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## Understanding Teacher Morale Among Primary School Teachers

L. Mboweni

University of South Africa, SOUTH AFRICA

Matshidiso Joyce Taole\* 

University of South Africa, SOUTH AFRICA

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**Abstract:** Teacher morale affects all aspects of the school and education system. Yet, the current status of teaching does not provide a rosy picture as teachers are reported to be demoralized and stressed. This qualitative study explored teachers' experiences that influence their morale. The study was guided by the research question: How do workplace experiences affect teacher morale in selected primary schools? Qualitative data were gathered through six focus group interviews with 36 teachers in four primary schools and were analyzed using a content analysis framework. Data revealed that teacher morale was low. Participants identified school climate factors such as inappropriate professional development activities and violence as threats to their morale. Furthermore, a lack of parental involvement in the affairs of the school was regarded as a setback by teachers. This study highlighted specific issues that influence teacher morale and contribute to the understanding of the state of their morale. The study recommends that more attention is given to ensuring that teacher morale is enhanced for educational goals to be realized. Improving teacher morale has many benefits in that it helps teachers to maintain a positive attitude and be happy at work.

**Keywords:** *Parental involvement, professional development, school climate, school violence, teacher morale.*

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### Introduction

Teaching is a complex and demanding profession as teachers are continually expected to meet the diverse needs of learners in the ever-changing instructional environment (Evers, 2011). According to Din et al. (2019), successful teaching and learning require the active participation of teachers with a positive attitude. As a result, it is important to ensure that teachers are supported in all their endeavors to provide learners with quality education (Bantwini, 2018; Din et al., 2019; Govindarajan, 2012). Quality of education is accentuated in Sustainable Development Goals number four (SDG4) which deals with the quality and equality in the provisioning of education in all sectors of education (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization [UNESCO], 2015). Provisioning of quality education is dependent on teacher morale as it impacts teaching directly and indirectly (Bantwini, 2018; Din et al., 2019). Teacher morale and productivity are interrelated and are vital in facilitating the successful execution of their duties. Boosting teacher morale will not only benefit the teachers but the learners and ultimately, the school will also benefit (Govindarajan, 2012; Hess & Johnson, 2010). High teacher morale will show increased learner achievement whereas low teacher morale is counterproductive as it may result in low productivity and teacher burnout (Bantwini, 2018; Din et al., 2019; Hess & Johnson, 2010; Norwood, 2016).

Furthermore, high teacher morale is associated with enthusiasm towards their work and optimism about their learners' progress (Hess & Johnson, 2010). There is a body of literature that suggests that teacher morale is negatively affected by the many demands that are currently placed on them and this has a negative impact on their performance (Liebenberg, 2017). In the same vein, teachers are inundated with numerous issues that affect their ability to successfully facilitate lessons and classroom activities (Norwood, 2016).

Teacher morale does not have a broadly acknowledged explanation (Sabin, 2015); rather it is deemed a multi-dimensional concept defined by the context in which teachers find themselves (Hess & Johnson, 2010). They argue that the working environment in which individuals find themselves, the level of job satisfaction, and the role of human needs inform the view of teacher morale. Morale is expressed as an interest and desire towards the job of a person for the accomplishment of his/her organizational objectives (Saleem et al., 2019). Researchers such as (Goldstein, 2015; Govindarajan, 2012; Willis & Varner, 2010) define teacher morale as a sense of satisfaction derived from a combination

**\* Corresponding author:**

Matshidiso Joyce Taole, University of South Africa, Pretoria, South Africa. ✉ [taolemj@unisa.ac.za](mailto:taolemj@unisa.ac.za)



of personal needs correlated with organizational needs. This implies that morale is interrelated with individual needs and organizational goals. For an individual to have high morale, there should be an alignment of his/her needs and the goals of the organization. Chambers (2015) asserts that “a combination of positive or negative sentiments, behaviour and spirits contribute to a general feeling of satisfaction” (p.7). When individuals’ needs and aspirations are met, they have a positive outlook which will increase their morale. For the purpose of this study, teacher morale refers to the overall satisfaction that a teacher feels with regard to his/her career (Webb, 2014).

