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Teachers' exposure and understanding of the role and services of educational psychologists in rural schools, South Africa: I have seen psychologists on TV only

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***Abstract*—** Educational psychologists are trained to support teachers, learners, and families; however, in many rural South African communities, such as the Mopani district in Limpopo, teachers have never encountered these professionals or their services. This study, grounded in a transformative research paradigm, explores systemic inequalities in psycho-educational support and amplifies the voices of rural teachers who are often marginalised in education policy and practice. Guided by social justice and equity principles, the study employed a qualitative approach and Participatory Action Learning and Action Research to engage eighteen teachers through focus group interviews. Findings reveal a persistent lack of access to and awareness of the roles of educational psychologists. Participants cited numerous barriers: stigma from parents/guardians, a burdensome referral process, limited teacher knowledge about when and how to refer learners, a national shortage of qualified educational psychologists, and insufficient departmental support. Teachers, some with over two decades of experience, expressed frustration, little to no interaction with educational psychologists, and uncertainty about their potential contributions to learner well-being. The study highlights the urgent need for policy reforms prioritising equitable access to psycho-educational services in rural schools. It calls for a transformative shift in educational support structures to address historical disparities and ensure all learners benefit from contextually relevant, professional psychological services.
Keywords: Cultural-historical activity theory, Educational psychologists, Inclusive education, Learner support, Teachers

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I. INTRODUCTION

EDUCATIONAL psychologists study cognitive and psychosocial processes involved in educational and human development and apply their knowledge to improve the learning processes (Burns, 2013). Bartolo (2015) highlighted that educational psychologists help teachers meet the needs of children with learning impairments and psychosocial challenges in an inclusive school environment.

According to the Professional Board for Psychology (2017) under the Health Professions Council of South Africa, the roles and functions of educational psychologists include assessment, diagnosis, and provision of interventions such as counselling and play therapy, as well as referral to other appropriate interventions such as paediatricians, occupational therapists, speech therapists, paediatric neurologists, and psychiatrists, to achieve optimal human functioning and development in the learning environment. Thus, educational psychologists can be called upon to assist in fostering a welcoming learning environment for all students in the classroom and at the school, in addition to helping with the engagement of a single student (Bartolo, 2015) and a small group of children with shared challenges.

The scope of this article can be attributed to the reality that teachers spend more time with the learners and are aware of their learners' needs for optimal learning development. Beukes (2010) asserts that a collaboration between educational psychologists and teachers promotes the exchange of meaningful knowledge, enabling and providing learner support in various aspects. This, therefore, suggests that a lack of collaboration may result in compromised learner support. Against this backdrop, this study investigates the public-school teachers' understanding of and access to educational psychologists' services to achieve optimal learner development and learning.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (United Nations General Assembly, 1949) proclaims every child's right to education, and the World Declaration on Education for All (WCEFA, 1990) reaffirms this right, advocating for inclusive and equitable educational opportunities. The Salamanca Statement (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation [UNESCO], 1994) similarly emphasised the necessity of inclusive education, asserting that all learners, particularly those most vulnerable, deserve meaningful and effective education. Realising these global aspirations requires accessible and context-sensitive support systems, including the services of educational psychologists who play a critical role in identifying and supporting learners' academic, emotional, and social needs.

In the South African context, inclusive education policy is guided by the *Education White Paper 6: Special Needs Education* (Department of Education [DoE], 2001), which advocates for transforming the education system to accommodate the diverse needs of all learners. Central to this transformation is the involvement of educational psychologists, whose professional competencies align with international standards (Educational Psychology Association of South Africa [EPASSA], 2023). These professionals are trained to provide comprehensive support through psychological assessments, counselling, behaviour management, and collaborative interventions involving teachers, families, and communities (Professional Board for Psychology, 2017).

However, the availability and accessibility of educational psychologists in South Africa remain uneven. While the profession is well-established, many educational psychologists operate in private practice and are concentrated in urban centres, creating a service gap in rural and township schools (Kumar, 2017). This uneven distribution undermines efforts to promote inclusive education and equitable learner support. Research confirms that teachers in under-resourced and rural schools face challenges accessing educational psychologists, often relying on limited district-based support or navigating referrals with insufficient training or guidance (Donald et al., 2010; Van der Berg et al., 2011).

