



Cape Peninsula
University of Technology

**EXPLORING TEACHERS' EXPERIENCES OF THE EDUCATOR
ASSISTANT PROGRAMME IN A HIGH SCHOOL IN THE METRO
EAST EDUCATION DISTRICT (WCED)**

by

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**Thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree Master of
Education**

in the Faculty of Education

at the Cape Peninsula University of Technology

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Mowbray

November 2025

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Signed

Date: November 2025

ABSTRACT

Academic research in South Africa's basic education sector is still developing; however, this sector often serves as a research site and context for researchers in related fields such as higher education, meaning comparatively more external researchers conduct studies in schools than schoolteachers. The motivation of this study was two-pronged (i) the researcher is a teacher at the sector under investigation and thus sought to address the aforementioned anecdotal conclusion, (ii) moreover, this study focused at giving teachers a platform to share their lived experiences of working with educator assistants as their voices are often overlooked in government administrative decision making.

Therefore, the primarily objective of the current study was to explore teachers' lived experiences of the working with Educator Assistants (EA) and their overall experience of the educator assistants programme in a selected township high school in the Western Cape Education Department, Metro East Education District. Academic research investigating teachers' lived experiences of the EA programme launched under the Presidential Youth Employment Initiative and implemented by the Department of Basic Education is scarce. Against this, the current study sought to answer questions such as, what are teachers' experiences of working with EAs and what was the impact of the EA programme in the study's context. To guide the research process, the Professional Learning Community (PLC) framework was adopted as the theoretical lens; teachers' lived experiences of working with EAs and their experience of the EA programme were examined through the PLC and its sub-dimensions. This approach concurrently articulated teachers' perceptions of EA influences in shaping the schools' PLC.

Accordingly, the study adopted an interpretivist, exploratory qualitative design to understand teachers' subjective experiences, feelings, and opinions on working with EAs and the EA programme, drawing specifically on phenomenology. Individual in-depth interviews and a focus group were conducted with teachers at the selected school and ATLAS.ti was used to analyse the data. Teachers' lived experiences with EAs, and the EA programme also informed the findings on how the programme affected the school's PLC.

Research findings indicate that teachers found EAs helpful and valuable, moreover teachers reported that the EA programme positively influenced and enhanced the school's PLC. Teachers overwhelmingly affirmed the programme's value and expressed a desire for its reinstatement (the EA programme was discontinued in November 2023 and reintroduced in May 2025; data generation occurred between these periods, hence teachers' experiences were retrospective). The PLC sub-dimensions of Shared Leadership and Decision-Making, Collaborative Inquiry, Shared Practice, and Evolving Relationships were perceived positive influences in a township school; however, Accountability was not.

Frameworks and models in the education literature are largely theoretically sound, but their robustness may be questionable due to limited interrogation across different contexts. This study therefore makes a distinct contribution to the education literature by examining a widely referenced framework in a new context. This study recommends negotiated and collaborative decision making between government, the Department of Basic Education, and schoolteachers in administrative decisions that directly impact schools' PLC.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Firstly, I give all glory and thanks to **God**. Without His grace, strength, and guidance, this work would not have been possible.

- **Dr Rolene Liebenberg**, I wish to express my deepest appreciation to you. For your guidance, patience, and support, that has been central to the completion of this thesis. Thank you for believing in the value of my research and for your constructive feedback. Your mentorship has shaped both this work and my confidence as a scholar. I am sincerely grateful for the time and dedication you have invested in me.
- **Dr Samantha Kriger**, I would like to extend my sincere gratitude for your support and insightful guidance. Your contributions enriched this study, and your willingness to assist whenever needed is truly appreciated. Thank you for your time, your encouragement, and the care you showed throughout this research journey.
- My mother, **Nomahlubi Sodlaka**, whose love, prayers, and unwavering support carried me through every challenge of this journey. Thank you for every sacrifice, every encouraging word, and every moment you stood by me. Gogi, you are valued.
- I am deeply grateful to my husband, **Kuhle Zwakala**, thank you for your patience. You have been my biggest supporter since day one. I love and appreciate you.
- My brother **Xhanti Sodlaka**, whose admiration and belief in me have always inspired me to push further. Thank you for your love, your pride in me, and for always cheering me on.

DEDICATION

To my late father, Sisa Patrick Sodlaka, though you are no longer with me, your guidance, love, and unwavering belief in me continue to inspire every step I take. This work is a testament to the values you instilled in me and the dreams you have always encouraged me to pursue. I carry you in my heart, always, Dlamini.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS AND ACRONYMS

BEEI	Basic Education Employment Initiative
DBE	Department of Basic Education
DHET	Department of Higher Education and Training
DoE	Department of Education
EA	Educator Assistant
FGD	Focus Group Discussion
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
HoD	Head of Department
LSA	Learning Support Assistant
PES	Presidential Employment Stimulus
PLC	Professional Learning Community
PYEI	Presidential Youth Employment Initiative
SGB	School Governing Body
SMT	School Management Team
StatsSA	Statistics South Africa
TA	Teacher Assistant
UK	United Kingdom
USA	United States of America
WC	Western Cape
WCED	Western Cape Department of Education

GLOSSARY

Term

Epistemology	Epistemology is the philosophical study of the nature, origin, and limits of human knowledge.
Etymology	The study of the origin of words and the way in which their meanings have changed throughout history.

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Introduction

School learning environments are co-created by teachers and administrative staff under the supervision of the school principal. Together, these stakeholders directly influence teaching and learning practices, which in turn determine the school's overall performance. Because these work environments are co-created, teachers share both intellectual and physical workspaces with administrative staff, which directly impacts teaching and learning activities (Carpenter, 2017). The South African Department of Basic Education (DBE) has incorporated a new layer of administrative staff in schools. Under the Presidential Youth Employment Initiative (PYEI), implemented as the Basic Education Employment Initiative (BEEI), the department employed Educator Assistants (EAs) in schools across the country. Launched in December 2020, the initiative aims to support teachers in addressing identifiable learning gaps by assisting with classroom preparation before lessons, providing in-class support during lessons, and helping manage learners after lessons (DBE, 2021).

Against this background, this study sought to explore teachers' experiences of how the EA programme influences the teaching and learning community in the Metro East Education District, Western Cape Education Department (WCED), South Africa. Due to a lack of empirical research on the impact of the EA programme in South African township schools, the advantages and disadvantages of the programme in these schools are unknown (Sabinet, 2023). Primarily, the EA programme seeks to achieve three objectives: (i) to ensure that teachers are supported in classrooms by maintaining discipline and preparing classrooms, (ii) to help teachers address identifiable learning gaps in various grades, and (iii) to assist teachers in reducing administrative workloads (DBE, 2021). Against this backdrop, the current study explored the impact of the EA programme from teachers' perspectives. This phenomenological study aimed to examine how schoolteachers describe their lived experiences with EAs and the overall impact of the programme (Koopman & Koopman, 2020).

In essence, the study examined how the EA programme influences schools' Professional Learning Communities (PLC), school culture, and teaching and learning practices. This was done by applying the existing PLC theoretical framework (Carpenter, 2017) in a new context – a high school in Khayelitsha. The PLC thus provided a theoretical lens for a holistic exploration of teachers' experiences of EAs and the EA programme.

1.2 Background of the study

1.2.1 Global overview of EAs

In the United States of America (USA), EAs are referred to as '*instructional aides*'. As in South Africa, their employment was motivated by efforts to combat poverty (Lewis, 2003, as quoted by Smuts, 2022). The importance of collaboration between teachers and EAs is highlighted by a study by Wallace et al. (2001), in which teachers reported that joint planning and scheduling with EAs were beneficial, particularly when tasks were aligned with the assistants' strengths and interests.

In the USA, Giangreco et al. (2010) found that an overreliance on one-on-one EA support may lead to a wide range of detrimental effects on students' learning processes. Moreover, there was also no evidence to suggest that the presence of EAs directly improves learning outcomes. Thus, the current study sought to understand teachers' experiences and perspectives within the South African context.

Similarly, in England, EAs are known as '*teacher assistants*' (TAs) and are predominantly women, often parents or homemakers. Research with schoolteachers in the United Kingdom (UK) found that they mitigated pupils' overdependence on adult support by sharing lesson plans with assistants (Angelides et al., 2009; Jackson et al., 2021). By contrast, in European countries such as the Czech Republic, TAs are generally young men, and their roles include supporting learners with special needs (Nemec et al., 2015).

Furthermore, the use of EAs to strengthen learning communities is a prominent focus of education policy and research in sub-Saharan Africa, yet policymaking processes remain weak, frequently overlooking teachers' lived experiences. Murugaiah (2023) examined teachers' beliefs about the purposes and values of education, the nature of teaching and learning, and the state of the professional learning community in Niger. Cassim and Moen (2020) explored the contributions of EAs to quality education in Grade 1 classrooms in South Africa. Although Mashele (2023) questioned the employment of EAs in South African schools instead of unemployed qualified teachers in an opinion column in the Sunday Times (4 June 2023, p. 3), my database search (Sabinet, 2023) did not identify any completed academic research in South Africa on teachers' experiences of the EA programme.

1.2.2 EAs in South Africa

As argued in the previous section, the definition of EAs varies across countries (Johnson, 2018). In South Africa, *teachers* are formally referred to as '*educators*'. The term '*education or educator assistants*' is appropriate in the context of South African schools (DBE, 2020).

Although EAs are described using the same titles across the sector, their duties range from general administrative work and manual labour to active roles in the classroom (DBE, 2020). According to Smuts (2022), understanding the history and roles of EAs is critical for insight into their influence on schools' learning environments.

Nonetheless, as noted earlier, EAs are known by different titles across regions and countries and undertake a variety of duties and responsibilities within school environments (Webster & De Boer, 2019). It is therefore imperative to clarify the role of EAs in schools for both students and educators, as EAs directly affect schools' teaching and learning environments (Blatchford et al., 2013; Smuts, 2022). Wren (2017) found that EAs can provide five types of support in schools, namely academic support, social support, behavioural support, physical support, and classroom support. Given the limited research on EAs and their roles in South African township schools, this study sought to contribute to the body of existing knowledge by addressing this gap. Specifically, it explored teachers' lived experiences of the EA programme in a selected township school.

The Department of Basic Education recruited EAs on short-term fixed-term contracts between the years 2020 and 2023 in public schools across all nine provinces in South Africa, the project was known as the Educator Assistants Programme. This programme was an element of the Presidential Youth Employment Initiative aimed at addressing youth unemployment post the COVID-19 Pandemic. The role of the EAs was to support teachers in their teaching and learning practices at schools (DBE, 2020; 2021; 2023). EAs possessed various qualifications, including qualifications in education; even though a qualification in education was not a mandatory requirement. However, they worked under the supervision of qualified educators. This study explored teachers' experiences of working with EAs and their overall impressions and experience of the EA programme (DBE, 2023).

1.2.3 Teachers' experiences

The impact of EAs on students' learning outcomes has been well researched (Harris & Aprile, 2015; O'Rourke & West, 2015; Gibson et al., 2016; Opie et al., 2017). However, research focusing on teachers' perspectives and experiences of EAs is underdeveloped. Teachers' lived experiences are individually held conceptions that are constantly related to the school environment and their beliefs. In short, teachers' lived experiences are interrelated with their beliefs or interpretation of their work environment (Fives & Buehl, 2012). It can therefore be concluded that teachers' experiences are shaped by their individual belief systems, professional working environments, and societal influences.

Moreover, the role of EAs has significantly transformed over time, from undertaking administrative tasks to specialised roles in teaching and learning activities (Rutherford, 2012).

However, when utilised ineffectively, EAs become a cost due to their low impact on the teaching and learning process. Supporting learners in their learning activities therefore requires a collaborative approach between teachers and their assistants. Consequently, understanding teachers' input and experiences of how the EA programme impacts schools' professional learning communities will benefit the WCED and the DBE at large (Jackson et al., 2021).

1.2.4 Schools' professional learning environment

A professional learning environment consists of educators who collaborate and engage in continuous reflection on their teaching and professional practices, with the aim of improving the overall performance of schools (Lin et al., 2018). In essence, teachers collectively construct meaning, knowledge, and teaching and learning practices (Oppi & Eisenschmidt, 2022). Consistent with community of practice theory, schools' professional learning environments or communities are characterised by educators who support one another in the pursuit of professional growth. To cultivate such communities, educators share experiences, stories, tools, and strategies to address common workplace challenges (Trust & Horrocks, 2018).

Furthermore, the DBE has introduced another layer of internal stakeholders in South African schools – EAs. By their very roles, EAs directly influence schools' PLCs. This study therefore explored how EAs shape schools' collaborative learning cultures and interactions with PLCs through the lens of teachers' experiences. To achieve its objectives, the study was guided by PLC theory (Hord, 1997; Carpenter, 2017).

1.3 Research problem

Teachers' lived experiences of the EA programme – launched in December 2020 under the BEEI in South African schools – remain largely unexplored (Sabinet, 2024). This study addressed this gap by examining the programme's impact on EA support in three key areas: (i) classroom preparation and discipline management, (ii) identifying learning gaps across all grades, and (iii) assisting with administrative workloads. The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore teachers' experiences of the Educator Assistants programme in a high school in the Metro East Education District (WCED) (Hall et al., 2016; Koopman & Koopman, 2020). Teachers' reflective responses provided valuable insights into their experiences of the programme and indicated the extent to which it is achieving its intended outcomes (Borrero et al., 2018).

Although academic research is common in the basic education sector, the voices and lived experiences of classroom teachers are often overlooked (Borrero et al., 2018). Engaging

teachers in academic research should be prioritised and understood in the context of their expertise and broader professional lives (Leat et al., 2015). Researchers in this sector should therefore find effective ways to amplify teachers' voices in educational research. In response, this study addressed both educational theory and practice. For theoretical guidance, it adopted the widely referenced PLC framework Teachers' lived experiences of the EA programme were explored through the lens of this framework, as a school's learning community is shaped primarily by the interactions between teachers and their assistants (Carpenter, 2017).

1.4 Research objective

The objectives of the study were to:

1.4.1 Primary objective

1.4.1.1 Explore teachers' experiences of the Educator Assistants programme in a high school in the Metro East Education District (WCED).

1.4.2 Secondary objectives

1.4.2.1 Examine the impact of the Educator Assistants programme in a high school in the Metro East Education District (WCED).

1.4.2.2 Explore teachers' perceptions of the role of Educator Assistants in shaping a schools' Professional Learning Community in a high school in the Metro East Education District (WCED).

1.5 Research questions

To achieve these objectives, the study was guided by the following research questions:

1.5.1 Primary research question

1.5.1.1 What are teachers' experiences of the Educator Assistants programme in a high school in the Metro East Education District (WCED)?

1.5.2 Secondary research questions

1.5.2.1 What is the impact of the Educator Assistant programme in a high school in the Metro East Education District (WCED)?

1.5.2.2 What are teachers' perceptions of the role of Educator Assistants in shaping a schools' Professional Learning Community in a high school in the Metro East Education District (WCED)?

1.6 Conceptual framework

1.6.1 Professional Learning Community (PLC)

This study adopted the PLC framework to guide its theoretical approach and to explore teachers' experiences of the EA programme, particularly its influence on the school's collaborative learning culture. According to Carpenter (2017), the PLC framework comprises the following sub-dimensions or features:

- Shared leadership and decision-making – refers to workplace dynamics in which educators and other staff members are empowered to act as co-leaders, guiding teaching and learning (Carpenter, 2017).
- Collaborative inquiry – the shared workplace – incorporates collaborative inquiry and problem-solving by teachers to evaluate the effectiveness of learning and teaching, supported by assessment systems and achievement data. The shared workplace is the collaborative space that teachers control to examine data, plan, share ideas, and set targets for learning and teaching experiences. The emergence of learning and teaching experiences tailored to individual learners is regarded as an innovation (Carpenter, 2017).
- Shared practice – shared workplace provides opportunities for teachers and other staff to share and refine learning and teaching practices based on student achievement, goals, and the management of the collaborative inquiry process (Carpenter, 2017).
- Accountability for outcomes – members of the shared workplace must accept responsibility for the results of the collaborative inquiry process, learner achievement, and approaches to learning and teaching (Carpenter, 2017).
- Evolving relationships – changes in personal and professional relationships among group members affect practice in the shared workplace. Shared trust, beliefs about practice, and common values regarding outcomes develop as the strength of relationships grows over time. Additionally, the shared workplace should provide opportunities for rich, deep professional relationships in which teachers and other staff members can navigate differing values and beliefs in a respectful, mutually

caring manner (Carpenter, 2017). Figure 1.1 presents the conceptual framework of this study.

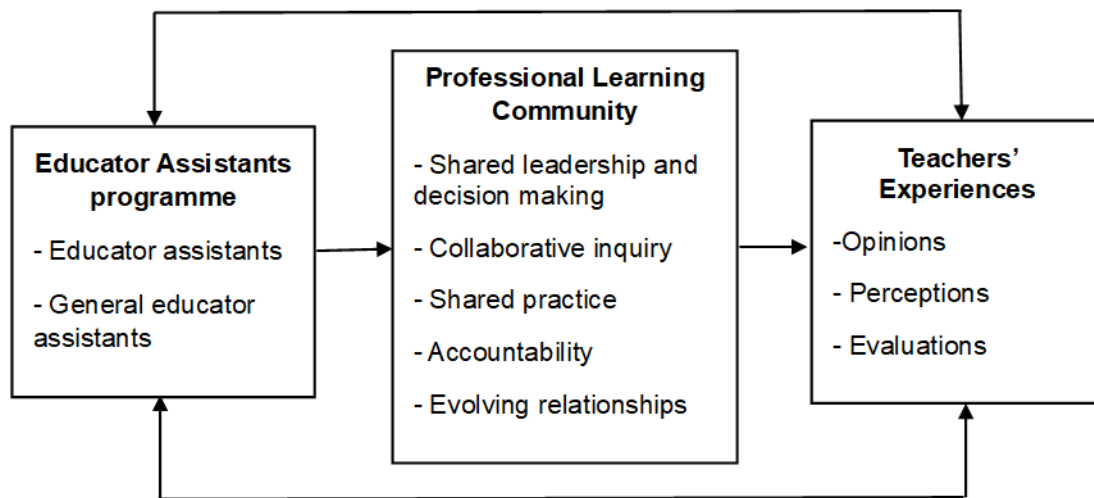


Figure 1.1: Conceptual framework (adapted from Carpenter, 2017)

Schools' professional learning culture is influenced by various stakeholders, including school management teams (SMTs), teachers, and EAs, who are the focus of this study. As shown in Figure 1.1 above, the EA programme was evaluated through the lens of the PLC framework. To understand teachers' experiences of the EA programme, the study was guided by features of PLCs necessary for their effective functioning.

1.7 Research design and methodology

1.7.1 Design

Academic research should reflect the researcher's epistemological position within the relevant discipline (Bell, 2013). Against this backdrop, I argue that both researchers and participants shape the research process and its findings; ultimately, knowledge is mediated through the researcher's interpretation (Scheiner, 2019). Epistemologically, this study accepts that teachers' experiences and perspectives regarding the EA programme at the selected school give meaning to the findings on how the programme impacts the school's teaching and learning environment. From a paradigmatic point of view, the study adopted an interpretivist research design to explore teachers' in-depth perceptions, attitudes, beliefs, and lived experiences regarding how the EA programme impacts a school's professional teaching and learning environment (Bleiker et al., 2019).

1.7.2 Methodology

Methodologically, this study is framed by phenomenology. Fundamentally, phenomenology is grounded in data from research participants who have experienced the phenomenon under investigation and focuses on understanding individuals' unique lived experiences of that phenomenon (Petty et al., 2012; Cibangu, 2022; Huynh et al., 2021). The author draws on Creswell's (2017) and Koopman and Koopman's (2020) understanding of qualitative phenomenological research, which they describe as an in-depth engagement with a small number of participants in order "to develop patterns and relationships of meaning". In this context, the focus is on teachers' experiences of the impact of the EA programme in a South African township high school. Township schools are located in impoverished areas and are largely attended by learners from low socio-economic backgrounds (Mbuisa, 2016).

Classrooms are often overcrowded, and teachers are overwhelmed; therefore, EAs should play a pivotal role in (i) preparing classrooms and maintaining discipline, (ii) identifying learning gaps across all grades, and (iii) assisting with administrative work. Since the inception of the EA programme in 2020, as a schoolteacher, I have personally observed how EAs behaved and influenced the learning environment in my school in Khayelitsha township; however, the impact of the EA programme has yet to be empirically explored in South African township schools, and this research aims to address this gap. Consistent with the study's interpretivist paradigm, teachers' experiences of the EA programme are central to the theoretical position of this study. Therefore, township public schools were the target population for this study for two main reasons:

- i. Academic research investigating the impact of the EA programme has yet to be conducted in South Africa, particularly in township schools.
- ii. Moreover, academic research on teachers' experiences of the EA programme in this sector remains scant.

1.7.2.1 Participation selection

A purposive sample of high school teachers (Grades 8–12) across various disciplines – including Heads of Department (HoDs), grade leaders, and teachers – was selected. The study employed a purposive, judgemental sampling approach (Malhotra, 2020) to ensure that participants possessed relevant experience with the EA programme. This qualitative research design incorporated two data generation methods: on-site focus groups and face-to-face semi-structured interviews, conducted with teachers at a selected township high school within the Metro East Education District, WCED, South Africa. The use of non-probability, judgemental sampling was appropriate, as the study aimed to capture the views and lived experiences of specific participants directly involved in the EA programme (Marshall, 1996).

1.7.2.2 Data generation

Two data generation methods were employed: an on-site focus group discussion (FGD) and semi-structured one-on-one interviews.

i. Semi-structured interview

In this qualitative study, face-to-face semi-structured interviews were conducted with Grades 8–12 high school teachers in a township school. According to Petty et al. (2012), interviews are the most suitable data generation method for phenomenological studies. In line with this guidance, to explore teachers' experiences of the EA programme, the study used individual in-depth interviews. In exploratory qualitative research, in-depth interviews with sector experts are encouraged (Malhotra, 2017). As detailed in the next section, the interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed for analysis. Although the length of interviews varied, Petty et al. (2012) note that such interviews typically range from 30 to 90 minutes.

ii. Focus group discussion

A FGD is a discussion led by skilled moderators in an unstructured manner with a small group of participants (Malhotra, 2017). The FGD comprised teachers and grade heads for Grades 8–12 from the selected school. The discussion took place in an empty classroom without interruptions during the interview process. Participants responded to a series of questions based on the research topic. All data collected from the FGD were triangulated with data gathered from the one-on-one interviews, with conclusions drawn from the combined evidence obtained through these methods.

1.7.2.3 Data analysis

Petty et al. (2012) state that in phenomenological research, data analysis involves coding, such as the coding of interview transcripts. In this study, the in-depth interviews FGDs with schoolteachers were audio-recorded and then transcribed into text. The qualitative data were then analysed using the software ATLAS.ti, which also facilitated the reporting of findings. Finally, thematic analysis was employed to identify patterns in the qualitative data.

