal's multi-faceted role in fostering teacher well-being by cultivating a positive school culture, maintaining a green school environment, and promoting teacher adaptability.

Maseko and Chigeza (2024) investigate the relational experiences that contribute to teacher well-being in rural primary schools. The study employed purposive sampling to select 10 male and female teachers with over five years of teaching experience from quintile 1–3 rural schools in South Africa. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and analysed thematically. The findings revealed that schools provide spaces for teachers to build positive relationships with learners, peers, and the community, which are crucial for their well-being. Teachers thrive through meaningful relationships that promote interpersonal collaboration, purpose, and fulfillment. These relationships not only enhance teachers' well-being but also contribute to the overall success of education.

Wessels and Wood (2019) aimed to collaborate with teachers to identify strategies for improving their well-being experiences. Using a participatory action learning and action research (PALAR) approach, six teachers from a rural primary school engaged in a six-week action learning set to reflect on ways to enhance their well-being. The findings revealed that frequent, informal social interactions with colleagues, combined with deliberate actions to focus on positive emotions, could significantly improve teachers' well-being. The PALAR approach provided a structured framework for this process, offering valuable insights into how collaborative learning can help sustain and enhance teachers' well-being.

Wu, S., Xu, et al. (2025) explore the relationship between social support and rural teachers' work engagement, focusing on the mediating role of mindfulness in teaching and the moderating role of psychological safety. The study, which involved 866 rural teachers, found that social support positively affects work engagement, with mindfulness in teaching partially mediating this relationship. Furthermore, psychological safety was found to moderate the connection between mindfulness and work engagement, with stronger positive correlations observed among teachers with high psychological safety. These findings underscore the importance of improving social support systems, promoting mindfulness in teaching, and fostering a psychologically safe environment to enhance rural teachers' work engagement.

## **Theoretical Perspective**

### **Social Support Theory**



Social Support Theory emphasizes the vital role of social relationships and networks in promoting well-being and alleviating the negative effects of stress. Developed by scholars like Cobb (1976), House (1981), and Cohen and Haslam, & Reicher, (2012), the theory highlights how various forms of social support emotional, informational, instrumental, and appraisal—help individuals cope with challenges and build resilience. This framework is widely applied in fields such as health psychology, education, and community studies, offering valuable insights into how social interactions contribute to mental, emotional, and physical well-being.

The theory was proposed in response to the growing recognition of the importance of social relationships in managing stress and promoting health. Early psychological research had focused primarily on individual coping mechanisms, overlooking the influence of interpersonal relationships. Social Support Theory emerged to address key questions: How do social relationships buffer individuals from stress? What types of support are most effective in different situations? How do social networks contribute to overall health and well-being? Cobb's foundational work (1976) established that feeling cared for and valued by others significantly reduces stress and its physiological effects. Later, Cohen and Wills (1985) refined this by introducing the buffering and main effect hypotheses to explain how social support affects health outcomes.

Social Support Theory identifies four primary types of support: emotional support, which provides empathy and care to reduce feelings of isolation and promote emotional resilience (Thoits, 2011); informational support, which offers guidance and advice to help individuals navigate challenges (Cutrona & Russell, 1990); instrumental support, which provides tangible assistance such as financial aid or physical help (House, 1981); and appraisal support, which involves feedback that boosts self-esteem and helps individuals assess their circumstances (Wills, 1991). The theory is grounded in two key hypotheses: the buffering hypothesis, which suggests that social support protects individuals from the harmful effects of stress, and the main effect hypothesis, which posits that social support has direct benefits for well-being by fostering a sense of belonging and security (Cohen, 2004).

The theory also distinguishes between perceived support, or the belief that help is available, and received support, or the actual support provided. Research indicates that perceived support is a stronger predictor of well-being than received support, as it enhances confidence and reduces anxiety (Lakey & Orehek, 2011). High-quality social support networks are linked to better health outcomes, including lower rates of depression, improved immune function, and faster recovery from illness (Kawachi & Berkman, 2001).

Social support networks are crucial for teachers, especially in rural areas, as they help maintain mental health and professional motivation. Emotional support from peers, guidance from mentors, and practical assistance from the community contribute to job satisfaction and resilience. In healthcare, social support is essential for managing stress and improving outcomes, with patients benefiting from both instrumental and emotional support. In the workplace,

employees with strong social support networks tend to have better job performance, lower stress levels, and higher job satisfaction, particularly when managers provide appraisal support by acknowledging employees' efforts.

