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A Systematic Review of the Potential of Instructional Leadership in Literacy in Achieving Social Sustainability in South African Rural Areas

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Abstract: Indications are that South African rural education experiences a literacy crisis that could jeopardise learners' progress and the social sustainability of the rural communities. The aim of this article is therefore to establish the extent to which instructional leadership in literacy can contribute to achieving social sustainability in rural schools. We conducted a systematic literature review and, after applying specific inclusion and exclusion criteria, identified 71 articles for this review. The review answers the following questions: a) What contextual challenges and socio-economic conditions influence literacy teaching, learning, and leadership practices in rural South African schools? b) How is instructional leadership in literacy conceptualised in the literature, and how does it relate to social sustainability in rural education contexts? c) What evidence exists on the impact, barriers, and enabling conditions of instructional leadership in literacy for advancing social sustainability in rural South Africa? Our main findings suggest that literacy is more than just a skill. Rather, it is a transformative tool that can change rural communities and, as such, serve as a source of social sustainability. Instructional leadership in literacy occurs amid myriad socio-economic challenges that require specific skills from school principals. To be effective, instructional leaders should therefore understand the rural context, adopt alternative leadership styles, and be flexible in their approach. The value of the article lies in its topicality and its contribution to educational leadership, rural education, and sustainability studies.

Keywords: Instructional leadership, literacy, social sustainability, rural education, systematic review.

1. Introduction

South Africa places a high premium on education to eradicate poverty and achieve social sustainability. One way of achieving this is through literacy. Literacy is defined as the ability to identify, understand, interpret, create, communicate, and compute, using printed and written materials associated with varying contexts. Literacy involves a continuum of learning that enables individuals to achieve their goals, develop their knowledge and potential, and participate fully in their community and wider society (Shay, 2024).

In South Africa, literacy is regarded as an important determinant of academic success and lifelong learning, which can contribute to eradicating poverty and to the country's development (DBE, 2016). Rural development is high on the South African development agenda. The National Development Plan (NDP) envisions that by 2030, "South Africa's rural communities must have better opportunities to participate fully in the economic, social and political life of the country" (NPC, 2012, p. 218). The NDP identifies the provision and access to quality education as one of the focus areas for realising this vision. The vision for quality education for rural learners has, among other things, led to the

National Framework for Rural Education, which aims to improve quality education by enhancing access and equity (DBE, 2022).

Learners in rural areas "face severe challenges that are unique to their environment" (Cekiso et al., 2022). These challenges inevitably negatively impact the promotion of literacy in rural schools. Rural schools are experiencing shortages of reading material; and most classrooms lack reading books for learners (Cilliers & Bloch, 2018). These realities of rural schools result in huge gaps in learner performance between urban and rural schools, with this gap manifesting "in the academic performance of the learners, especially their reading performance" (Cekiso et al., 2022). Results from the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) and local research confirm that South African learners, including those in rural contexts, perform poorly in literacy (DBE, 2023). During the 2021 PIRLS assessments, South Africa scored the lowest among participating countries, as most of its Grade 4 and Grade 6 learners struggled with basic reading skills (DBE, 2023). Alarmingly, this situation persists despite political commitment and various interventions at both the classroom and policy levels (UNESCO, 2024). Recent research by the Department of Education itself suggests that only 31% of Grade 1 learners achieved the Home Language Reading Benchmark. In Grades 2 and 3, just over 30% of learners met their respective Home Language Reading Benchmarks. The research further indicated that by the end of grade 3, 15% of learners were still unable to read a single word (DBE, 2023).

Instructional leadership is critical to improve the quality of teaching and learning (Madonsela et al., 2025). According to Awan et al. (2022), instructional leaders consistently address instructional issues and curriculum implementation. Referring to the link between instructional leadership and literacy improvement, Groenewald (2024, p. 121) averred that "[e]ffective instructional leadership is central to promoting literacy development in schools". Similarly, Abella et al. (2024, p. 70) claim that "[o]ne crucial dimension of instructional leadership "involves literacy practices, particularly in the context of fostering student achievement in reading. Instructional leadership in literacy, therefore, encompasses the principal's active involvement in practices that not only develop and maintain literacy in school but also contribute towards the improvement of the quality of its teaching and learning.