Literature suggests different factors that impact teacher morale which include workload inside and outside the school (Mackenzie, 2007); training, physical facilities of the school and resources (Hirsch & Emerick, 2007); teacher professional development and empowerment (Mackenzie, 2007) and learners’ conduct (Sabin, 2015). Every aspect of the educational process can be impacted by teacher morale, as noted by Darling-Hammond (2000). The teacher is expected to navigate all the activities in any educational system and educational context with little support, a mammoth task placed on teachers. Therefore, more effort needs to be geared towards ensuring that teacher morale is enhanced for educational goals to be realized. This study was guided by the following research question. *How do workplace experiences influence teacher morale in selected primary schools?* The specific research questions were:

- How does the school climate influence teacher morale?
- How does the violence in school influence teacher morale?
- How does continuous professional development influence teacher morale?

### *Statement of the problem*

Various research has been carried out from the positivistic perspective, through surveys describing the importance of teacher morale, the role it plays in the context of teaching and learning and factors that influence teacher morale (Eboka, 2017; Govindarajan, 2012; Mackenzie, 2007). Quantitative research has shown that teacher morale is influenced by teacher dissatisfaction, low pay, and stress (Din et al., 2019; Govindarajan, 2012; Pendino, 2012). Quantitative research has used pre-determined variables into which participants needed to fit their views and perspectives (Yilmaz, 2013). In contrast, this qualitative study sought to provide an in-depth description of teacher morale from the perspective of the participants, attempting to understand how participants create meaning from their experiences. The study aims at contributing to the existing literature related to morale in an educational context by highlighting specific issues that influence teacher morale, taking into account the paucity of research on improving morale especially in the school setting (Din et al., 2019; Pendino, 2012).

## **Literature Review**

### *Teacher morale*

Sivakumar and Arun (2019) indicate that teacher morale is associated with job pride, outlook, and emotions a teacher has within a workplace setting. How teachers view themselves, their roles and the level at which their needs are met by the organization determine their morale. Teacher morale is seen as a pivotal component in creating a conducive learning environment. Morale is also viewed as an integrated phenomenon that includes the individual and the groups associated with the individual at the workplace (Senechal et al., 2016). A teacher that has positive relationships with his/her colleagues and learners will find satisfaction at work. When morale is high, individuals become enthusiastic and perform to the best of their ability to ensure that the goals and mission of the organization are met. Alignment of organizational objectives with the individual needs leads to high morale, whereas the disjuncture between the organizational objectives and the individual needs leads to low morale (Mackenzie, 2007). Mackenzie (2007) identified three levels of morale in the educational context. These levels of morale are interrelated and comprise personal, school and professional morale. If the teacher is struggling with finances at a personal level, this might impact his/her work. In the same vein, unattractive work conditions can influence teachers negatively at the professional level (Ingersoll, 2001). Security for teachers is important for them to feel safe and secure in their workplace.

### *School climate and teacher morale*

School climate is a fluid concept as it is defined differently by individuals who experience it. May and Sanders (2013) argue that school climate is the main ingredient in defining the health and productivity of the school. It is an important factor that determines the success or failure of educational management (Syahril & Hadiyanto, 2018). School climate is a multi-dimensional construct that deals with teachers’ work conditions (Orsi et al., 2016). This means that school climate can be negative or positive, healthy or unhealthy, depending on the situation in which individuals find themselves. For example, there will be a positive school climate if individuals feel supported and valued, and a negative climate will result when individuals do not feel supported and valued. In the same vein, a school climate can influence teacher morale negatively or positively. Teachers that are supported are likely to remain at the school (Gardner, 2010). School climate is defined by Syahril and Hadiyanto (2018) as “shared beliefs, values, and attitudes that accommodate the interaction between students, teachers, employees and principals in schools” (p.17). School climate relies heavily on the relationship teachers have with their students, colleagues and the principal and determines the general atmosphere of the school, in

addition, school climate is established by the collaboration between teachers, learners and staff, availability of resources, the state of the facilities, curriculum, infrastructure, principal leadership, patterns of interpersonal relationships in the school and the learning environment (Kyrou et al., 2020; Syahril & Hadiyanto, 2018). According to Taylor (2019), school climate is determined by the way teachers and students feel about the school as well as factors that influence the behaviour of those who reside in the school.

