

From Constraint to Innovation: How Rural Educators Navigate Instructional and Relational Demands in Large Classes

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Abstract:

This study examines how teachers manage large classrooms in rural secondary education by identifying instructional, behavioral, relational, adaptive, institutional, and community-based management practices. Using an interpretivist paradigm, the study employed a qualitative case study involving three purposively selected Grade 11 teachers at a rural secondary school. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, classroom observations, and document analysis, and were analyzed through data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing and verification. The findings reveal three interconnected patterns of classroom management. First, teachers implement instructional and behavioral management through systematic lesson planning, cooperative learning, classroom rules, routines, and positive reinforcement. Second, relational and adaptive management is developed through empathy, effective communication, learner engagement, time management, and resource improvisation. Third, institutional and community support becomes essential in addressing overcrowding, limited resources, teacher workload, discipline challenges, and restricted professional development opportunities. The study concludes that effective classroom management in rural settings is an integrated, adaptive, and multilevel process shaped by teacher agency and contextual support. The findings imply that sustainable improvement requires ongoing teacher professional development, stronger institutional and community collaboration, and systemic interventions that address overcrowding and resource constraints in rural educational environments.

Key Words: Classroom Management, Large Classrooms, Teacher Agency, Rural Education

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INTRODUCTION

Large-classroom management is an important educational concern because classroom conditions strongly influence students' opportunities to learn and teachers' capacity to provide effective instruction (Barnes-Story et al., 2025; Chan

& Smith, 2024; Sarjana et al., 2026). Manageable learning environments support participation, discipline, and achievement. When classes become overcrowded, teachers must divide limited time and attention among many learners while maintaining instructional quality (Majeed & Kareem, 2025; Sa'i et al., 2025). Evidence from South African research shows that large classes are linked to reduced learner participation, limited individualized feedback, behavioural difficulties, and weaker learning outcomes (Graham, 2023; Mulaudzi & Ngcobo, 2026). These challenges are especially consequential in rural communities where schools may simultaneously experience resource constraints and socioeconomic pressures. Understanding how teachers manage large classrooms matters not only for classroom practice, but also for educational equity and the quality of public schooling in underserved communities and schools (Chinhara & Kuyayama, 2024; Rangarajan et al., 2025; Lasut & Neman, 2025; Radhiyah, 2025).

Overcrowded classrooms create a general problem because the number of learners can exceed teachers' capacity to provide individualized instruction, monitor behaviour, assess progress, and respond to diverse learning needs (Tadesse, 2026). In many public secondary schools, student-teacher ratios remain above recommended levels, with some classrooms exceeding 40 or even 50 learners. These conditions can increase classroom noise, reduce participation opportunities, complicate classroom organization, and limit meaningful feedback (El-Sayed et al., 2025; Kihaga et al., 2025; Maundu et al., 2025). Consequently, teachers may spend substantial instructional time addressing discipline and administrative demands rather than facilitating learning (Castro, 2023; Nwoko et al., 2024). Inadequate infrastructure, shortages of teaching materials, absenteeism, poverty, and limited parental involvement in some rural communities further intensify the problem (Nyathi, 2025; Saha, 2023). Thus, persistent overcrowding is a systemic educational problem that requires context-sensitive classroom management responses and institutional support.

The problem is especially visible in rural secondary schools in Limpopo Province, where teachers must manage large groups under constrained conditions. In the Thabina Circuit, Grade 11 teachers work with classrooms where maintaining discipline, encouraging participation, completing assessments, and addressing individual learning needs can become difficult (Ayiawung et al., 2023). Limited classroom space and teaching resources may restrict teachers' ability to arrange seating, conduct collaborative activities, or provide differentiated instruction (Gaitas et al., 2025; Mohammed et al., 2026). Research suggests that overcrowding can intensify behavioural problems and reduce opportunities for personalized feedback, while teachers may experience increased workload and emotional strain (Tshangana et al., 2023). Nevertheless, teachers do not respond passively to these constraints. They adapt through student grouping, peer assistance, classroom routines, positive reinforcement, and alternative seating arrangements. This context makes their experiences important to investigate and to professional learning.

