

Sustaining Collaborative Learning in a Rurally Located University Classroom in South Africa: Conducive Conditions and Possible Threats

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Abstract: This study investigated how collaborative learning, as a teaching and learning approach, can be enhanced to promote pre-service teachers' participation in university classrooms in rural areas of South Africa. The study aimed to identify the conducive conditions that support collaborative learning, as well as the threats that may hinder the implementation of collaborative learning in rural classrooms. Asset-based community development served as the theoretical framework for this study. A transformative paradigm was adopted, employing a participatory research design to bring together individuals with relevant experiences and opinions. The study involved fifteen participants, including five lecturers with more than five years of experience, five third-year students, and five fourth-year students from a selected university. Data was collected through focused group discussions and interviews. Thematic analysis was used to analyse the data. The findings of the study revealed that connecting activities to assessment, proper planning, linking content to students' lives, and establishing a positive classroom

culture were conducive conditions for collaborative learning. On the other hand, language barriers, unconducive classroom infrastructure, and lack of infrastructure were identified as factors that could hinder the implementation of collaborative learning in this study. The study recommends the creation of favourable conditions, such as aligning activities with assessments and effective planning, to promote collaborative learning among pre-service teachers in rural university classrooms in South Africa.

Keywords: Collaborative learning, rural university classrooms, pre-service teachers, asset-based community development, conducive conditions.

1. Introduction

Lack of classroom participation among pre-service teachers in rural universities globally, including South Africa, is a concern for universities and stakeholders in higher education (Halverson & Graham, 2019). Factors such as classroom climate, student background, culture, and language create barriers to active and participatory classrooms (Susak, 2016). Du Plessis and Mestry (2019) found that students at rural campuses are academically, socially, and historically marginalised, lacking access to quality education compared to their urban counterparts. This poses a threat to their educational development. Moreover, professionals and capable teachers who promote learner-centred teaching methods like collaborative learning (CL) are more inclined to work in urban areas where resources such as good roads, water, and electricity are available (Columna-Pérez, 2020). Consequently, rural students miss out on the benefits of learning from peers, engaging in collaborative learning, exchanging ideas, and developing critical reasoning skills beyond the classroom (Chandra, 2015), as everyone should have equal access to quality education and resources. In the same vein, Sivaramanan (2015) also argues that cultural assumptions, social beliefs, norms, and environmental influences contribute to the lack of classroom participation among pre-service teachers in rural

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university settings. In light of these challenges, there is a need for more research and awareness on how CL can be implemented to enhance learning among pre-service teachers in rural universities and address the barriers to its adoption.

CL is an educational approach that involves students learning together to solve problems and achieve common goals (Laal & Laal, 2012). This approach helps pre-service teachers develop critical thinking, learn from one another, master content, and actively engage with the subject matter (Burke, 2011). Although CL has been studied across various disciplines, there is limited research on its application among pre-service teachers in rural universities who, due to their environment, often feel neglected and lose interest in education, thus undermining the sustainability of their learning. Therefore, the premise of this study is to identify the conditions that could make CL worthwhile and investigate factors that could hinder the implementation of favourable conditions in rural university classrooms. This is important because previous literature by Du Plessis and Mestry (2019) highlights the challenges faced by pre-service teachers in rural university classrooms, such as a shortage of teaching resources and qualified teachers, which hinder practical pedagogical approaches. In this study, the CL strategy was used to promote participation among pre-service teachers by dividing them into groups of five to address specific topics. Their collaboration is supported by the assumption of asset-based community development adopted in the study.