1.7.3 Trustworthiness

According to Connelly (2016), trustworthiness concerns the rigour of the data and methods used to ensure a study's quality and credibility; thus, research procedures should render a study worth reading. In qualitative research, trustworthiness encompasses *credibility*, *transferability*, *dependability*, and *confirmability* (Korstjens & Moser, 2018). The participants in the current study were teachers in the field of basic education, and thus can be considered

experts in the sector. Participation was entirely voluntary, and participants' confidentiality and anonymity were prioritised. Written consent was obtained before conducting all interviews.

Furthermore, a necessary level of trust was established between the researcher and the participants. Although broad research findings may be shared with the school and the department upon request, participants will not be involved in any process after data generation, and the school's name and the details of individual participants will be concealed. From an ethical perspective, the participants' confidentiality and consent were prioritised as required by the CPUT Faculty of Education Ethics Committee (see Appendix F – The Participant Consent Form).

1.7.4 The researcher's position

The researcher was considered an 'insider', as she teaches in the same region where the data were collected. Accordingly, she conducted the in-depth interviews with high school teachers. This positionality benefitted the study by affording ready access to participants (Dwyer & Buckle, 2009). Recognising that bias is often questioned in qualitative research, the researcher upheld the highest standards of credibility, ethical conduct, authenticity, and honesty to provide faithful accounts of teachers' experiences of the EA programme.

1.7.5 Ethical consideration

Ethical considerations in research concern the rights and ethical practices involved in conducting studies. These include respecting participants' right to decide whether to take part, guaranteeing confidentiality, and protecting personal information (Schurink, 2010; Singh, 2020). This study adhered to these principles, and the researcher respected all participants' right to choose whether to participate fully, partially, or not at all in the data generation process. Consent to conduct the research was obtained from both the school concerned and the WCED (see Appendices A and B, pp. 97-98). Furthermore, this study fully adhered to the research ethics requirements of CPUT's Faculty of Education Ethics Committee. Ethics clearance was obtained before data generation commenced (see Appendix C).

Overall, to address all ethical issues, this study was guided by five main ethical considerations in social science research, namely minimising risks, respecting autonomy, protecting participants' privacy, offering reciprocity, and ensuring equal treatment of participants (Hammersley & Traianou, 2012, as quoted by Arendse, 2022).

- Minimising risk: During primary data generation, no emotional or other harm was caused to participants. The researcher respected the participants' work and social responsibilities, and interviews were scheduled to suit their availability.

- Respecting autonomy: The nature and purpose of the research were explained to all the participants. As an exploratory study, open-ended questions enabled the participants to express themselves freely without undue guidance.
- Protecting participants' privacy: The identities of participants were concealed, and both the school where the research was conducted and all individual participants were anonymised.
- Offering reciprocity: All participants were treated with respect. Feedback and the study's findings will be provided to the participants upon request.
- Equal treatment: All participants were treated equally and with respect. Each provided written consent before the interview began and was informed that they could withdraw it at any time.

1.8 Significance of the study

The contribution of this study is twofold: (i) it explores teachers' experiences of the EA programme within the South African school sector, specifically in a township high school; the findings may be useful to the WCED and the DBE more broadly in assessing how the EA programme influences schools' professional learning communities, and may contribute to future departmental planning; and (ii) from an academic perspective, it examines the applicability of a widely referenced framework (PLC) in a new context, indicating whether the framework is relevant and applicable in a township high school.

1.9 Delimitations of the study

Even though the current study explored teachers' lived experiences with EAs and the EA programme in the Western Cape Education Department, Metro East District, it specifically focused on one township high school. Teachers' from grades eight to ten were targeted as participants and the only criteria was that each teacher must have previously worked with a Teacher Assistant. The school that was explored is a high school in Khayelitsha, the biggest township by population in the city of Cape Town municipality.

1.10 Chapter summary

This chapter introduced the study by outlining its background and context, with a particular focus on South Africa's basic education sector and the WCED. As the research examined a specific programme within a township context, the programme's background was briefly

discussed. A preliminary review of the literature was then presented, with particular attention to the theoretical framework adopted. Key components of the thesis were also contextualised, including the problem statement, research objectives and questions, and the research methodology. The following chapter provides a more detailed review of the current literature and identifies the research gap.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Introduction

The primary aim of this study was to understand teachers' experiences of the EA programme in a South African school. To achieve this aim, an extensive review of existing literature was essential to establish a sound theoretical foundation. Accordingly, this chapter analyses and synthesises relevant literature to construct the theoretical basis for the study. Through a critical engagement with existing research, the chapter provides contextual grounding and delineates the study's contribution to the broader field of educational literature. In doing so, it situates the current study within the educational literature and discusses critical constructs relevant to its context.

Academic research is common in the education profession; however, the voices and lived experiences of teachers are often overlooked (Borrero et al., 2018). Teachers' lived experiences are individually held conceptions that are continually related to the school environment and to their beliefs. Teachers' lived experiences are interrelated with their beliefs about, and interpretations of, their work (school) environment (Fives & Buehl, 2012). By contrast, the impact of EAs on students' learning outcomes has been well researched (Harres & Aprile, 2015; O'Rourke & West, 2015; Gibson et al., 2016; Opie et al., 2017). However, research focusing on teachers' perspectives and experiences of EAs is limited, particularly in South Africa. Consequently, this phenomenological study addresses this gap by investigating how schoolteachers describe their lived experiences with EAs and the overall impact of the EA programme in a selected township school within the WCED (Koopman & Koopman, 2020).

The chapter is structured as follows: The discussion begins with an explanation of the theories that underpinning the study – Dewey's theory of experience. This is followed by the contextualisation and application of the social-ecological framework (McMahon et al., 2017). Thereafter, phenomenology (a critical guide to this inquiry) is discussed, followed by the community of practice, the PLC, the history of the South African school system, township schools, EAs, the Presidential Employment Stimulus, and the EA Programme in South Africa. The chapter concludes with a sectoral overview of the WCED and its context.

2.2 Theory of experiences

With the current study's focus being on teachers' experiences of the EA programme in a selected township high school, Dewey's (1938) theory of experience was deemed an appropriate theoretical lens to frame the review of relevant literature. Experience is shaped through the interaction between human beings and their environments; it arises in the interplay between a person and their context. As a central concept in education, Dewey, an educational pedagogue, conceptualises experience as a natural phenomenon inherently situated within human existence and its environments; 'experience is what we do', meaning it cannot be detached from human beings, whether as providers or consumers of education (Dewey, 1892) as quoted by Berding, 1997. Experience is a foundational concept in Dewey's pedagogical worldview; he positions it as comprising both trying and undergoing and defines education as the continuous reconstruction of experience. He explains educative experiences as those that are agreeable in the short term, connected to past experiences, and conducive to future experiences, thereby yielding growth (Krutka et al., 2017). Figure 2.1 below depicts Dewey's theory of experience in graphical form.

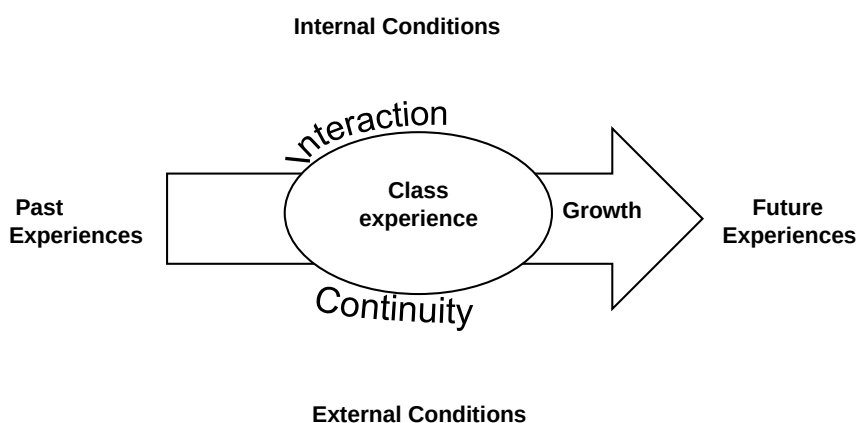


Figure 2.1 Theory of experience

(Source: Dewey, 1938, as quoted by Krutka et al., 2017).

This framework views continuity and interaction as the longitudinal and latitudinal aspects of educative experience (Dewey, 1938). Continuity rests on prior experiences that are modified to shape future encounters with a given phenomenon or environment. For instance, youth unemployment is alarming in South Africa. While education is widely regarded as a means to combat unemployment, employing youth as EAs in schools can address both imperatives. Similarly, the dimension of interaction does not occur independently or in a vacuum (Krutka et al., 2017). That is, experiences are shaped by the environments in which people live; as noted

by Dewey (1938, as quoted by Stark, 2020), experience occurs within the person while arising from sources outside the person. Stark (2020) concurs, stating that experience is always situated in a specific moment and place that shape it, and the person undergoing it is part of that world.

In this study's context, township schoolteachers should consider how external (e.g. communities, parents, government) and internal environments (students, school governing bodies [SGBs], SMTs, EAs) shape their experience of the EA programme (Krutka et al., 2017; DBE, 2022). From a Deweyan perspective, the teacher is an integral part of the school environment shaped by EAs and experiences it through interaction (Dewey, 1938). Clarifying foundational dimensions of experience – interaction, continuity, environment – and their interconnectedness may help understand schoolteachers' experiences of the EA programme in South African township schools. Social-ecological theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) also provided a suitable framework to guide this study in addressing the identified research gap.

2.3 Social-ecological framework

Social-ecological theory states that individuals are affected by proximal and distal factors across multiple levels of analysis. This means that individuals interact with one another within and across levels, and there are bidirectional influences between individuals and their environments (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; McMahon et al., 2017:503). Based on the social-ecological framework, McMahon et al. (2017) identify three levels important in a school environment, namely individual, interpersonal, and organisational. This model is relevant to the current study, as teachers' experiences of the EA programme are primarily individual; moreover, through school operations that foster teamwork and relationships with other teachers, their experiences can also be interpersonal; finally, at an organisational level (e.g., the DBE, the WCED, and the SMT), policies and systems inherently affect teachers' work environments and experiences, including their experience of the EA programme.

- Individual level: As an educator in this sector, I have observed that policy formulation typically occurs at higher levels by the DBE and the WCED, with implementation delegated to schools. However, direct engagement with individual teachers regarding their perspectives and experiences on certain issues remains limited (author's own note). In response to this gap, the present study focused on exploring teachers' lived experiences of the EA programme in a township school in the WC.
- Interpersonal level: In the context of this study, the interpersonal level refers to collaboration and relationships among teachers and other stakeholders within the

school environment, including fellow teachers, administrative staff, and EAs. The quality of these working relationships directly affects the overall school climate and, ultimately, performance (Price, 2011; McMahon et al., 2017:503). The introduction of a new layer of administrative support staff between 2020–2023, in the form of EAs, influenced this climate. Through teachers' lived experiences, this study explored how the presence of EAs transformed school environments (author's own note).

- Organisational level: According to McMahon et al. (2017), this level involves the structures, systems, and policies that shape the functioning of schools. Although the EA programme was initiated by the DBE, its implementation depended on individual schools. Consequently, new administrative structures were required to facilitate collaboration and participation purposes within each school. This study contends that, for effective reflection and planning, both the DBE and the WCED would benefit from incorporating feedback derived from schoolteachers' lived experiences of the EA programme.

2.4 Community of practice

Communities of practice are widely understood as networks of people who share ideas in professional environments. Community implies belonging to a particular group, characterised by belonging, support, collaboration, and a degree of trust (Nixon & Brown, 2013). The concept of *communities of practice* is often used to examine how groups of professionals learn and share knowledge. Individual professionals within the community share common interests and concerns and interact frequently. Skill sets and competencies are developed through interaction and, consequently, learning occurs as a result of shared activities (Federici & O'Brien, 2022).

Therefore, communities of practice foster collaborative learning and growth among professionals who share common interests and passions (Jones et al., 2022). The purpose of forming such communities is to produce and share knowledge and experiences. According to Wenger and Trayner (2015), communities of practice are networks that embody two complementary aspects of the social fabric of learning rather than separate structures. The essence of this social fabric lies in its orientation towards shared knowledge rather than mere relationships. In this context, a community of practice embodies an identity of co-creation that is actively shaped by its members (Matemba et al., 2023). Moreover, Lave and Wenger (1991) and Wenger (2011) assert that communities of practice comprise three fundamental elements, as illustrated in Figure 2.2 below.

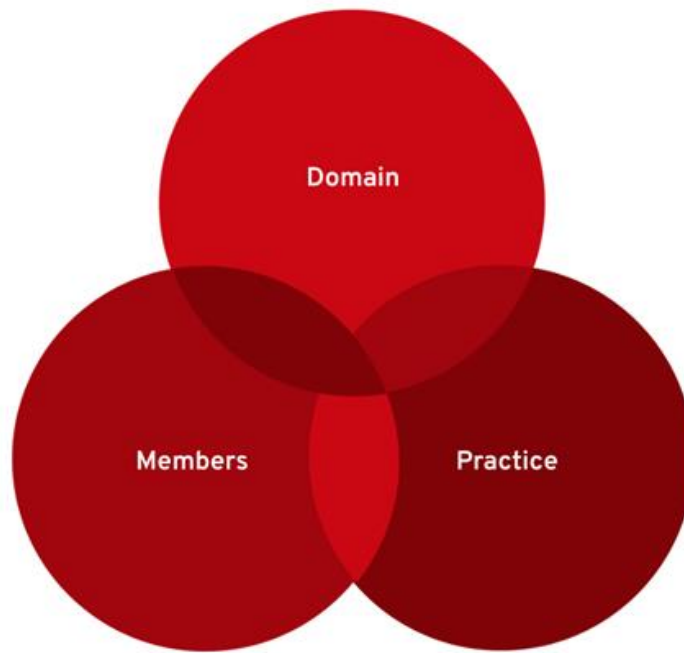


Figure 2.2: Emergence of community of practice elements

(Lave & Wenger, 1991, as quoted by Buckner, 2019)

- A community of practice extends beyond a mere grouping of professionals; it represents a network of individuals who share a common domain of interest, where membership signifies commitment. Members dedicate themselves to this domain and are distinguished from other communities by their specific competencies. However, the expertise within a particular community of practice may not always be fully recognised or valued by those outside it.
- A community pursues the interests of its domain. The community of professionals is committed to its shared domain and engages in joint activities that promote mutual support, collaboration, and the exchange of information. Through these interactions, a co-creative learning environment is cultivated, enabling members to build reliable and dependable relationships.
- Members of a community of practice are not merely people with shared interests but practitioners in their fields; they share resources, stories, and experiences over time and devise solutions to their common challenges.

Furthermore, the authors argue that a community of practice is not a closed entity, as it allows newcomers to engage and contribute to gain new insights while enriching the existing

knowledge of its members (Nixon & Brown, 2013). However, it remains essential to identify members' areas of expertise, knowledge interests, and backgrounds, as well as their readiness to learn from and contribute to the community.

Additionally, Elbrink et al. (2023) differentiate between communities of practice that emerge spontaneously or from the 'bottom up' and more structured and purposeful 'top-down' initiatives. The current research concerns the latter. Bottom-up communities of practice consist of people who are passionate about a specific knowledge speciality and who spontaneously form a community based on intrinsic motivation, whereas top-down communities of practice are purposefully initiated to achieve specific objectives. For instance, in the context of the current study, schools and schooling systems are developed by the government or by private individuals to educate young children and young people. Teachers are then invited or employed to contribute to this community of practice by sharing skills and knowledge among themselves and educating students (Elbrink et al., 2023). This community of practice is more structured and hierarchical; schools are often overseen by SGBs and led by school principals, SMTs, and HoDs. However, all teachers contribute to this community of practice to achieve the schools' objectives. Therefore, a community of practice can also be seen as a vehicle to traverse disciplinary boundaries and facilitate interdisciplinary teaching practices in which knowledge is created, stored and shared, and transferred (Pharo et al., 2014).

Amin and Roberts (2006) state that there are four types of communities of practice, namely: craft, expert, online, and professional communities of practice. This study concerns the professional community of practice, which is often found in schools and institutions of higher learning, including universities. Townley (2020) posits that the concepts of *community of practice* and *professional learning community* in schools are often used interchangeably, although distinctions exist between them. The following section explores the theoretical foundation of the PLC, which served as the guiding framework for the present study.

2.5 Professional learning community

It is important to differentiate between different communities of practice; this can be achieved by examining their antecedents and consequences. According to Amin and Roberts (2006, as cited in Townley, 2020), there are four types of communities of practice: (i) Craft/Task Communities, where the outcome is the reproduction of a skill or task, for instance, a master training an apprentice in a field; (ii) Expert Communities, which are more likely to be planned to respond to emerging problems that can affect other existing communities; (iii) Online Communities, a newer aspect of communities of practice that are difficult to define precisely; and (iv) the Professional Community of Practice, which is prevalent in school systems and

higher education institutions where formal education is provided to students seeking knowledge and skills. The PLC, a theory of interest to the current study, emanates from the Professional Community of Practice.

Therefore, the PLC serves as the theoretical frame of this research as it offers an important lens and context for understanding teachers' experiences of the EA programme. It is widely accepted that PLCs are groups of educators who work together regularly and collaboratively to develop knowledge and skills to positively influence students' academic performance (Dufour & Eaker, 1998; Townley, 2020). Similar to communities of practice, PLCs are groups of professionals who share a common passion and gather to improve their understanding and practice – in this context, schoolteachers. Hence, it can be argued that PLCs seek to improve student learning.

PLCs are more structured and formally organised, with learning communities devising shared goals to solve problems relating to students' learning. Therefore, a PLC sees learning as a social construct based on interaction and collaboration, meaning that learning takes place in the real world, facilitated by teachers for the benefit of students. Furthermore, PLCs have transformed and expanded education beyond the classroom environment, integrating it with regional and national standards (Roberts & Pruitt, 2009; Carrino & Gerace, 2016).

In this regard, research conducted by Kruse et al. (1994) on building PLCs in schools argued that a PLC comprises five elements, namely reflective dialogue, a focus on student learning, interaction among teacher colleagues, collaboration, and shared values and norms. Of interest to this study is how these elements were affected by the introduction of EAs in a South African township high school and what the teachers' experiences were.

- **Collaboration**

The fundamental characteristics of PLCs are collaboration and collegial spaces in which professionals use enquiry-based approaches to address daily teaching practice in their school contexts (Feldman, 2016). In PLCs, collaboration denotes systems and processes in which teachers work interdependently in teams to influence their practice in ways that positively affect teamwork, students' results, and overall school performance (DuFour et al., 2016). Collaborative enquiry has the potential to bring about necessary changes in teaching practice through sustained engagement to generate new ideas, rethink existing beliefs, and pursue ongoing learning about new ways of teaching (Katz & Earl, 2010). A PLC in a collaborative environment encourages teachers or participants to discuss their existing pedagogical learning and teaching practices, allowing for possible shifts in those approaches and beliefs. PLCs should be safe spaces for teacher engagement where everyone can scrutinise and improve or

amend long-held beliefs about teaching approaches. Therefore, mutual engagement, trust, and respect are important in these spaces (Feldman, 2016).

DuFour et al. (2010) argue that collaboration enables teachers to share knowledge and compare notes to devise better teaching practices, so no teacher is isolated from contributing to and benefiting from shared knowledge. This community of teachers relentlessly questions the status quo, continuously seeks new methods of learning and teaching, and then reflects on results (Eaker & Marzano, 2020). Therefore, collaboration within a school PLC maximises teachers' expertise and students' performance.

- **Dialogue atmosphere**

Dialogue characterises PLCs through knowledge sharing and learning. It is a central foundation for building relationships and communities, possessing transformative power in individuals, groups, and communities (Roper, 2019). Its essence lies in attunement to others' points of view and the co-construction of knowledge through critiquing and contrasting ideas. Dialogue is cumulative over time and connects past and future occurrences beyond an immediate interaction (Hennessy et al., 2016). For instance, in a school environment, dialogue enables knowledge to be co-constructed between teachers and students, and among students, through both contradictory and complementary perspectives.

In schools and other educational institutions, students, teachers, lecturers, and administrators frequently convene in groups, with conversations characterised by debate, persuasion, negotiation, and other approaches that contribute to the essence of PLCs (Roper, 2019). Through dialogue, members of a PLC can co-evolve by inventing, learning, and defining themselves as a collective with a common purpose and vision for the future. Dialogue thus functions as a foundational principle of education, as it fosters idea generation and knowledge creation in PLCs such as schools (Zhang, 2016). It nurtures a respectful and enabling engagement in which teachers can willingly and honestly reflect on their practices without fear of undue scrutiny. Dialogue in teachers' PLCs should allow teachers to be vulnerable, to express their uncertainties and fears, and to acknowledge mistakes and conceptual weaknesses. It should also create an environment where participants can collectively devise solutions to the generic problems they encounter in their school community (Feldman, 2016). Zhang (2023) argues that without dialogue, PLCs in schools would be stagnant; teachers, students, and administrators would suffer from boredom and would not fulfil the purpose of the school professional community.

2.5.1 PLCs in schools

In school contexts, PLCs are understood as collaborative, collegial environments where teachers use inquiry-based approaches to address teaching practices. PLCs allow teachers to reflect on practice and examine relationships between stakeholders within the school environment – such as other teachers, students, and administrative staff – to improve the community (Feldman, 2016). In school environments, PLCs shift the focus away from isolated, teacher-centred approaches towards student-centred approaches, where teachers collaborate and work interdependently to achieve a school's intended purpose (Hurst, 2015). Thus, PLCs lead to collective learning that contributes to a school's innovative capacity; when teachers are part of a PLC, they are actively engaged in their own professional learning and that of their colleagues, which should result in improved student learning (Van Meeuwen et al., 2020). Su et al. (2023) concur, noting that a PLC can exist within a school or extend across institutional boundaries; this enables teachers to design lessons collectively, conduct peer reviews, and facilitate ongoing co-reflection on teaching practices in a learning-oriented and growth-promoting manner.

In the South African context Botha (2012) studied PLCs to improve practice and learning in public school and found that these schools can benefit from the practices of PLC which seeks to improve teaching practices and substandard learner achievement. Similarly, Feldman (2020) explored the role of PLCs to support teacher development in the same country. This study argues that learning in PLCs is social and collaborative as PLCs encourage teachers to engage on the social, cultural, and physical structures in schools and how these factors influence teachers' practices. Whereas Botha and Nel (2022) explored purposeful collaboration through PLC and its influence on South African teacher educators' challenges.

Moreover, Goncalves et al. (2022) posit that teachers in a PLC develop a sense of community, a positive view of their professional environment, and shared growth and empowerment. The authors further state that school-based PLCs are grounded in the understanding that knowledge emerges from teachers' everyday experiences and that professional learning is enhanced through critical reflection on those experiences.