The Screening, Identification, Assessment, and Support (SIAS) policy (DBE, 2014) was introduced to address some of these systemic challenges. The policy mandates a coordinated approach to identifying learners' support needs and formalizes the role of educational psychologists in the assessment process. According to the Minister of Education, SIAS aims to "respond to the needs of all learners in our country, particularly those who are vulnerable and most likely to be marginalised and excluded" (DBE, 2014, p. 5). It emphasises that an educational psychologist should assess every learner requiring additional support, with the resulting recommendations forming the basis of teachers' in-class support strategies.

Despite these policy frameworks, studies show that many teachers in inclusive schools lack the knowledge and the systemic support to effectively utilise educational psychological services (Dalton et al., 2012; Van der Berg et al., 2011). Teachers report limited awareness of identifying learning barriers or initiating referrals, contributing to frustration, elevated stress levels, and reduced efficacy in supporting learners with diverse needs. Furthermore, teacher training often insufficiently prepares educators to engage with psychosocial issues such as school violence, emotional trauma, or learning disabilities—areas where educational psychologists could provide valuable expertise (Professional Board for Psychology, 2017).

In countries like the United Kingdom, educational psychologists are well integrated into school support systems, working collaboratively with interdisciplinary teams to address learner and teacher needs (Surrey County Council, 2023). In South Africa, while the competencies of educational psychologists are comparable, systemic issues such as workforce shortages, inequitable distribution, and limited integration into public schools persist (EPASSA, 2023; Donald et al., 2010). Consequently, there is a disconnect between policy aspirations and lived realities in schools.

Therefore, to actualise the goals of inclusive education, it is imperative to enhance the availability and visibility of educational psychologists in all school settings and to equip teachers with the necessary knowledge and pathways for accessing these services. Ensuring that educational support structures are functional, visible, and accessible to teachers is critical to fostering inclusive learning environments where all learners can thrive.

III. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Background to the theory

This study employed Cultural Historical Activity Theory (CHAT) as a theoretical lens to understand teachers' meaning making regarding their limited exposure to educational psychologists. Grounded in Lev Vygotsky's constructivist worldview, CHAT originates from his foundational work in cognitive, developmental, and cultural psychology, particularly from his studies involving children with hearing and speech difficulties (Igira & Gregory, 2009). Vygotsky's socio-genetic law of cultural development posits that knowledge is socially constructed through dynamic interaction between social and psychological processes (Mayisela, 2017; Vygotsky, 1987). He argued that social exclusion deprives individuals of access to culturally mediated cognitive tools, potentially leading to secondary and tertiary disabilities (Rodina, 2006).

CHAT has been widely applied across disciplines, particularly in education, to examine how individuals and groups interact within activity systems composed of subjects, tools, rules, community, and division of labour. Within the South African context shaped by a legacy of educational inequality, this framework is beneficial in examining systemic contradictions and structural limitations that hinder inclusive educational practices.

Objectives and assumptions of the theory

CHAT aims to uncover and explain activity systems' systemic relationships, contradictions, and transformation potentials. The main objective of applying CHAT in this study is to explore how teachers internalise and operationalise the culture of learning support, including the role of educational psychologists, within their professional practice. An underlying assumption of the theory, as used in this study, is that teachers are socialised into an activity system in which they are expected to collaborate with various stakeholders such as District-Based Support Teams (DBST), School-Based Support Teams (SBST), parents, learners, and health professionals to support learners with special education needs. The authors assume that teachers can actively participate in inclusive education practices when sufficiently exposed to auxiliary support services and adequately resourced. CHAT presumes that activity systems are mediated by tools (such as White Paper 6 and the SIAS policy), historical legacies, and the distribution of roles within the system.

Relevance to the study

CHAT is relevant to this study as it provides a robust analytical framework for examining the historical, cultural, and systemic dimensions of inclusive education in South Africa. Specifically, it enables the researchers to highlight how the legacy of apartheid-era education, characterised by a medical model of exclusion and a lack of systemic support for Black learners, continues to shape present-day educational practices and teacher training.