Furthermore, Abdullah et al. (2012a) emphasise the importance of participation among pre-service teachers in teaching and learning. They suggest that pre-service teachers should possess qualities such as being active, compassionate, curious, creative, patient, and attentive to learners. Classroom participation has been shown to enhance communication, increase collaboration among pre-service teachers, and encourage dialogue between students and lecturers. It also serves as feedback and encourages shy peers to speak up, potentially leading to improved academic performance (Abdullah et al., 2012b; Bahmanbizar et al., 2019). In general, collaborative learning benefits university students in classrooms, as cited by many scholars worldwide, especially in South African universities. Among several of these benefits are improved academic performance and enhanced critical thinking skills. This is achieved by fostering the development of critical thinking skills through encouraging students to engage in discussions, analyse information, and solve problems together. According to Lämsä et al. (2021), collaborative learning also promotes social integration by providing opportunities for students from diverse backgrounds to interact, collaborate, and learn from one another. Additionally, it helps develop teamwork skills that are highly valued in the workplace, as highlighted by Järvenoja et al. (2022). Based on this, one can argue that collaborative learning has a strong potential to increase student engagement and motivation. Therefore, promoting active participation and engagement among students, collaborative learning leads to increased motivation and enthusiasm for learning.

A collaborative learning strategy has been mentioned as a teaching method that promotes active participation among pre-service teachers in rurally located university classrooms (Yang et al., 2018). This indicates the importance of both lecturers and students in making the classroom an engaging place. It is assumed that when pre-service teachers collaborate, learning becomes active and exciting, thus increasing participation. Unfortunately, participation among pre-service teachers in rural university classrooms has been lacking, as identified by Pobbi et al. (2018), due to norms, culture, and climate. This has led to the problem of the study: the lack of participation among pre-service teachers in South Africa's rural university classrooms. Empirically, the study of Uleanya et al. (2020) and Uleanya (2022) support the above problem, showing that an uncondusive environment, such as classrooms without proper winter resistance during winter, hinders student participation, hence encourages teacher-centred teaching methods, which makes collaborative learning problematic. Thus, the sustainability of collaborative learning in South African rural universities is essential. This paper focuses on identifying the conducive conditions necessary to effectively implement collaborative learning in pre-service teachers' education in rural contexts, as well as the possible threats that might hinder such implementation.

1.1 Research Objectives

The study explores how to enhance collaborative learning among pre-service teachers in rural university classrooms. The following objectives guided the study:

- To examine the conducive conditions that can sustain collaborative learning among pre-service teachers in a rural university classroom.
- To evaluate the potential threats that could hinder the implementation of the collaborative learning.

2. Theoretical Framework

Asset-Based Community Development (ABCD) is a theoretical framework that focuses on developing a community based on its talents and strengths (Evans, 2019). According to Forrester, Kurth, Vincent, and Oliver (2020), ABCD is a theory that supports community-driven development. In other words, by adopting this theory, pre-service teachers and lecturers in the University come together as assets in the classroom community to identify conditions that promote CL and threats that hinder its implementation. CL, as stated by Laal and Ghodsi (2012), helps pre-service teachers achieve common goals, develop communication skills, promote participation, share knowledge, and build interpersonal relationships that enhance academic achievement.

This framework was developed by John McKnight and Jody Kretzmann (1993) with the belief that communities should explore the assets available to them for development. This means that the university community should be able to recognise and suggest conducive conditions that support CL and address any obstacles to its implementation. Furthermore, ABCD empowers pre-service teachers to come up with the best solutions without relying on external resources. Thus, this approach emphasises the individual and communal strengths, capacities, and willingness to solve problems. It is no wonder that Syarifuddin (2017) and Omodan (2020a) argue that the best resource a country can develop to sustain itself and its citizens is the knowledge acquired, building a strong and reliable economy.

Based on the above arguments, ABCD emphasises enhancing collective citizens and focuses on the assets and strengths available in a community, rather than solely focusing on problems and needs. It is appropriate for this study as it encourages pre-service teachers in rural universities to find a way forward for their predicament through the CL strategy (Haines, 2014). In this study, the community is the University, and the students represent the strengths and potential. Lastly, the awareness that pre-service teachers in rural university classrooms face academic disadvantages due to their environment highlights the importance of this study.