These preconditions are relevant and important in the South African vision of social sustainability (SS). SS is realised when the basic needs of all people are met without exceeding the boundaries of the ecosystem (Eba, 2020), and it centres on the "imperative of human well-being today and in the future" (Desiderio et al., 2022, p. 528). As such, SS concerns itself with issues of equity, human rights, racism, poverty, peace, solidarity, fairness, and social justice. SS also focuses on hunger, security, clean water and sanitation, health and well-being, decent work, social responsibility, quality education, cultural diversity, quality of life, social cohesion, and sustainable communities (Bao et al., 2023; Glavič, 2020). Societies characterised by social injustices, inequity, and undemocratic tendencies are thus not oriented towards SS and can therefore not develop sustainably. SS is central to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), as the majority of the 17 SDGs and their associated targets emphasise human well-being and the social sphere (UN, 2015).

The need for SS is more pronounced in South Africa's rural areas, where poor socio-economic conditions compound the plight of rural communities and keep them trapped in cycles of socially unsustainable development. Education is essential to achieving SS, and South Africa's endorsement of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) places a responsibility on the country to provide quality education by promoting learners' literacy levels. School principals can, through instructional leadership, play a significant role in promoting literacy, enhancing the quality of education, and achieving SS. Jean-Francois (2022) confirms that school principals are responsible for providing instructional leadership to achieve sustainability.

Various studies on instructional leadership in rural areas of South Africa have been conducted (Hompashe, 2018; Madonsela et al., 2025; Naidoo, 2021). In general, research has focused on the leadership role of the rural principal. We could not find any South African research that highlights the role of instructional leadership in literacy in achieving social sustainability. Therefore, this study fills that gap and responds to the call of Cekiso et al. (2022) for rural education research to address the challenges unique to rural schools and communities.

In this systematic review, we answer the following main research question: *How can instructional leadership in literacy contribute to achieving social sustainability in rural areas of South Africa?* The following questions will guide this study:

- SRQ1: What contextual challenges and socio-economic conditions influence literacy teaching, learning, and leadership practices in rural South African schools?
- SRQ2: How is instructional leadership in literacy conceptualised in the literature, and how does it relate to social sustainability in rural education contexts?
- SRQ3: What evidence exists on the impact, barriers, and enabling conditions of instructional leadership in literacy for advancing social sustainability in rural South Africa?

2. Methodology

This qualitative study is couched in the Systematic Literature Review Framework. The main aim of Systematic Literature Reviews (SLRs) is to apply a comprehensive, rigorous approach, guided by a structured protocol, to identify, select, and analyse relevant literature on a specific topic (Muka et al., 2020). In this study, we applied this approach to identify, explore, and analyse the literature on instructional leadership in literacy to achieve social sustainability in rural South Africa. For Shaheen et al. (2023, p. 2), SLR involves "searching multiple databases, screening articles for eligibility, assessing the quality of included studies, and synthesising the results". This framework ensured transparency, consistency, and replicability throughout the review process.

Brignardello-Petersen et al. (2025) emphasised the importance of a comprehensive search for available evidence that meets the SLR eligibility criteria. The following outlines the rationale and methodology for the literature search.

Scope and purpose of the search: To ensure complete coverage of the literature, we identified studies relevant to the study's focus and the search aimed to ensure the inclusion of high-quality, peer-reviewed sources. Multiple databases were consulted to ensure a focus on education, leadership, literacy and sustainability. This initial search enabled us to become acquainted with the existing literature on the topic (Bramer et al., 2018).

Databases and search platforms: These included Scopus, Web of Science, ERIC and Google Scholar. In this comprehensive search, we followed Gusenbauer's (2022) advice, which holds that searching multiple major bibliographic databases ensures diverse perspectives and disciplines relevant to the study.

Search terms, keywords, and Boolean Operators: Search terms and keywords were crucial, and a combination of these and Boolean operators ("and", "or" and "not") ensured that only relevant studies were captured (Skinner, 2023). Four main constructs formed part of our search strategy: "Instructional leadership", "Literacy education", "Social sustainability", and "rural context". Based on these constructs, the following search strings were entered: "instructional leadership" OR "educational leadership" OR "school leadership" AND "literacy" OR "reading" OR "writing skills" AND "social sustainability" OR "sustainable development" OR "community development" AND "rural education" OR "rural schools" AND "South Africa" OR "sub-Saharan Africa". Where applicable, synonyms and related terms were used to broaden the search. This ensured a comprehensive retrieval of relevant studies. The entire search process was conducted iteratively, with initial searches followed by refinements to keywords and combinations. Following Skinner's

(2023) suggestion, the search syntax was also adapted for different databases. For Shaheen et al. (2023), this strategy is crucial because databases use search strategies differently. The reference lists of the selected studies were also screened, which helped to identify additional relevant sources not captured in the database searches.