By examining the contradictions between the intentions of inclusive policies (e.g., White Paper 6, SIAS, and Integrated School Health Policy [ISHP]) and the realities of their implementation, CHAT illuminates gaps in support systems and professional development for teachers. This is crucial in understanding why, 30 years into democracy, many rural teachers still lack access to educational psychologists and related services.

Ultimately, CHAT aids in identifying opportunities for transformation within the education system, particularly in recognising teachers not as passive recipients of policy but as central agents in enacting inclusive practices. It supports the study's goal of exploring how cultural and historical influences shape teachers' engagement with learning support services, and how systemic contradictions can be leveraged for developmental change.

IV. OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY

This study investigates the public-school teachers' experiences and understanding of the services provided by educational psychologists to support learners and teachers in the Mopani district in an inclusive school setting.

V. METHODS

Research approach

This study adopted a qualitative approach to understand teachers' meaning making regarding their limited exposure to educational psychologists within inclusive education. Qualitative research is particularly suited for exploring complex social phenomena where context, perceptions, and lived experiences are central to the inquiry (Creswell & Poth, 2018). In this case, the qualitative approach enabled the researchers to explore rural teachers' nuanced and contextually embedded experiences in historically marginalised communities in South Africa. Braun and Clarke (2022) noted that qualitative methods allow for a detailed exploration of how individuals construct meaning in their social and institutional environments. Furthermore, this approach aligns with the transformative paradigm of the study, which

seeks not only to understand participants' realities but also to highlight systemic inequalities and promote social change (Mertens, 2020). The study captured participants' voices through qualitative methods, such as interviews and reflective discussions. It revealed the

contradictions within the activity systems that shape their professional practices and access to support services.

Research paradigm

This study is situated within the transformative

paradigm, which emphasises the importance of addressing social injustice and giving voice to historically marginalised populations (Mertens, 2020). Rooted in critical theory, the transformative paradigm goes beyond simply describing social realities; it seeks to challenge power structures and advocate for systemic change. In the context of South African education, where rural teachers often lack access to educational psychologists and other support services due to legacies of apartheid and structural inequality, the transformative paradigm provides an appropriate lens for examining and disrupting these inequities. This paradigm is particularly relevant for research involving vulnerable or underserved communities, as it encourages collaboration with participants to promote empowerment and social transformation (Sweetman et al., 2010). Using this approach, the study prioritised rural teachers' lived experiences and perspectives, highlighting how institutional policies and historical contexts shape their limited engagement with inclusive support systems. The transformative lens thus enabled the researchers to explore these challenges and advocate for more equitable access to learning support services in line with inclusive education policies such as White Paper 6 (DoE, 2001) and the SIAS policy (DBE, 2014).

Research design

This study applied Participatory Action Learning and Action Research (PALAR) as a methodological framework to support collaborative knowledge construction and systemic transformation in the context of inclusive education. PALAR is a participatory, democratic, and action-oriented research approach prioritising participants' voices, agency, and lived experiences, particularly those from marginalised communities (Kearney & Zuber-Skerritt, 2022). Aligned with the transformative paradigm, PALAR fosters social learning and empowerment through reflection, dialogue, and action cycles. In this study, PALAR enabled rural teachers to critically reflect on their limited exposure to educational psychologists and co-develop strategies for improving access to learning support services within their schools. The method was particularly suitable because it recognised teachers not as passive research subjects but co-researchers who engage in inquiry and change within their real-life contexts (Zuber-Skerritt, 2018). Through participatory workshops and collective dialogue, teachers explored the systemic barriers embedded in historical and institutional structures and proposed contextually relevant practices for inclusive support. Thus, PALAR served as a data collection strategy and a developmental tool for building collaborative capacity and advancing inclusive education practice in under-resourced rural settings.

Participants

The study was conducted in the rural village of the Mopani district, in the Limpopo province in South Africa. This district has thirteen public schools, far from reach for most children, and the health care services centres are far from the families. The main language spoken in the village is Sepedi.