3. Methodology

This study employed transformative paradigm (TP) as a research worldview. Rehman and Alharthi (2016) explain that the TP focuses on marginalised societies or groups to give voice to historically, politically, or socio-economically neglected pre-service teachers. TP shares similarities with participatory research, which is motivated by human rights and social justice, particularly in marginalised South African rural university classrooms (Chouinard, 2010). By adopting the transformative paradigm, this study seeks to emancipate pre-service teachers in rural university classrooms and provide them with an education comparable to their urban counterparts. The goal is to examine the favourable conditions that support collaborative learning (CL) in the University classrooms and assess potential obstacles to its implementation. It is essential to adopt a paradigm that values the opinions of those directly affected (Mertens, 2010). Additionally, TP empowers pre-service teachers in rural universities to view learning from a different perspective, enabling them to challenge and transform existing problems as agents of change. That is, it gives the participants opportunity to transform their situations through a positive lens, either individually or through

collaboration. Hence, pre-service teachers in this context are encouraged to see their rural environments not as hindrances to quality education but as opportunities for growth (Ballard, 2018).

The study is situated within a qualitative research approach. To gain insights into the perceptions, opinions, and emotions of pre-service teachers and lecturers who understand the problem at hand and are well-positioned to identify the necessary conditions for promoting CL and the threats that may hinder its implementation, a qualitative approach is most appropriate. According to Elo and Kyngäs (2008), qualitative research is conducive to understanding social phenomena. To achieve the aim of the study, the researcher needed to collaborate with students and lecturers at the university being studied in order to share their experiences. As a result, participatory research (PR) was chosen as the appropriate research design. PR is a research methodology that emphasises the participation of marginalised communities in bringing about positive changes that they desire (Omodan, 2020b). It is a research methodology that involves involving and prioritising people's voices, actions, and decisions (Jensen, 2020). This means that the pre-service teachers and lecturers selected as participants in the study had the opportunity to discuss the conducive conditions that could sustain collaborative learning (CL) in the university, as well as the hindrances that could prevent its implementation.

According to Bergold and Thomas (2012), there are four fundamental principles of PR that should be considered. Firstly, democracy is a requirement for PR, which means that there is a need for a democratic social and political context. Secondly, there is a need for a safe space that allows participants to freely express their thoughts. Thirdly, both participants and researchers should be aware of their different roles and activities. Finally, there should be clear criteria for who qualifies to be part of PR. Therefore, in PR, it is important that the participants are the individuals directly affected by the situation being studied because the goal is to give a voice to those who are voiceless and to improve their situation by allowing them to share their opinions. These principles were followed in order to ensure that the participants could share their experiences while the researcher maintained a balanced power dynamic in the discussions. A conducive environment was provided that encouraged the participants to speak freely and to opt out of the discussion if they wished to do so (Surmiak, 2018).

In implementing CL in the university, the pre-service teachers were divided into two groups. The researcher facilitated the sessions and encouraged everyone to participate in the discussion. Each group had 45 minutes for their discussions, and the students were mixed in terms of gender. This approach was in line with the principles of ABCD, which was the framework adopted in the study. The ABCD framework emphasises the importance of using community assets and strengths to solve problems within a community, thereby promoting participation and allowing the community to provide the conditions needed to sustain CL and identify hindrances to their learning.

3.1 Data Collection

The focus group discussion (FGD) and interview were selected as data collection methods in the study due to their appropriateness. Two methods were chosen to accommodate the tight schedule of lecturers. FGD was selected for pre-service teachers, as students might not feel comfortable sharing their opinions in the presence of their lecturers. According to Nyumba et al. (2018), FGD is an effective tool for gathering information involving individuals with similar experiences discussing a specific topic of interest. In this study, third- and fourth-year students from the faculty were brought together since they shared similar experiences related to the topics being discussed. This was done to ensure that they could identify the conditions that could support CL in the University and identify potential obstacles to its implementation. In other words, third and fourth-year students were grouped with the researcher to address the stated objectives. The interview was chosen as the second data collection method for the five selected lecturers due to their busy schedules and inability to participate in the group discussion. An interview is a qualitative research method that involves a

conversation between the interviewer and interviewees, with the aim of obtaining the necessary information (Mavhandu-Mudzusi, 2018).