Teachers' personal experiences, in turn, play a vital role in shaping their identities – influencing their beliefs, values, and aspirations regarding the kind of teachers they wish to become. These identities are situated within broader political, social, institutional, and personal contexts that collectively shape how they make sense of themselves in their professional roles (Kington, 2006, as cited in Feldman, 2016).

Furthermore, teachers' experiences can inform the development of new belief systems and pedagogical approaches. Opfer and Pedder (2011) note that where beliefs and experiences

intersect, teachers make professional instructional decisions that may open new pedagogical possibilities. Guided by this perspective, the current study adopted the PLC framework as its theoretical foundation to explore teachers' experiences of the EA programme in South African schools. In doing so, it explored the following PLC sub-dimensions, as outlined by Carpenter (2017):

- Shared leadership and decision-making – educators and other staff act as co-leaders in guiding teaching and learning.
- Collaborative inquiry – the shared workplace fosters collaborative inquiry and problem-solving by teachers to assess the effectiveness of teaching and learning using assessment systems and achievement data.
- Shared practice – the shared workplace provides opportunities for teachers and other staff to share and refine teaching and learning practices based on student achievement, goals, and the conduct of the collaborative inquiry process.
- Accountability for outcomes – members in the shared workplace are accountable for, and accept, the results of the collaborative inquiry process, learner achievement, and the quality of teaching and learning.
- Evolving relationships – changing personal and professional relationships among group members affect practice in the shared workplace. Trust, shared beliefs about practice, and shared values regarding outcomes develop as the strength of relationships grows over time.

Therefore, to achieve the study's objectives, the EA programme was examined through the lens of the PLC framework. The investigation into teachers' experiences of the EA programme was guided by key features of PLCs deemed essential for the effective functioning of a school-based PLC. According to Townley (2020), PLCs operate across primary, secondary, and high school contexts, where research is translated into practice to improve student outcomes and where competition is de-emphasised. This study focused on a township school in the WC province, South Africa.

2.6 History of the South African schooling system

According to Seroto (2012), the initial schooling system in South Africa was established by indigenous people who passed on the knowledge and skills required for survival over centuries. The author states that an African child was brought up by the entire community in which they

lived and was educated in the culture and traditions of that community. In essence, a curriculum existed: an indigenous education comprising traditions, religion, and rituals delivered orally from one generation to the next. The arrival of colonialists eroded and devalued this indigenous form of education as various Western systems were introduced, depending on who governed the country. South Africa was governed by minority white governments throughout the twentieth century until 1994, and these governments legislated and administered the disenfranchisement and oppression of people of other races, compromising their lives and livelihoods. This systematic race-based discrimination was officialised as apartheid in 1948 when the National Party took office. Among other consequences, this discrimination and segregation created separate schools and a separate schooling system for learners of different races (McKeever, 2017; Walton & Engelbrecht, 2024). Access to education, as well as the type of curriculum and education provided, was determined along racial lines; for instance, the Bantu Education Act of 1953 ensured that black South Africans received an inferior education compared to white South Africans. The Bantu Education curriculum was tailored to limit the intellectual advancement of black South Africans for purposes of control. Consequently, under the apartheid system, schools were divided by race, exacerbating inequalities in education and deepening societal divisions (Tibbetts & Weldon, 2017). Race-based education systems in South Africa promoted disunity, segregation, and discrimination rather than national unity.

The demise of the apartheid government in 1994 led to a drastic transformation of the schooling system (among other sectors) and of schools' PLCs. An immediate task for the post-apartheid government was to address obvious inequalities in the education system through policy changes and robust redress programmes (Feldman, 2016). These programmes were necessary to ensure equal treatment of all schools and learners and to build an inclusive education system that afforded learners equal opportunities. Therefore, the transition from apartheid to democracy was characterised by reconstruction, development, democratisation of the system, non-discrimination, inclusivity, equality, unity, and social justice, among other democratic imperatives.

In essence, the DBE aligned with and subscribed to the country's constitutional values of the equal right to education, non-discrimination, and inclusivity (De Villiers, 2022). Inclusive education was central to this sector and aimed to confront discrimination and educate learners in a cost-effective way. However, even though the principles and practices of inclusive education are universal, they needed to be adapted to a unique post-apartheid South Africa (De Souse, 2020). For instance, the Department of Education (DoE) adopted an inclusive education policy, including Education White Paper 6: Special Needs Education: Building an Inclusive Education and Training System (DoE, 2001; Mosito et al., 2020). Such policy

changes led to a shift in the educational paradigm, and a social-ecological model was adopted as both a framework and an approach to building an inclusive education system (Swart & Pettipher, 2019).

However, shifting the DBE to a social-ecological approach required improving teachers' skills and knowledge to meet learners' needs in the new system. To date, teachers continue to receive training to equip them to impart adequate skills and knowledge to learners. This training also aims to shape teachers' beliefs, attitudes, value systems, behaviour, commitment to social justice, integration, and sense of belonging (Lawrence et al., 2017; Swart & Pettipher, 2019). Christian (2023) concurs that teachers play a key role in transforming the country and the education system by being qualified, competent, dedicated, and caring, as enshrined in the Professional Teaching Standards of the South African Council for Educators (SACE, 2024).

2.6.1 Current state in South African schools

Development of the South African basic education system has required an overhaul of the systematically exclusionary apartheid socio-economic legacies, and evidence suggests many success stories since the dawn of democracy in 1994. However, according to Reddy and Zulu (2019), challenges such as inadequate infrastructure and social protection, as well as slow progress in the quality of teaching and the culture of learning, persist. For instance, although racial segregation and profiling were abolished in South African schools after 1994, schools that historically served the white population largely remain functional, whereas progress in transforming schools that served underprivileged black communities, such as those in townships, has been slow; this study concerns the latter context. Challenges such as crime, lack of order, rebellion, high failure rates, and high dropout rates persist in township schools (Mestry & Ndhlovu, 2014). Township schools largely serve socio-economically disadvantaged learners, and the above challenges can be attributed to these factors (Christian, 2023).

There is a clear correlation between socio-economic privilege and quality of life in South Africa, and the same applies to basic education: the quality of education in privileged suburban areas is superior to that in low socio-economic areas such as townships. Sayed (2016) argues that inequalities from the apartheid education system persist, as racial discrepancies result in learners from disadvantaged areas receiving poorer-quality education compared to those in affluent schools. Inequalities are also evident in physical infrastructure such as classrooms and sports facilities; in affluent schools, learners progress in sports and other extramural activities to a greater extent than those in disadvantaged communities and township schools. Therefore, a direct correlation exists between a school's current and historical context, the quality of education offered, the general wellbeing of learners, and their academic performance.

It is therefore the responsibility of the DBE to recognise that historical imbalances between South African schools still exist, and that varying degrees of support are required to address schools' unique challenges (Smuts, 2022). For instance, township school learners need additional support with the use of English as a medium of instruction. A major challenge in the post-apartheid South African school system is the linguistic mismatch between the English used in schools and the languages used by learners at home and in their communities. Consequently, classes are characterised by multilingualism, with learners often taking opportunities to speak their mother tongue in classrooms (Stoffelsma & Van Charldorp, 2020). In essence, current inequalities in township schools, which largely emanate from the apartheid schooling system and affect schools' Professional Learning Communities, warrant academic exploration to help address existing challenges.

2.6.1.1 Township schools

According to Robbins et al. (2024), three decades after the end of apartheid, South Africa's education system still fails to provide learners in townships with an adequate schooling experience. Townships are characterised by inadequate infrastructure, high population density, limited access to social services, and persistent challenges such as crime, unemployment, and other social ills. More than half of the country's population remains unemployed, with the majority residing in rural areas and townships. This pervasive poverty and inequality continue to have a direct and detrimental impact on schools within these communities. Forty percent of South African learners do not complete Grade 12; this high dropout rate occurs in Grades 10, 11, and 12 and is prevalent in township schools (World Bank, 2022; BusinessTech, 2023; Marsay, 2024). Consequently, township schools are directly affected by these factors (Myende & Nhlumayo, 2020).

Due to economic disparities across South African society, the government categorised schools into a quintile system; in this system, schools in economically disadvantaged communities such as townships receive more substantial support from the DBE than schools in affluent areas such as suburban areas (South Africa, 1996; Reyneke, 2024).

Learners from disadvantaged socioeconomic backgrounds, such as those in townships, continually face academic and social challenges across school, home, and community environments, with these difficulties often hindering academic success (Sinay, 2018; Mampane, 2023). The quality of education in low socioeconomic environments, such as villages and townships in South Africa, is notably substandard. Moreover, these institutions largely serve black and coloured learners. The provision of high-quality schooling in townships is limited by resources and other various environmental adversities (Bayat et al., 2014).

Poverty in township environments is a risk factor that compromises many learners' future ambitions and prospects. Moreover, learners from high-risk environments such as townships are often profiled as 'high risk' due to the possibility of developing behavioural problems arising from exposure to multiple risk factors in their social and community environments (Willis & Hofmeyr, 2018; Mampane, 2023). For instance, Mosito and Sitoyi (2024) conducted a study examining school violence and its impact on teachers' well-being. Their research revealed that educators experienced violence perpetrated by students in township schools within the WC, and that such violent incidents had a detrimental effect on teachers' health and overall well-being. These findings substantiate the assertion that violence and other criminal behaviours originate from the socio-environmental contexts of learners and directly influence the school environment.

Similarly, Metsing and Tlale (2024) found that learners are also victims of school violence, either at the hands of teachers who still practise the outlawed corporal punishment or through violence perpetrated by other learners in the form of fights or bullying. Furthermore, Dlungwane and Hamlall (2024) argued that although violence by schoolboys against schoolgirls in townships is often implicit, this behaviour has contributed to the national scourge of gender-based violence.

Another unique phenomenon in township schools is the necessary parent–teacher partnership (or lack thereof) in educating learners. Parental involvement in learners' educational experiences is a key component globally, and in South African schools parents are empowered to partake in schools' decision-making processes through formalised structures such as SGBs, as stipulated by the South African Schools Act (South Africa, 1996). However, the socio-economic and cultural conditions in township schools limit parent–teacher partnerships (Sibanda, 2021). For instance, townships are largely situated far from urban economic centres, so parents often leave for work very early in the morning and return in the evening; in many instances this prevents them from fully participating in their children's school activities. Moreover, due to historical reasons, many parents and/or guardians in townships are either illiterate or semi-illiterate and therefore cannot fully contribute to their children's academic activities (Scott, 2019).

Moreover, township schooling can largely be characterised as an educational context where schools contend with challenges such as budget constraints and inadequate resource allocation. These challenges compromise the delivery of teaching and learning and undermine administrative processes and practices (Nkambule, 2020; 2023). Nevertheless, through sustained efforts in efficient coordination, effective leadership practices, and school-wide employee commitment, township schools possess the ability to be competitive and, in a few instances, they do succeed (Nkambule, 2023).

However, Thaba-Nkadimene (2020) refutes this notion and argues that the present government is not doing enough to transform inequitable education provision by supplying the resources needed to improve the teaching and learning environment in township schools. Similarly, a study by Nzuza (2024) on school categorisation in South Africa questioned the influence of government policies and politics on dysfunctional schools in townships and rural areas.

In recent times, the South African government, through its DBE, incorporated a new layer of support staff in schools. Under the Presidential Youth Employment Initiative (PYEI), implemented as the Basic Education Employment Initiative (BEEI), the department employed EAs in schools across the country between 2020 and 2023 (this study concerns teachers' reflective experiences of the EA programme during this period; the programme was reintroduced in South African schools in May 2025). The initiative started in December 2020, with the main role of EAs being to help educators address identifiable learning gaps by providing support with classroom preparation before lessons, supporting educators during lessons, and managing learners after lessons (DBE, 2022).

2.7 Educator Assistants

The term EA refers to support staff working in schools who assist teachers by providing administrative support. The term is often used interchangeably with “teacher assistant” or “educational assistant”. In some instances, they are referred to as ‘teacher aide’, ‘paraeducators’, or ‘paraprofessionals’, etcetera (Clarke, 2019; Webster & De Boer, 2019). It is also worth noting that EAs are recognised not only by their different titles but also by their varied personal profiles and the duties assigned to them. Therefore, the description of EAs is in flux depending on the country in question (Johnson, 2018).

For instance, in the USA, EAs are referred to as “instructional aides” (Lewis, 2003, as quoted by Smuts, 2022). In this context, collaboration between educators and EAs is highly valued, with teachers emphasising the importance of joint planning and scheduling. This collaborative approach allows tasks to be aligned with the strengths and interests of EAs, thereby enhancing their contribution to the teaching and learning process (Wallace et al., 2001). However, caution has been raised regarding overreliance on one-on-one EA support, as it may negatively affect learners' overall educational experiences. Academic research by Giangreco et al. (2010) found no conclusive evidence that the presence of EAs directly improves students' learning outcomes.

The current study explored teachers' experiences of the impact of EAs in a South African context. In the UK, EAs are known as "teacher assistants" and are mostly women, often parents or homemakers (Jackson et al., 2021). The employment of EAs has been on the rise in this region, for example in England, where assistants comprise around one quarter of school staff (Losberg & Zwozdiak-Myers, 2021). Moreover, research conducted with schoolteachers in this region revealed that teachers sought to prevent students from becoming overly dependent on TAs by sharing their lesson plans with them (Angelides et al., 2009; Jackson et al., 2021). In several European countries, TAs are typically young men whose primary responsibility is to support learners with special needs (Němec et al., 2015).

Furthermore, the inclusion of TAs has become a prominent topic in education policy and research across Sub-Saharan Africa, with the overarching goal of enhancing students' learning experiences. Murugaiah (2023) examined teachers' beliefs regarding the purpose and values of education, the nature of teaching and learning, the role of TAs, and the overall status of PLC in Niger. Similarly, Cassim and Moen (2020) explored the contributions of EAs to quality education in Grade 1 classrooms in South Africa.

Additionally, the global demand for employing EAs is increasing, making it essential to clarify their roles – specifically, that they are intended to add value to teachers' work rather than replace them. In essence, EAs should recognise that their function within schools is complementary rather than primary (Sharples et al., 2018, as quoted by Losberg & Zwozdiak-Myers, 2021). The following section presents a summary of the literature on EAs in various parts of the world (Smuts, 2022). These sections provide a global overview of some of the differing interpretations of who EAs are, their various titles, roles, and responsibilities, as well as the qualifications and training required for the position.

2.7.1 Educator Assistants' Profiles (a global overview)

EAs are referred to as Teacher Assistants (TAs) in Australia, research (Butt, 2016) was conducted in Australia's mainstream schools in a major city to identify models of TA development and support, and to determine the effectiveness of the models applied. Their responsibilities in this context were to help with additional support to learners who qualified for financial assistance under the focus, City's Student Disability Criteria. Various models were applied in these schools to guide TA on how to execute their responsibilities. For instance, *Withdrawal model*: TAs withdraw students with disabilities and learning difficulties, individually or in groups, from classes to provide targeted support. *Itinerant TA model*: TAs move from student to student, from class to class, and from teacher to teacher to provide support to students with disabilities and learning difficulties. *Unit model*: one TA is assigned to a same-

age unit of four classes, moving between students with disabilities and learning difficulties to provide support. *One-on-one model*: one TA provides support to one student with disabilities and learning difficulties. The *Class support model*: one TA provides support to one class and its teacher, focusing solely on students with disabilities and learning difficulties. Unlike in South Africa TAs in this context were not qualified, but they provided extensive support to students. This study recommended that the required TA qualifications, skills, and training should be reviewed to ensure TAs are fully equipped to facilitate students' learning under the guidance of a teacher. This TA training, including workplace-specific training, should be completed prior to working in an inclusive classroom (Butt, 2016).

Butt (2018) further explored the actual qualifications of TAs compared with the required qualifications in primary schools in Australia's capital city. In this context TAs' main roles were to provide classroom learning support to students with disabilities and learning difficulties, enabling them to access mainstream schools. This study found that TAs receive minimal training and supervision. Requirements for qualification, including prerequisite knowledge are inconsistent across the country, largely due to the lack of formal training platforms.

In Canada EAs are referred to as Educational Assistants (EAs), and Bennett et al. (2021) explored the critical role of Educational Assistants in a district's transition from a segregated to an inclusive service-delivery model for students with special educational needs. In this case EAs were assigned responsibilities including managing student behaviour, providing remedial instruction, facilitating the use of technology, and counselling individual students or small groups throughout the day. Even though it was not mandatory, EAs attended an accredited community college for 18 month long training.

Němec et al. (2015) examined the role of Teaching Assistants working with socially disadvantaged students in selected schools in the Czech Republic. The study found that clarifying that TAs are not replacements for teachers was important; their role was complementary rather than primary. TAs were not responsible for the education of students with special educational needs. The selected schools that participated in this research indicated that allocating TAs to classrooms without professional development and clear job descriptions is insufficient and less effective in supporting learners.

Similarly, in the United Kingdom EAs are known as TAs, and Lehané (2016) explored experienced TAs perceptions and constructions of their work in supporting the inclusion of learners with special educational needs in mainstream secondary schools. TAs' perceptions of their roles varied, from enforcing learner compliance, to providing alternative provision for learners, to implementing inclusive practices where these might be lacking in the teacher's practice etcetera. Interestingly, over 90% of the TAs who took part in this study held university

degrees. Basford et al. (2017) explored how local authorities, senior leadership teams, and teachers understand their responsibilities for the deployment, leadership, and management of TAs in the primary school sector also in the UK. Most TAs who participated indicated that their work entailed 'doing what the teacher asks', 'working with groups during teacher-led class activities', and 'administrative work'. Furthermore, many TAs had a direct instructional, front-line pedagogical role, routinely supporting pupils with special educational needs on a one-to-one basis or in groups. However, TA training was reported as limited.

More specifically Cockroft and Atkinson (2015) examined the role of TAs in England; this study took place at a mainstream primary school in north-west England where TAs are referred to as Learner Support Assistants (LSA). LSAs reported a mismatch between their initial understanding of their roles, as outlined in their job descriptions, and the realities of their employment. Although the LSAs who participated in this study had completed Supported Teaching and Learning Level 2 training, ongoing training was still required throughout their time as LSAs to support learners effectively. Hence Clarke and Visser (2016) recommended that schools should clearly define TA roles in their policies to help teachers and learners understand them in this country. Clarke (2019) explored this context again at a later stage, this time he studied how the TA role has evolved in English primary schools. Findings indicated that TAs' responsibilities had evolved from "paint pot washers" to "pedagogues" in a range of different areas (p. 11), however, training was still limited.

Research on EAs in the United States of America focused on the utilisation of EAs in inclusive schools, EAs are also referred to as TAs in this country. Research findings revealed ambiguity on TA roles and responsibilities, hence this study recommended that clear, appropriate roles be assigned. On going training was also recommended (Giangreco, 2013).

2.7.2 Educator Assistant research in South Africa

Numerous EA studies have been conducted in South African, for instance Richter (2016) researched the School-Based Training Model implemented by universities in South Africa that offer education qualifications. Student teachers are appointed as assistant teachers in schools for a set period as part of their curriculum. This research was conducted at an under-resourced primary school in a peri-urban area of the Eastern Cape Province. Findings indicated that student teachers at universities gain practical experience as assistant teachers in real schools as part of their training. The School-Based Training Model involved placing university student teachers in schools to work as assistant teachers and is a requirement for completing their degrees or certificates. Whereas Seobi and Wood's (2016) study sought to gain insight into the need for EA services in the Foundation Phase, specifically Grade 1 classrooms. The

findings of this study indicated that EA duties varied and included cleaning and other manual tasks; 'watching' classes; assisting with administrative duties such as photocopying and data capture; and identifying learners' needs and helping 'slow' learners. However, no training was provided for EAs; this represents a gap, as training and mentoring are needed to help them develop the skills required to support classroom instruction effectively.

Another study (Cassim & Moen, 2020) in the same country reported that at quantile one to three schools with multi-grade classes in rural and township schools EA tasks varied, including supporting learners' individual needs; providing necessary support to both learners and teachers; 'freeing up' teachers to deliver quality education; and assisting with administrative duties. No formal qualifications were required; teachers prioritised the commitment and personality of EAs.

Lastly as stated earlier and also in Chapter 1, DBE formalised the appointment of EAs from the year 2020 and the role is to "provide support to teaching and learning in the classrooms; provide support to the teacher, such as typing, photocopying, distribution of teaching materials, capturing of data, filing, record keeping, etc; support the teacher with technical preparation of the classroom for teaching and learning and ensure that teaching materials are available and ready for use; oversee learners in and out of the classroom settings such as in the library, laboratory, school events and during lunch breaks etc" (DBE, 2020, p. 36). NQF Level 4 qualification certificate were required for EAs, with NQF Levels 6 and 7 considered an added advantage.

2.7.3 Educator Assistants' profile sub-conclusion

Sections 2.7.2 and 2.7.2 present an empirical, research-based overview of the complexities surrounding the titles, roles, and responsibilities of EAs. It was important for the current study to conduct a global review of the history of EAs for comparison with the South African context. According to Smuts (2022), understanding the history and roles of EAs is essential for gaining insight into their influence within school learning environments. Jardi et al. (2022) examined the factors that shape and sustain successful working relationships between EAs and teachers. This line of inquiry is significant, as the absence of strong collaborative relationships can negatively affect the overall learning environment of schools. These relationships develop over time through negotiation, dedication, and time (Sonah et al., 2024).

Rytivaara et al. (2019) suggest that teacher–EA relationships can be built in three steps: (a) commitment to building a partnership with a colleague, (b) learning to share practical knowledge through discussing their personalities, professional backgrounds, and classroom

practices, and (c) joint reflection. Cassim and Moen (2020) concur that teacher–EA working relationships are critical, particularly in the foundational grades, such as Grade 1. These authors argue that the employment of EAs has become indispensable in South Africa due to the important role they play in assisting both teachers and learners in a school sector that faces challenges such as class overcrowding.

Mashele (2023), writing in an opinion column for the *Sunday Times* (4 June 2023:3), raised a provocative question about the employment of EAs in South African schools – wondering why, amid persistent teacher unemployment, qualified educators were being overlooked. In South Africa, teachers are formally referred to as ‘educators’; thus, ‘EA’ is relevant in South African schools. Even though EAs are referred to by the same title in this sector, the duties assigned to them vary from general administrative work and manual labour to active roles in the classroom environment (DBE, 2020). A national database search conducted by the researcher (Sabinet, 2023) yielded no evidence of completed academic research in South Africa on teachers’ experiences of the EA programme launched under the PYEI and implemented as the BEEI.