Documentation and methodological rigour: We used a database search matrix to document the search terms, the databases consulted, and the retrieval outcomes. This strategy enhanced the transparency, rigour and reproducibility of the study. Furthermore, it ensures methodological rigour through a clear audit trail and supports the replicability of the research process. Brignardello-Petersen et al. (2025) noted that reviewers should be mindful of factors that may undermine the trustworthiness of a study's results. Hence, to ensure internal validity, we assessed several types of bias across all included studies and the overall review process, including publication, selection, performance, detection, and reporting bias (Cochrane Handbook for Systematic Reviews of Interventions, 2023).

2.1 Inclusion and exclusion criteria

Based on the search strategy and aligned with the study's three main constructs, the following eligibility criteria were developed (Table 1). The idea was to include only relevant, high-quality studies aligned with the SLR's objectives.

Table 1: *Eligibility Criteria*

Criteria	Inclusion Criteria	Exclusion Criteria
Study Focus	Studies addressing instructional leadership, literacy, and/or social sustainability in education.	Studies not related to instructional leadership, literacy, or sustainability.
Context/Setting	Studies focused on rural education, particularly in South Africa or sub-Saharan Africa.	Studies focused exclusively on urban or non-African contexts without relevant insights.
Population	School leaders, educators, learners, and education stakeholders.	Studies unrelated to education (e.g., corporate leadership only)
Time Frame	Publications from 2015 to 2026	Studies published before 2015 (unless highly seminal and relevant).
Language	English and Afrikaans.	Studies published in other languages.
Source Type	Peer-reviewed journal articles, dissertations, and theses.	Non-scholarly sources such as blogs, opinion pieces, and unverified web content.
Additional Sources	Relevant book chapters, conference proceedings, policy reports (especially SA context).	Sources without academic or policy relevance.
Geographical Scope	South Africa and sub-Saharan Africa.	Studies with no applicability to the African or rural education context.
Quality Assurance	Studies indexed in recognised databases.	Studies from predatory journals or with a lack of academic rigour.
Relevance to Constructs	Studies addressing at least one of the three constructs: instructional leadership, literacy education, or social sustainability.	Studies not aligned with these core constructs.

We opted for a ten-year time frame – from 2015 to 2026 because we believed that this time frame reflects recent developments in instructional leadership, literacy and sustainable development. Given the South African context, we also included non-English literature. This stance aligns with the views of Shaheen et al. (2023), who argued that including non-English literature reduces the risk of bias. Although the search focused primarily on peer-reviewed journal articles, we also considered book chapters, conference proceedings and key policy reports relevant to South African education,

rural development and Instructional leadership in literacy. Key policy documents and government reports promote inclusiveness (Zawacki-Richter et al., 2020).

2.2 Screening, selection and data extraction process

During the research, we followed the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) framework. This approach ensured rigour, replicability, and minimisation of bias in selecting relevant studies. During the identification phase, all records were retrieved from the selected databases, and duplicate records were identified and removed to ensure each study was counted only once. During the screening phase, the remaining studies underwent an initial screening based on titles and abstracts. Studies that did not meet the inclusion criteria were excluded. We conducted an eligibility assessment and reviewed the full texts of potentially relevant studies for possible inclusion (per the inclusion and exclusion criteria). A data extraction form was utilised for this purpose (Table 2). Although we conducted the process separately, we held weekly MS Teams meetings to discuss progress and resolve uncertainties. The reasons for exclusions were documented to support transparency and reproducibility (Plaatjies & Pretorius, 2026). Hereafter, we conducted additional screening (snowballing). This process aims to enhance completeness by screening reference lists to identify additional relevant studies that may not have been captured in the initial database searches.

Ethical adherence was achieved through careful consideration of common forms of search bias, such as data, citation, availability, language, country, familiarity, and multiple publication bias (Surti, in Zawacki-Richter et al., 2020). We also refrained from data falsification, data fabrication, and deceit, and paid special attention to the clarity of our reporting.

Table 2: *Summary of data extraction plan*

Identify data sources	Determine relevant literature sources.	Search databases, journals and repositories
Pilot testing	Tested extraction form	Conducted a trial run on a subset of studies
Extract data	Extract from selected studies	Use the standardised form
Data cleaning	Reviewed and cleaned for completeness	Checked for inconsistencies, missing data, and errors.
Data synthesis	Analyse the extracted data	Used qualitative methods to synthesise the data and draw conclusions.
Monitoring	Maintain quality	Ensured ongoing accuracy and consistency in

2.3 The data synthesis process

The entire screening and selection process was documented using the PRISMA flow diagram (Figure 1). The diagram shows the number of records (n=875) identified through searches of major databases. Then, the excluded records and the number of records after duplicates were removed were shown. We then indicated the records screened by title and abstract, as well as those excluded for failing to meet the eligibility criteria. This was followed by an indication of the full texts excluded and concluded by the total number of studies included in the review. This diagram enhances the transparency and credibility of the review process by clearly illustrating how the final sample was derived. Page et al. (2021) noted that specifying the number of records retrieved per database will make it easier for others to assess whether they have successfully replicated a search. A total of 53 studies were eventually included and are demonstrated in the PRISMA image below.