Previous studies have identified several approaches for managing large classes. Instructional strategies include careful lesson planning, cooperative learning, peer-assisted learning, and short engaging activities that sustain attention (Indriayu, 2025). Behavioural strategies emphasize clear rules, consistent routines, positive reinforcement, and delegated responsibilities through class monitors or group leaders (Al-Zyoud et al., 2025; Sumar et al., 2025). Environmental strategies include flexible seating arrangements that improve visibility, movement, and interaction. These studies demonstrate that classroom management can combine instructional, behavioural, and physical approaches (Charteris et al., 2026; Arifin et al., 2025; Mulyadi et al., 2025). However, much of the existing literature describes recommended strategies or effects of overcrowding rather than examining how teachers select, adapt, and perceive these strategies in rural contexts. Consequently, qualitative evidence remains limited on the practical processes through which teachers manage large classrooms when resources, time, and individualized attention are severely constrained.

The literature further reveals a contextual gap concerning the relationship between classroom management strategies and teaching effectiveness in rural South African secondary schools (Maifala, 2024). Studies have documented the negative consequences of overcrowding, including reduced participation, poorer instructional quality, and increased behavioural difficulties (Vakili et al., 2024). Other research has emphasized collaboration, peer support, routines, and positive reinforcement as useful responses. However, these studies offer insufficient insight into teachers' lived experiences of implementing such strategies in Grade 11 classrooms within under-resourced rural settings (Ramaila et al., 2025; Sepadi, 2025). Limited attention has been given to how teachers evaluate strategy effectiveness, modify practices during classroom interaction, and negotiate persistent constraints (AlRamamneh et al., 2026; Deniz & Pinar, 2026). Addressing this gap matters because strategies considered effective in the general literature may operate differently under specific conditions.

The state of the art lies in integrating instructional, behavioural, and environmental classroom management strategies through a qualitative examination of teachers' adaptive practices in a rural secondary school. Rather than treating overcrowding as only a structural problem, the study examines how teachers actively negotiate its consequences through collaborative learning, peer assistance, routines, positive reinforcement, and classroom organization. The study draws on Vygotsky's Social Constructivist Theory and Skinner's Behaviourist Theory. The former perspective explains how peer interaction and collaborative learning can support engagement when teacher attention is limited. In contrast, the latter explains how reinforcement, rules, and routines can shape desirable behaviour. This integrated perspective offers a useful framework for understanding classroom management as both instructional and behavioural work in everyday classroom practice and decision-making.

The research problem is the limited contextual understanding of how Grade 11 teachers effectively manage large classrooms in a rural secondary school in the Thabina Circuit, Limpopo Province. The study therefore asks how teachers manage large classrooms, which strategies they use, how strategies are implemented, and which challenges influence effectiveness. The central argument is that effective management in overcrowded classrooms depends not on a single technique but on teachers' adaptive combination of instructional, behavioural, and environmental strategies. Drawing on both theories, the study argues that collaborative practices can distribute learning support among students, while consistent routines and positive reinforcement can strengthen order and maximize instructional time. A qualitative examination effectively generates context-specific evidence for teacher development, school leadership, resource planning, and policies that improve equitable learning opportunities.

RESEARCH METHODS

This study employed a qualitative approach within an interpretivist paradigm and used a case study design to explore how Grade 11 teachers manage large classrooms in a rural secondary school (Mulaudzi & Ngcobo, 2026). The interpretivist paradigm was appropriate because the study aimed to understand teachers' experiences, perceptions, meanings, and adaptive practices within their natural educational context. A qualitative case study enabled a comprehensive examination of contemporary classroom management practices in a real-life setting. The study focused on instructional, behavioural, and environmental management, including responses to overcrowding, discipline, learner participation, and diverse learning needs. The study population comprised secondary school teachers who taught large classes, while three Grade 11 teachers were selected as information-rich participants. The researchers used purposive sampling because the participants had direct experience relevant to the research objectives and could provide detailed information about classroom management practices.

The study was conducted at a public secondary school in Thabina Circuit, Mopani West District, Limpopo Province, South Africa. The school was purposively selected because it represents a rural educational context characterized by classroom overcrowding, limited teaching and learning resources, and challenging socioeconomic conditions. It accommodates approximately 800 learners from Grades 8 to 12 and employs 22 teachers, with most classrooms containing approximately 50–70 learners. This setting provided an appropriate context for examining classroom management under resource-constrained conditions. Three Grade 11 teachers participated because of their direct experience managing overcrowded classrooms. Before data collection, the researchers obtained permission from the relevant school authority and secured informed consent from all participants. Teachers were informed about the study's purpose, voluntary participation, confidentiality, anonymity, and the right to

withdraw without consequences. To protect identities, participants were coded as T1, T2, and T3.