2.7.4 South African Presidential Youth Employment Initiative

The outbreak of the devastating COVID-19 pandemic severely disrupted the global economy and livelihoods, with South Africa being no exception. In response, the PYEI – a component of the Presidential Employment Stimulus (PES) – was introduced to address the economic challenges resulting from the pandemic as part of the South African government’s broader economic recovery plan. Central to this strategy were employment stimulus measures designed to create job opportunities, particularly targeting young people between the ages of 18 and 35 in South Africa. The initiative was aimed not only at providing much-needed work experience for young people but also at developing critical skills and competencies and creating real employment opportunities that could improve their prospects of permanent and/or long-term employment. Even though the PYEI provided fixed-term contract employment opportunities to young people, the initiative formed part of public investment in a mass employment strategy to stimulate economic activity and growth (DBE, 2020).

The DBE implemented the PES under its own initiative, the BEEI. Similarly, the BEEI sought to confront the economic challenges brought by the COVID-19 pandemic as part of the South African government’s economic recovery strategies, thus its objectives were:

- To provide schools with the capacity to manage the impact of COVID-19 on schooling, whilst supporting the Basic Education Sector as it repositions itself and reimagines the future beyond COVID-19;
- To ensure that school infrastructure is maintained through the provision of General School Assistants; and
- To support the retention of SGB funded posts at fee-paying schools and posts at government-subsidised independent schools.

Consequently, the DBE recruited youth to serve as Education Assistants and General School Assistants – the current research focuses on the former. The BEEI recruited EAs and General School Assistants on short-term fixed-term contracts between 2020 and 2023 in public schools across all nine provinces in South Africa. EAs primarily supported teachers in their teaching and learning practices (DBE, 2020; 2021; 2023). As stated in Chapter 1, the EA programme was an element of the Presidential Youth Employment Initiative, and the programme was implemented as the Basic Education Employment Initiative and sought to confront the economic challenges resulting from the COVID-19 Pandemic. So, the EA programme was part of the governments’ economic recovery initiatives post the pandemic and specifically targeted unemployed youth between the ages 18–35-year-old. Moreover, the criteria were youth who were neither enrolled in education and/or training institutions, nor recipients of any government grant and this was inclusive of youth living with disabilities. The EA programme entailed various categories such as EA – Curriculum; EA – Reading Champions; General School Assistant – child and youth care worker; General School Assistant – handyman etcetera, this study concerns EA – Curriculum (DBE, 2021).

EAs had various qualifications, including qualifications in education; however, a qualification in education was not a strict requirement in the recruitment process. Having EAs in schools is a well-established practice globally. The assistants may not be qualified educators; however, they play a pivotal role as support staff in the school environment. As mentioned in Table 2.1, EAs are referred to differently across the globe; these paraprofessionals are sometimes called “Teacher Assistants” or “Classroom Assistants”, and in the case of the BEEI under the PYEI they are known as “Education/Educator Assistants” (EAs) (DBE, 2020).

EAs work under the supervision of qualified educators. It is also general practice for paraprofessionals to work with learners one-on-one or in small groups to reinforce learning, with support provided during or after the teacher’s lessons. For instance, EAs may work with students who require extra attention in grasping certain concepts or pieces of work during a class, with assistance provided while the educator continues to conduct lessons. As stated in

Chapters 1 and 3, this study explored teachers' experiences of the EA programme implemented by the BEEI under the PYEI in a high school in the Metro East Education District in the WCED (DBE, 2023).

2.8. Study context – WCED

The South African basic education system comprises 12 years of schooling, with attendance compulsory from Grade 1 to Grade 9. Grades 1 to 7 are formally referred to as primary education, Grades 8 and 9 as lower secondary education, and Grades 10 to 12 as upper secondary education. This categorisation is important because some schools offer up to Grade 7 (primary), while others end at Grade 9 (lower secondary). However, Grades 1 to 7 are generally offered in primary schools, whereas Grades 8 to 12 are offered in high schools. The sector also includes one year of pre-school (Grade R) as part of its schooling levels.

Furthermore, South African schools are categorised into five quintiles for needs-based government budget allocation. Quintile 1–3 public schools are no-fee schools; they do not charge school fees and largely serve historically disadvantaged and currently underprivileged areas, whereas the majority (70%) of Quintile 4–5 schools charge fees, with the remaining 30% designated as no-fee schools. As of December 2023, the WCED comprised 1,269,655 learners and 45,563 educators in 1,786 ordinary public and independent schools across eight districts (see Figure 2.3). Table 2.2 presents the numbers of learners, educators, and schools from 2021 to 2023 across all nine provinces (DBE, 2023b; World Bank, 2024).



Figure 2.3: The Western Cape Education Districts (World Bank, 2024)

Table 2.1: Number of learners in ordinary public and independent schools by sector and province from 2021-2023 (DBE, 2023b).

Province	LEARNERS			EDUCATORS			SCHOOLS		
	2021	2022	2023	2021	2022	2023	2021	2022	2023
Eastern Cape	1 848 053	1 826 150	1 806 119	62 698	61 404	61 303	5 341	5 311	5 285
Free State	726 713	728 844	723 621	23 867	24 343	24 575	1 071	1 029	1 021
Gauteng	2 564 812	2 611 641	2 628 047	91 958	93 453	94 860	2 941	2 991	2 979
KwaZulu-Natal	2 893 958	2 883 354	2 875 858	96 659	95 650	96 407	6 022	6 021	6 020
Limpopo	1 799 130	1 798 646	1 799 294	53 582	54 592	55 322	3 855	3 847	3 839
Mpumalanga	1 134 889	1 145 287	1 150 356	36 963	37 579	37 143	1 785	1 784	1 771
Northern Cape	304 566	306 056	306 653	10 486	10 667	10 869	585	586	586
North West	872 601	875 095	880 080	28 248	28 923	28 707	1 539	1 548	1 549
Western Cape	1 264 527	1 244 898	1 269 655	42 662	44 382	45 563	1 755	1 754	1 786
South Africa	13 409 249	13 419 971	13 439 683	447 123	450 993	454 749	24 894	24 871	24 836

According to a 2024 World Bank Group Western Cape education sector analysis report, the WC has higher school learning levels than other provinces in South Africa. The report attributes

this to numerous factors: (a) the WC provides school subsidies and support to learners from disadvantaged backgrounds beyond national policy requirements; (b) the WC spends the most on scholar transport and provision for learners with special needs compared to other provinces; (c) it is reported as the only province in South Africa that administers learners' assessments annually to track learning progress; and (d) the province implements its own comprehensive programme to address learning losses resulting from COVID-19-related school closures. This outlook may also be attributed to the WC being among the best-performing provinces on key macroeconomic indicators, such as its contribution to South Africa's Gross Domestic Product (GDP) (World Bank, 2024).

Despite this positive outlook, as in other provinces in the country, the WCED also faces learning crises. Key hindrances that directly impact teaching and learning include disparities by socio-economic group and race. Learning levels are higher, and learner experience is better, in Quintile 4–5 schools where White and Asian students predominate, due to resources and school location, compared to Quintile 1–3 schools dominated by Black and Coloured students and located in rural and township areas (World Bank, 2024). In this regard, the current study explored teachers' experiences of the EA programme launched by the PYEI under the BEEI between 2020–2023, and how it influenced a school's PLC. The research was conducted in a township school (Quintile 1–3) within the WCED's Metro East Education District.

2.9 Chapter summary

The South African government should be acknowledged for its attempts to curb national youth unemployment. The PYEI, implemented under the BEEI in the basic education sector in South Africa, added value by stimulating youth economic activity from 2020 to 2023 and was later reintroduced in May 2025. Through the BEEI, the department deployed EAs to schools in all nine provinces, ensuring that teachers were supported in classrooms during the global crisis period of the COVID-19 pandemic.

However, the government did not fully do research on how the placement of EAs would influence the PLCs of schools. This study addressed this gap by retrospectively investigating teachers' lived experiences of working with EAs. In a school environment, the PLC is co-created by all educators who are directly involved in teaching and school practices; in this context, this includes EAs. Therefore, this chapter reviewed relevant literature to identify, evaluate, and synthesise current work on key constructs central to the study, namely experience theory, phenomenology, PLC theory, and community of practice theory.

The chapter concluded by presenting a global overview of EAs, including their titles and roles in various countries, the historical development of the South African schooling sector, an outline of the PYEI, and a contextual overview of the WCED.

The next chapter details the research methodology employed in the study and discusses its suitability for addressing the research objectives and answering the research questions.

CHAPTER 3

RESEARCH DESIGN & METHODOLOGY

3.1 Introduction

The previous chapter reviewed relevant literature to identify gaps in the educational literature and clarify this study's contribution. This exercise also served to situate and position the study within current educational literature. Accordingly, key theories relevant to this study were elucidated, namely experience theory, phenomenology, community of practice theory, and professional learning community, among others. This chapter outlines the research design and methodology most suitable for addressing the research problem and achieving the study's objectives.

In this regard, the nature of the research problem indicated that an interpretivist, exploratory, qualitative research design and approach were most appropriate for achieving the study's objectives. Methodologically, the study is grounded in phenomenology; this approach is applicable to research that explored peoples lived experiences of a specific phenomenon – in this context, teachers' lived experiences of the EA programme.

The current chapter is structured as follows: firstly, the researcher's philosophical stance is articulated; this is followed by a detailed explanation of the adopted research design and relevant methodology; thereafter, the research approach is presented; the chapter concludes by explaining the relevant research methods, sampling techniques applied, data generation and analysis, trustworthiness, and ethical considerations.

3.2 Philosophical stance

Academic research should reflect researchers' ontological and epistemological positions within their disciplines (Bell, 2013). Consequently, both the research process and its findings are shaped by the interactions between researchers and participants; in essence, knowledge is mediated through the researchers' interpretation (Scheiner, 2019). This study explored educators lived experiences of the EAs programme in a selected school in the Metro East District and therefore adopted interpretivism to deconstruct and interpret educators' subjective beliefs and experiences of the programme (Du Plooy-Cilliers et al., 2014). Epistemologically, the study recognises that teachers' experiences and perspectives of the EA programme provide meaningful insights into how the programme influences a school's teaching and learning environment. From a philosophical standpoint, the research aligned with the

interpretivist paradigm, as it sought to explore teachers' lived experiences and interpretations of how the EA programme shapes professional teaching and learning contexts within schools (Bleiker et al., 2019).

Therefore, given the nature of the research problem and context, the study is situated in phenomenology because "the epistemological foundation of phenomenological research rests in truth seeking and meaning making about people's lived realities" (Koopman & Koopman, 2020:14). Phenomenologists hold that the nature of truth and reality is found in human beings' lived experiences, and in this case, those of educators. Accordingly, unlike positivist quantitative research, this study sought to understand the programme's impact by exploring teachers' lived experiences. It was primarily concerned with gaining deeper insights into teachers' lived experiences, perceptions, memories, and feelings regarding the EA programme in a selected school. Thus, phenomenology was deemed the most appropriate methodology as it adopts an experience-oriented approach to investigating peoples' lived experiences.

Exploring educators' lived experiences of the EA programme enabled the researcher to describe, with philosophical depth and rigour, how the programme impacted a school's PLC (Koopman & Koopman, 2020).

3.3 Research design and methodology

Research design serves as the framework that guides the conduct of academic studies by outlining the specific procedures and processes required to address an identified research gap or phenomenon (De Villiers, 2022; Smuts, 2022). In essence, it functions as a strategic plan that directs how the study will be carried out, detailing how the research objectives and questions will be addressed to resolve the identified gap (Malhotra, 2017; Christian, 2023).

It is widely accepted that academic research is primarily guided by three research designs (and their sub-dimensions): descriptive, causal, and exploratory (Malhotra, 2017). *Descriptive research* outlines a phenomenon and seeks to answer questions such as who, what, where, when, and how, often illustrating relationships between variables under investigation (Brown et al., 2018; Siedlecki, 2020). *Causal research* focuses on determining cause-and-effect relationships, typically using repeated experiments to support causal inferences and demonstrate regularity, with the researcher inferring causation (Brown et al., 2018). An *exploratory design* – specifically phenomenology – is most applicable to the present study in the field of education.

Exploratory research is used when little or no prior research exists on the phenomenon under investigation; its purpose is to discover the new or unknown and to provide in-depth insight

into an identified problem (Saunders et al., 2019; Olawale et al., 2023). As stated in Chapter 1, this study addresses the lack of academic research on educators' lived experiences of the EA programme in South Africa and therefore adopts phenomenology, an experience-oriented strategy, to understand those experiences.

Phenomenology enabled educators to provide in-depth descriptions of their classroom experiences of working with EAs (Husserl, 1982; Derrida, 2004, as quoted by Koopman & Koopman, 2020). It is distinguished from other research approaches in that its essence and quality are recognised retrospectively, as lived experiences can only be examined through reflective investigation (Van Manen, 1990, as quoted by Koopman & Koopman, 2020). The current study explored educators' lived experiences of the EA programme in March 2025. The programme had been implemented by the DBE between 2020 and 2023. Phenomenology provides education researchers with a foundational lens and methodological approach for understanding the actions and behaviours of educators (including EAs) and learners within school environments.

3.3.1 Research approach

Two primary research approaches exist – quantitative and qualitative – while mixed-methods research involves applying both. Quantitative research involves the collection and interpretation of numerical data and typically seeks to address the who, what, when, how many, and where (Apuke, 2017). It is therefore more systematic and formal, seeking to describe variables and test their relationships. Responses are usually predetermined because the data collection instruments and questionnaires are closed-ended and structured (Hendricks, 2023). The quantitative approach describes specific research phenomena through testing hypotheses; thus, data collection and analysis are statistical (Malhotra, 2017). The current study sought in-depth insights into educators' experiences of the EA programme; therefore, structured, closed-ended quantitative methods were deemed unsuitable for achieving the study's objectives.

On the other hand, a mixed-methods research approach may be more suitable when neither quantitative nor qualitative research applied independently provides sufficiently conclusive findings. Mixed-methods research involves collecting, analysing, and integrating both quantitative and qualitative data in a single study (Creswell, 2008). It is chosen when researchers believe that combining quantitative and qualitative approaches will yield a better understanding of the research problem than a single-method design. Moreover, mixed-methods approaches can be applied concurrently or sequentially in a single study, depending on the research gap under investigation. Nonetheless, as qualitative phenomenological research, this study focused on gathering data from participants' lived experiences – in this case, educators' lived experiences of the EA programme.

Phenomenology, which provides a lens for examining human experiences by exploring how individuals perceive and interpret phenomena or environments (Sheehan, 2014). This approach is understood as the study of the essence of consciousness and perception, describing the meaning of individuals' lived experiences (Muhammad et al., 2023). In essence, phenomenology is an appropriate tool for exploring and describing individual experiences of related or similar phenomena. It is a distinctive research method because it allows participants to express their lived experiences of a phenomenon without distortion or consequence (Zirzow, 2023). Similarly, Nagaletchimee et al. (2022) argue that phenomenology is unique because it has its own theoretical and philosophical foundations; it is a systematic inquiry into people's lived experiences and inner meanings, which are key to understanding human experience. This approach seeks to avoid preconceived assumptions about the phenomenon under study, relying instead on detailed, descriptive accounts of participants' perspectives (Bonyadi, 2023). Consequently, phenomenology has become widely applied in the field of education.

Drawing on phenomenological methodology, several studies have examined teachers' lived experiences in diverse educational contexts. Hall et al. (2016), for instance, used phenomenology to understand teachers' experiences with nutrition education in American schools, while Yuksel-Arslan et al. (2016) employed the same approach to explore teachers' experiences of using digital storytelling in early childhood education in Turkey. Similarly, Nagaletchimee et al. (2022) explored teachers' lived experiences of teaching online during the COVID-19 pandemic in higher education institutions in Malaysia. Murugaiah (2023) applied phenomenology to examine Nigerien teachers' educational beliefs and experiences of conflict-affected Niger, and Christian (2023) utilised it to explore educators' motivation and experiences of teaching in primary schools in the crime-ridden Cape Flats in Cape Town, WC.

Furthermore, existing research on the application of qualitative phenomenology in the education sector suggests the presence of a community of researchers and teachers who share knowledge – a community of practice, in essence (Wilson et al., 2020; Lave & Wenger, 1991). Qualitative approach seeks to understand social or psychological phenomena from the viewpoints of participants with first-hand experience of the phenomenon under investigation (Merriam & Grenier, 2019). Data generation in this approach is relatively unstructured; questions posed to participants are usually open-ended, allowing them to express themselves in their own words with minimal interjection. Longer and more flexible engagements with participants aim to attain greater depth and richness of data (Bryman et al., 2014). Qualitative data generation methods include interviews, observations, FGDs, conversations, word association and sentence completion, and collages, among others.

Qualitative research therefore concerns participants' views, opinions, and beliefs about the subject under investigation. Researchers adopting this approach hold that the world is

constructed by people with their attitudes, beliefs, assumptions, and values; to understand the world and its realities, people's experiences should be explored (Nieuwenhuis, 2016). In line with this, the current study adopted a qualitative approach to understand educators' lived experiences, beliefs, opinions, and perceptions of the EA programme implemented by the DBE between 2020–2023.

Educators' first-hand experiences of the EA programme's implementation were analysed to understand the practical implications of having EAs in a school environment and how EAs influenced a school's professional learning environment. A variety of methods are used in qualitative research; the current exploratory qualitative phenomenological study triangulated individual in-depth interviews and FGDs to collect data, address its objectives, and answer its research questions (Nieuwenhuis, 2016).

3.3.2 Qualitative data generation methods

The choice of research method should be guided primarily by the nature of the research problem under investigation rather than the researcher's personal preference. Accordingly, the selected method must be suited to achieving the study's objectives and responding to the research questions in order to fill the identified research gap. Furthermore, the research method should be aligned with the specific research paradigm, particularly when a distinct approach (quantitative or qualitative) is adopted rather than mixed methods (De Villiers, 2022). The current study triangulated two qualitative methods for data generation, namely in-person individual in-depth interviews and an in-person FGD, both grounded in interpretivist exploratory qualitative research (Du Plooy-Cilliers et al., 2014).

3.3.2.1 Interviews

This research method explores participants' experiences, opinions, beliefs, and perceptions to develop an in-depth understanding of the social phenomena under investigation. Accordingly, interviews seek to understand the world from the participants' perspectives and to establish meaning in their experiences (De Jonckheere & Vaughn, 2019). Interviews are a primary method in qualitative research. This study employed semi-structured individual depth interviews, consisting of in-person interactions between the researcher and a single participant (educator) per interview. Semi-structured interviews were particularly useful because the researcher, who is also an educator, had first-hand experience of the EA programme.

Furthermore, qualitative interviews are typically flexible, allowing the researcher to probe extensively and encourage participants to speak freely (Cooper & Schindler, 2006). This enabled educators to describe in detail their experiences, feelings, and views on the impact of

the EA programme in their school. Educators were asked specific questions about the programme's impact in their school (the interview guide questions are explained later). Effective interviewing requires the researcher to build rapport and trust to elicit rich, elaborative responses, which was facilitated by the researcher working in the same sector (Babin & Zikmund, 2016). Nonetheless, it remained important for the researcher to act professionally and pose insightful, clear, and direct questions to achieve the study's objectives.

The researcher requested meetings with individual educators at the school concerned, in line with consent granted by the school principal, and collected data in February 2025. Interviewees received the interview questions in advance, which helped them prepare and gave the researcher richer insights, as educators had time to reflect on their experiences of the EA programme. One FGD was also conducted with educators who did not take part in the individual interviews.

3.3.2.2 Focus group discussion (FGD)

Similar to interviews, FGDs are used in qualitative studies to discover, understand, reflect on, and explain participants' subjective accounts of lived experiences related to a specific phenomenon under investigation (Tracy, 2019). In this context, the focus is on educators' lived experiences of the EA programme. A FGD is a qualitative data generation method in which a group of six to twelve participants share their beliefs, attitudes, perceptions, and opinions on a particular subject (Gumbo & Maphalala, 2015). FGDs are unstructured and open-ended, with each participant drawing on group interactions and engagement to articulate their beliefs and experiences regarding the topic under investigation. Although the researcher coordinates these engagements, participants should determine the length and flow of the dialogue. The researcher merely guides the discussion and allows participants to engage fully (Gibbs, 2012).

According to Gumbo and Maphalala (2015), interactions between participants are a key strength of FGDs because they illuminate their views and meanings, and may prompt them to reconsider and re-evaluate their beliefs about specific experiences during the discussion. The current study conducted one FGD at the school concerned, consisting of six participants. This FGD was preceded by individual interviews with different participants. Triangulating these two data generation methods enabled the study to achieve its objectives. The research sample comprised educators from a selected school.

3.3.3 Sampling

An important requirement in academic research is to obtain findings and draw inferences about the elements or characteristics of a study's population. However, time and cost constraints

typically preclude a census in academic projects; hence, study populations are sampled. A population is a complete group of people or objects of interest in research that share common characteristics, while a target population is the subset that shares specific characteristics or experiences (Creswell & Creswell, 2017; Willie, 2022). The population for the current study was township schools in South Africa that implement the EA programme; the target population was township schools in Cape Town. As noted above, studying the entire target population was not feasible; thus, a subset or sample of the target population was studied.

A sample is a smaller set of units from a target population that is studied to determine the nature of, and draw inferences about, that population (Adam, 2024). Sampling is the process of selecting a subset of the population that meets the specifications and requirements of a study, after which the selected sample participates in the research. In some instances, all units have an equal chance of selection; in others, they do not (Babin & Zikmund, 2016). Broadly, sampling approaches comprise probability and non-probability methods (Rahman et al., 2022). Probability sampling involves random selection in which each unit has an equal chance of being chosen and is common in quantitative research, whereas non-probability sampling relies on researchers' judgement for unit inclusion, so not all units have an equal chance of selection (Stratton, 2021).

Given the nature of the research gap identified in this study, a non-probability, judgemental, purposive sampling technique was adopted (Obilor, 2023). Accordingly, research participants were identified prior to data generation, namely educators in a selected township high school. These participants met the inclusion criteria because they all had first-hand experience of working with EAs in their school. In addition to the five participants in the FGD, eight other educators were interviewed. This sample size is consistent with qualitative literature; for instance, Malhotra (2017) suggests that in loosely structured qualitative studies, personal interviews with industry practitioners should be considered. The author further notes that qualitative samples seek in-depth insights into the subject under investigation and that sample sizes tend to be small and non-representative. What matters is the quality and meaning of individual experiences based on participants' positions and professional expertise; in this case, educators in the South African DBE with experience of working with EAs in the context of this research. Table 3.1 below presents a preview of research participants, this table depicts important factors such as participants' years of experience in teaching, years of service at the specific school, management roles of the participants at the school such as School Management Team, and the grades the participants taught.