3.2 Selection of participants

The study employed convenience sampling to select fifteen participants from the selected University. The participants consisted of five third-year pre-service teachers, five fourth-year pre-service teachers, and five lecturers with five years or more of experience. The reason for selecting these participants was their perceived relevance in providing in-depth information about specific questions related to their views on classroom participation in rural university classrooms. Third- and fourth-year pre-service teachers, who have had three to four years of teaching and learning experience, either face-to-face or online, appeared to be better suited to share their experiences compared to first- and second-year pre-service teachers. As for the lecturers who have spent five years or more in the university, the study aimed to gain insight into their experiences of teaching in a rural environment, their perceptions of pre-service teachers' attitudes towards classroom participation during discussions, the factors they believed contributed to the lack of participation and potential strategies to promote participation among pre-service teachers. The participants' responses were instrumental in exploring the possibilities of CL.

3.3 Data analysis

The study employed thematic analysis to analyse and interpret the collected data. Thematic analysis is a qualitative research method that involves identifying, analysing, and interpreting the data (Omodan, 2023). Braun and Clarke (2006) outline six principles that should be followed, including 1.) thoroughly examining the generated data to develop a proper understanding; 2.) assigning initial codes to identify commonalities across the data; 3.) engaging in the process of identifying themes by analysing and organising the coded data; 4.) reviewing the themes to ensure accurate categorisation of the coded data; 5.) defining and naming the themes; 6.) writing up in a logical, concise manner. Once the data was collected through participants' recordings, I transcribed the recordings by listening to them repeatedly, organising them based on commonalities, assigning codes, and attributing meanings to each concept.

The study adhered to all ethical considerations to ensure that participants were treated with respect and that their identities were kept confidential. Participants were provided with an informed consent form to indicate their voluntary participation in the study. The study obtained ethical approval from the ethics committee of the Faculty of Education at the University of the Free State, with the ethics number UFS-HSD2021/2085/22. For the purposes of anonymity in this study, lecturers were represented as L1 to L5, while pre-service teachers were represented as S1 to S10.

4. Results and Findings

This section provides an analysis of the data based on the objectives of the study: the conducive conditions that can support collaborative learning and the threats that may impede the implementation of the CL. As indicated by the participants, the primary factors that contribute to a favourable environment include aligning activities with assessments, proper planning, connecting the course content with students' lives, and establishing a positive classroom culture. Conversely, participants identified unconducive classroom infrastructure and language barriers as obstacles to the implementation of CL.

4.1 The conducive conditions that could enhance collaborative learning

As expressed by the participants, the key elements that contribute to a favourable conditions involve aligning activities with assessments, effective planning, connecting course content with students' lives, and fostering a positive classroom culture.

Theme 1: Linking activity to assessment

One of the factors that could sustain CL among pre-service teachers in rural universities is linking class activities to assessment to promote participation. The participants' statements below confirm this:

L1: Continue to link activity to assessment through something. We think that once we group students in a group, they will participate. You need sessions where you explain how they should work together in a group.

S7: For participation to be sustained through CL, it is necessary to assign a task to each person so that when they have challenges, they will know how to overcome the challenge.

L5: If students know they will get a mark for specific tasks, they are motivated to do the work, keep asking questions, and be ready to participate.