Table 1. Characteristics of Research Informants

Informant Code	Grade Taught	Teaching Experience	Classroom Context		Selection Criteria	
T1	Grade 11	Experienced teacher	Large (approximately 50–70 learners)	classroom	Direct managing classrooms	experience overcrowded
T2	Grade 11	Experienced teacher	Large (approximately 50–70 learners)	classroom	Direct implementing management strategies	experience classroom
T3	Grade 11	Experienced teacher	Large (approximately 50–70 learners)	classroom	Relevant addressing and behavioural challenges	experience instructional

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, classroom observations, and document analysis to provide comprehensive, complementary evidence. Researchers conducted semi-structured interviews with three Grade 11 teachers to identify the strategies they used, why they chose them, how they implemented them, and the challenges they encountered when managing large classrooms. Interviews were conducted face-to-face, audio-recorded with participants' permission, and transcribed for analysis. Classroom observations examined learning organization, student behaviour, classroom space, participation, and responses to disruptions during lessons. The study also examined documents, including lesson plans, class schedules, and attendance records. The researchers collected data in the natural school setting. Ethical principles followed the Declaration of Helsinki, with voluntary participation, confidentiality, and anonymity maintained throughout. Multiple techniques enabled triangulation among participants' accounts, observed practices, and documentary evidence during data collection and analysis.

Data analysis followed the interactive model of Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña, comprising data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing and verification (Zuliani et al., 2026). First, interview transcripts, observation notes, and documents were systematically reviewed, coded, categorized, and organized thematically. Second, condensed data were displayed through thematic matrices and narrative descriptions to identify patterns, relationships, similarities, and differences across participants and data sources. Third, the researcher continuously verified preliminary conclusions by comparing interpretations across interview, observation, and documentary evidence. Credibility was strengthened through source and technique triangulation involving different teachers and collection methods. The researcher conducted member checking by returning relevant interpretations to participants for confirmation and clarification. An audit trail documented decisions concerning data collection, coding, interpretation, and conclusion development. These procedures

strengthened the credibility, dependability, confirmability, and overall trustworthiness of the findings throughout the analysis.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

Integrated Instructional and Behavioural Management

Operationally, Integrated Instructional and Behavioural Management refers to the way teachers combine instructional and behavioural strategies to maintain order, participation, and effective learning in large classrooms. The strategies identified in the field included structured lesson planning, peer-assisted learning, cooperative learning, clear classroom rules, consistent routines, positive reinforcement, and the use of class monitors or group leaders. The findings indicate that teachers did not treat instructional and behavioural management as separate practices. Instead, they combined them to respond to the demands of overcrowded classrooms. Structured planning reduced unnecessary transitions and instructional time loss, while peer-assisted and cooperative learning enabled learners to support one another when individual teacher attention was limited. At the same time, rules, routines, and reinforcement helped keep collaborative activities organized and purposeful.

Interview findings showed that lesson planning was considered an important foundation for managing large classrooms. One teacher stated, "I plan my lessons ahead of time so the kids know what's coming. When things are structured, it cuts down on unnecessary noise and wasted time." This statement indicates that lesson planning served not only a pedagogical function but also a preventive classroom management function. By establishing a clear sequence of activities, the teacher reduced uncertainty, idle time, and opportunities for disruptive behaviour. The researcher interprets this finding to mean that structured planning enables teachers to exercise greater control over instructional time in overcrowded classrooms. Thus, lesson planning becomes a management mechanism through which teachers organize both learning activities and learner behaviour.

The interviews also revealed that teachers used peer-assisted and cooperative learning to compensate for their limited capacity to provide individual attention to every learner. Teachers reported that learners were frequently encouraged to work together, discuss tasks, and support classmates who experienced difficulties. Teachers sometimes positioned stronger learners to assist those who needed additional support during group activities. The researcher interprets this practice as a form of distributed instructional support, in which learners partially share responsibility for learning rather than concentrating it entirely on the teacher. Cooperative learning therefore served two interconnected purposes: facilitating academic participation and supporting classroom order. By keeping learners actively engaged in structured tasks, teachers reduced opportunities for disruptive behaviour while maintaining

participation across large groups. To synthesize the interconnected strategies identified in the findings, Figure 1 presents a model illustrating how instructional structuring, distributed learning support, and participatory behavioural regulation collectively contribute to sustained learning and classroom order in overcrowded classrooms.