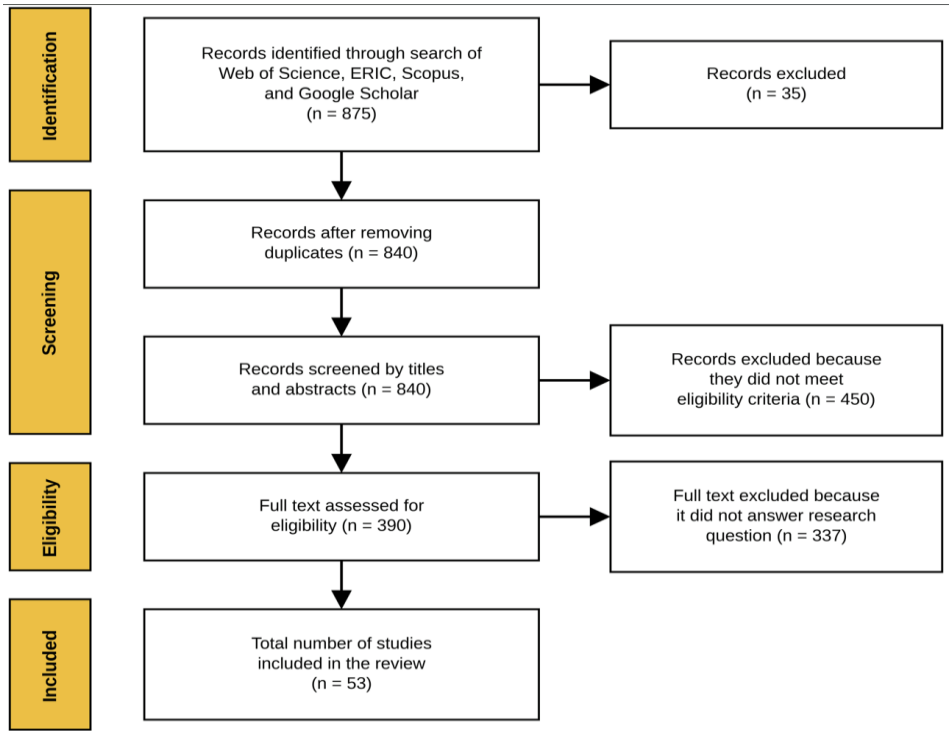


Figure 1: *PRISMA flow diagram*

To ensure trustworthiness, peer-reviewed articles, methodological rigour, and journal credibility were considered.

3. Results

The findings of the SLR are presented next in relation to the three sub-research questions. The results are organised and synthesised in the three tables below, as evidenced by the reviewed studies. Together, the findings provide an overview of the context, practices, and outcomes associated with instructional leadership in rural educational settings.

Table 3: *Contextual and socio-economic conditions in rural South African schools*

Themes	Key Issues Identified in Literature	Implications for Literacy and Leadership
Poverty	High levels of poverty, inequality, and unemployment in rural communities (Amnesty International, 2020; StatsSA, 2019; World Bank, 2018).	Limits access to learning resources; affects learner readiness and participation.
Infrastructure Deficits	Lack of water, electricity, transport, and internet access (Duri, 2026; Rautenbach et al., 2023).	Constrains teaching methods, digital literacy integration, and school functionality.
Educational Inequality	Persistent rural–urban disparities in literacy performance (e.g., PIRLS results) (Cekiso et al., 2022; DBE, 2023).	Reinforces systemic literacy gaps and weakens educational outcomes.
Resource Constraints	Shortage of books, libraries, ICT tools, and learning materials (Cekiso et al., 2022; Taole et al., 2024).	Restricts exposure to reading and limits instructional quality.
Teacher Shortages and Incapacities	Underqualified teachers and insufficient subject knowledge in literacy (DBE, 2015a; Madonsela et al., 2025).	Reduces instructional effectiveness and limits the delivery of the literacy curriculum.