The participants comprised teachers from two public rural inclusive schools: primary and secondary schools. The primary school had 523 learners and 12 teachers, with eleven teachers participating in the study; the principal was excluded. The secondary school had 480 learners and eleven teachers, of whom seven took part in the study. Detailed participant information is provided in the accompanying tables (Tables 1 and 2)

Table 1: Demographic information of participants from research site 1 (Primary school)

Research site 1:	Participant (P)	Age	Gender	Education Level	Experience	Inclusive Education Training
Secondary school	P1	55	Female	B. Hons	24	Yes
	P2	59	Male	B. Hons	26	No
	P3	31	Male	B. Ed	4	Yes
	P4	36	Male	B. Ed	9	Yes
	P5	39	Female	B. Ed	13	Yes
	P6	50	Female	Diploma	21	No
	P7	50	Male	Diploma	20	No
	P8	43	Female	B. Ed	18	Yes
	P9	45	Female	B. Ed	12	No
	P10	39	Male	B. Ed	12	Yes
	P11	46	Male	Diploma	15	No

Table 2: Demographic information of participants from research site 2 (Secondary school)

Research site 2:	Participant (S)	Age	Gender	Education Level	Experience	Inclusive Education Training
Secondary school	S1	35	Male	B. Ed	6	Yes
	S2	50	Female	Diploma	20	No
	S3	37	Male	B. Ed	8	Yes
	S4	40	Male	B. Ed	13	No
	S5	51	Female	Diploma	22	No
	S6	54	Male	B. Ed	22	Yes
	S7	49	Male	Diploma	11	No

The focus group discussion at Research Site 1 (the primary school) comprised 11 participants, including five females and six males. The participants' teaching experience varied, with two teachers having less than 10 years of experience, five with over 10 years, and four with more than 20 years. Regarding qualifications, three participants held a diploma in education, six had a bachelor's degree, and two had an honours degree in education management. Additionally, six participants reported knowledge of inclusive education, learning support needs, and the School-Based Support Team (SBST) roles. It is also worth noting that the teacher-pupil ratio at this school is 1:45.

The focus group at Research Site 2, the secondary school, comprised seven participants, including two females and five males. The teacher-pupil ratio at the school is 1:44. Regarding teaching experience, two participants had less than 10 years of experience, two had over 10 years, and three had more than 20 years. Regarding academic qualifications, three participants held a diploma in education, while four possessed a bachelor's degree.

The research sites were purposively selected to participate in this study, and teachers were requested to volunteer to participate in the focus groups. Purposive sampling, sometimes called judgmental, selective, or subjective sampling, is a type of non-probability sampling in which researchers pick survey participants based only on specific inclusion criteria (Ames et al., 2019). In this case, schools were picked based on their rurality and accessibility to the researchers, with one having to be a primary school and the other a high school.

Data collection

Focus group discussions

The focus groups were used to collect data that responded to this study's research questions. The interview protocol consisted of eight open-ended questions, developed by the researchers, which were subjected to a piloting phase to identify and address any potential gaps before implementation. These questions formed the semi-structured interview guide that directed the focus group discussions. Focus groups were selected due to their ability to elicit a wide range of insights from a purposively chosen group of participants (Nyumba et al., 2018). They also enabled the researchers to probe deeper into participants' experiences, thoughts, and cognitive processes regarding the interview topic (Terre Blanche et al., 2006). Interviews were conducted in Sepedi (the local language) and English, allowing participants to express themselves freely and comfortably in their preferred language. Each interview lasted approximately one hour and 20 minutes at both schools. The researcher took detailed notes on significant responses while recording the discussions. The researchers later transcribed the

recordings to maintain the accuracy and authenticity of the participants' responses, and the other two analysed the transcribed data.