Table 3.1: Preview of the study's participants

Participant's selection				
Participants	Years of experience	Years at the school	Research method	Site and school category
P 1 – SMT member and 12 teachers.	28	4	Face-to-face interview	Quantile 2 Township School (Khayelitsha Western Cape)
P2 – SMT member and 9 teachers.	19	19	Face-to-face interview	
P3 – SMT & Grade 11 teacher	23	12	Face-to-face interview	
P4 – Grade 8 teacher	7	7	Face-to-face interview	
P5 – Grade 9 teacher	5	5	Face-to-face interview	
P6 – Grade 10 teacher	13	5	Face-to-face interview	
P7 – Grade 11 teacher	19	15	Face-to-face interview	
P8 – Grade 10 teacher	11	6	Face-to-face interview	
			Focus group	
P9- Grade 12 teacher	8	8	Face-to-face interview	Quantile 2 Township School (Khayelitsha Western Cape)
P10- Grade 8 teacher	14	6	Face-to-face Focus group	
P11- Grade 10 teacher	30	18	Face-to-face Focus group	
P12-Grade 11 teacher	22	17	Face-to-face Focus group	

3.4 Data generation instrument design

The purpose of the interview guide was to elicit meaningful data from educators on their lived experiences of EA programmes through their work with EAs. As mentioned earlier, the interview guide was used to facilitate and structure interviews and a FGD with educators at a school within the WCED. The design of the interview guide was informed by the interview guide framework, as suggested by Leedy and Ormrod (2010:149-152). These authors advise researchers to prepare research questions in advance to properly guide the data generation process. They further advise that participants' cultural differences should always be considered, and that researchers should establish rapport with participants to elicit in-depth input. Given the nature of qualitative research, data should be collected in a suitable setting without interruptions. Moreover, the researcher should not display surprise, agreement, or disapproval in response to any of the participants' contributions. As noted, a single interview guide was used to facilitate interviews and a FGD, as the study objectives and research questions were the same.

- Interview guide questions explained

As stated in Chapter 1, teachers' experiences of the EA programme were explored through the lens of the PLC framework and its sub-dimensions. Accordingly, teachers were asked to reflect on their experiences of working with EAs in relation to PLC dimensions and sub-dimensions. This approach also examined the applicability of the PLC framework in a Quantile 1–3 township school.

Question 1. What is your understanding of the background of the EA programme?

This question was used to determine whether the research participants understood the EA programme and its background. In the very rare instances where a participant did not, the interview was discontinued. This occurred with a teacher who joined the sector and a particular school after 2023.

Question 2. Describe how EAs have influenced the professional learning community/environment in your school?

First, the term 'PLC' was defined for the research participants. The question then aimed to determine the EAs' overall impact on the schools' PLC, as reported by the teachers.

Question 3. Shared leadership and decision-making

This dimension was defined to prepare participants to engage with the sub-dimensions outlined below.

3.1 What leadership responsibilities did EAs possess and display in your school?

This question aimed to determine whether EAs demonstrated leadership traits and responsibility whilst working at the school.

3.2 In what ways did EAs give direction to learning and teaching activities in your school?

This question sought to determine whether EAs assumed any leadership or took initiative in schools' teaching and learning activities [Note: EAs were not trained to lead teaching and learning; they were meant to assist teachers].

Question 4. Collaborative inquiry

This dimension was explained to participants to prepare them to engage with the sub-dimensions outlined below.

4.1 How did EAs collaborate with teachers to determine the effectiveness of learning and teaching activities in your schools?

This question examined whether EAs took the initiative to collaborate with teachers to review and provide input on the effectiveness of teaching and learning activities.

4.2 What was the role of EAs in teachers' data examination, plotting, sharing ideas, and target setting for learning and teaching practices in your school?

This question examined specific sub-dimensions and the extent to which EAs supported teachers in examining data, plotting, sharing ideas, and setting targets.

4.3 What were the contributions of EAs in innovation initiatives to enhance learners' learning and teaching experiences in your school?

This question examined whether EAs contributed to innovation in teaching and learning to enhance learners' experiences.

Question 5. Shared practice

This dimension was defined for participants so they could engage with the sub-dimension described below.

5.1 How do EAs influence shared workspace and learning and teaching practices with teachers to address students' goals and achievements in your school?

This question explored teachers' experiences of sharing workspaces with EAs, including offices, staffrooms, and classrooms. It was important to ask this because shared workspaces directly influence teaching and learning activities.

Question 6. Accountability for outcomes

This dimension was defined to prepare participants for engaging with the sub-dimensions outlined below.

6.1 In what ways are EAs accountable in your school, and to whom are they accountable?

This question sought to determine whether EAs were held accountable, and to whom they were accountable or reported.

6.2 How do EAs collaborate with teachers in accounting for acceptance of results and learner achievement in your school?

The purpose of this question was to assess EAs' willingness to collaborate with teachers on learners' results and performance.

Question 7. Evolving relationships

This dimension was explained to participants to prepare them to engage with the sub-dimensions outlined below.

7.1 How would you describe the professional relationship between EAs and the rest of the school community in your school?

This question explored the kinds of relationships EAs had with students, other support staff, parents, the SGB, and others.

7.2 How would you describe the level of trust and shared values between EAs and teachers in your school?

The question sought to determine whether trust existed between teachers and EAs and whether EAs aligned with school values.

Question 8. What is your overall experience of the EA programme, and how would you describe its impact on the schools' learning community/environment?

This question sought to elicit teachers' overall experiences of the EA programme and its influence on the schools' professional learning environment.

3.4.1 Data generation

According to Malhotra (2017), research gaps arise from the review and analysis of secondary data or existing literature; therefore, secondary data collection precedes the collection of primary data. In line with this, the present study began with a review and analysis of literature in the field of education, as presented in Chapter 2, during which the research gap – namely, the lack of academic research on the impact of the EA programme in South African schools – was identified. It is also pertinent that the researcher, an educator in the same sector, observed that such a study would be meaningful to both the sector and government.

To explore educators' experiences, beliefs, attitudes, perceptions, and feelings regarding the impact of the EA programme, the researcher conducted in-person semi-structured individual interviews followed by a face-to-face FGD (Babin & Zikmund). Meetings were scheduled for both data generation activities, and data were collected by the researcher, who is also an educator. All interviews and the FGD were audio-recorded and subsequently transcribed verbatim for analysis. An interview guide addressing all research objectives was used for both the interviews and the FGD.

3.4.1.1 Data analysis

As mentioned earlier, the interviews and the FGD were audio-recorded and then transcribed to text for analysis and interpretation. Firstly, two projects were created on ATLAS.ti, one for individual in-depth interviews and another for the FGD. The same codes were developed in both projects to formulate the study's themes for thematic analysis. The themes emanated directly from the questions posed in the FGD and individual in-depth interviews. All the interview transcripts were then uploaded to the projects, and each interview transcript was analysed individually, and data was coded according to the codes developed, the same coding process was followed with the FGD transcript. A code book was then downloaded from both projects for analysis and reporting purposes; this is where the verbatim quotations were extracted from. Similarly, code networks from both projects were extracted and these coded networks also entail participants' direct quotations and presented in mind maps like figures in the chapter. Therefore, the writing up was presented as follows, the theory tested was revisited thereafter the direct quotations presented in textual format or in networks. Comparison was then conducted between the theory tested and the quotations, whereafter sub-conclusions were presented to derive findings.

3.5 Research site

The South African basic education system categorises school levels by grade: Grades 1–7 constitute primary school, whereas Grades 8–12 constitute high school; the present research focused on the latter. South African schools are also grouped into five quintiles for needs-based government budget allocations. Quintile 1–3 public schools are no-fee and largely serve historically and currently underprivileged areas, while Quintiles 4–5 are fee-paying for those who can afford to pay (DBE, 2023). The school selected for this study falls within Quintiles 1–3, as academic research in this category remains limited. The school is a high school located in the biggest townships in the Cape Town metropole, Khayelitsha and comprises 42 teachers. The student population is approximately one-thousand four hundred students and offers tuition from grade eight to grade twelve. The number of EAs allocated to the school were twenty-five in the year 2020, and thereafter fifteen in 2021 and 2022 respectively.

Socio-economic disparities between Quintiles 1–3 and 4–5 are pronounced and often affect teaching and learning environments. Learning levels and learner experiences are generally stronger in Quintiles 4–5 than in Quintiles 1–3, including rural and township schools, where Black and Coloured students predominate (World Bank, 2024). The study explored teachers' experiences of the EA programme launched by PYEI and implemented under BEEI between 2020 and 2023 and its impact on the school's PLC. The specific context was a township school (Quintiles 1–3) in the WCED, Metro East Education District.

3.6 Trustworthiness

Research trustworthiness concerns the extent to which the data and methods used support the quality and credibility of a study (Connelly, 2016). In qualitative research, it addresses key elements such as transferability, credibility, dependability, and confirmability (Korstjens & Moser, 2018). Participants in this study were teachers in the basic education sector, specifically within the WCED, and were therefore considered experts in this field.

In addition to participation being entirely voluntary, the participants' confidentiality and anonymity were completely safeguarded. Written consent was obtained before all interviews and the FGD. Additionally, the researcher-built rapport and trust with all participants. Research findings may be useful to the school, the department, and government, and will be made available on request; however, participants and the specific study context (school) will be concealed. Moreover, neither the school nor the participants will be involved in any process after primary data gathering.

Ethically, participants' confidentiality and consent were prioritised in line with the requirements of CPUT's Faculty of Education Ethics Committee and the WCED Research Directorate. Both bodies granted ethical clearance for this research (see Appendices A, p. 97, and C, p. 99).

3.7 Ethical consideration

Ethical considerations in academic research concern ethical principles, particularly in data collection. They include respecting participants' rights and willingness to participate or decline participation, guaranteeing confidentiality, and protecting personal information, as discussed by Schurink (2010) and Singh (2020). The current research adhered to these considerations, and the researcher respected all participants' preferences regarding full or partial participation in the data generation process. Consent letters to conduct the research were obtained from the school concerned (see Appendix B, p. 98) and from individual participants before all interviews and the FGD. Ethical clearance was also obtained from CPUT's Faculty of Education and the WCED. Therefore, this study complied with the research ethics requirements of CPUT's Faculty of Education Ethics Committee and the WCED.

Moreover, to address ethical considerations, this study was guided by five core ethical principles in social science research (Hammersley & Traianou, 2012, as quoted in Arendse, 2022): minimising risk, respecting autonomy, protecting participants' privacy, and ensuring reciprocity and equal treatment.

- Minimising risk: During primary data generation, participants were not subjected to harm, whether emotional or otherwise. The researcher respected their work and social commitments, scheduling interviews and FGDs to suit the participants' availability.
- Respecting autonomy: The study's purpose was explained to all participants before data generation. As an exploratory study, open-ended questions were used to enable participants to express themselves fully without being led.
- Protecting participants' privacy: Participants' identities are concealed, and the school in which the research was conducted is also anonymised.
- Offering reciprocity: All research participants were treated with respect.
- Equal treatment: All research participants were treated equally and with respect, and the researcher was attentive to cultural dynamics. Each participant signed a letter of consent for interview and FGD participation before each session. Participants were informed that they could withdraw from the interview or FGD at any time.

3.8 Chapter summary

This chapter outlined the study's research design and methodology, providing the framework that enabled the study to address its purpose and research objectives and to respond to the identified gap. The researcher, a teacher in the sector of interest, first articulated her philosophical stance. As a practitioner, she aligned with interpretivism, as the study explored teachers' in-depth experiences and the meaning of the EA programme; the nature of the research problem therefore located the study within an interpretivist paradigm.

The chapter then detailed the research design and methodology and clarified the adopted approach, revisiting the research objectives and questions to ensure alignment with the methodology. It concluded by outlining the research context, sampling and sampling techniques, data generation and analysis, trustworthiness, and ethical considerations. The next chapter presents the empirical data, its analysis, and the study's conclusions.

CHAPTER 4

DATA ANALYSIS AND RESEARCH FINDINGS

4.1 Introduction

The previous chapter outlined the methodology and data generation methods used to address the research objectives and questions of the current study. The research problem at hand informed the choice of methodology and design best suited to meet the study's aims. As stated in Chapters 1, this study primarily sought to explore teachers' lived experiences of the EA programme in a selected township high school in the Metro East Education District WCED. The findings may be useful for academic purposes and for the education department in the WC province and nationally. For theoretical guidance, this study adopted the PLC framework as its theoretical lens. In essence, teachers' experiences of the impact of the EA programme were explored through the PLC and its sub-dimensions; teachers were asked how EAs affected their schools' shared leadership and decision-making, collaborative inquiry, shared practices, accountability, and evolving relationships. I revisit the research objectives for context: the study sought to address one primary and two secondary research objectives.

Primary objective

- To explore teachers' experiences of the Educator Assistants programme in a high school in the Metro East Education District (WCED).

Secondary objectives

- To examine the impact of the Educator Assistants programme in a high school in the Metro East Education District (WCED).
- To explore teachers' perceptions of the role of Educator Assistants in shaping a schools' Professional Learning Community in a high school in the Metro East Education District (WCED).

Accordingly, in-depth face-to-face individual in-depth interviews were conducted with high schoolteachers at a township school in the Western Cape Metro East Education District. To gain further insight, a FGD was conducted to explore teachers' experiences of the EA programme.

4.2 Reporting structure

The research findings are presented in the following structure.

- A synopsis of the theoretical underpinnings of each question is revisited, as discussed in Chapter 2 of the literature review; thereafter, direct quotations from teachers are presented. Sub-conclusions are then drawn based on the alignment or misalignment between the brief theoretical overview and teachers' inputs; this is how the study derives its findings. For example, the data generation process began by establishing whether teachers at the school understood the background and purpose of the EA programme; this was the first question in the process. This qualifying question determined whether an interview should continue or be discontinued. This is followed by a presentation of findings on whether PLC dimensions are applicable or inapplicable in this context. Finally, the study presents teachers' overall experiences of the EA programme, addressing the first secondary objective.

Citations/quotations from ATLAS.ti-coded interview transcripts are referenced as follows: 7:11 *They were accountable to the SMT or the HOD* (P7-TSG8T). This indicates that the quotation is from the 7th participant and is the 11th quotation coded; P7 = Participant 7, TS = Township School, G8T = Grade 8 Teacher. Figure 4.1 below presents the relevant codes derived from the tested theories.

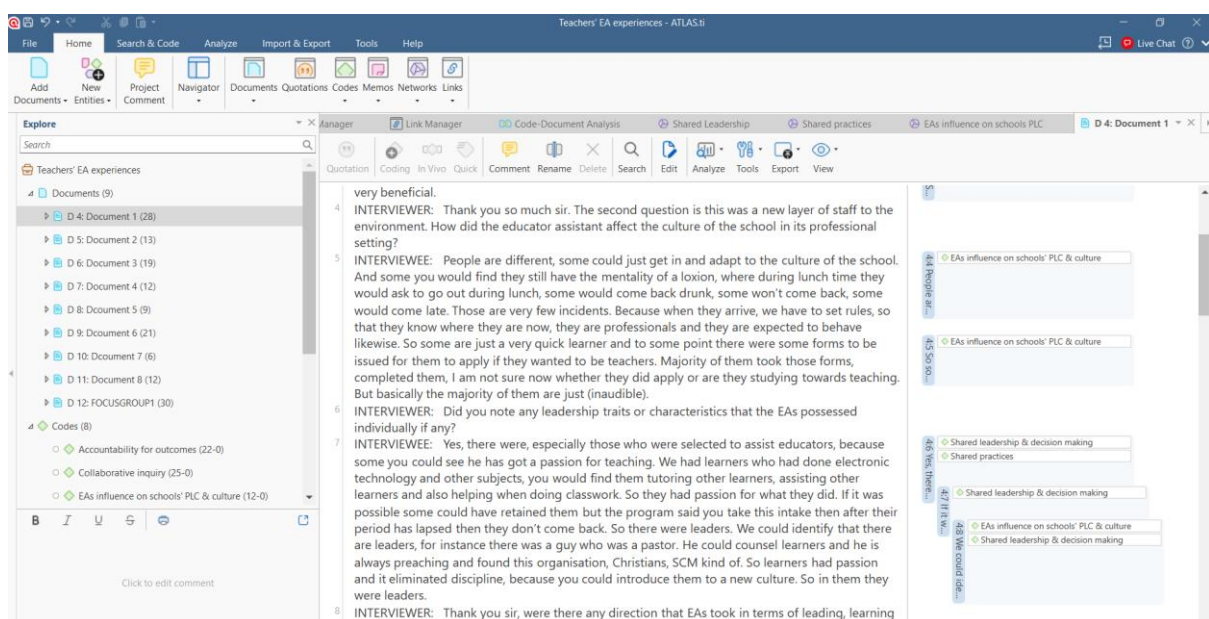


Figure 4.1: Coded transcript (Source: Authors' notes ATLAS.ti project)

4.2.1 Background and purpose of the EA programme

In response to the global economic downturn caused by the outbreak of COVID-19, the government launched the PYEI as part of PSE. This initiative focused on creating employment opportunities, particularly for young people aged 18 to 35. The DBE implemented the PSE through its own programme, the BEEI, which recruited youth to serve as EAs and General School Assistants, with the programme running from 2020 to 2023. EAs primarily provided support to learning and teaching activities in the classrooms; provided support to teachers such as typing, photocopying, distribution of teaching materials, capturing of data, filing, record keeping, among other duties. They supported teachers with technical preparation of the classroom for learning and teaching and ensured that teaching materials were available; EAs also oversaw learners in and out of the classroom environments such as the library, laboratory, and many other school events (DBE, 2020; 2021; 2023). The citations below present teachers' accounts of their understanding of the EA programme and its purpose.

4:1 *"Ja, I think the purpose was the fact that teachers are overloaded. They have got too much work to do, especially administrative. So, the programme came as a result of alleviating that workload from the teachers" (P4-TSG8T).*

9:1 *"My understanding of the EA programme – I think it started just after COVID-19. It was just to help teachers with administration and the management of the school. And two, is to assist educators in class in managing registers and, assisting whereby if they do have content background, they were even given time to assist learners with their homework and class activities during class..." (P9-TSG12T).*

12:1 *"Basically it was a presidential project, to address now the problem experienced by the youth with regard to the unemployment rate in our country and to address the poverty levels all over the country. I can say for instance, especially the marginalised, marginalised I the sense that, although for instance we didn't accommodate people who are disabled. At my school we didn't have anybody who was disabled, it could be in other schools" (P12-TSG11T).*

Although participants' responses varied somewhat, they captured the background and purpose of the introduction of the EA programme by the South African government, implemented by the DBE. The programme was launched during the COVID-19 pandemic to support basic education during that period (DBE, 2020; 2021; 2023). It provided temporary employment to selected youth across the country, thereby simultaneously addressing the challenge of unemployment. Based on the data presented above, it can be concluded that teachers at the

school under investigation clearly understood the background and purpose of the EA programme.

4.2.2 Professional learning community and culture

The citations below depict teachers' perception on how EAs influenced and shaped their school's PLC and culture.

4:4 "People are different, some could just get in and adapt to the culture of the school, and some you would find they still have the mentality of a township, where during lunch time they would ask to go out during lunch, some would come back drunk, some won't come back, some would come late. Those are very few incidents" (P4-TSG8T)

7:7 "As I said before that some of the EAs were qualified educators, not only the qualified educators. Some of them were social workers, different careers. So, they come to school with the understanding of the community. For example, if she is a social worker, she will understand the behaviour of the learner in the class" (P7-TSG11T).

9:3 "So they helped us to maintain the culture in our school even the matter of having like let us say there is a teacher who is absent at school, so there would be no one to babysit those learners. So, the presence of educator assistants, it assisted us concerning that, so learners were well attended" (P9-TSG12T).

This study's first secondary research objective was to explore teachers' experience of the EA programme through the lens of the PLC framework. Consequently, its second secondary research objective was to explore teachers' perceptions of the role EAs played in shaping the schools' Professional Learning Community in a high school in the Metro East Education District (WCED). Therefore, the quotations above present findings on how teachers at the school felt EAs influenced their school's PLC and overall school culture. As suggested by verbatim inputs from teachers, the school's PLC and culture were directly impacted by EAs, at times negatively, as stated by participant 4:4. However, the findings also suggested that the school's PLC was positively impacted as some EAs possessed social worker skills that teachers found useful to learners. Thus, it can be concluded, based on the teachers' perceptions presented in quotations above that EAs positively influenced the school's PLC.

A school's PLC and culture are primarily shaped by its internal stakeholders, notably teachers and learners, who collectively construct meaning, knowledge, and teaching and learning practices (Oppi & Eisenschmidt, 2022). To build professional learning communities in schools, teachers share experiences, stories, tools, and strategies to address common workplace issues (Trust & Horrocks, 2018). Therefore, teachers account and perception on how EAs influence their school is consistent with the aforementioned theory.

Moreover, teachers indicated that EAs also influenced the schools' PLC through displaying leadership skills; these findings are presented in Figure 4.2 below.

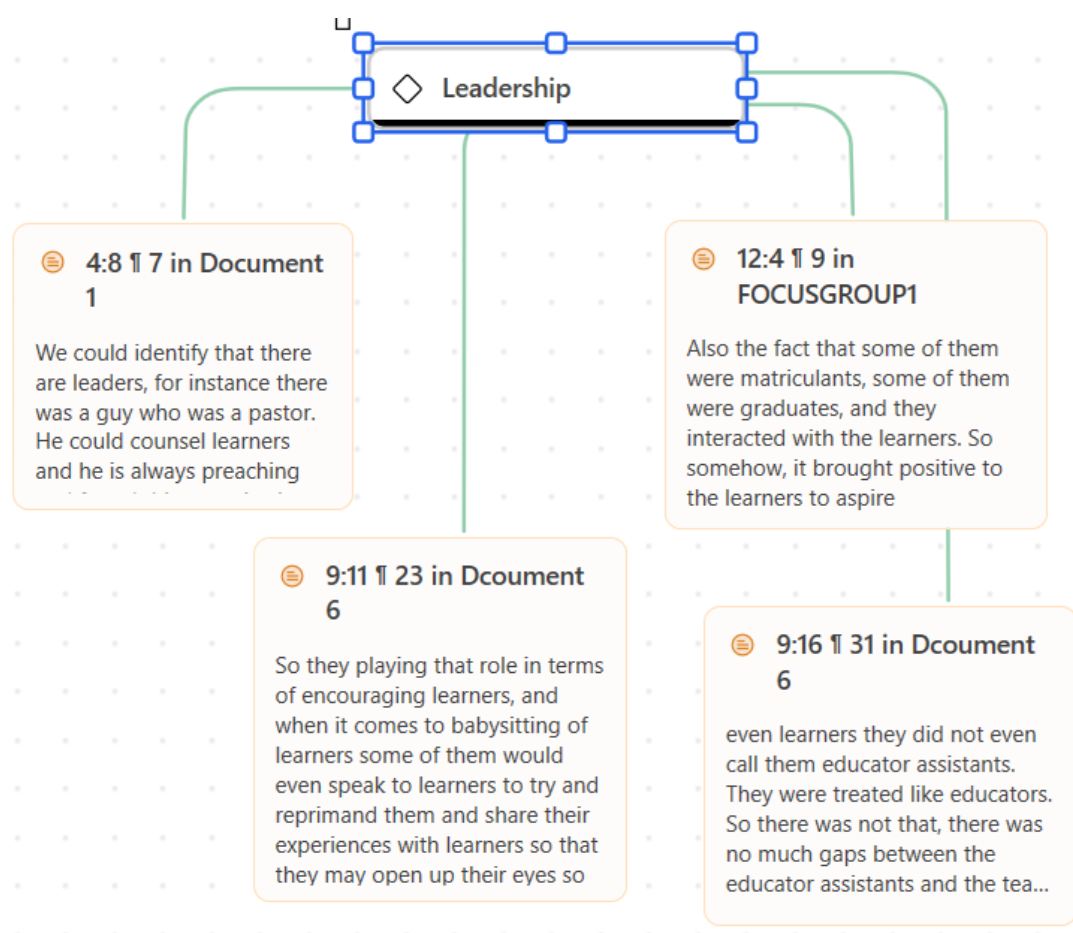


Figure 4.2: Leadership – theme in ATLAS.ti

Leadership has become a critical requirement in fostering inclusive professional learning communities in schools. Schools are typically hierarchical, with limited focus on inclusivity. Teachers indicated that EAs programme implementation has, to some extent, required schools to become more inclusive and to share leadership responsibilities, as referenced by the quotations in Figure 4.2 above. Consequently, schools may need to re-examine leadership in their PLCs due to the presence of EAs. Moreover, schools should consider a shift towards

more collaborative and culturally responsive leadership styles that can effectively address the challenges faced by township schools (White et al., 2025). Leadership was also prominent under the PLC sub-dimension “Shared Leadership and Decision Making”, discussed in section 4.2.3.1 further below.