Geographical Isolation	Rural schools are remote and have limited opportunities for collaboration (Taole et al., 2024).	Inhibits professional development and Instructional leadership support networks.
Socio-Cultural and Linguistic Diversity	Multilingual classrooms with limited teacher preparedness (Cekiso et al., 2022; Senyshyn & Martinelli, 2021).	Leads to mismatched instruction and reduced learner comprehension.
Historical Inequalities	Legacy of apartheid education and "racially based literacy inequalities" (Magxala & Baidoo, 2025; Meiklejohn et al., 2021).	Sustains structural disadvantage and affects literacy development.
Health and Social Challenges	Poor healthcare access, hunger, and social instability (Bao et al., 2023; Duri, 2026; Glavič, 2020).	Negatively affects learners' concentration, attendance, and literacy performance.

Table 3 presents the key contextual and socio-economic conditions that influence the development of literacy education in South African schools. It is evident that these structural challenges, such as poverty, educational inequality, poor infrastructure, and resource deficits, hamper the effective implementation of literacy instruction and the achievement of literacy outcomes. Central also includes teacher-related dynamics, such as teacher shortages and insufficient subject expertise and preparedness. Lastly, due to the multicultural, multilingual nature of education in South African schools, effective literacy instruction is often undermined by the mismatches between the language of instruction and learner comprehension. The findings also suggest that instructional leadership in rural schools faces serious challenges. Confronted with external structural challenges, instructional leaders are expected to adopt an adaptive, context-responsive approach. Overall, the table demonstrates that poor literacy outcomes are attributed to a combination of factors.

Table 4: *Effective Instructional Leadership practices for literacy improvement and social Sustainability in Rural Contexts*

Dimensions	**Practices Identified**	**Contributions**
Vision and Mission Setting	Establishing and communicating clear literacy goals aligned with the curriculum (Dagen & Bean, 2020; Jordaan, 2021; Naidoo, 2021).	Provides direction and shared focus for literacy achievement.
Curriculum Knowledge and Support	Strong subject, pedagogy, and assessment knowledge; modelling instruction (Abella et al., 2024; Groenewald, 2024; Hallinger, 2021; Madonsela et al., 2025).	Enhances teacher capacity and instructional quality.
Instructional Programme Management	Monitoring learner progress, classroom observations, and feedback (Awan et al., 2022; Hallinger et al., 2016; Naidoo, 2021).	Improves teaching effectiveness and learner outcomes.
Distributed Leadership	Involvement of SMTs, literacy teams, and teacher leaders (Andrin et al., 2024; Naidoo, 2021).	Shares responsibility and strengthens instructional coherence.
Professional Development (PD)	Coaching, PLCs, training, and continuous learning opportunities (Abella et al., 2024; Dagen & Bean, 2020).	Builds teacher expertise and improves literacy instruction.
Resource Management	Allocation of books, ICT tools, and instructional materials (Cekiso et al., 2022; DBE, 2015a; Taole et al., 2024).	Expands learning opportunities and supports diverse literacy practices.
Literacy-Rich School Culture	Promoting reading culture, collaboration, and inclusive practices (Abella et al., 2024; Groenewald, 2024; Morris et al., 2019; Taylor & Collins, 2023).	Encourages sustained engagement with literacy across the school.
Culturally Responsive Leadership	Integrating multilingualism, translanguaging, and local knowledge (Senyshyn & Martinelli, 2021; Thapa, 2025).	Enhances learner engagement and comprehension.

Data-Driven Leadership	Use of assessment data to inform instruction (DBE, 2015a; Jordaan, 2021).	Supports targeted interventions and continuous improvement.

An analysis of the data in Table 4 shows that effective instructional leadership for literacy encapsulates numerous intertwined practices. These are clear vision setting, sound curriculum knowledge, and active instructional management. Notably, it emphasises collaboration through distributed leadership approaches and professional development. In addition, the content emphasises a literacy-rich culture and context-responsive, data-driven approaches for effective practice. Eventually, this approach to leadership ensures improved outcomes. The alignment between vision, practice and monitoring enhances overall instructional coherence. In addition, the findings highlight the centrality of teacher capacity building through the enhancement of pedagogical content knowledge. This has a positive effect on instructional quality and sustainable literacy improvement. The findings also revealed the need for contextual responsiveness through leadership, resource management, and literacy-rich school cultures. The acknowledgement of these practices is important as literacy development does not happen in a vacuum or in isolation. It is grounded in the social, cultural and material realities of learners. Furthermore, it is evident that data-driven leadership, together with an emphasis on continuous monitoring and feedback, is vital for obtaining reliable assessment data for specific literacy improvement interventions.