The above statements demonstrate how collaborative learning (CL) can be sustained in a university, which aligns with Macpherson's (2015) assertion that well-structured classroom activities support CL in rural universities. Drawing from the experiences of L1, S7, and L5, it is believed that when lecturers connect group work with grades, students become more eager to participate, as they are aware of the potential benefits. In other words, in order to sustain CL in the university, it is assumed that the lecturer should frequently motivate students by assigning grades to these activities. L1 further explained that besides grading students' work, lecturers should also encourage students to ask questions for clarity, as this contributes to achieving a higher grade, which may not have been possible otherwise. Additionally, based on L1's experience as a university lecturer, linking class activities to grades encourages students to engage and interact with their peers actively, thus contributing to the sustainability of collaborative learning in rural universities. In other words, according to this participant, when students work together without the incentive of grades, their participation tends to decrease (Ahmad, 2021). I agree with L1 that activities should be tied to assessment if lecturers intend to sustain learning through CL. S7 further explained that for students to actively participate in the classroom and foster learning, each group member should be assigned a task, as this increases their likelihood of collaborating, developing communication skills, and learning to solve problems as they arise. From the researcher's perspective, supported by Sedrakym et al. (2020) and Sancar et al. (2021), it has been proven that linking assessment to the teaching outcome motivates pre-service teachers to become involved, as they are aware that the lecturer will evaluate their work. Indirectly, this approach promotes collaboration among pre-service teachers.

Theme 2: Proper planning as a condition

Linking activities to assessment requires thorough planning from the lecturers' perspective in order to ensure sustained CL learning in rural university classrooms. This section will analyse proper planning as a crucial condition. The following statements are from the participants:

L4: I always see that learning can be sustained if the lecture is adequately prepared in whatever module we teach.

L2: There is a need for planning. For example, in one module, I gave students group work; the aim was for them to understand the content. This was easy for me to do because I consciously planned the lesson that way to allow students to participate.

L3: Yes, it also goes back to planning because if, as a lecturer, you put much work into planning, then when it comes to classroom activities, it becomes easier for our students to participate

L1: As a lecturer, engaging students with proper planning is easy. It requires you to become creative, think about it, and make it work.

Planning is critical in teaching and learning. Lecturers cannot attend class without proper planning. When planning to teach, critical thinking is necessary, especially when designing activities with specific outcomes in mind, such as sustainable learning. In L2's case, he planned his class activity with the clear objective of helping students understand the content being discussed. He believed that working in groups would benefit the students in achieving this goal. Although it took time, he was successful. L3 also recognises the importance of proper planning in making class activities more accessible for students to collaborate and sustain learning. Additionally, L1 emphasised that proper planning is essential for sustaining collaborative learning. It allows students to engage with the content, requiring the lecturer to be creative and innovative.

Based on the study with the participants, it was revealed how important it is for colleagues to engage in in-depth planning of the content they intend to teach and the class activities. These activities should not only align but also be engaging since empirical evidence supports this claim (Syakur & Sabat, 2020; Rivari et al., 2021; Imleesh et al., 2023). This construct is unique because only lecturers indicated proper planning as one of the factors that could sustain the adoption of collaborative learning in the university. The ABCD initiative aims to build collective understanding among students, facilitating the exchange of knowledge and skills needed to empower pre-service teachers (Martin & Bolliger, 2018).

Theme 3: Link content with students' lives as a conducive condition

To sustain CL in the rural university, it was found that linking the content to the lives of pre-service teachers was a conducive condition. The conversations from participants are provided below:

L4: When class activity is linked to a work situation or work experience since they are student teachers in training and because they will be working with people with different attitudes, socioeconomic status, religions, and languages.

S3: Working together allows acquiring skills that can be learned while learning in the group, so if there is any problem, they must solve it instead of running to the lecturer to report.

L5: Content can be relevant to students' lives if lecturers are flexible in teaching by allowing them to share their experiences.