Literature has suggested various factors that influence the school climate such as teacher morale and collaboration between the administrators and staff (Taylor, 2019) leadership practices (Ross & Cozzens, 2016), collaboration, teamwork, and professionalism (Taylor, 2019), leadership styles (Strasser, 2014), how teachers perceive their responsibilities (Tsang & Liu, 2016), and student discipline (Colcord et al., 2016) as well as and respecting and involving teachers in decision making is seen as a way of enhancing their morale (Erichsen & Reynolds, 2019). Syahril and Hadiyanto (2018) identified four aspects of school climate, namely relationships, personal growth/ development, system maintenance and change, and physical environment. When all these factors are in harmony, a pleasant working climate will surface and individuals will perform to their maximum potential (Syahril & Hadiyanto, 2018). Teachers want favourable working conditions in the execution of their duties and that will inspire them to work well, thus impacting positively on their morale.

However, school climate can be influenced by various factors which in turn can affect teacher morale. These factors include school violence, professional development, and parental involvement all of which are briefly discussed below.

#### *School violence and teacher morale*

Violence is one of the factors that can influence teacher morale with widespread school violence being a serious cause for concern. Violence in schools has rendered schools as one of the more risky and dangerous places to work, rather than the safe havens they ought to be (O'Connor & Mooney, 2014). The trauma associated with school violence was reported to have the potential of adversely changing the attitude of teachers towards their work, particularly if it goes untreated (Burk, 2010). The prevalence of violence amongst teachers undoubtedly affects their efficiency in a negative way which results in low teacher morale (Mboweni, 2020). It is difficult for victims of school violence to cope in their workplace as they have to relive the violent incident every time that they enter their workplace (Roberts et al., 2012). Being involved in school violence results in the victims' emotional instability and adversely affects the work climate for teachers in a negative way (Mboweni, 2020).

Furthermore, Mateu-Gelabert's (2000) study on the interrelationship between school violence and communities found that school violence is contextual and mirrors the interrelationship between the school and the communities in which they are situated. Gomes et al. (2013) confirm that school violence is dependent on community characteristics such as household violence, poor socio-economic factors and poverty. They suggest that violence in the surrounding areas can have a strong influence on what goes on inside the school walls.

#### *Professional development and teacher morale*

Knowledge is continuously evolving; therefore, teachers need to be equipped with the necessary knowledge and skills to function effectively to meet the demands of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Therefore, the importance of professional development cannot be emphasized. Several researchers have identified the benefits of teachers' professional development. Professional development provides teachers with authentic experiences that build on their background knowledge and enhance their reflection and increase their professionalism (Nugroha et al., 2020). When teachers' professional developmental needs are met, they tend to have high morale (Govindarajan, 2012), particularly as professional development is seen as a process of empowerment (Potoleaa & Tomab, 2015), cultivating self-efficacy (Bosso, 2017), enhancing lifelong learning and development (Nugroha et al., 2020) and being an essential mechanism for deepening teachers' content knowledge and developing their teaching practices (Postholm, 2012). However, professional development activities need to be aligned to the teachers' needs for them to have a positive influence on teacher morale. Bosso (2017) contends that professional development experiences that are poorly developed, inadequate, or inapplicable are a source of frustration for teachers because such practices are often perceived as incompatible with effective teaching and learning strategies and beliefs. The Cambridge Assessment International Education (CAIE, 2017) confirms that teachers' professional development activities are fraught with challenges. CIGCSE further mentions that the challenges facing teachers' professional development activities include the tendency among the professional development programme designers to assume that because all teachers have received the same preservice training, therefore they have the same needs. The second challenge is the top-down approach to professional development that is not beneficial to teachers. It is important to consult teachers before professional development activities are designed as teachers should be involved and consulted when professional development activities during this process