Table 5: *Impact, barriers, and enabling conditions of Instructional Leadership in literacy for SD*

Category	Key Findings from Literature	Implications for SS
Impact on Learners	Improved reading skills, comprehension, and academic performance (Andrin et al., 2024; DBE, 2023; Groenewald, 2024).	Enhances lifelong learning and employability.
Impact on Society	Literacy is linked to economic growth, civic participation, and social cohesion (Addae, 2021; Magxala & Baidoo, 2025; Mojapelo, 2023).	Contributes to poverty reduction and community development.
Social Justice Outcomes	Literacy addresses inequality, marginalisation, and access to knowledge (Magxala & Baidoo, 2025; Meiklejohn et al., 2021; UNESCO, 2017).	Promotes equity, inclusion, and human rights.
Transformation Potential	Literacy as a tool for empowerment and social change (Cilliers & Bloch, 2018; Magxala & Baidoo, 2025).	Supports sustainable and equitable rural development.
Key Barriers: Resource Limitations	Lack of infrastructure, ICT, and teaching materials (Cekiso et al., 2022; Rautenbach et al., 2023; Taole et al., 2024)	Limits the implementation of effective literacy programmes.
Key Barriers: Capacity Constraints	Insufficient teacher training and principal expertise (DBE, 2015b; Madonsela et al., 2025; Taole et al., 2024).	Weakens instructional leadership effectiveness.
Key Barriers: Contextual Challenges	Poverty, isolation, and socio-economic hardship (Amnesty International, 2020; World Bank, 2018).	Reduces the impact of leadership interventions.
Key Barriers: Policy-Practice Gap	Policies exist, but are not effectively implemented (DBE, 2016, 2015a; Hompashe, 2018).	Undermines literacy improvement and SS goals.
Enabling Conditions: Policy Frameworks	SASP and PAM provide guidelines for instructional leadership.	Offer structural support for leadership practices.
Enabling Conditions:	Continuous teacher training and coaching (DBE, 2016; 2015a).	Strengthens instructional quality and learner outcomes.

Professional Development Enabling Conditions: Collaboration	PLCs, SMT involvement, and community engagement (Abella et al., 2024).	Enhances shared responsibility and sustainability.

Table 5 demonstrates the positive influence of instructional leadership on literacy, its impact on learners, and the advancement of SD. From an SD perspective, it promotes equity, improves achievement and supports social development. In rural contexts, however, the effectiveness of instructional leadership is constrained by key barriers, including limited resources, capacity constraints, contextual challenges, and poor policy implementation. The findings further showed that, in addition to professional development and collaboration, supportive policies are critical to strengthening leadership practices and advancing sustainability outcomes. Interestingly, the data also showed that instructional-level leadership plays a strong role in improving literacy-related areas, such as reading proficiency, comprehension, and critical thinking. At the broader societal level, improved literacy supports economic growth, civic participation, social cohesion and access to knowledge. Overall, the findings revealed that instructional leadership in literacy is a solid strategy for school sustainability and for aligning resources, training, and policy implementation.

4. Discussion

This systematic review aimed at addressing the following research questions: (a) What contextual challenges and socio-economic conditions influence literacy teaching, learning, and leadership practices in rural South African schools? b) How is instructional leadership in literacy conceptualised in the literature, and how does it relate to social sustainability in rural education contexts? c) What evidence exists on the impact, barriers, and enabling conditions of instructional leadership in literacy for advancing social sustainability in rural South Africa?

In answering the first research question, the review found a complex set of socio-economic factors that severely influence and shape rural education within South Africa. These factors operate in tandem to create a systemic, entrenched set of barriers that limit the effective implementation of instructional leadership in literacy.

The literature indicates that high poverty, unemployment, and infrastructure shortages contribute to a context of chronic deficits and systemic shortages. Reports from Amnesty International (2020), RSA (2019), and the World Bank (2018) paint a picture of a rural context in which basic human and educational needs are largely unmet. A lack of basic infrastructure, such as water, electricity, proper sanitation, and stable internet access (Duri, 2026; Rautenbach et al., 2023), impairs the functioning of rural schools and jeopardises effectiveness, thereby compromising the quality of education. In addition, rural schools also experience shortages of books, libraries, and Information and Communication Technology (ICT) (Cekiso et al., 2022; Taole et al., 2024), affecting the implementation and integration of digital literacies in rural schools, depriving learners of rich learning environments and, in turn, affecting classroom teaching and learning. This is because such classrooms are. These results leave rural learners with poor or no literacy skills and unprepared for the job market. Apparent human capital shortages further aggravate the impact of socio-economic factors. The literature reveals that rural schools experience persistent and limiting shortages of qualified teachers. Indications also suggest that rural teachers are often poorly qualified or lack subject-matter knowledge in literacy instruction (DBE, 2015a; Madonsela et al., 2025). The linguistic realities of rural classrooms further compound the challenges faced in rural schools. Rural teachers are often expected to teach in multilingual contexts without the necessary training to meet learners' language needs (Cekiso et al., 2022; Senyshyn & Martinelli, 2021). A mismatch between the language of teaching and learning and the language learners use impairs comprehension and leads to lower literacy outcomes.