As a lecturer, it is important to clearly communicate to students why you have chosen to have them work in groups and what your expectations are. Additionally, when students are learning in groups, it is important to inform them that they may encounter challenges. However, their ability to accommodate each other and work towards resolving their differences is a skill that will be beneficial beyond university life, as stated by S3 and L4. This means that pre-service teachers are taught at the university to work with individuals who may differ from them in various aspects. Furthermore, according to L4, pre-service teachers should be exposed to strategies that encourage classroom participation regardless of their location in order to promote collaborative learning within and outside of the university. One way to sustain collaborative learning is by establishing a connection between the course content and students' everyday lives. By relating the content to their daily experiences, learning becomes relevant, meaningful, and enjoyable. This aligns with L5's assertion that learning should be flexible, allowing students to learn by sharing their own experiences. SC supports this approach (Lenkauskaitė et al., 2020). In terms of pre-service teachers who are still in training, I believe that connecting subject content with work-life experiences would prepare them to work with individuals of different backgrounds, attitudes, characters, and religions and equip them with the skills to overcome challenges and successfully complete their degrees.

Theme 4: Establish a classroom culture as a condition

Establishing a classroom culture was one factor that could sustain CL in the rural University. Here are the conversations with participants:

L5: I think it is about establishing a culture in a classroom, and for me, what I do is at the beginning of the year, we laid down the rules.

S6: Unclear communication means that lecturers should be clear when setting rules. Clarity in communication is crucial.

S10: There should be class rules where, for example, respecting each other is prioritised; otherwise, if we do not respect each other, we find it challenging to work together.

The findings highlight the importance of clear class rules in sustaining collaborative learning (CL) in the university. Participants emphasised the need for explicit instructions to guide students (L5; S6). It is important to note that setting rules at the beginning of the academic year helps establish expectations and consequences, which promotes compliance among students (L5). The study also reveals concerns about unclear rules disrupting effective learning, emphasising the need for instructors to communicate guidelines effectively (S6). Furthermore, participants noted the significance of mutual respect among students in rural university settings for sustaining CL (S10). This aligns with existing literature that emphasises the role of establishing a positive learning culture in enhancing teaching and learning outcomes (Martin & Bolliger, 2018). The study identifies several key conditions for successful CL, including instructors connecting content to students' lives, linking activities to assessments to enhance participation, establishing a collaborative classroom culture, and effective planning (Sutton & Shouse, 2016). The adoption of the ABCD framework reinforces the community-driven approach, which encourages collaboration between lecturers and students in identifying and implementing the necessary conditions for sustainable CL.

4.2 Threats that could impede the implementation of the solutions suggested

This section discusses the factors that hamper the implementation of CL in rural university classrooms, such as language and uncondusive classroom infrastructure.

Theme 1: Uncondusive classroom infrastructure as an impeding factor

For pre-service teachers to effectively collaborate in a classroom, a conducive environment is essential; hence, it emanated from the data that one of the threats that could impede the implementation of CL is the uncondusive classroom. Below are some of the conversations from participants:

L5: About the infrastructure, I think universities need to realise that the way of teaching has changed. That also calls for change and adaptation in the tools that are used for teaching and learning (lecture halls). The way they are arranged impedes collaborative learning.

L1: The current state of the university lecture hall does not promote collaborative learning. I think the restructuring and re-arrangement of university infrastructure may help promote collaborative learning and student participation.

S4: How our lecture halls are arranged impedes efforts at collaborative learning. The infrastructure is immovable in most lecture halls.

From the statements above, it is clear that classroom infrastructure, specifically the design of classrooms in the University, hinders the implementation of collaborative learning. Ogedi and Obionu (2017) further support this by confirming that an unfavourable classroom environment poses a threat to education, particularly in disadvantaged university areas. Based on the experience of L5, it was observed that the layout of lecture halls does not encourage student collaboration, making it

challenging to implement collaborative learning in such circumstances. Essentially, although literature and studies propose strategies to foster student collaboration, achieving the desired outcome becomes difficult if the environment does not support it. Furthermore, L1, a lecturer at the university, also affirms that the current classroom arrangement obstructs the implementation of collaborative learning in rural universities (Malinga et al., 2022). Additionally, S4 acknowledges that immovable infrastructure in the University is a hindrance to implementing collaborative learning. I agree with the above-mentioned participants, as supported by OECD/ACET (2020) that the lecture hall structures in Africa and South Africa do not promote collaborative learning; instead, they undermine the education system and fall below the standards of the 21st century.