4.2.3 PLC sub-dimensions

As stated in Chapters 1, the PLC framework (Carpenter, 2017) was adopted as the theoretical lens guiding the study to explore teachers’ experiences of the EA programme. This meant that teachers’ experiences were explored through the lens of PLC sub-dimensions. This served two purposes: (i) to understand teachers’ experiences of how EAs influence their schools’ leadership and decision-making, which is the first sub-dimension in the PLC framework; (ii) to explore teachers’ perception on the role EAs played in shaping the schools PLC. Figure 4.2 below presents the study’s conceptual framework; as can be seen, the study sought to explore how the EA programme, through the lens of the PLC, influenced teachers’ experiences. The question numbers in blue indicate which questions in the interview guide addressed each PLC sub-dimension.

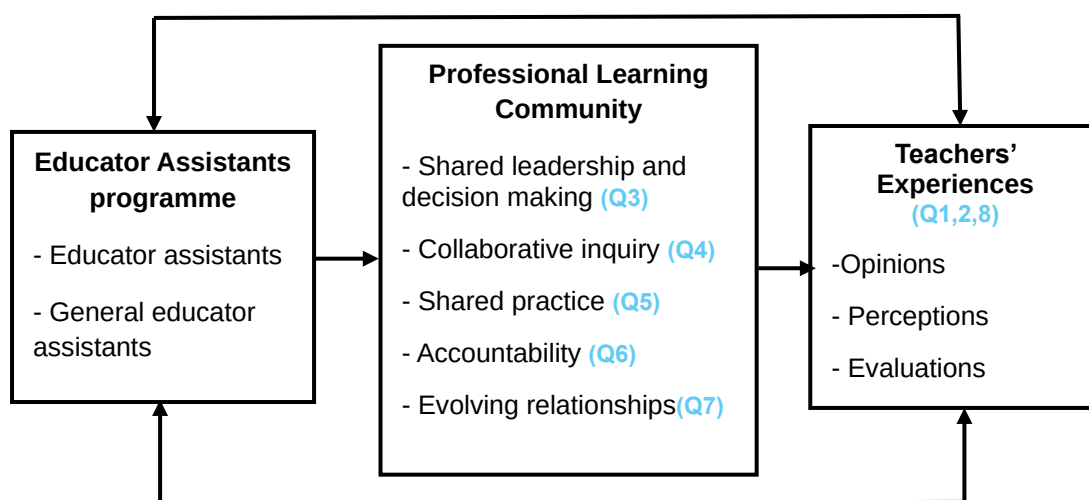


Figure 4.3: Conceptual framework (adapted from Carpenter, 2017)

4.2.3.1 Shared leadership and decision-making

The quotation below present teachers experiences on shared leadership and decision-making with EAs and how they perceived this shaped the PLC in their school.

4:8 *"We could identify that there are leaders, for instance there was a guy who was a pastor. He could counsel learners, and he is always preaching and found this organisation, Christians, SCM kind of. So, learners had passion and it eliminated ill-discipline, because you could introduce them to a new culture. So, in them they were leaders" (P4-TSG8T).*

6:4 *"I feel like student teachers are easy to learners. So, learners find them friendly than us because they are new people and also, they are kindly relatively younger than us, so it is easier to speak to when it comes to learners. It is part of showing leadership skills to be able to understand problem of learners and to a basic level, and also to be able to speak to them with their personal issues or academic issues" (P6-TSG10T).*

12:7 *"They were allocated per department, and naturally there would be one educator assistant who stands out and assume the leadership role of that cohort that is allocated by the Department. So as the SMT will know who to go to if we need a certain task to be performed. Secondly, I already mentioned that when a teacher is absent, they will stand in class for that particular teacher. And if they are well versed in that particular subject, they will assume even the issue of assisting learners directly" (P12-TSG10T).*

The quotations above relate to findings on 'Shared Leadership and Decision-Making' at the school and the influence of EAs according to teachers experiences. The findings indicate that EAs played important leadership roles at the school. Participant 4:8 alluded to an EA who assumed leadership by establishing a religious society. Participant 6:4 reported that EAs were more relatable to learners and thus played a leading role in understanding learners' challenges. Another teacher indicated that EAs played key leadership and decision-making roles across different departments within the school. In light of these findings, it can be concluded that teachers had positive experiences with EAs regarding the leadership and decision-making roles EAs played at the school.

Moreover, teachers reported that they perceived EAs to be positively shaping and influencing the PLC at the school, they reported that EAs went above and beyond in shared leadership and decision-making. In schools, teachers and other staff members may negotiate to act as co-leaders in directing learning and teaching activities to shape a PLC. The quotations above illustrate how shared leadership and decision-making were influenced by the presence of EAs at the school thus influenced the PLC positively.

The quotation in Figure 4.4 below suggests that EAs were passionate about their work.

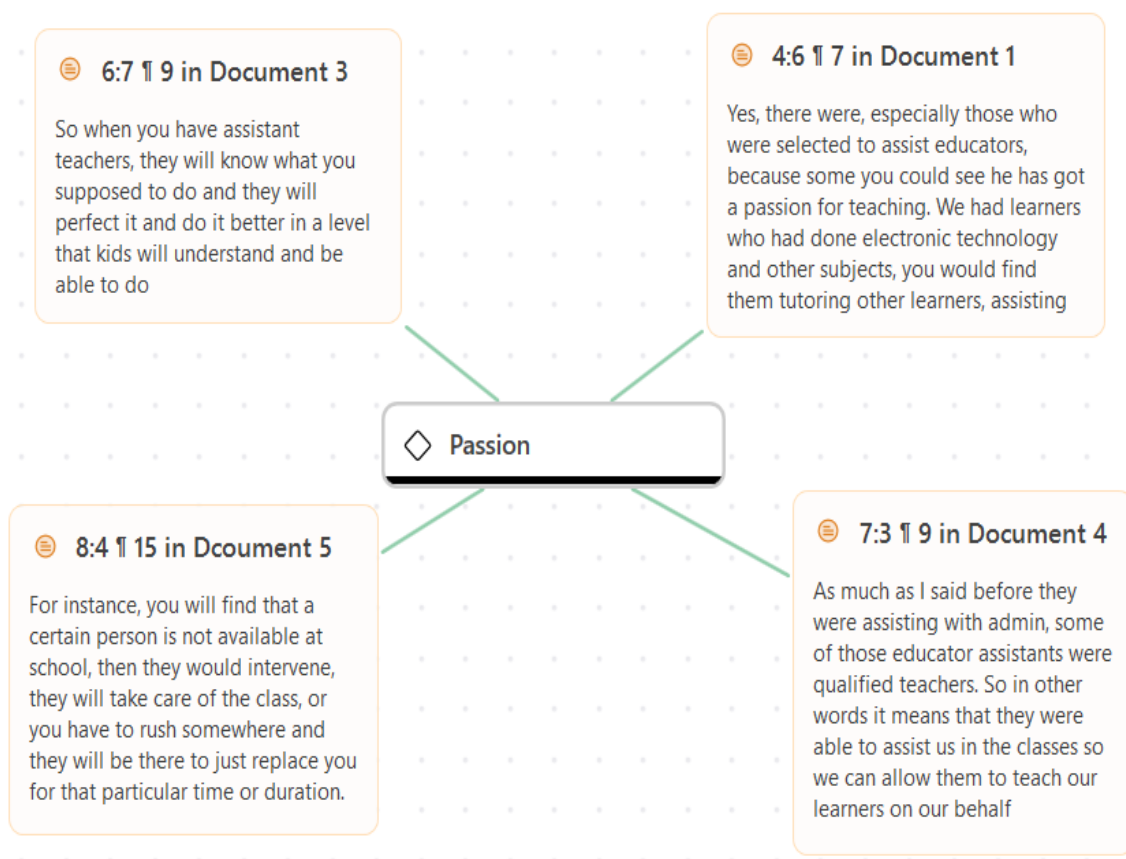


Figure 4.4: Passion – theme in ATLAS.ti

Teachers' quotations indicated that EAs went 'above and beyond' to ensure they positively contributed to the school's PLC; this can be described as *passion*. EAs freely chose to be passionate and regarded their roles as important, hence teachers perceived them to be positively shaping the schools' PLC. Furthermore, the findings suggest that EAs were neither pressured nor compelled to undertake extra activities, indicating that their passion was harmonious (Houlfort et al., 2014).

4.2.3.2 Collaborative inquiry

Below, teachers reflect on how they collaborated, planned, and innovated with EAs at the school concerned.

6:10 *"As I was saying, that in terms of the quality, if you have more numbers of learners in your class you can't control or maintain the quality of the content that you give the learners or the feedback that come from the learners. So, if you*

have an assistant teacher in your class, he or she will be able to identify that there is a certain learner who is struggling on this and then you now will be able to specifically go and assist that learner” (P6-TSG10T).

9:7 *“As I said they managed it in terms of managing a classroom and keeping it disciplined. So that’s why I say the collaboration was there, because whenever we had a problem maybe there is a learner who stole something at maybe in class, so those educators’ assistants will be there to help do searches” (P9-TSG12T).*

12:13 *“When teacher A is not at school, teacher A will liaise with the teacher assistant who falls within the department, provide him or her with worksheets. And during that particular teacher’s period the teacher assistant will be there, teaching out the worksheets and making it a point that learners work” (P12-TSG11T).*

The findings above indicate that teachers are often overwhelmed by large class sizes; by collaborating with EAs, they were able to give each learner individual attention and to design and implement learning interventions where needed. EAs also identified learning gaps among learners, bringing these to teachers’ attention and indicating that collaboration was initiated by both teachers and EAs. Teachers’ experiences of collaborative inquiry were positive, with ideas shared between teachers and EAs on how to enhance teaching and learning. Meaning teachers perceived EAs to be positively shaping the schools PLC through collaborative inquiry. According to Carpenter (2017), a shared PLC fosters collaborative inquiry and problem-solving among teachers to evaluate the effectiveness of learning and teaching, as well as to provide assessment systems and archive data. In this instance the quotation suggest that the shared workplace was a collaborative space that teachers and EAs managed to examine data, plan, share ideas, and set targets for learning and teaching practices.

Moreover, teachers regarded EAs as effective communicators within the school and this was perceived to be positively shaping the schools' PLC, as shown in Figure 4.5.



Figure 4.5: Effective communication – theme in ATLAS.ti

Furthermore, teachers at the school concerned confirmed that their experiences were that EAs played a crucial role using effective communication to help achieve the school's goals. In any institution, effective communication supports effective management and aids the achievement of institutional goals. In schools, effective staff management depends on effective communication; management involves working with and through all staff members to achieve the school's objectives. Thus, the realisation of a school's goals depends on effective communication among all operational staff members (Akinnubi et al., 2012).

4.2.3.3 Shared practice

In the quotations below teachers attest to how the presence of EAs at the school shaped the PLC on shared practice.

4:16 *"Yes, you could see their determination that there is something driving them. Sometimes they would have afternoon classes with the learners supporting them. And sometimes a teacher would have Saturday classes, he would come to assist the teacher. Find that the teacher has two groups of*

learners, the teacher is busy with this group and the EA is busy assisting the other” (P4-TSG8T).

6:3 *“Assistant teachers were assisting with a class when we are not be able to reach number of kids. Like if you have class of 50 learners, you can’t reach all of them, you can’t give them the quality time. So having assistant teachers who is assisting to engage with those kids that we cannot reach on a normal day and normal time. So, they were very useful” (P6-TSG10T).*

7:6 *“Okay, I think their role when you are in class, you teaching, maybe after class he would come to me and give me feedback, maybe we can use new strategies to accommodate all the learners that we have. So, the learning was effective because even if I couldn’t pick a problem, but an EA could pick that problem and then come to me after and then discuss that” (P7-TSG11T).*

As can be seen in the quotations above, according to teachers, EAs played a critical role in the school’s learning and teaching practices for student achievement and success, even when they were required to assist beyond their contracted working hours. Teachers indicated that all students’ learning needs were addressed, even in large classes. Teachers stated that EAs were also able to identify learning needs that a teacher might not have noticed; this typifies shared practice. These findings confirm that teachers’ experiences of EAs within the shared practice dimension were positive and indicate that there was indeed a need for EAs. In essence teachers perceived EAs to be passively influencing the schools PLC on shared practice. According to literature, (Carpenter, 2017) shared workplace offers teachers and other staff members an opportunity to share learning and teaching practices based on student achievement, goals, and management of the collaborative inquiry process. The incorporation of EAs into the schooling system directly influenced shared practice, in this instance as reported by teachers in a positive manner.

Figure 4.6 below presents further quotations from teachers and their experiences on roles EAs played in the schools shared practice.

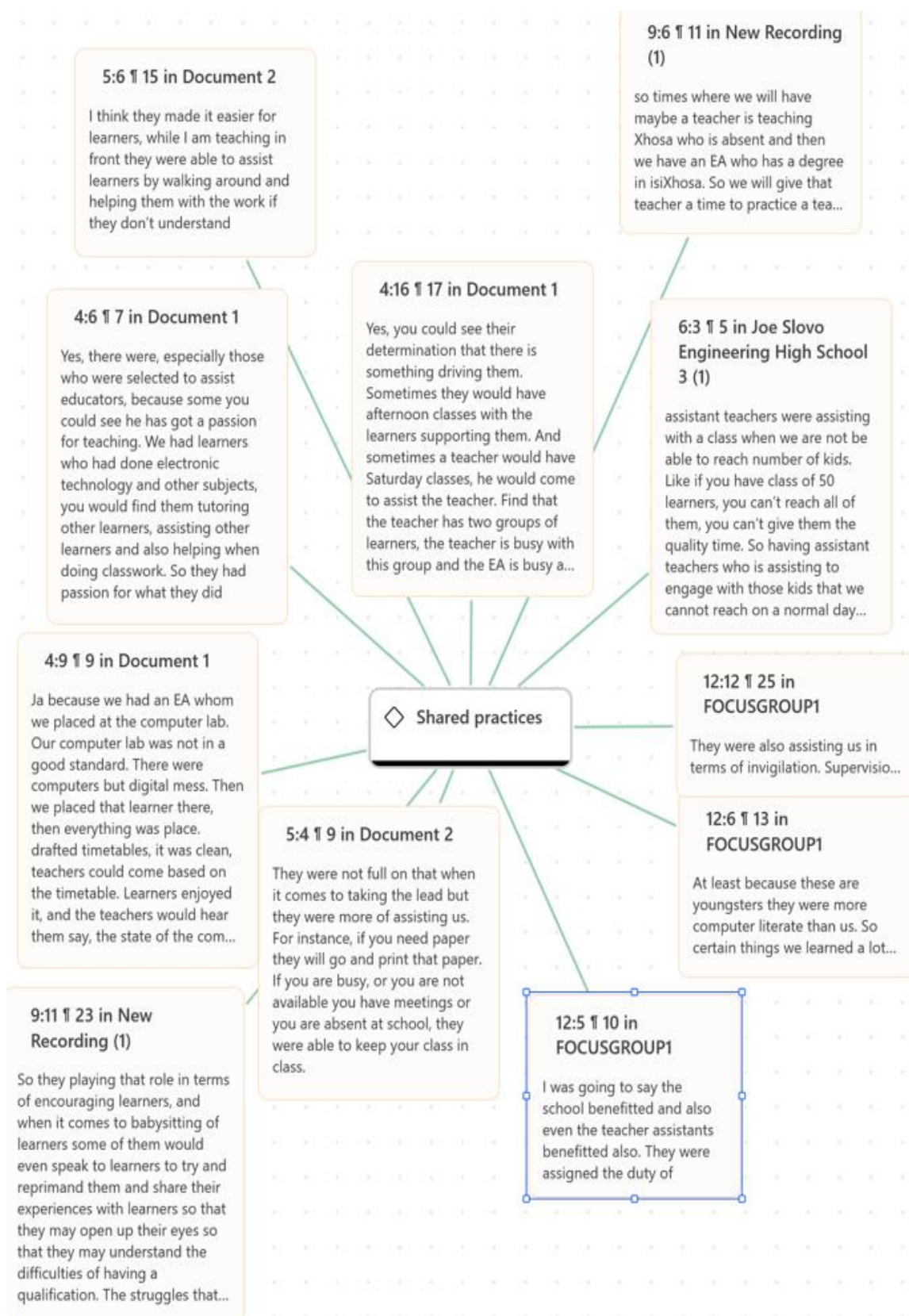


Figure 4.6: Shared Practices – theme in ATLAS.ti

(Source: Researcher's notes in ATLAS.ti).

4.2.3.4 Accountability for outcomes

In this section, the study first explored to whom EAs were accountable and, secondly whether they were held accountable for learners' achievement or results.

4:18 *"Ja they were accounting to the deputy principle. When they arrived, we addressed them and we told them that they account to the deputy principle. When they are not going to be at work this is the person they have to contact. Whatever problem they experience then they go to the deputy principal, unless the deputy principal is not at school" (P4-TSG8T).*

6:15 *"They accounted to our Deputy Principal. So, with them in terms of clocking in and clocking out, accounting to her. In terms of classroom work they are accounting to a teacher who they are assigned to" (P6-TSG10T).*

12:18 *"They accounted to each departmental head. And then the issue of like their attendance was monitored. And in some cases where their attendance was severely erratic, drastic measures were taken to get that particular EA out of the system" (P12-TSG11T).*

Although the findings indicate two lines where EAs accounted to – namely the deputy principal and/or the HoD. Against this, it is evident that EAs operated within an organised system of governance and accountability.

The quotations below present findings on whether EAs were held accountable for the results of collaborative inquiry and learner achievement.

4:19 *"We did not hold accountable the EAs, because they are not our teachers, the person we hold accountable is the teacher, because we ask him, we have got someone to assist you and you never complained, you always appreciated this person, but similarly there is no improvement, what is the problem? Especially we have such discussions when we do results analysis" (P4-TSG8T).*

7:12 *"It was only the teachers. The EAs were initially were not supposed to teach but to assist us with the admin, so they were not held accountable for the results, it was just the teachers" (P7-TSG11T).*

12:21 *"You see you bringing something else now like they were boundaries, there were things that EAs couldn't do like marking, they couldn't do that. And other activities that needed a teacher, there were boundaries" (P12-TSG11T).*

Teachers reported (as evidenced in the quotations above) that even though EAs shared a workspace with them, they were not accountable for the results of the collaborative inquiry process or for learners' achievements. Teachers were clear that EAs were not teachers and were not supposed to teach; consequently, they could not be held accountable for learner achievement or for approaches to teaching and learning. Teachers shared their experiences and views on accountability for outcomes in relation to EAs' involvement and clearly defined the boundaries of EAs' roles. Therefore, it can be concluded that teachers did not perceive that EAs influenced nor shaped the schools PLC on 'accountability of outcomes' at their school. Carpenter (2017) posits that members in a shared workplace must accept accountability for the outcomes of the collaborative inquiry process, learner achievement, and approaches to teaching and learning. However, even though EAs were temporary members of the shared workspace at the school, they were not held accountable for learner achievement and were not expected to lead approaches in teaching and learning.

Figure 4.7 below illustrates the 'Accountability of Outcomes' subcategory associated with this dimension, namely 'School Performance'.

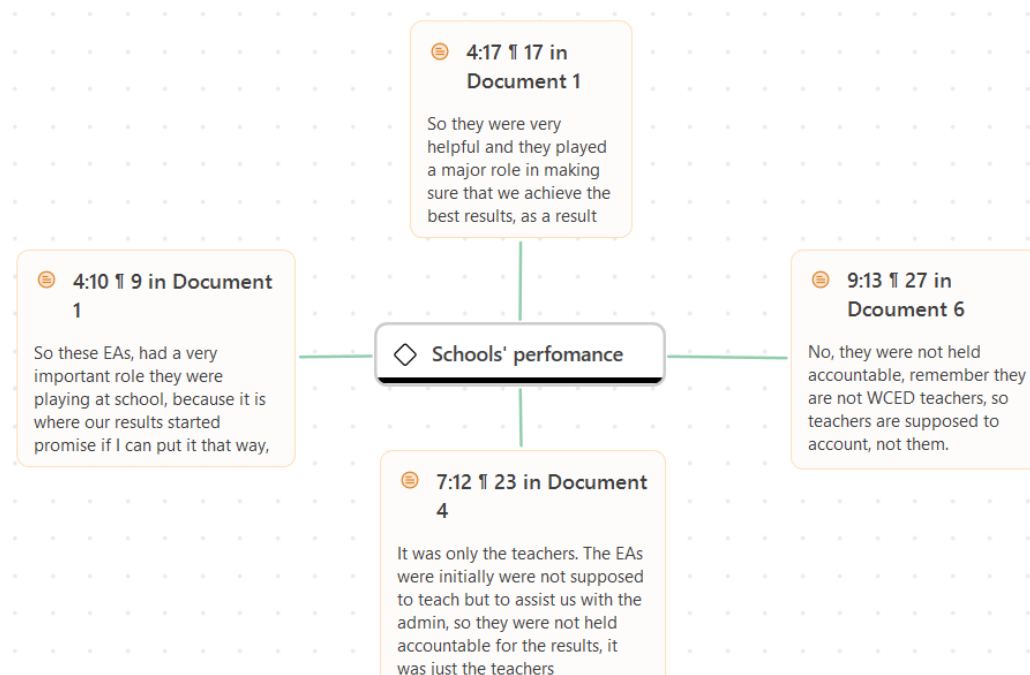


Figure 4.7: Schools' performance – theme in ATLAS.ti

Even though teachers did not perceive that EAs shaped the schools PLC on *accountability for outcomes dimensions*, teachers acknowledged that EAs had a direct positive impact on the school's results and overall performance (see Figure 4.6 above). This is an important subcategory finding, as a school's academic performance is often seen as an indicator of quality and, on this basis, such schools may attract top learners and teachers.