*Parental involvement and teacher morale*

The importance of parental involvement in the education of their children cannot be overemphasized. Parental involvement (PI) has been implicated as one of the key components that influence teacher morale and the benefit of PI in the education of their children has been documented in the literature. When schools are supported by parents, teachers' level of job satisfaction increases (Hornby & Lafaele, 2011). Schools that receive a great deal of parental support have teachers that are more satisfied (Sapungan & Sapungan, 2014). PI boosts teacher morale and increases job satisfaction level (Sapungan & Sapungan, 2014), promotes social and behavioral adjustment (Hornby & Lafaele, 2011), boosts the reputation of the school among community members (Shahid, 2018), increases learner performance and improves child-parent relationship (Hornby & Blackwell, 2018) as well as ensuring improved school attendance and attitude (Hornby & Lafaele, 2011). Parents can be involved through activities such as attending teacher-parent conferences and meetings, involvement in fund-raising activities and helping with homework (Stewart, 2008). Involving parents in school life is giving them a voice in decision-making regarding the teaching and learning of their children. Parents are expected to play an active role in their children's education. However, some parents display a 'don't care attitude' when expected to participate in activities that relate to their children. Hornby and Blackwell (2018) identified the following barriers to PI in the children's education: individual parent and family barriers, child factors, parent-teacher factors and societal factors. Teachers would like to see their learners doing well and when learners' performance increases, teachers get the feeling of accomplishment, and their morale increases. Conversely, low performance reduces teacher morale.

**Methodology***Research design*

This qualitative study is nested in a constructivist paradigm that aimed to explore teachers' experiences of morale in their workplace. A case study design with multiple cases was used as this provided for in-depth study of the cases in their natural setting, acknowledging the context of each case (De Vos et al., 2011).

*Sampling and participants*

The study took place in the Bohlabela District of Mpumalanga province, South Africa, in schools that are public schools dependent on government funding. Learners in these schools are from disadvantaged communities and many families are headed by children as some parents are deceased and others are working in the coal mines or on farms and only come home a few times during the year. Most of the schools are in dilapidated conditions and do not have security features such as fences around the schools or alarm systems. Thirty-six primary school teachers were purposively selected from four primary schools in the four circuits in the Bohlabela district of Mpumalanga Province. Eligibility criteria required individuals to have three or more years of teaching experience at these schools. The study did not intend to generalize the results but to provide an in-depth understanding from the participants' perspectives of the factors that influence teacher morale and what can be done to lift teacher morale.

*Data collection and analysis*

In this qualitative study, six focus group discussions were used to collect data. Each focus group was made up of between four to six participants. Focus groups offered the researchers the opportunity to examine participants' stories, experiences, views and concerns (Kitzinger, 2005). In addition, focus groups created an opportunity for group members to interact with each other freely. Members of the group could support, comment and disagree with each other. An interview guide was used to ensure that the focus of the study was maintained. Appointments were made with participants and interviews were conducted at places and times convenient to participants. The audio recorder was used to keep accurate and full recordings of the information gathered during interviews and permission of using the audio recorder were sought from participants before the interview begins. The researchers gathered data until saturation occurred, that, until no new information was coming from the data. All recorded data was transcribed for analysis, which was done inductively. Participants were asked to go over all of their interview transcripts and see if the transcribed data matched the information they truly meant to communicate. Participants were given the opportunity to revise or amend their statements. Content analysis was used as the analytical framework for this study (Leedy & Ormrod, 2015). The transcribed data was read several times and notes and headings were written on the transcripts to capture the meaning of the data. Frequently used words and phrases were identified. The categories were then generated from the headings and grouped according to their similarities and differences in meaning. Then the categories were given names according to the different interpretations and these categories were developed into themes. Three broad themes emerged from the analysis and included professional development activities, school violence, and parental involvement.

*Ethical issues*

Permission to conduct research was sought from the University of South Africa (018/03/30818664/23/MC) and the district office of the Limpopo Department of Education. Human subjects were involved in this research, therefore ethical principles which informed the interaction and rapport with the participants were strictly adhered to, as suggested by

Flick (2014). Informed consent was sought and the nature of the study was clearly explained to the participants. Participants were also told that their participation in the study was voluntary and they had the right to withdraw from the study without penalties (Flick, 2014). Participants were assured that the data they provided would be treated with strict privacy and confidentiality. No identifying information was included in the results section of this study.

### Findings

Three broad themes emerged from the analysis and included professional development activities, school violence, and parental involvement.