Figure 1. Integrated Instructional and Behavioural Management Model

Figure 1 shows that integrated classroom management in overcrowded classrooms develops through three interconnected stages. First, instructional structuring establishes clear planning, sequencing, routines, and time efficiency, providing a preventive foundation for maintaining classroom order. Second, distributed learning support through peer assistance and cooperative learning allows learners to share responsibility for academic participation when teachers have limited capacity to provide individual attention. Third, participatory behavioural regulation strengthens classroom order through shared rule-setting, positive reinforcement, and learner leadership. The progression illustrates that these strategies function not as isolated practices but as mutually reinforcing mechanisms. Together, they support sustained learning and classroom order, suggesting that effective management of overcrowded classrooms depends on integrating instructional organization, distributed responsibility, and participatory behavioural regulation.

Classroom observations supported the interview findings, showing collaborative learning, peer support, and cooperative activities that increased participation and reduced disruptive behaviour. Teachers reinforced classroom rules through reminders, while class monitors or group leaders helped maintain order and monitor participation. Overall, effective classroom management involved an integrated process of structured planning, shared learning responsibilities, and preventive strategies rather than isolated techniques.

Relational and Adaptive Classroom Management

Operationally, Relational and Adaptive Classroom Management refers to teachers' use of positive interpersonal relationships and flexible responses to classroom conditions to sustain learner engagement and learning despite limited time and resources. The sub-finding encompasses empathy, respect, communication, encouragement, humour, storytelling, learner participation, time management, and resource improvisation. The findings show that teachers did not rely exclusively on formal rules and disciplinary measures. Instead, they built relationships with learners as part of their management practices and adjusted

instructional resources to meet classroom needs. Relational strategies helped teachers create an atmosphere in which learners felt respected and encouraged to participate. At the same time, adaptive practices enabled teachers to continue instruction despite shortages of textbooks and other learning materials. Classroom management therefore emerged as both an interpersonal and practical process shaped by teachers' ability to respond flexibly to learners and contextual constraints.

One teacher emphasized the importance of positive relationships by stating, "When students feel like they matter, they respond well. I try to understand where they're coming from and encourage them, instead of just yelling." This statement indicates that the teacher viewed empathy and recognition as alternatives to purely punitive approaches to discipline. Rather than responding immediately through reprimands, the teacher attempted to understand learners' circumstances and encourage more appropriate behaviour. The researcher interprets this practice as relational regulation, whereby teachers influence learner behaviour through trust, respect, and interpersonal connection. Such an approach appears particularly important in large classrooms because frequent direct control of every learner is difficult. Positive relationships can therefore reduce resistance to teacher directions while strengthening learners' willingness to participate in classroom activities.

The interviews also indicated that teachers used humour, storytelling, questioning, encouragement, and opportunities for learners to express their opinions to maintain attention and participation. At the same time, teachers adapted their instructional materials when formal resources were insufficient. One teacher explained, "We do not have enough books, so I make charts and diagrams to make sure everyone understands the lesson." This statement shows that resource limitations stimulated, rather than prevented, teacher adaptation. The teacher transformed available materials into alternative instructional resources to ensure that learners could still access the content. The researcher interprets this practice as evidence of teacher agency, whereby teachers actively modify their instructional practices in response to contextual limitations. Adaptation therefore involved not only interpersonal responses to learners but also practical decisions concerning instructional materials, time, and classroom organization.

Table 2. Evidence of Relational and Adaptive Classroom Management

Data Source	Empirical Evidence	Management Indicator	Interpretive Meaning
Grade 11 Teacher (T1)	"When students feel like they matter, they respond well. I try to understand where they're coming from and encourage them, instead of just yelling."	Relational regulation	Empathy, respect, and encouragement are used to regulate behaviour through trust rather than punitive control.
Grade 11 Teachers	Teachers described using humour, storytelling,	Engagement-oriented	Interactive and affective communication sustains

(T1–T3)	questioning, encouragement, and opportunities for learners to express their views.	communication	attention and encourages active learner participation.
Grade 11 Teacher (T2)	“We don't have enough books, so I make charts and diagrams to make sure everyone understands the lesson.”	Resource improvisation	Teachers demonstrate agency by adapting available materials to maintain access to instruction under resource constraints.
Grade 11 Teachers (T1–T3)	Teachers described using structured schedules, short transitions, attendance records, lesson plans, and assessment documents.	Organizational adaptation	Time and administrative practices support instructional continuity and reduce organizational disruption in large classrooms.