4.2.3.5 Evolving relationships

The citation below captures teachers' descriptions of the relationships they developed with EAs with whom they shared a workspace with.

6:19 *"The trust that we had, the relationship we had between assistant teacher, you wouldn't see any gap until you go to a class. The relationship we tried to establish, even though we were not handing over our job and task to them but the relationship that we had it was a professional relationship whereby we had one goal to make sure those kids are being helped" (P6-TSG10T).*

9:14 *"Positive relationship, they will be part of the staff, even in briefings in the morning, educator assistants will be part of those briefings. Even in parent meetings, also educator assistants will be part" (P9-TSG12T).*

10:5 *"So the relationship it was good, even if they wanted help, they reached out to us..." (P10-TSG8T).*

11:9 *"There were good relationships" (P11-TSG10T).*

12:24 *"It was good because they were involved with question papers. At no stage was there an irregularity that arose out of them working around question papers and all those things...We never experienced such a thing. The level of trust was there" (P12-TSG11T).*

Teachers indicated that their relationship with EAs was professional from the outset. They also stated that although EAs were not qualified teachers, they were treated like teachers and attended all teacher meetings, such as morning briefings and parent meetings. The findings further indicate that teachers trusted EAs with their students. Moreover, teachers reported that EAs adapted to and abided by the school's value system. Against this, it is evident that teachers perceived EAs as positively shaping and influencing the schools' PLC on *evolving relationships dimensions*. Moreover, teachers reported that EAs were trusted and aligned with the school's values and beliefs. Inherently, evolving personal and professional relationships among group members influence practice within a shared workspace. As these relationships deepen over time, trust, shared beliefs about practice, and common values regarding

outcomes begin to develop. In a school context, the shared workspace should nurture professional relationships that enable teachers and other staff to engage respectfully with differing values and beliefs (Carpenter, 2017).

Additionally, the research findings indicate that teachers fully welcomed, embraced, and incorporated EAs into the school environment, as articulated under the sub-category 'Collegiality' in Figure 4.8 below.

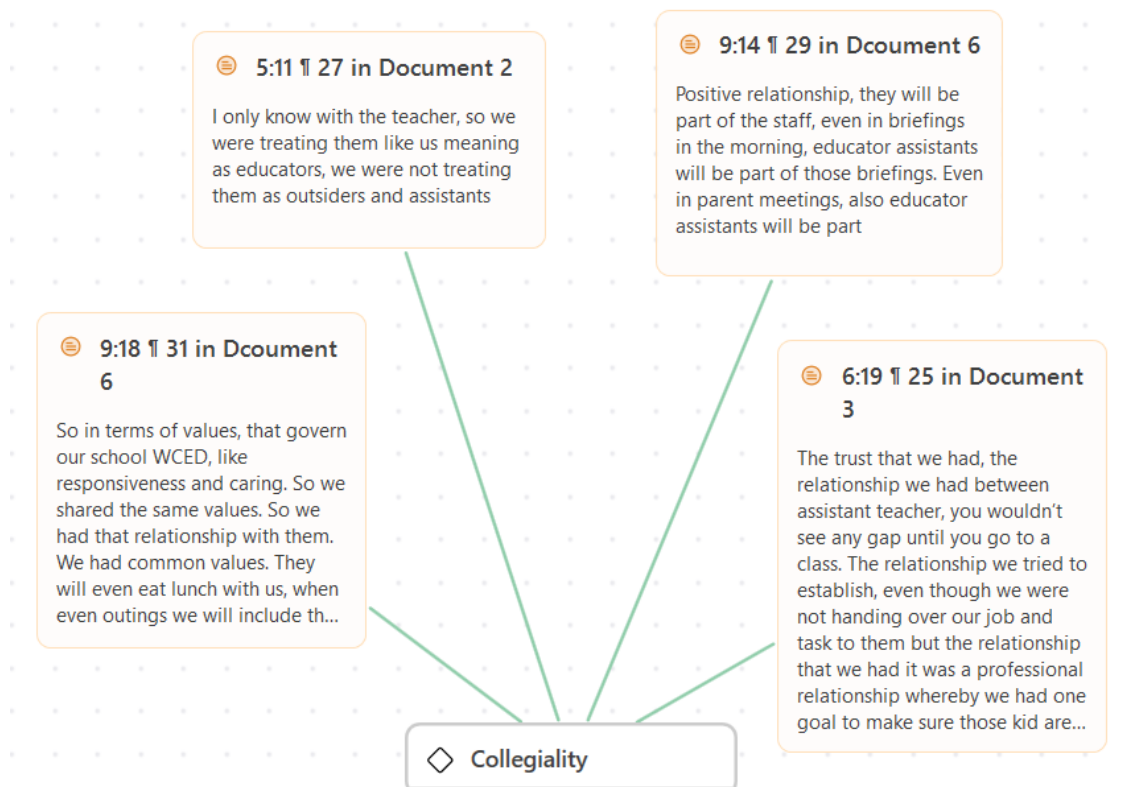


Figure 4.8: Collegiality – theme in ATLAS.ti

Building and sustaining evolving relationships requires a collegial environment. Collegiality is critical in academic settings such as schools and depends on interpersonal relationships, trust, and support among teachers across both vertical and horizontal structures. Moreover, collegiality is a behavioural phenomenon linked to a shared institutional or academic context (Jandric et al., 2023). The teachers at the school under investigation demonstrated collegial behaviour by accepting, embracing, and incorporating EAs into their school.

4.2.4 Teachers' overall EA programme experience

The excerpts below capture teachers' views on the impact of the EA programme at the school, this study's first secondary research objective.

6:20 *"First of all we miss them, if it is possible, we would like to have them again because they were making our life easier, at the same under this country of ours where the unemployment rate is getting, you also think it is a better opportunity for these youngsters to do something rather than join gangsterism, also do all the criminal activities outside. So as a young person I also feel like it was a great opportunity. I will be welcoming it if it comes again" (P6-TSG10T).*

9:19 *"That programme was very effective it was very assisting. When you look at the workload that we are under, even now, have you ever moved to our classes and saw how overcrowded our classes are? So having educator assistants it was quite a relief. I would also like to see the program coming back again. It was quite a relief. Also, in terms of managing the school, you have a printing office, printing office was operated by them. It was easy for us, when we want to make copies, we won't go around looking for someone responsible" (P9-TSG12T).*

9:21 *"They were even inspired to do Education. They in varsities now. After the programme they were even inspired to do a teaching you understand, so that is how effective the programme was really" (P9-TSG12T).*

12:30 *"The assistants they helped us immensely" (P12-TSG11T).*

10:6 *"Overall I will say excellent. And as a result, there are some educators that let's say 80% of the educator they still request teacher assistants, they still want them" (P10-TSG8T).*

12:22 *"I would say excellent. No major hurdles except in the case that the principal just mentioned. All in all, if we had the means we could have kept them longer" (P12-TSG11T).*

4:26 *"When we were told that the program is no longer happening anymore, we were very much disturbed because the EAs were very much helpful in class and in terms of behaviour and uplifting the results. Some of the EAs you can see is better than the teachers. And the learners can hear and understand the EA better than the teacher" (P4-TSG8T).*

11:11 *"It is actually a good program if there are clear guidelines to it and maybe also the criteria used to get, to recruit the EAs. Maybe that if it can be looked*

at, it can maybe make the program better, if let us say they looking at second years of whatever course, not just take everybody because that clashes with our values in our profession and values in our school as well. Because some of them, they just think they are same age as those kids, whereas some of them you actually see because of their background maybe they training to be a teacher or training to do whatever course. Then you get to see there is a standard. So maybe the recruitment can be better or the guidelines of recruiting there can be worked on then you can give us someone that will be in line with what we are doing here” (P11-TSG10T).

12:29 *“It helped me a lot, I think I am struggling with, when it comes to the last minute especially when it comes to administration. They helped me a lot, they took care of that in my department, typing question papers, making copies on time, remaining even after school to make copies. And that gave me enough time to concentrate on my coping to be in class, to make class preparation and get involved in teaching and learning and making it effectively in the class. So, to me that program did help us. And I was just asking when was the year that they were here? He says it was the year before last. And if I remember very well, that year before last our school results, grade twelve results improved tremendously. It means teachers had enough time to concentrate on the class room situation without worrying when it comes to admin” (P12-TSG11T).*

The quotations above provide compelling evidence of the impact of the EA programme in a township school based on teachers’ experiences. Participants’ accounts consistently confirm that the programme had a positive impact on the school’s PLC. The programme was effective, offering relief and support to what appear to be overworked teachers. Administrative support and classroom facilitation emerged strongly as the areas where EAs were most useful, according to the teachers interviewed. Teachers expressed a strong desire for the return of the EA programme, which was discontinued by the DBE in December 2023. Although teachers felt the recruitment process should be reviewed and made more stringent, they nonetheless found the programme to have a positive impact at the school. Teachers also demonstrated an understanding of the programme’s impact beyond the school, stating that the EA initiative played a critical role in reducing youth unemployment, albeit on a short-term basis.

4.3 Chapter summary

This chapter presented the primary data collected, its analysis, and the research findings and conclusions. These findings addressed the study's objectives; the primary objective was to explore the impact of the EA programme in a township school in the WC Metro East Education District. This objective was achieved, with section 4.2.4 presenting the teachers' experiences of the overall impact of the EA programme in their school. In addition, the study pursued two secondary research objectives to help address its primary objective: (i) to explore teachers' experiences of the EA programme in a township school in the WC Metro East Education District; this objective was achieved, and the findings and sub-conclusions were presented in sections 4.2.1 to 4.2.4; (ii) to explore the applicability of the PLC framework in a township school in the same context. This objective was also achieved, and the applicability of the PLC sub-dimensions was presented in section 4.2.3. As the PLC framework served as the study's theoretical lens, this second secondary objective helped address the primary objective. The following chapter presents a summary of the findings, discusses the theoretical and managerial implications, and outlines the study's recommendations and limitations.

CHAPTER 5

SUMMARY, RECOMMENDATIONS & LIMITATIONS

5.1 Introduction

Primarily, this study sought to explore teachers lived experiences of the EA programme and how the programme impacted a township school in the Western Cape Metro East Education District in the WCED. Therefore, it was important to ascertain teacher's overall and holistic experiences of working with EAs. Moreover, the study also explored teachers' perceptions on how EAs influenced and shaped the Professional Learning Community at the school.

The schools system (also known as basic education) is overseen by DBE and they are responsible for the schooling system in South Africa, and this system comprises Grade R to Grade 12 and adult literacy programmes (DBE, 2025). As a government division or department, the DBE is entrusted with implementing government policies in schools, among other responsibilities. However, due to the lack of empirical or academic explorations of the impact of these government policy decisions, the present study sought to address this research gap. Specifically, it explored the impact of the EA programme, which was launched in South African schools in December 2020 under the BEEI.

While academic research is common in the DBE, the voices and lived experiences of teachers are often overlooked. Therefore, findings from teachers' experiences of the EA programme may be useful to the DBE for review and refinement and to gauge whether the programme is achieving its intended purposes. Moreover, the research findings of the current study may also contribute to the body of education literature. For theoretical guidance, the study adopted a widely referenced framework in the education field, namely the PLC framework (Carpenter, 2017). Accordingly, teachers' lived experiences of the EA programme and the impact of the EA programme at the selected school was explored through the lens of the PLC framework. A secondary research objective was to explore teachers' perception on how the roles of EAs influenced and shaped the PLC at the selected school. In line with this, the PLC framework is reintroduced in Figure 5.1 on the next page; a summary of the research findings per PLC sub-dimension is presented, followed by practical recommendations to the DBE and the WCED.

5.2 Reintroduction of the PLC framework

As theorised in the literature review chapter, PLCs consist of groups of teachers who are trained and supported to work regularly and collaboratively to develop the knowledge and skill

set required to improve teaching and learning effectiveness and student outcomes (Townley, 2020). This framework served as a theoretical guide to explore teachers' lived experiences of the EA programme and the impact of the EA programme in a selected township school. Moreover, teachers' perception on EA's influence on shaping the schools' PLC was also explored through this specific PLC framework. Therefore Figure 5.1 below shows which questions in the interview guide interrogated specific PLC sub-dimensions. Question 1 is not depicted in Figure 5.1 because it was an opening question that elicited participants' broad understanding of the EAs programme and its purposes. Similarly, Question 8 explored participants' overall experiences of the EA programme.

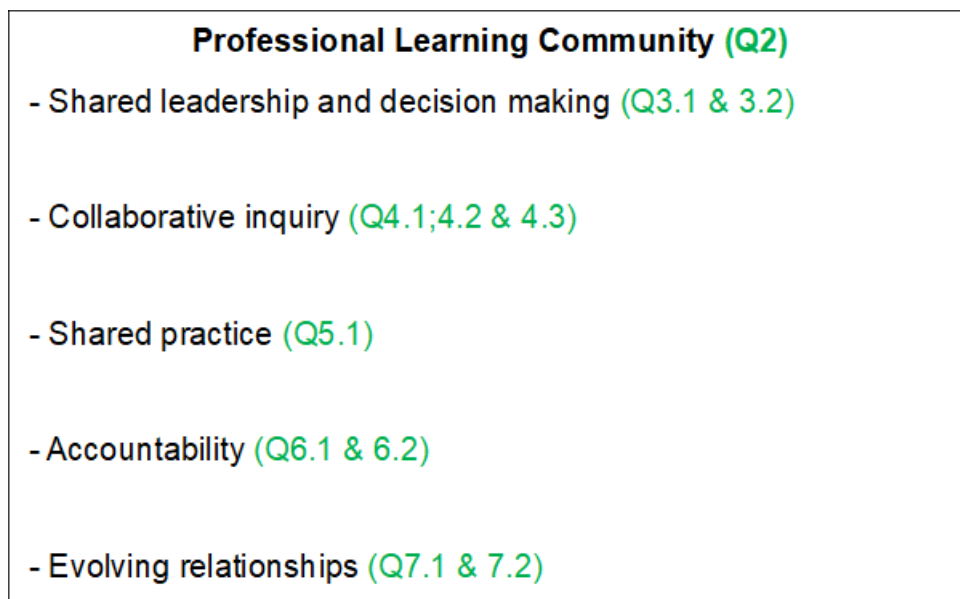


Figure 5.1: PLC framework applied

5.2.1 Background and purpose of the EA programme – Township school

Research findings indicate that teachers at the school under investigation understood the background and purpose of the government's EA programme, implemented by the DBE. Although the programme was launched during the COVID-19 period, interviewees suggested that the school was initially neither well prepared nor thoroughly briefed on how it should be implemented. This gap can be attributed to several factors, including shortcomings in communication between the DBE, the WCED, and the school.

Recommendation 1. It is widely known that youth unemployment in South Africa is among the highest globally; therefore, any government efforts to address it are welcomed by society. This high unemployment rate includes teacher graduates. Accordingly, initiatives such as the EA programme should consider the context and

dynamics of the sectors in which they are implemented. In line with this, this study recommends that unemployed teacher graduates be prioritised in the recruitment of EAs. This would serve several purposes: firstly, advancing the EA programme's objective of reducing youth unemployment; secondly, enabling unemployed teacher graduates to add greater value in schools owing to their academic qualifications; and thirdly, giving them the opportunity to put theory into practice. For example, if the Department of Health were to implement a youth unemployment programme, unemployed doctors and nurses would be suitable candidates.

5.2.2 Professional learning community – Township school

It was also important to examine the school's PLC and culture, and how these were influenced by the integration of EAs into this community. Theory (Oppi & Eisenschmidt, 2022) suggests that a school's PLC is shaped by its internal stakeholders, such as teachers and learners. Teachers are expected to share experiences, strategies, and tools to advance teaching and learning. Therefore, it was important to understand how this community was affected by the introduction of a new layer of stakeholders in the form of EAs.

Recommendation 2. Research findings revealed that EAs' behaviour, and its influence on the school's professional learning environment and culture, varied from EAs who adapted and positively influenced the school community to EAs whose behaviour was inconsistent with the school's professional setting and culture. In light of this, the current study recommends that EAs should undergo rigorous training prior to being incorporated into a school's PLC. This training is particularly crucial for schools in townships because EAs are often recruited from young people living nearby, and it is widely known that the likelihood of unemployed youth engaging in unlawful activities is higher in townships than in suburban areas, meaning learners may be exposed to individuals engaged in lawlessness.

5.2.3 Shared leadership and decision-making – Township school

Like other institutions, for structure and efficiency, leadership plays a critical role in a school's professional community. Owing to its nature as an educational institution, leadership is often negotiated through dialogue and a culture of collaboration. Although formal leadership structures – such as the school principal, deputies, HoDs, and the SMT – exist, leadership is shared. For instance, teachers are entrusted with leadership and decision-making in their classrooms. The findings of the present study revealed that EAs played an instrumental role in leadership and decision-making at the township school under study.

Recommendation 3. Research findings also revealed that EAs appeared more relatable to students than permanent teachers, a phenomenon likely attributable to

generational gaps. It is conceivable that younger EAs (aged 18–35) are more relatable to learners than older teachers who may be three or four generations ahead. In light of this, the study suggests that the DBE should be deliberate about employing younger qualified teachers, as those who are closer in age to the current generation of learners may better support schools' PLCs. Moreover, the DBE should consider implementing the EA programme for longer periods rather than on once-off, one-year contracts.

5.2.4 Collaborative inquiry – Township school

Fundamentally, collaborative inquiry refers to a collective approach to inquiry and problem-solving by teachers to determine and monitor teaching and learning practices, and to develop appropriate systems and data management. In essence, collaborative inquiry is teacher-led and involves sharing ideas, setting targets for teaching and learning practices and outcomes, among other activities. Collaborative inquiry is particularly critical for township schools because these schools often face inherent challenges arising from their geographic locations and prevailing social ills.

Recommendation 4. Study findings revealed that teachers at the school studied were overwhelmed by large class sizes. Consequently, they worked with EAs to alleviate the pressure. Teachers reported that they could not give individual attention to learners, and EAs played a role in identifying these learning gaps and bringing them to teachers' attention. However, this was not the intended purpose of the EA programme; EAs are meant to provide administrative support and not be directly involved in learners' teaching and learning experiences. The teacher–learner ratio imbalance may compromise learners' learning experiences and performance; hence this study recommends that the DBE prioritise employing sufficient teachers in township schools to avoid reliance on unqualified EAs.

5.2.5 Shared practice – Township school

The nature of schools and other academic institutions compels educators to engage in shared practice. This means a school's PLC is co-created by internal stakeholders, particularly teachers, through practices such as team-based planning, shaping learners' thinking, and other learning activities to achieve a common goal, typically learners' success. The findings of this study indicate that EAs played a crucial role in schools' learning and teaching practices to support learners' success.

Recommendation 5. It appears there were few limits to the role EAs played in influencing shared practices in teaching and learning. The study found that EAs helped identify learners' learning gaps that teachers may not have spotted. Furthermore, it was reported that EAs also stepped in and managed classrooms in cases of teacher

absenteeism. Although teachers reported the positive influence of EAs on shared practices at the school, this is concerning, as it suggests that EAs' roles were extended beyond their intended purpose. It is also troubling that EAs were directly involved in learners' learning experiences. In light of this, the study recommends that EA roles be limited to the intended purpose of the programme, and that the DBE and WCED implement systems to monitor this, as expanded EA responsibilities may compromise learners' learning experiences. Moreover, schools should be required to foster a collaborative culture in which teachers routinely compare notes on teaching and learning.

5.2.6 Accountability – Township school

This study explored accountability as a PLC sub-dimension and examined to whom EAs were accountable within the school. The findings showed that although EAs shared workspaces, they were not held accountable for the outcomes of the collaborative inquiry process or for learners' progress and results. Consequently, the study concluded that accountability, as a PLC building block, was not applied to EAs in this school. However, the findings also indicated that EA reporting lines were clearly defined, meaning that EAs were monitored and held accountable for their roles within the school.

Recommendation 6. Ordinarily, members of a PLC collectively develop an understanding of how school learners learn and how to improve their learning experience. This involves activities such as team teaching and teachers looking beyond their own classrooms for effective techniques. In this regard, although EAs formed part of the PLC at the township school under study, their accountability should be limited to their defined scope of work and role within the school. Furthermore, performance reviews for EAs should be considered to assess their actual impact in schools.

5.2.7 Evolving relationships – Township school

To build a successful PLC, teachers should recognise that trust, beliefs, and a sense of shared values and direction are essential. Teachers reported in this study that their relationships with EAs were professional from the beginning. Teachers noted that, even though EAs were not qualified to teach, the school PLC treated them as teachers, and EAs attended all teachers' meetings. Moreover, EAs appeared to adapt readily to the school's value system, which is conceivable given that they themselves are products of the WCED school system. According to teachers, EA–teacher relationships evolved over time and were characterised by reliability and trust.

Recommendation 7. Regularity and familiarity are important factors in building a PLC. Despite the EA programme's intended purpose of reducing unemployment, I

recommend that the DBE and WCED consider employing the same EAs to ensure continuity and stability. As reported, EAs directly influence a school's PLC; therefore, retaining the same individuals is ideal for sustainability and for ensuring that EAs have a positive influence on a school's PLC. Each time new staff enter the school environment, integration into the school's PLC must begin anew.

5.2.8 Teachers overall EA experience – Township school

As explained in Chapters 1 and 3, the primary purpose of this study was to explore teachers' experiences of the EA programme, with a high school in a township was selected as the context and site for data generation. This exploration required theoretical guidance; therefore, the PLC framework was adopted as the guiding theory, as reported in Chapter 4. Furthermore, it was important to ascertain teachers' overall or holistic experience of the EA programme beyond the PLC framework-guided research process. As reported in the previous chapter, study participants unambiguously indicated the value of the EA programme and its positive influence on the school PLC. Interviewed teachers indicated that administrative support and class facilitation were the areas where the EA added the most value. Teachers called for the return of the programme because gaps at the school became evident when it was discontinued.¹

Recommendation 8. This study recommends that the DBE consider making EAs a permanent programme within the school system. However, the criteria used to recruit EAs should be reviewed, as discussed in sections 5.2.2 and 5.2.3 of the current chapter. Moreover, EAs' influence on a school's PLC should remain within the scope of their responsibilities, as overlap with teachers' responsibilities may compromise learners and their learning experiences.