Furthermore, the rural context also suffers from a lack of basic health and other social services. In this regard, hunger and poor or inaccessible healthcare services directly affect learners' performance, concentration, and school attendance (Bao et al., 2023; Duri, 2026; Glavič, 2020). The review suggests that literacy teaching, learning, and leadership practices in rural South African schools occur within a highly contested environment characterised by various socio-economic factors, physical resource constraints, and teacher shortages. This negatively impacts the effectiveness of both instructional leadership in literacy and literacy teaching.

In relation to research question 2, the findings in Table 4 suggest that rural education requires a specific type of leadership capable of responding to its unique demands. As such, traditional, bureaucratic approaches to school leadership that portray school leaders as the sole source of authority and are somewhat divorced from classroom realities do not fit the rural educational context. Rather, this SLR suggests a paradigm shift towards more active, flexible, collaborative, and responsive leadership that is also actively involved in classroom events. SD. In this regard, instructional leaders in literacy in rural schools should develop a vision and mission that speaks to the promotion of literacy in their schools, and which is articulated into clear literacy goals across all grades (Dagen & Bean, 2020; Jordaan, 2021; Naidoo, 2021) and which informs all literacy activities within the school. In addition, they must have and demonstrate sound knowledge of the curriculum and support teachers in implementing literacy instruction. This is evident from the SLR, which suggests that leaders in rural schools should possess pedagogical and subject knowledge, as well as knowledge of assessment practices (Groenewald, 2024; Hallinger, 2021). The implementation of this knowledge will directly enhance teacher confidence and instructional quality (Abella et al., 2024; Madonsela et al., 2025). Such a display suggests that instructional leaders in literacy should move beyond distant monitoring to active involvement in managing the instructional plan within the school, through classroom observations and constructive and formative feedback to teachers (Awan et al., 2022; Hallinger et al., 2016).

Moreover, the SLR appears to promote distributed leadership approaches to ensure effective management and sustainability (Andrin et al., 2024; Naidoo, 2021). Distributed leadership creates opportunities for instructional leaders to devolve leadership capabilities and opportunities and share them with members of the school management team. literacy teams, grade heads and classroom teachers; this builds internal capacity and ensures coherence in literacy.

Distributed leadership enables continuous professional development. Chronic shortages of qualified and well-trained teachers in rural areas require instructional leaders to focus on developing their teachers. Once-off training sessions and workshops are not sufficient. Rather, instructional leadership for improved literacy in rural schools demands the establishment of professional learning communities, the use of individualised peer-mentoring, and the creation of unique and needs-specific training sessions that empower rural teachers and develop and enhance their subject content knowledge and their teaching practices (Abella et al., 2024; Dagen & Bean, 2020). Since professional development efforts in South African rural areas are "often fragmented, uncoordinated, and irrelevant to the individual school, and do not attend to improving quality of teaching and learning" (Albers & Flint, 2021, p. 560), "a need exists for programmes that respond to the needs of the teachers, the schools and the community, and for instructional leaders to be culturally responsive".

South African rural areas and classrooms are by design multilingual spaces. Yet they are approached as monolingual and monocultural spaces. Disregard for their lingual and cultural diversity disadvantages rural learners. The SLR reveals that to be effective, instructional leaders must not only validate local languages and knowledges but must also integrate them into the formal curriculum (Senyshyn & Martinelli, 2021; Thapa, 2025). Validating and celebrating local languages and knowledges significantly reduces possible barriers to learning, enhances learner understanding, and promotes inclusivity (Shaheen et al., 2023).

Finally, findings from research question 2 indicate that instructional leaders must be intentional in creating a literacy-rich school culture. This suggests that literacy is not confined to a single subject or the sole responsibility of a single teacher; rather, it is inherent to the school's practices and celebrated throughout the school (Morris et al., 2019; Taylor & Collins, 2023). However, creating such a culture requires strategically managing limited resources and ensuring the equitable distribution of textbooks, reading books, and ICT equipment (Cekiso et al., 2022; DBE, 2015a; Taole et al., 2024).