#### *Theme 1: Professional development activities*

The result of this study shows that professional teacher development is one of the factors that affect teacher morale. According to the participants, professional development activities did not meet their developmental needs. In their accounts of the events surrounding professional development participants said:

*I go to workshops but what I get there is not what I need. I find the workshop is not helping me in doing my job. They just call us to tell us what they want. I think if they can talk to us and find what we need. That will be better.* (Participant in Focus Group 4)

*It is demoralizing for the department to fail teachers in the aspect of professional development. As teachers, our performance and the performance of learners cannot improve if we are not given the necessary development to improve our teaching skills.* (Participant in Focus Group 6)

*We are just called for a workshop and when we get there, we find that it is not something that we need. I am struggling to teach special needs children in my class but no one is helping me with that.* (Participant in Focus Group 3)

The recurrent theme in the interviews was a sense amongst participants that when professional development programmes were designed, they were not consulted. This resulted in development programmes that did not address the teachers' specific needs. Some participants expressed the feeling of neglect from their provincial department of education. One participant from Focus Group Two stated "*I believe the department does not care about our needs.*" This statement seems to indicate that the department is failing to prioritize the professional development needs of teachers. The findings also indicate that ignoring professional teacher development needs, negatively affects the progress of teachers. The focus groups felt that the underperformance of teachers may negatively affect learners; for instance, the professional development did not equip teachers with skills to deal with learners with special needs and thus they found themselves unprepared to deal with learners with special needs.

#### *Theme 2: School violence*

School violence is regarded by participants as one of the factors that negatively influence teacher morale. Schools are no longer regarded as 'safe havens' and that has instilled fear and insecurity amongst teachers. They have experienced violence on the school premises such as shootings which may be traumatic. Talking about this issue, participants in focus groups 4, 5, and 3 expressed their experiences in the following manner:

*Schools are no longer safe, when I come to school, I am not sure that I will return home after school. This is demoralizing as coming to school is not fun anymore. We are no longer safe here.* (Participant in Focus Group 4)

*I had to undergo trauma counseling for six months after witnessing a murder on the school premises. I still fear for my life ever since that fateful morning. This incident negatively affected my morale to the point where I still contemplate leaving the profession.* (Participant in Focus Group 5)

*I was once gang-raped as I had to remain at school after hours to complete my unfinished work. The culprits gained access because our school premises do not have a fence and there is no security guard to ensure our safety. To make matters worse, the perpetrators were not arrested.* (Participant in Focus Group 3)

It is evident from the above quotes that some participants have experienced serious forms of violence such as witnessing a colleague being stabbed to death, and one being gang-raped in the school premises. Some violence that teachers witness or experience does not originate from the school but comes from the community. Schools are not secure as members of the community can easily gain access. People who break the law are not punished. Schools have become the breeding ground for criminals and criminals from the communities have access to the schools. Teachers no longer feel that they are safe to do their work as they were constantly looking over their shoulders. The unsafe conditions in the schools diminish teachers' morale and going to school each day is seen as a threat to their lives.

#### *Theme 3: Parental involvement*

The recurrent theme in the interviews was a sense amongst participants that the involvement of parents in their children's education played a role in their morale, as the parents were the most important stakeholders in the learners' schooling. Talking about this issue participants said:

*I become demoralized when the parent does not take responsibility for their children's education. (Participant in Focus Group 3)*

*It is not motivating when the parents refuse to become part of their children's education. It is just difficult to help learners who are struggling in their studies when their parents are not on board. (Participant in Focus Group 4)*

*As a teacher, I derive satisfaction when I interact with the parents regarding their children's education. I view this as positive feedback and it goes a long way in the improvement of my morale. (Participant in Focus Group 1)*

*As a teacher, I have noticed that children whose parents are involved in their education perform better than children whose parents are not involved. (Participant in Focus Group 6)*

A common view amongst participants was that the involvement of parents in their children's education is considered as positive feedback on the part of the teachers. The study also found that teachers were demotivated in their work when parents relinquish their responsibilities. On the contrary, teachers who received feedback from parents and had parents who continuously interacted with them were reported to derive job satisfaction which went a long way in enhancing their morale.