Procedure

When approaching the research field for data collection, we were mindful of the power dynamics inherent in the researcher-participant relationship. The study recognised that the identity and position as a researcher could influence how participants perceived the researcher, which might shape their willingness to share or how they responded. She employed strategies such as asking open-ended questions, providing context for the study, explaining confidentiality measures, and ensuring participants could express themselves without judgment. We recognise that shared identities might influence how participants engage with the researcher. Further, using the pilot study, the researcher remained attentive to how her background could impact her questioning manner and the interactions she facilitated. She remained reflexive and regularly checked her assumptions (hypotheses) to ensure she did not inadvertently guide participants toward certain responses or limit their expressions to confirm her assumptions.

This study collected data from a biographical questionnaire and focus group interviews. The biographical questionnaire was used to collect and provide data on the participants' age range, gender, years of teaching experience, knowledge of inclusive education, and the kind of school (primary or secondary) they were currently teaching in.

Data analysis

This study employed thematic analysis to systematically code and categorise the data to directly address the research questions, identifying significant patterns and organising them into coherent themes (Marks & Yardley, 2004). The choice of thematic analysis was guided by its flexibility and capacity to provide a comprehensive, in-depth interpretation of the data (Braun & Clarke, 2012). We initially organised the excerpts corresponding to each research question when analysing the data. We then examined the similarities and differences across the excerpts from each focus group discussion, grouping related themes and allowing distinct themes to emerge independently.

In this study, we ensured trustworthiness through participant validation, consulting other researchers, and rigorous techniques to gather data (Johnson et al., 2020). Participants were quoted verbatim in the results section of the findings.

This study employed a reflexive and collaborative approach to data analysis, recognising that researchers' positionalities inherently influence the process of interpretation. We acknowledged from the outset that complete objectivity is unattainable, and that our individual beliefs, values, and lived experiences would inevitably shape how we understood the data. To mitigate potential bias, we implemented several strategies, including peer debriefing among the three researchers, member checking to validate findings with participants, and triangulation across diverse data sources (i.e., participants from both a primary and a secondary school). These measures helped ensure that our interpretations were firmly grounded in participants' perspectives rather than filtered through our assumptions. We employed coding methods such as open coding, thematic analysis, and participatory coding to allow patterns and themes to emerge organically from the data. Additionally, we sought feedback from colleagues and participants who could provide alternative viewpoints and critically engage with our interpretations. This reflexive process contributed to a more ethical, rigorous, and nuanced analysis of the findings.

Ethical considerations

Ethical considerations are fundamental when conducting research. This study's approval was obtained from the university's ethics committee (Ethics number: 2018, HREC Non-Med, MEDP/18/005 IH). Before data collection, all participants were provided with detailed information about the study, and each participant gave their informed consent by signing consent forms. Their rights were thoroughly explained, ensuring voluntary participation, and based on a clear understanding of the research process. At the same time, their dignity and privacy were preserved through confidentiality and anonymity in written reports using participants' codes.

VI. RESULTS

Teachers' familiarity with the role of educational psychologists

Teachers who participated in the two selected inclusive schools in the Mopani district revealed that they had never heard of or collaborated with educational psychologists for learner support. One participant from the primary school focus group discussion had this to say:

"To *be honest with you, I have never seen or collaborated with an educational psychologist. To assist learners with special needs, I use the limited psychology knowledge I got while training to be a teacher. This is sad and disturbing. I wish our department could do something"* (FGD P).

The above excerpt indicates that educational psychologists' services are not available in inclusive schools in the Mopani district. This is against the recommendations of the Salamanca Statement (UNESCO, 1994) for a multi-disciplinary approach. In a proper inclusive setup, psychologists, nurses, medical doctors, and physiotherapists must assist each other in developing an appropriate evaluation of the learners and special needs educators who can interpret Braille and understand sign language. If any of these are missing, then there is a challenge.

To support the evidence that these teachers have limited exposure to educational psychologists, they even admitted that their encounters with educational psychologists are only on television.

"Since I understand the importance of educational psychologists in an inclusive school, I have only seen them as celebrities, especially on international TV. I therefore concluded that the services of educational psychologists are not meant for those in rural areas and developing countries. Our African countries are good at ratifying international policies, but implementation is challenging." (FGD, S).