## **Social Capital Theory**

Social Capital Theory explores how social networks and relationships function as valuable resources that individuals and groups can leverage for collective action, access to opportunities, and overall well-being. Originally coined by Pierre Bourdieu (1986) and further developed by James Coleman (1988) and Robert Putnam (2000), the theory highlights the importance of trust, reciprocity, and shared norms in fostering cooperation and improving social and economic outcomes. This concept is particularly relevant in contexts with limited formal institutional support, such as rural areas, where communities depend on interpersonal relationships and networks for survival and development.

The theory was proposed to examine the intangible benefits derived from human connections, addressing concerns about declining civic engagement and social trust, especially in urbanized societies. Social Capital Theory seeks to explain how interpersonal and group relationships provide access to resources, foster resilience and collective well-being, and support social, economic, and educational development. For example, Putnam's (2000) seminal work *Bowling Alone* analyzed the decline of community participation in the United States and its adverse impact on societal cohesion and productivity.

Central to Social Capital Theory is the idea that social networks serve as resources, granting access to information, emotional support, and economic opportunities. These networks enable communities to address collective challenges, such as improving local infrastructure or enhancing educational outcomes (Bourdieu, 1986).

Social Capital Theory identifies three primary forms of social capital that contribute to individual and community well-being. Bonding Capital refers to strong ties within close-knit groups, such as families and local communities, which provide emotional and practical support. For rural teachers, this might manifest in their reliance on colleagues and local networks for encouragement and advice during challenging times. Bridging Capital involves weaker connections between diverse groups that facilitate access to resources and encourage innovation by exposing individuals to new ideas and perspectives. For instance, rural teachers collaborating with urban educators can share strategies and solutions to overcome resource limitations. Linking Capital pertains to vertical relationships connecting individuals or communities to formal institutions and resources, such as government programs, funding, and training. This form of capital is especially important for marginalized groups, like rural teachers, as it helps bridge the gap between their needs and institutional support, enabling access to resources and opportunities (Woolcock & Narayan, 2000).



Trust and reciprocity are fundamental to social capital, as communities with high levels of these qualities are better equipped to solve collective problems and provide mutual support. This fosters resilience, reduces social isolation, and strengthens community ties (Putnam, 2000). High social capital is associated with numerous positive outcomes, such as improved educational attainment (Coleman, 1988), enhanced mental health and well-being (Kawachi & Berkman, 2001), and greater community participation (Putnam, 2000).

Social capital plays a pivotal role in addressing gaps in infrastructure and services. For rural teachers, bonding capital provides emotional resilience and support, helping them navigate professional isolation and resource scarcity. Bridging capital, such as participating in inter-school collaborations or educational workshops, fosters professional growth by introducing new teaching methods and perspectives. Meanwhile, linking capital facilitates access to institutional support, such as government programs or NGO partnerships, enabling rural educators to benefit from training opportunities, infrastructure improvements, and learning materials. Collectively, these forms of social capital empower rural teachers to overcome challenges, enhance their professional capacity, and contribute to community development.

### **Conceptual Framework Integrating Social Support Theory and Social Capital Theory in Relation to Teacher Well-Being in Rural South Africa**