5.3 Summary of findings and conclusions.

Firstly, it was important to establish whether teachers at the selected school understood the background and purpose of the EA programme implemented as BEEI by DBE. Even though teachers reported that the school was not adequately prepared to incorporate a substantial number of employees at the schools' PLC, their roles proved valuable. The ill preparedness is conceivable as the PYEI programmes were implemented as a response mechanism to the COVID-19 pandemic. Nonetheless, beyond its positive contribution to the schools' PLC as reported by teachers, the EA programme addressed other critical social challenges such as

high youth unemployment rates in South Africa. Therefore, based on research findings, it may be advisable for DBE to consider the programme for long-term implementation.

Furthermore, the study explored teachers' lived experience of working with EA and the impact the EA programme had on the school. The PLC framework (Carpenter, 2017) was used to guide this exploration. Meaning, teachers' experiences were explored through the lenses of this framework. In this regard teachers reported that EAs played instrumental roles in *shared leadership and decision making*. Moreover, even though EAs did not teach nor lead teaching activities, teachers stated that they closely *collaborated* with EAs in teaching and learning activities. Once again it can be concluded that the EA programme served purpose beyond the schools' PLC, findings suggest that EAs learned practical leadership and decision-making skills and had the opportunity to collaborate with trained and qualified teachers.

Moreover, the nature of an educational institution meant that EAs *shared responsibilities* with teachers as they were allocated some of the teachers' administrative responsibilities. Indeed, teachers attested that EAs played crucial roles in *shared practices* at the school. However, this may be challenging as findings suggest that EA roles were extended beyond their intended purpose. This suggests that a framework to guide EA programme implementation at schools may be a necessity. Teachers did, however, report that even though EAs were *accountable* to HoDs and the school principal, they were not held accountable for learners' performance. These findings clarify and re-emphasize that EAs are not teachers but assistants to teachers.

Additionally, teachers reported that they established strong and positive *relationships* with EAs based on trust and reliability. For instance, EAs could be relied on in instances of teacher absenteeism. These findings on EA-teacher relationship confirm teachers' perceptions on EA roles in influencing and shaping the schools' PLC. Teachers reported that some EAs adapted and positively influenced the schools' PLC. Whereas other displayed behaviors inconsistent with the schools' environment. In this regard, DBE may consider EAs who are pursuing qualifications related to education as a requirement.

5.4 Limitations of the study

The limitations of the present study are neither unique nor unusual but inherent in academic research.

- The study used a sample rather than a census due to time and cost constraints.
- The sample size is small, which is inherent in qualitative research; other studies could, for instance, use quantitative or mixed methods to research this topic further.

- The study used one township school as a case study; it would be valuable to explore teachers' experiences of the EA programme in other schools, both in other townships and in suburban schools.
- The study is limited to a township school within the WCED. It would therefore be beneficial to conduct similar research in other provinces.

5.6 Chapter summary

Chapter 5 presented a comprehensive summary of the study's findings and their broader relevance to basic education. The results regarding the value of the EA programme at the school under investigation were compelling. As noted, this research explored the impact of the EA programme retrospectively, since the government discontinued it in December 2023. It was later reintroduced in May 2025, after this study's **data generation** period. The chapter also provided practical recommendations for each key finding.

To explore teachers' lived experiences of the EA programme, the study employed the well-established PLC framework as its guiding theoretical lens. This framework was tested for its relevance, robustness, and applicability in a new context, thereby contributing to the advancement of educational theory. The chapter concluded by identifying the study's limitations, acknowledging that this may not be exhaustive.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX A: WCED Consent Letter



Directorate: Research

meshack.kanzi@westerncape.gov.za

Tel: +27 021 467 2350

Fax: 086 590 2282

Private Bag x9114, Cape Town, 8000

wced.wcape.gov.za

REFERENCE: 164E0FAF000003D-20231018

ENQUIRIES: Mr M Kanzi

Ms. Chuma Sodlaka
3 Valley Oak Street
Cape Town
7830

Dear Chuma Sodlaka,

RESEARCH PROPOSAL: EXPLORING TEACHERS' EXPERIENCES OF THE EDUCATOR ASSISTANT PROGRAMME IN A HIGH SCHOOL IN THE METRO EAST EDUCATION DISTRICT (WCED).

Your application to conduct the above-mentioned research in schools in the Western Cape has been approved subject to the following conditions:

1. Principals, educators, learners including family members and all WCED staff are under no obligation to assist you in your investigation.
2. Principals, educators, learners including family members and schools should not be identifiable in any way from the results of the investigation.
3. You make all the arrangements concerning your investigation.
4. Educators' programmes are not to be interrupted.
5. The Study is to be conducted from 15 October 2024 till 30 September 2025.
6. No research can be conducted during the fourth term as schools are preparing and finalizing syllabi for examinations (October to December).
7. Should you wish to extend the period of your data collection, please contact Mr M Kanzi at the contact numbers above quoting the reference number.
8. A photocopy of this letter is submitted to the principal where the intended research is to be conducted.
9. Your research will be limited to the list of schools as forwarded to the Western Cape Education Department.
10. A brief summary of the content, findings and recommendations is provided to the Director: Research Services.
11. The Department receives a copy of the completed report/dissertation/thesis addressed to:

The Director: Research Services
Western Cape Education Department
Private Bag X9114
CAPE TOWN
8000

We wish you success in your research.

Kind regards,
Meshack Kanzi
Directorate: Research
DATE: 15 October 2024

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be 'Meshack Kanzi', written over a horizontal line.

APPENDIX B: School Consent Letter



UXOLO HIGH SCHOOL

PRINCIPAL: Mr KJ BONANI

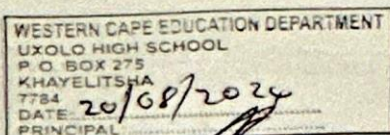
**Physical Address: BATHANDWA NDONDO
ROAD, 20 SECTION MANDELA PARK, KHAYELITSHA,
TELEPHONE: (021) 811 7572, FACSIMILE: (021) 367 3707**

Postal Address: P.O. BOX 275, KHAYELITSHA, 7784

Email: admin@uxolo.wcape.school.za Emis Number: 0106041339

To whom this concerns

This letter serves to confirm that Uxolo High School (Bathandwa Ndondo Road, 20 Section Mandela Park, Khayelitsha) has granted Ms Chuma Joy Sodlaka (student number 210132744) permission and support to collect data from teachers at the school for the completion of her Master of Education thesis titled *EXPLORING TEACHERS' EXPERIENCES OF THE EDUCATOR ASSISTANT PROGRAMME IN A HIGH SCHOOL IN THE METRO EAST EDUCATION DISTRICT (WCED)*. This letter is applicable until she completes the degree.



APPENDIX C: CPUT Ethical Clearance Certificate



Private Bag X8, Wellington, 7654
Jan van Riebeeck Street, Wellington, 7654
Tel: +27 21 864 5200

P.O. Box 652, Cape Town, 8000
Highbury Road, Mowbray
Tel: +27 21 680 1500

FACULTY OF EDUCATION

On the 30th of August 2024 the Acting Chairperson of the Faculty of Education Ethics Committee of the Cape Peninsula University of Technology granted ethics approval (EFEC 05-07/2024) to Ms Chuma Joy Sodlaka for research activities related to a staff project / **degree project**

Title:	Exploring teachers' experiences of the Educator Assistant Programme in a high school in the Metro East Education District (WCED)
--------	--

Comments:

The EFEC unconditionally grants ethical clearance for this study. This clearance is valid until 30th August 2027. Permission is granted to conduct research within the Faculty of Education only. Research activities are restricted to those details in the research project as outlined by the Ethics application. Any changes wrought to the described study must be reported to the Ethics committee immediately.



Date: 30 August 2024

Prof P Boer
Acting Chair
EFEC

APPENDIX D: Interview/Focus Group Discussion Guide

Teacher Interview/focus group discussion guide

Providing the interviewee’s name is optional. Participants are high school teachers in a township high school in the Metro East district WCED.

Q1. What is your understanding of the background of the educator assistant programme?

.....

Q2. Describe how educator assistants influenced the professional learning culture in your school.

.....

Q3. Shared leadership and decision making:

3.1 What leadership responsibilities did educator assistants possess and display in your school?

.....

3.2 In what ways did educator assistants give direction to learning and teaching activities in your school?

.....

Q4. Collaborative inquiry

4.1 How did educator assistants collaborate with teachers to determine the effectiveness of learning and teaching activities in your schools?

.....

4.2 What was the role of educator assistants in teachers’ data examination, plotting, sharing ideas, and target setting for learning and teaching practices in your school?

.....

4.3 What were the contributions of educator assistants in innovation initiatives to enhance learners learning and teaching experiences in your school?

.....

Q5. Shared practice

5.1 How did educator assistants share learning and teaching practices with teachers to address students' goals and achievements in your school?

.....

Q6. Accountability for outcomes

6.1 In what ways were educator assistants accountable in your school, who were they accountable to?

.....

6.2 How did educator assistants collaborate with teachers in accounting to acceptance of results and learner achievement in your school?

.....

Q7. Evolving relationships

7.1 How would you describe the professional relationship between educator assistants and the rest of the school community in your school?

.....

7.2 How would you describe the level of trust, and shared values between educator assistants and teachers in your school?

.....

7.3 Can you describe how educator assistants and teachers managed differing values, and beliefs systems in your school?

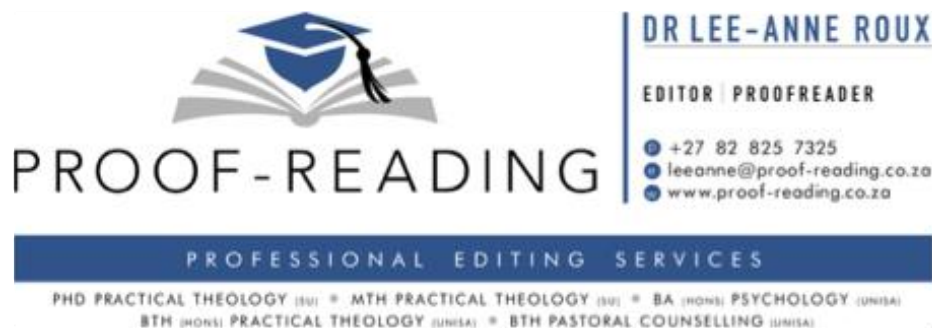
.....

Q8. What was your overall experience of the educator assistant programme, and how would you rate it?

.....

End

APPENDIX E: Language Editing Certificate



3 November 2025

TO WHOM IT MAY CONCERN

RE: LANGUAGE EDITING

This letter serves to confirm that I have edited the thesis titled:

**Exploring teachers' experiences of the Educator Assistant
Programme in a high school in the Metro East Education District
(WCED)**

By

Chuma Joy Sodlaka

[This certificate does not cover any alterations made subsequent to the editing process].

Please feel free to contact me if you need any further information.

Yours sincerely,

Dr Lee-Anne Roux

APPENDIX F: Participant Consent Form

Faculty of Education

Ethics informed consent form



CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN A RESEARCH

Category of Participants (tick as appropriate):

<i>Principals</i>	☐	<i>Teachers</i>	☒	<i>Parents</i>	☐	<i>Lecturers</i>	☐	<i>Students</i>	☐
<i>Other (specify)</i>	☐								

You are kindly invited to participate in a research study being conducted by Chuma Joy Sodlaka from the Cape Peninsula University of Technology. The findings of this study will contribute towards (tick as appropriate):

<i>An undergraduate project</i>	☐	<i>A conference paper</i>	☐
<i>An Honours project</i>	☐	<i>A published journal article</i>	☐
<i>A Masters/doctoral thesis</i>	☒	<i>A published report</i>	☐

Selection criteria

You were selected as a possible participant in this study because you are a teacher at the schools under research.

The information below gives details about the study to help you decide whether you would want to participate.

Title of the research:

Exploring teachers' experiences of the EA programme in a high school in the Metro East Education District (WCED)

A brief explanation of what the research involves:

This study aims to explore teachers' experiences of the EA programme in a high school in the Metro East Education District (WCED). Under the Presidential Youth Employment Initiative (PYEI), implemented as the Basic Education Employment Initiative (BEEI) the department employed Educator Assistants (EAs) in schools across the country. The initiative commenced in December 2020 and the primary role of EAs is to assist teachers in addressing identifiable learning gaps in classrooms and schools. This study seeks to explore teachers' experiences and their perspectives on how the EA programme influences the teaching and learning community in the Metro East Education District, Western Cape Department of Education, South Africa.

Why is this research important?

The importance of this research is to discover what influence the EA program has had on teaching and learning and on the identifiable gaps in classrooms.

Benefits of research

The benefits of this study will be two-fold (i) Firstly it will explore teachers' experiences of the EA programme in the South African school sector context, specifically in a township school. The findings of this research will be useful to the WCDE and DBE large to assess how the EA programme influenced schools' professional learning community. So, research findings may contribute to the department's future planning, (ii) from an academic point of view, this study explores the applicability of a widely referenced framework (PLC) in a new context. Therefore, findings will indicate whether the framework is relevant and applicable in a township high school context.

Incentives

There will be no monetary, participants will be offered snacks during the interviews.

Procedures (duration)

It is anticipated that the duration of the interaction with the participants will take a period of two weeks. Firstly, interviews will be conducted with participants followed by focus groups and thereafter observation. \

Right to withdraw/ voluntary

Participants will be treated with respect at all times and protected from any judgement as a result of this research. Participation is voluntary and participants will have the right to withdraw at any stage of the research.

Confidentiality and anonymity

Participation in the study will be entirely voluntary. Participants will be assured of confidentiality and anonymity. Participants will not be exposed to possible physical or psychological harm. They will be asked to give written consent.

Potential risks, discomforts or inconveniences

There are no known risks, discomfort and inconveniences.

What will happen to the data when the study is completed?

The data will be kept by the researcher for audit purposes.

Kindly complete the table below before participating in the research.

Statement	Tick the appropriate column	
	Yes	No
1. I understand the purpose of the research.		
2. I understand what the research requires of me.		
3. I volunteer to take part in the research.		

4. I know that I can withdraw at any time.		
5. I understand that there will not be any form of discrimination against me as a result of my participation or non-participation.		
6. Comment:		

Please sign the consent form. You will be given a copy of this form on request.

Signature of participant	Date

Researchers

	Name:	Surname:	Contact details:
1.	Chuma Joy	Sodlaka	+27 65 961 8299
2.			
3.			

Contact person: Chuma Joy Sodlaka	
Contact number: +27 65 961 8299	Email: 21013277@mycput.ac.za joysodlaka@gmail.com
Supervisor Details:	Contacts

APPENDIX G: Sample of Transcribed Interview

New Recording (1)

INTERVIEWER: Thank you so much sir for your time. So, I am going to ask you a few questions and I would like you to answer. Firstly, I would like to ask you what is your understanding of the Educator Assistant Program.

INTERVIEWEE: My understanding of the EA program I think it started just after Covid19. It was just to help teachers with administration and the management of the school. And two, is to assist educators in class, in managing registers and assisting whereby if they do have content background, they were even given time to assist learners with their homework and class activities during class. However, they were not allowed to set papers and marking. And those were allowed to teach were those who had degree in Education or diploma in Education. So, it was meant to assist educators with administration in class and also there were other general assistants, who were assisting the school in terms of cleaning the school and also ground duties in the school.

INTERVIEWER: Describe how educator assistants influence the professional learning culture in your school?

INTERVIEWEE: It did, positive change I would say. It made it easy for the school to function. And it was assisting very much, especially for administration, it was easy for educators to focus more on content delivery and it reduced workload in terms of managing class, classroom management, disciplining learners. Because we had a problem specifically of learners who were bunking. Then those general assistants were assisting regarding that and it also assisted us the culture that we wanted to maintain of zero tolerance to late coming. So having general workers also they assisted us concerning such things. So, they helped us to maintain the culture in our school even the matter of having like let us say there is a teacher who is absent at school, so there would be no one to babysit those learners. So, the presence of educator assistants, it assisted us concerning that, so learners were well attended. You will find that there will be no class where there is no supervision of learners. But after that there was a lot of improvement. Teachers were not present at school, maybe a teacher is ill, so it is not easy to get a substitute for two days or for a week. So, it was easy to get assistance from educator assistants.

INTERVIEWER: Now we are going to touch on shared leadership and decision making. What leadership responsibilities did educator assistants display in your school?

INTERVIEWEE: In terms of leadership responsibilities?

INTERVIEWER: If any, if there were any leadership responsibilities that they showed that they possessed and they displayed it in your school.

INTERVIEWEE: Not that I am aware of.

INTERVIEWER: In what ways did educator since give direction to learning and teaching activities in your school?

INTERVIEWEE: It is specifically those who were able to assist in terms of teaching and learning. It was mostly those with the degree in Education because to take someone to expose him or her to an environment whereby they have to exercise and display teaching and learning strategies and theories. But having those who had a diploma in Education or a degree in Education. It was easy for them to have exposure of teaching and learning. Even though some don't even have time to practice. (Inaudible – other language) teaching prac. But for them to work and to manage a class, so times where we will have maybe a teacher is teaching Xhosa who is absent and then we have an EA who has a degree in isiXhosa. So, we will give that teacher a time to practice a teaching and learning in class.

INTERVIEWER: Now how did the educator assistants collaborate with teachers to determine the effectiveness of learning and teaching in your school.

INTERVIEWEE: Collaborate?

INTERVIEWER: Yes, how did the teacher assistants collaborate with teachers to determine the effectiveness of learning and teaching activities in your school?

INTERVIEWEE: As I said they managed it in terms of managing a classroom and keeping it disciplined. So that's why I say the collaboration was, because whenever we had a problem maybe there is a learner who stole something at maybe in class, so those educators will be there to help do searches. They will participate (inaudible – other language) safety. And also, they be there and say mostly we will also include

them in parent teacher meetings. So, their presence it reduced and also it reduced in discipline and maintained a discipline (inaudible – other language). They assisted basically the ones with degree in Education are the ones who collaborated easy with educators. Then those who had grade twelve, you could say some of them are lab managers, that is also where they assisted.

INTERVIEWER: Thank you sir. What was the role of the educator assistants in sharing ideas and setting targets for learning and teaching in the school?

INTERVIEWEE: Setting targets. Basically, educator assistants they assisting teachers. And also, hence I say those who did like an excellent job are those who had a background of education, diploma and degree in Education. So those people are well vested. So, at some point we were able to share and get ideas from them how do deal effective with learners in class. So then general assistants, they assisted in managing the school like the school environment. But in terms of effective teaching and learning they did not play much role except those ones who were professional educators.

INTERVIEWER: What were the contributions of educator assistants in innovation to enhance learning and teaching in your school?

INTERVIEWEE: (Inaudible – other language).

INTERVIEWER: Is there anything that they came up with to enhance the learning?

INTERVIEWEE: No.

INTERVIEWER: Not that you think of, thank you sir. We are almost done. Now we are talking about shared practices, how did the educator assistants share learning and teaching practices with the teachers. Mainly to address student goals and student achievements.

INTERVIEWEE: We have a committee that celebrates (inaudible – other language). After each and every term, then we use assistants to help us type those certificates and hand them over. So, they playing that role in terms of encouraging learners, and when it comes to babysitting of learners some of them would even speak to learners to try and reprimand them and share their experiences with learners so that they may open up their eyes so that they may understand the difficulties of having a qualification. The struggles that they personally experienced after grade 12. So that's

where they would assist in encouraging learners. Having teacher assistants, it also gave learners hope because when they saw their brothers and sisters coming at school working with them and engaging in teaching and learning. So, it gave them hope that there is (inaudible – other language). So, when they saw that person who has been staying at a loxion and having an opportunity to work as a teacher assistant. So, it gave them that hope that hope that even though it may seem that it is difficult to get a job with a degree the government does have programs to assist such individuals.

INTERVIEWER: In what way were educator assistants accountable in your school and who were they accountable to?

INTERVIEWEE: When the educator assistants came, they were handed to the Deputy Principal. Then the Deputy Principal will distribute them according to their qualifications and their expertise to relevant HODs, each department had a certain number of EAs. Then the HODs was responsible to distribute the EAs to relevant teachers like if someone has mathematics, they were handed over to the maths department HOD, then the HOD will see where there is a need to a certain teacher.

INTERVIEWER: And how did the teacher assistants collaborate with teachers in accounting for the results and learner's achievements in your school. Were educator assistants held accountable as teachers when it came to the results that the learners obtained?

INTERVIEWEE: No, they were not held accountable, remember they are not WCED teachers, so teachers are supposed to account, not them.

INTERVIEWER: When we speak about evolving relationships, I would like to know, how would you describe the professional relationship of the educator assistant and the rest of the school community, so for instance the relationship of the educator assistants with the parents and the SGB, how would you explain that relationship?

INTERVIEWEE: Positive relationship, they will be part of the staff, even in briefings in the morning, educator assistants will be part of those briefings. Even in parent meetings, also educator assistants will be part. In my department we had one educator assistant of which I gave her a role to be a secretary of our department. So, we had that relationship. We did not give them an opportunity where they will feel like

they are loners. They are educator assistants that belong to us. So, we having that positive relationship with them.

INTERVIEWER: How would you describe the level of trust and shared values between educator assistants and teachers in your school?

INTERVIEWEE: Yes, we do. As educator assistants, even learners they did not even call them educator assistants. They were treated like educators. So, there was not that, there was no much gaps between the educator assistants and the teachers. Even when we talk about trust, the level we trusted them with our learners, is the level we trust each other as the school staff. So, there was no part whereby we will feel like we don't trust this individual, we can't leave her with kids and stuff. So, in terms of values, that govern our school WCED, like responsiveness and caring. So, we shared the same values. So, we had that relationship with them. We had common values. They will even eat lunch with us, when even outings we will include them. (Inaudible – other language) but we tried as the management of the school to fight that, whatever that we are doing they are part of us. Even the non-teaching staff they are part of us. If you move around our school even the caretaker of the school, some learners think he is an educator. So that's how we do things in our school.

INTERVIEWER: Lastly, what was your overall experience of the EA program and how would you rate it?

INTERVIEWEE: Educator assistant they brought a relief, I won't lie. That program was very effective it was very assisting. When you look at the workload that we are under, even now, have you ever moved to our classes and saw how overcrowded our classes are? So having educator assistants it was quite a relief. I would also like to see the program coming back again. It was quite a relief. Also, in terms of managing the school, you have a printing office, printing office was operated by them. It was easy for us, when we want to make copies, we won't go around looking for someone responsible. You will station there. Those who are at the lab will station there. If you are a teacher in your class, you have an assistant, you want to make copies, because remember in our school our learners are not allowed this side. So, you have to come from your class, and do copies, it was easy to function, even to run, it was much very easy. After the program was suspended and ended, things were bad. And even to the community, it did a bad job because now look (inaudible – other language). They were

even inspired to do Education. They in varsities now. After the program they were even inspired to do a teaching you understand, so that is how effective the program was really. (Inaudible – other language). So, it played a huge role in the community and in our school. (Inaudible – other language).

INTERVIEWER: Thank you so much sir for your time. That is the end of our interview.

APPENDIX H: Turnitin Report

Exploring teachers' experiences of the educator assistant programme in a high school in the Metro East Education District (WCED)

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