The comment above clearly shows that educational psychologists are not known in the Mopani District, and their services have only been seen on television. This compromises the quality of education. Educational psychologists play an essential role in assessments. Assessments determine the placement model to be used for each child. For example, placing some children in a regular school might not be suitable, but instead at home or in a hospital. Some will require special care within a regular school.

Services of psychologists in other fields

Participants highlighted that psychologists are available in other fields such as police services, hospitals, and social work. They wondered why the education sector is being neglected, even though it is the key department supplying other departments with skilled personnel. Even among the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), Goal 4 is the main driver of the other goals (UNESCO, 2017). Goal number for advocates for ensuring inclusive and equitable quality education and promoting lifelong learning opportunities for all. The absence of educational psychologists makes it challenging to achieve this goal.

"The government is not taking education seriously; that is why we do not have or are not collaborating with educational psychologists" (FGD, P, and FGD, S).

It is high time the DoE takes serious measures to deploy educational psychologists in all schools. Educational psychologists play an essential role in an inclusive school environment. They make the work of regular teachers easier.

The following themes emerged from the second research objective, which sought to investigate teachers' perceptions regarding the accessibility of educational psychological services in the Mopani district:

DoE is deliberately killing the education system

Most teachers felt that educational psychologists' non-availability had been deliberately done to kill the education system. They felt that the department is aware of the importance of educational psychologists in the education of the learners, especially in assessing and providing counselling sessions. Most of them felt that if educational psychologists cannot be available in each school, the district should at least have five that can be shared by the schools as needed.

"Why is the department failing to provide at least five per district? They are simply not interested. We need people in district offices who understand the value of an educational psychologist in a school" (FGD, S).

Shortage of educational psychologists in the country

Some felt that maybe it is because of the shortage of educational psychologists in the country. The few available are unwilling to leave comfortable urban areas for rural areas. They also felt that most educational psychologists are unwilling to go to rural areas because they may not do private practice, as rural people do not have money.

'"We suggest that the government should work with universities to train more educational psychologists" (FGD, P).

Lack of support from the DoE

The first barrier hindering access to educational psychologists by Mopani district teachers is the lack of support from the Department of Education. The teachers in Mopani district appeared doubtful that they would ever engage with an educational psychologist. In the focus group discussion, they had this to say:

"We feel failed and neglected by the Department of Education. Our welfare and that of learners is not paramount. They just enjoy sitting in those fancy offices and driving fancy cars" (FGD, S).

Several expectations, such as providing quality education, collaboration with educational psychologists, introducing remedial classes, and ensuring that learners progress to the next grade, are highlighted in numerous Department of Education policies. However, minimal resources are provided for the teachers and their schools to reach the milestones set. Quantitative data in this research have shown that over 60% of the teachers are familiar with the term "inclusive education"; however, it has not been brought to operationalisation through practice. These views were stressed by the head teacher as follows:

"We do not know the services of an educational psychologist because we do not have one. Maybe we would have met one to assist in understanding some of the barriers in our schools if the department took our lists of children experiencing barriers seriously and sent us one to help. I have 24 years of teaching experience, but I do not know the services of an educational psychologist or have even heard of one, which is embarrassing. The department wants the learners to pass and pushes us as teachers to make the children pass, but then the learners cannot even write or read. So, what is quality education in that case? Learners cannot write or read, so I promote them to the next grade. What is that? (Appeared upset). I think the department is more concerned with looking good on paper, and we forget about the groundwork we need to do for the individual needs of the learners" (Principal).

Considering that the Department of Education oversees all mainstream and special schools, it is alarming that teachers feel less supported at the grassroots level. In a normal inclusive setup, a multi-disciplinary approach must involve all relevant stakeholders, including educational psychologists.

Shortage of qualified educational psychologists

There are very few educational psychologists in the country, and those who are available are overwhelmed. One participant observed that even those in urban areas face similar predicaments. He had this to say:

"When I was doing my internship in one urban school, my mentor told me about a child who was referred to an educational psychologist when he was in grade 1 for assessment and had not received assistance until grade 2 after repeating the grade. Surely this is a cause for concern" (FGD, P).