In answering the 3rd research question, this literature review found that literacy, or the ability to read and write, is more than just a skill. It is a transformative tool that can change rural communities, combat marginalisation and discrimination, and serve as a source of social justice, economic and social self-determination, and freedom. In this regard, the literature indicates that instructional leadership in literacy improves learners' reading skills, comprehension, and overall academic performance (Andrin et al., 2024; DBE, 2023; Groenewald, 2024). This promotes lifelong learning opportunities, and it increases future employability. In addition, literacy also has a positive impact on society, as it promotes economic growth, active civic participation, and enhances social cohesion (Addae, 2021; Magxala & Baidoo, 2025; Mojapelo, 2023). In this context, literacy enables communities to break the cycle of poverty and drives community and rural development towards social sustainability.

Furthermore, literacy is framed as a basic human right. Thus, in rural South Africa, promoting literacy effectively challenges systemic inequality, counters the exclusion of rural voices, and enables access to the global knowledge economy (Magxala & Baidoo, 2025; Meiklejohn et al., 2021; UNESCO, 2017). In addition, literacy's transformative potential is evident in its capacity to serve as an instrument for radical empowerment and structural social change (Cilliers & Bloch, 2018). As such, it empowers rural learners to become active agents in developing their communities and pursuing social sustainability.

We acknowledge that rural realities limit the potential role of instructional leaders in literacy, thereby hindering their effective execution of responsibilities and the advancement of social sustainability. Thus, to be effective in their roles, instructional leaders in literacy need to be mindful and appreciative of the realities of the rural context and develop and demonstrate qualities that respond to the rather challenging rural context in which they find themselves. Such leaders must be resilient, adaptive, flexible, self-reliant, inclusive, collaborative, problem-solving, and reflective (Awodiji et al., 2023). They must also possess values of social equality; a belief in democratic governance and participation in decision-making; the ability to encourage and strengthen community-school and school-community engagement (Kadji-Beltran et al., 2013); and, finally, the ability to promote diversity and social justice (Conway, 2015). A sensitivity for democratic practices, collaboration, diversity, and social justice speaks directly to SS. As such, instructional leadership in literacy offers rural school principals an opportunity to become change agents. In doing so, school principals not only improve rural learners' chances of success in school but also create opportunities for social advancement, which we contend will advance SD.

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

The purpose of this article was to establish the extent to which instructional leadership in literacy can contribute to social sustainability in rural areas of South Africa. We have a) demonstrated that certain contextual challenges and socio-economic conditions influence literacy teaching, learning, and leadership practices in rural South African schools; b) indicated how instructional leadership in literacy is conceptualised in the literature, and how does it relate to social sustainability in rural education contexts; and c) identified existing evidence on the impact, barriers, and enabling conditions of instructional leadership in literacy for advancing social sustainability in rural South Africa? All these findings suggest that instructional leadership in literacy has the potential to improve the living conditions of rural people and so contribute towards social sustainability in rural

contexts. Based on these findings and to strengthen the role of the principal as instructional leader in literacy in pursued of social sustainability we recommend: that rural school principals a) develop a sensitivity for the unique socio-economic realities of their rural schools, and that the schools' vision, policies and strategies for literacy and SS be reflective of these realities; b) that instructional leaders in literacy in rural schools adopt a leadership style that is responsive of the needs of the rural context and the rural school – this includes, being participatory and democratic and involve the entire staff and other stakeholders of the school; adopt cultural responsive practices, are flexible, and adaptive to contextual changes and uncertainties; and finally c) that instructional leaders in literacy in rural contexts develop a critical stance towards literacy, literacy education and develop an awareness and acknowledges its impact on SS. Such a stance will enable them to question current practices in literacy development, situate learning within learners' lives, and advance SS.

5.1 Implications for practice

This review has highlighted the conditions in rural education as barriers to effective instructional leadership in literacy. The findings of this review hold various implications for the South African rural education landscape. These implications relate to education policy, teacher development and training, and school management. Policy needs to be more flexible and adaptive to the unique literacy needs of the rural context. Teacher development and training programmes should prepare teachers for the demands of literacy in rural communities, and school management should adopt more democratic, participatory management practices.

5.2 Limitations

The authors are English and Afrikaans speakers. To facilitate engagement with the literature, only articles published in English or Afrikaans were included. Thus, disregarding available and relevant research in other languages. Our literature search was limited to a few databases, potentially omitting high-quality, relevant journals. Whilst we have used rigorous screening methods and strictly adhered to our inclusion and exclusion criteria, human error may have led to the accidental exclusion of relevant journals.

6. Declarations

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Data Availability: This review is based entirely on publicly available data and information sourced from peer-reviewed articles, reports, and other academic publications cited in the manuscript. No new primary data were generated or analysed during this study. Readers may refer to the cited sources for detailed information.

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