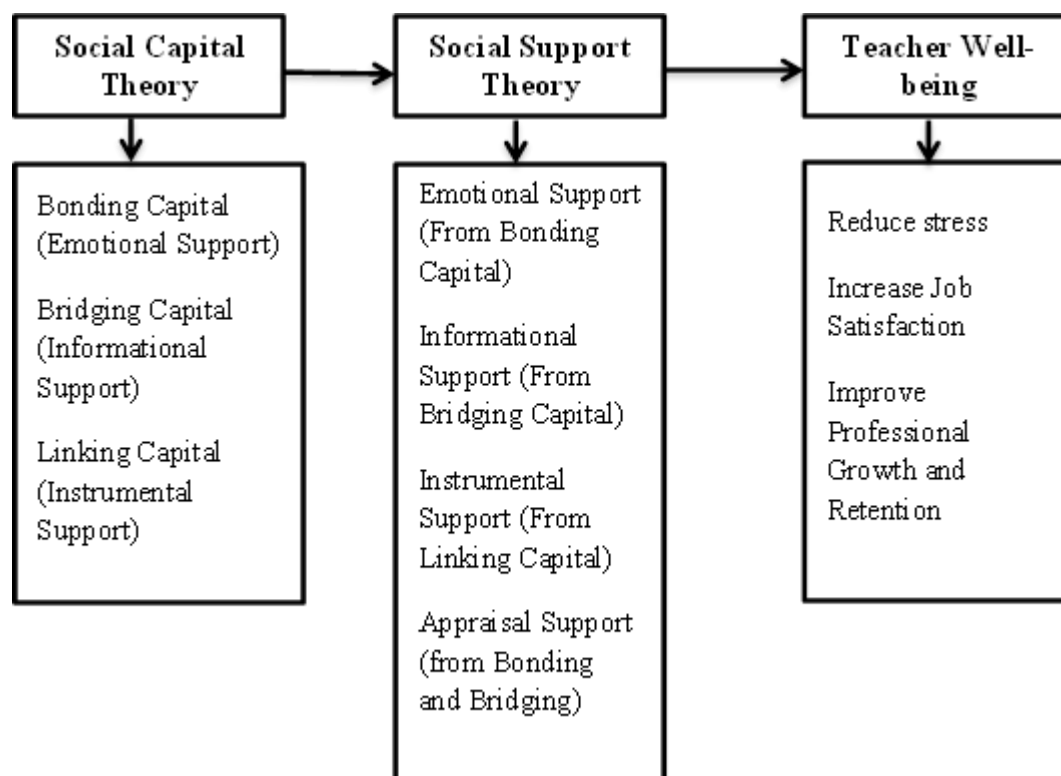
Teacher well-being, particularly in rural settings, has gained significant attention due to the unique challenges these educators face. These include professional isolation, lack of resources, and limited access to professional development opportunities. Addressing teacher well-being is critical not only for improving their quality of life but also for enhancing student outcomes and fostering educational development in underserved communities.

Theories such as Social Capital Theory (Bourdieu, 1986; Putnam, 2000) and Social Support Theory (Cobb, 1976; House, 1981) provide valuable insights into the role of interpersonal relationships and support networks in mitigating these challenges. While Social Capital Theory focuses on the resources embedded in social networks, Social Support Theory emphasizes the types of support (emotional, informational, instrumental, and appraisal) that enhance individual resilience and coping mechanisms.

### **Justification for the Model**

Rural teachers in South Africa face unique challenges, such as a lack of institutional support, limited access to professional resources, and high levels of stress due to social isolation. These difficulties underscore the need for both formal and informal support networks to enhance teacher well-being. Unfortunately, formal systems like policies and funding often fail to meet the specific needs of rural educators. In this context, informal networks, including colleagues, community members, and professional associations, play a crucial role in providing emotional and practical support. To address these challenges effectively, integrating Social Capital Theory and Social Support Theory is vital. While Social Capital Theory focuses on the structural and

relational aspects of networks, Social Support Theory delves into the specific forms of aid provided by these networks. Combining both theories offers a more comprehensive approach to understanding and improving teacher well-being. A multi-faceted approach is required to address the diverse needs of rural teachers, where emotional resilience, professional growth, and self-efficacy are just as important as financial or material assistance.



**Source: Authors' Design (2024)**

### **Social Capital Theory**

Bonding capital refers to the strong ties within close-knit groups, such as colleagues and community members (Ahmad, et al., 2023). These relationships foster a sense of solidarity and provide both emotional and practical support, which are crucial for individuals working in challenging environments like rural schools. Bridging capital, on the other hand, represents weaker connections that link individuals to diverse groups outside their immediate circles (Leonard, 2004). This form of capital allows teachers to access external resources, innovative ideas, and professional networks, which can enrich their professional development and reduce feelings of isolation. Linking capital involves vertical relationships with institutions, authorities, and formal organizations, offering instrumental support such as funding, training opportunities, and policy assistance (Kamatsiko, 2021). This enables teachers to overcome logistical challenges and access the vital resources needed to improve their teaching and well-being.