The shortage of educational psychologists in the district is worrying. It is one of the causes of human waste in schools. Many learners drop out of school because of failure and being forced to repeat grades. The availability of educational psychologists can help reduce the failure rate, thereby decreasing dropout rates.

Lack of knowledge by teachers as to when an educational psychologist is needed

From the data generated, it was evident that most regular teachers have limited knowledge of inclusive education. They do not even understand the professionals who are supposed to be part of an inclusive school, such as those who should be available at resource centres. As a result, they do not know when to request the services of an educational psychologist. One participant shared the following:

"To be honest with you, this concept of inclusion is complicated, even I do not understand when I should ask for the services of an educational psychologist" (FGD, S).

Referral process demands a lot of paperwork from teachers

Some participants lamented the tedious referral process, which is one reason teachers avoid seeking educational psychologists' services. The process starts by identifying the learners with learning challenges during teaching and assessment. The next stage is for the educator to notify the parent/guardian and provide ongoing support (remediation or tutorials after school). The educator is expected to complete parent/guardian consent forms, which sometimes are not accessible or available. The educator is also expected to have an individual support plan. This is compounded by rural schools' high educator-to-pupil ratio, making it difficult for educators to complete these processes. Educators are expected to implement the SIAS policy 2014, issued by the DBE, to provide learners who require additional support to enhance their learning by completing various forms (DBE, 2014). For example, the educator needs to complete the Support Needs Assessment Forms 1 and 2. After this, the educator is expected to request assistance from the SBST, which, in most schools, is only available on paper. This means the SBST is not functional; if it is, its members lack expertise. The educators are expected to record all their work for the learner. Not only is this very laborious for the teachers, but the process also involves parents who may not be cooperating, due to their limited capacity and fear of stigmatising their child, thereby delaying the whole process.

"Ladies and gentlemen, we are already overloaded; doing the paperwork is stressful. I wish we could have an educational psychologist in every school" (FGD, P).

The above excerpt shows that teachers have a lot of work to do. The absence of educational psychologists in schools makes their situations worse.

Parents/Guardians stigmatising sending children to educational psychologists

As much as there is a gap between teachers' understanding of the function of educational psychologists, parents also seem to misunderstand the role of educational psychologists as pathologising. Most parents stigmatise sending children to educational psychologists. They think that when an educator suggests that they should be sent to an educational psychologist, it means that the child is insane.

"It is sad that most parents see sending a learner to an educational psychologist as something negative. They think the educator is saying their children are insane. Educating them on the role of educational psychologists is ideal" (FGD, P).

So, parents must be educated on the roles of educational psychologists. This will help them understand and appreciate the role of educational psychologists in an inclusive school.

VII. DISCUSSION

From the data generated and highlighted in the findings above, it is evident that there is no culture and history of using educational psychologists in the Mopani district. Barber et al. (2016) claim that it is unfair to include all children in an educational setting without adequate preparation, as each student has the right to engage in a positive and fully accessible learning environment. The absence of an educational psychologist seriously hinders the learners in an inclusive setup. In the current era, societies value education and strive to empathetically respond to learners' difficulties (Schonert-Reichl, 2017). This is highlighted and emphasised in numerous education policies, including the Education White Paper 6 (Department of Education, 2001), its implementation SIAS policy (DBE, 2014), and the ISHP (Department of Health & Department of Basic Education, 2012). Since the beginning of democratic South Africa, improving educational access to secluded and marginalised communities has been highlighted as a priority. This included the introduction of the quintile rankings to highlight schools

with a greater need for resources and support services. The schools visited for this research have been in operation for over 50 years under quintile one (Student Portal, N. D), which positions them as part of schools that require extensive support services. However, the teachers' lack of knowledge of services provided by educational psychologists indicates that the SIAS policy (DBE, 2014) is not actively applied. Therefore, no child has ever been assessed, diagnosed, and provided with support services in either of these schools. This also indicates that the teachers are not fully engaging all the necessary stakeholders to provide support.