Theme 2: Language as an impeding factor

South Africa is a diverse country with 11 official languages. This means that even in higher learning institutions, pre-service teachers can speak their own languages. However, in most university classrooms, the English language is used as the primary means of communication. Unfortunately, according to the participants, this language barrier hinders students from effectively collaborating with their peers or working in groups, as stated by (Us Saqlain et al., 2020). Here are some excerpts from their conversations:

L1: Language is a challenge because often, when students get into groups, they want to speak their language, but when you have different students from different cultures, sometimes the group work will not be effective.

S2: Students feel reluctant to speak in class if the lecturer insists that they speak in the English language, and because of that, they prefer not to participate.

South Africa is a diverse country with eleven official languages, which makes it difficult for students in rural universities to participate effectively in classrooms. This is because English is the primary language used for communication at the university. However, it is important to note that students are still able to speak their languages within the premises and among themselves. The challenge arises when they have to work together in a group, as each student wants their own language to be chosen for communication. This hinders the implementation of cooperative learning in the selected university. According to S2, students are unwilling to participate in class or groups if they are expected to interact in English. Instead, they prefer to be passive and simply listen. Mataka, Bhila, and Mukurunge (2020) support the argument that language barriers hinder cooperative learning in rural universities in South Africa. They explain that due to the country's history of colonisation, English is still seen as a foreign language, which affects the mindset of the students. This belief that English is a foreign language was also mentioned by Brock-Utne (2021), highlighting that it is not just one participant's opinion.

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

In conclusion, this study emphasises the important factors necessary to successfully implement collaborative learning (CL) in rural universities. These factors include connecting class activities to assessment, relating subject content to students' lives, fostering a conducive classroom culture, and careful planning. To ensure the effectiveness of these solutions, it is crucial to address obstacles such as an unfavourable classroom infrastructure and language barriers. The findings also highlight the significance of instructors actively involving students in both the planning and teaching methods to improve the quality and retention of learning.

Furthermore, the adoption of the asset-based community development (ABCD) framework in South African rural universities has significant implications. Collaborative learning not only promotes knowledge sharing, empowerment, and inclusivity among students and educators but also extends these benefits to community members. Through collaborative learning, students develop critical thinking, problem-solving skills, and empathy, which provide a solid foundation for recognising and

mobilising themselves classrooms community assets. Additionally, collaborative learning encourages interdisciplinary collaboration, preparing future leaders to effectively engage in ABCD initiatives and promoting sustainable and community-driven development efforts in rural areas.

Based on the insights of the study, the following recommendations are proposed:

- The government should prioritise education in rural locations by improving standard infrastructure facilities. This will align with 21st-century teaching and learning approaches, which support and sustain collaborative learning.
- Rurally located universities should empower lecturers to explore diverse and experiential teaching strategies that foster meaningful learning experiences for students.
- Students should be encouraged to be aware of the integral role of language in teaching and learning and to view language not as a problem but as an essential aspect of the educational process.

6. Limitations of the Study

The research was conducted at a rural university in the Free State Province, South Africa. The sample consisted of fifteen participants, including ten pre-service teachers and five lecturers from the faculty of education at the chosen university. As a result, the findings from this study cannot be applied to the entire population, but they are specifically relevant to the scope of the study. Future research efforts could explore the impact of rural university environments on pre-service teachers. Furthermore, it is important to acknowledge a limitation in the study's scope, as it only focused on one faculty. This narrow focus suggests the need to consider other faculties as potential areas for future research.

8. Declarations

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Data availability: Data for the study is available from the corresponding author on request.

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