### Discussion

This study examined the morale of a selected group of primary school teachers and explained the experiences that influence their morale. Declining teacher morale has been closely linked to insufficient and irrelevant professional development programmes intended for teachers. These findings match those observed in earlier studies (Guskey, 2014; Perumal, 2011). This finding also confirms the association between the quality of the work done by teachers and the quality of professional development which is offered to them (Gjedia & Gardinier, 2018; Lachner et al., 2016). The quality of teachers in schools will determine the quality of learners produced. Teachers are the focal point in any education system and the quality of teachers is critical to the success of any education system (Eboka, 2017). In their accounts of the events surrounding their participation in professional development activities, participants indicated that the training that they attended was not appropriate for the challenges that they face such as dealing with special needs learners. This is in line with the observation of Park and So (2014) that teachers regard professional development, though with good intentions, as unstructured, not appropriate, and not in touch with the actual challenges they were experiencing. Mackenzie (2007) argued that teacher development was directly linked to teacher morale. If teachers are not supported and motivated, their morale will be seriously impacted and this could have a detrimental effect on learner performance. Guskey (2014), reiterated that to transform and enhance the morale of teachers as well as their enthusiasm and outlook towards their profession, professional development should be prioritized. The study showed that participants were ill-equipped to deal with learners with special needs and that demotivates them as they feel they are not playing their part as teachers. Additionally, as San Jose et al. (2017) argued teachers have the desire for all their learners to learn, and when they fail in their efforts, frustration ensues.

Furthermore, this study shows that a lack of parental involvement in the education of their children is a serious factor influencing teacher morale. The importance of parental involvement in education has been documented by various researchers (Bantwini, 2018; Ghanney, 2018). Sapungan and Sapungan (2014) emphasize that schools that received a great deal of parental support have teachers that are more satisfied. Furthermore, participants indicated that there was a lack of communication between themselves and their learners' parents. They felt that parents were disinterested in their children's education, which contributed to their declining morale. Lack of communication between parents and teachers reduced teacher morale (Hornby & Lafaele, 2011).

Another important finding was that some teachers were victims of violence as some had witnessed violence in their schools. School violence has a negative influence on the culture of teaching and learning (Zulu et al., 2004) and this could have a detrimental effect on how the teachers view their job and the school. Being exposed to violence is related to trauma, stress, and depression (Volungis & Goodman, 2017). When teachers are victimized, they will not be happy doing their work as they would be fearing for their lives. Schools are no longer safe environments and this impacts effective teaching and learning. As Colcord et al. (2016), mentioned, a conducive school climate enhances learning and positive behaviour including teacher morale. However, school violence has rendered schools as one of the more risky and dangerous places to work, rather than the safe havens they ought to be (O'Connor & Mooney, 2014). Violence in the surrounding areas can have a strong influence on what goes on inside the school walls and influence teacher morale

### Conclusion

This qualitative study examined the morale of primary school teachers and explained the experiences that influence their morale. Teacher morale is important as it assists teachers in maintaining a positive attitude towards their work and improves learner achievement. Happy teacher enjoys their work and provides support for their learners. One of the more

significant findings to emerge from this study is that teachers are incapacitated to meet the needs of learners with special needs. This could be linked to the inappropriate professional development activities to which teachers are subjected. This study found that generally teachers are not consulted when professional development activities are designed. This leads to professional activities that do not benefit them and which lowered their morale. Teachers feel supported and encouraged when parents get involved with the life of the school and the education of their children.

### Recommendations

This study highlighted specific issues that influence teacher morale and contribute to the understanding of the state of their morale. The study recommends that more attention is given to ensuring that teacher morale is enhanced for educational goals to be realized. Improving teacher morale has many benefits in that it helps teachers to maintain a positive attitude and be happy at work. It is hoped that understanding what influences teacher morale can be used to develop targeted interventions aimed at enhancing teacher morale. Another key policy priority should therefore be to plan for teacher involvement in professional development programmes. In addition, this study contributes to the existing body of literature on teacher morale. Future research that will involve longitudinal studies to establish the influence of teacher morale should be undertaken in other districts in the Mpumalanga province. Furthermore, models to examine the theoretical and practical impact of teacher morale must be established, to foster and develop teacher morale for teachers to acquire a love and enthusiasm for their job.

### Limitations

Acknowledging the study's limitations allows the reader to appreciate the constraints imposed on the study and to comprehend the context in which the research claims are made (Flick, 2014).

Due to time and funding constraints, this study was limited to one district (Bohlabela) out of four districts in Mpumalanga Province, resulting in a small sample. The Bohlabela District is divided into sixteen circuits; however, this study was carried out in four circuits of Bohlabela District which are Greenvalley, Manyeleti, Aurtherseat, and Casteel. These restrictions might reduce the generalisability of the research findings in other contexts. In the future, the research could be expanded to include other circuits and districts in the Mpumalanga Province.

### Authorship Contribution Statement

Mboweni: Conceptualization, design, analysis, writing. Taole: Interpretation, Editing/reviewing, supervision.

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