From the Cultural Historical Activity Theory (Igira & Gregory, 2009) perspective, the multiple stakeholders in the child's support system have their roles. When educational psychologists provide emotional support to teachers to confront stressful situations in which their actions can impact the learners' learning and well-being, empathetic learning environments will be promoted (Ruzek et al., 2016; Schonert-Reichl, 2017). Support from educational psychologists will help teachers handle circumstances they have never encountered before, brought to school by challenging groups of learners, crowded classrooms, a lack of enthusiasm, and absent parents (Ruzek et al., 2016). Unfortunately, these rural teachers are unfamiliar with the benefits that educational psychologists can offer to ease their stress and improve learner support. The psycho-education role of psychologists is needed in rural communities to educate and facilitate understanding of learning support needs related to stigmatisation of various barriers to learning.

Considering the activity systems and educational psychologists' role in screening, identification, assessment, and providing intervention as support to alleviate learning challenges, teachers not knowing them is a profound contradiction. On the one hand, teachers confess that they struggle with learners experiencing learning difficulties. Conversely, teachers are not in touch with the critical services educational psychologists offer to alleviate the challenges. This contradiction highlights the need for teachers' development in this regard. It appears that not only teachers need this kind of input, but also the parents, who are representative of the whole community, have internalised the apartheid government's segregating and pathologising medical position on learning support and disability. The different pockets of the communities need psycho-education on learning support and the necessary interventions, including the educational psychologists' role. Given the objective of teaching and learning being to develop children's holistic cognitive, social, emotional, spiritual, and physical skills, these cannot be adequately achieved with the limitations that parents and teachers have about the crucial services provided by educational psychologists and other auxiliary support services. It is a universal principle that every child has the right to basic education as an essential human right (Madani, 2019; Marishane, 2017). However, satisfying this right requires that all children's educational needs be met holistically, which is achieved through three components: access, quality, and a safe environment for learning (Marishane, 2017). Following the SDGs 2030 (2015), South Africa appears to have improved access to education; however, providing quality support services for all appears challenging (Marishane, 2017).

Despite the significant demand to access psychological services, most of South Africa's underprivileged communities still do not have access to such essential services (Barnwell, 2016). With the evident inequalities in South Africa, educational psychologists cannot limit themselves to consulting in private offices (Barnwell, 2016). These findings align with the statistical report by the Educational Psychology Association of South Africa (2021), indicating that in South Africa, 50.4% of educational psychologists work in private practice, and only 5.2% of these professionals are involved in public service. The uneven distribution of educational psychologists may be due to the perceived lack of opportunities and resources to contribute to learner support in rural schools. Educational psychologists are then highly distributed to urban areas such as Gauteng Province and private practice, where most individuals can afford their services (Gaede & Versteeg, 2011). The Department of Education and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) must collaborate with all stakeholders to provide educational psychologists in all schools in the country, especially rural schools, for the optimum learning and developmental outcomes of all the learners.

VIII. CONCLUSION

From the data generated and the findings of this study, it can be concluded that teachers in the Mopani district know very little about the work of educational psychologists. They only see the work of educational psychologists from a far-fetched distance, such as from television and other fields of psychology. While there is a minimal number of educational psychologists in South Africa, there is an extreme shortage in rural areas. This hurts inclusive education in marginalised rural communities. The Department of Education is not supporting schools in accessing educational psychologists, as the number of psychologists employed by the DoE.

Considering the study's findings, the researchers suggest that platforms for collaboration between stakeholders, such as parents, teachers, and educational psychologists, should be established to provide quality learner support. We further recommend training more educational psychologists and possibly increasing their numbers in each district. If possible, each school should have an educational psychologist. Regular teachers should be trained on inclusive education and how to work with other professionals needed in an inclusive school. Educational psychologists in urban areas and private practice are requested to involve themselves in community work through NGOs and other possible avenues so that learners can access psychological services in their contexts. The DoE is challenged to respond to the need for psychological services in Mopani district, as the public-school teachers have indicated that their learners experience learning barriers that require the intervention of educational psychologists. The DoE is encouraged to establish well-resourced centres in each school. Schools are encouraged to have information-sharing meetings with the parents/guardians to help remove the stigma associated with referring a learner to an educational psychologist.

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X. CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

There are no conflicts of interest in this study.

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