## **Social Support Theory**

Emotional support, derived from bonding capital, plays a pivotal role in reducing stress and fostering a sense of belonging for teachers (Zheng, 2022). Close relationships with colleagues and community members serve as a buffer against burnout and feelings of isolation, providing emotional reassurance in challenging environments. Informational support, grounded in bridging capital, offers teachers guidance, advice, and resources that are essential for professional development and problem-solving (Murray, et al., 2020). Access to new ideas and diverse perspectives not only improves instructional practices but also broadens teachers' skill sets. Instrumental support, stemming from linking capital, addresses logistical challenges by offering tangible resources such as funding, equipment, and policy support (Omole, et al., 2024). This form of assistance is crucial, particularly in under-resourced rural settings, where resources may be scarce. Appraisal support, strengthened by both bonding and bridging capitals, involves constructive feedback and validation, which enhance teachers' self-esteem and professional efficacy (Mendez, et al., 2024). This form of support is instrumental in fostering a greater sense of purpose, reinforcing teachers' confidence in their roles, and promoting long-term well-being.

## **Impact on Teacher Well-Being**

Reduced stress is a key outcome of emotional support, as close networks help alleviate feelings of isolation and burnout, which are prevalent among teachers in rural settings (Agyapong, et al., 2022). By offering a sense of belonging and solidarity, these networks play a critical role in teacher well-being. Increased job satisfaction is another significant benefit, as all forms of support emotional, informational, instrumental, and appraisal contribute to a greater sense of fulfillment and purpose (Hamidi, 2023). This, in turn, fosters a more positive work experience and higher job satisfaction among teachers. Professional growth and retention are strengthened through informational and instrumental support, which are essential for continuous learning and skill development (Alsakarneh, et al., 2023). By providing access to resources, training, and feedback, these forms of support help reduce turnover rates and ensure long-term teacher retention, particularly in rural schools where resources may be more limited.

## **Strengthening Social Support Networks**

To enhance teacher well-being in rural schools, several strategies can be employed to strengthen various forms of social capital (Alsakarneh, et al., 2023). Enhancing bonding capital for emotional support should focus on fostering strong relationships within schools through formal and informal support groups. Promoting team-building activities and mentorship programs can further deepen peer connections, creating a more cohesive and supportive environment (Gafni Lachter, & Ruland, 2018). Expanding bridging capital for informational support involves encouraging teachers to engage in regional and national educational networks, with technology serving as a tool to connect rural teachers with external experts and resources (Ahmad, et al., 2023). This helps bridge the gap between isolated schools and broader educational

opportunities. Strengthening linking capital for instrumental support requires establishing partnerships with governmental and non-governmental organizations, enabling rural schools to secure essential resources (Amagoh, 2015). Advocating for policies and programs that prioritize rural teacher support can yield long-term benefits. Finally, providing appraisal support through multiple channels such as feedback mechanisms ensures teachers receive constructive input on their performance, while celebrating achievements boosts morale and reinforces a sense of purpose, ultimately enhancing teacher well-being.

## **Conclusion**

The integration of Social Support Theory and Social Capital Theory offers a robust framework for addressing the challenges faced by teachers in rural South Africa. The findings revealed the significance of fostering bonding capital to enhance emotional resilience, bridging capital to facilitate access to new ideas and resources, and linking capital to provide instrumental support through partnerships and funding. These dimensions collectively contribute to reducing teacher stress, increasing job satisfaction, and promoting professional growth. Ultimately, strengthening these support systems not only improves teachers' well-being but also leads to enhanced educational outcomes, creating a more sustainable and effective educational environment in rural South Africa.

## **Recommendations**

To enhance teachers' well-being, schools should focus on fostering bonding capital by establishing support groups, team-building activities, and peer counseling to build emotional resilience and a sense of community. Expanding bridging capital is equally essential through cross-school collaborations, online professional networks, and the use of technology to connect teachers with external experts and resources. Strengthening linking capital involves advocating for increased funding, forming partnerships with governmental and non-governmental organizations, and pursuing grants to address resource constraints. Additionally, appraisal support can be provided by implementing peer reviews, mentorship programs, and recognition initiatives to motivate and encourage professional growth. Lastly, promoting a supportive school culture with open communication, work-life balance initiatives, and tailored professional development programs is crucial for fostering a sustainable and enriching teaching environment. By implementing these strategies, schools can ensure improved teacher well-being and better educational outcomes in rural South Africa.

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