Table 2 shows that relational and adaptive classroom management involves three interconnected functions: regulating behaviour through relationships, sustaining engagement through interactive communication, and maintaining instructional continuity through adaptive resource and time management. Teachers use empathy, respect, and encouragement to influence learner behaviour through relational rather than punitive mechanisms. Humour, storytelling, questioning, and learner expression help sustain participation. Resource improvisation and organizational adaptation demonstrate teachers' agency in responding to material and time constraints. These practices operate as interconnected processes rather than independent strategies. Positive relationships facilitate learner responsiveness, interactive communication sustains engagement, and adaptive resource management supports instructional continuity. Thus, effective management in overcrowded classrooms depends on combining relational responsiveness with adaptation to sustain participation and instructional effectiveness despite contextual constraints.

Classroom observations further demonstrated the relational and adaptive nature of teachers' practices. Teachers were observed asking questions, inviting learners to express their views, using encouragement, and employing humour and storytelling to sustain attention. Learners were also encouraged to support one another and recognize classmates' achievements. When learning materials were limited, teachers used improvised instructional aids such as charts, posters, and diagrams. Documentary evidence further showed that teachers maintained attendance records, lesson plans, and assessment documents. The researcher interprets these findings as evidence that teachers adapted simultaneously at interpersonal, instructional, and organizational levels. Teachers were therefore not simply responding to individual behavioural problems; they were continuously adjusting their practices to sustain learning within a constrained environment.

Restatement and description of the pattern. The findings reveal three interconnected mechanisms underlying relational and adaptive management:

building relationships, sustaining engagement, and adapting available resources. Teachers used empathy and respect to establish positive relationships, communication and interactive techniques to sustain participation, and resource improvisation and time management to maintain instructional continuity. The pattern indicates that large-classroom management requires teachers to be flexible in both their interactions and their use of resources. Rather than viewing resource scarcity only as a limitation, teachers demonstrated agency by creating alternative solutions. Thus, relational trust and practical adaptability function together as complementary mechanisms for sustaining classroom effectiveness.

Institutional and Community Support amid Structural Constraints

Operationally, Institutional and Community Support amid Structural Constraints refers to how school leadership, Curriculum Advisors, parents, and community members contribute to classroom management. At the same time, teachers face structural limitations such as overcrowding, inadequate resources, heavy workloads, learner discipline issues, and limited professional development. The findings indicate that classroom management cannot be understood solely as an individual teacher's responsibility. Teachers operate within a broader support system involving School Management Teams (SMTs), Curriculum Advisors (CAs), parents, and community members. These actors provide professional guidance, behavioural support, educational resources, and supervision. However, the effectiveness of such support remains conditioned by persistent structural constraints. Consequently, teachers' classroom management practices reflect an interaction between individual agency, institutional assistance, community involvement, and broader resource limitations.

One teacher highlighted the contribution of parental involvement by stating, "When parents are involved, students behave better because they know someone at home is paying attention to their progress." This statement demonstrates that parental involvement extends behavioural monitoring beyond the classroom. Teachers perceive parents as partners who can reinforce expectations concerning attendance, discipline, and learner progress. The researcher interprets this finding as evidence of distributed accountability, in which responsibility for learner behaviour is shared between school and home. This mechanism is particularly important in overcrowded classrooms because teachers have limited capacity to monitor every learner continuously. Parental engagement therefore provides an additional layer of support that complements classroom-based management strategies.

The interviews further indicated that teachers received professional assistance from SMTs and Curriculum Advisors through workshops, classroom visits, and professional guidance. Community members also contributed by providing educational resources and assisting with supervision during examinations and school activities. However, teachers simultaneously reported inadequate assistance from district officials and insufficient opportunities for

professional development. The researcher interprets these findings as revealing a tension between the need for external support and the limited consistency of that support. Teachers demonstrate resilience and adaptability, but their capacity to manage overcrowded classrooms is constrained when institutional and professional support is insufficient. Therefore, individual teacher competence alone cannot fully resolve problems rooted in structural conditions within the educational system.

Table 3. Support and Structural Constraints

Level	Actor/Condition	Support or Constraint	Management Implication
Family	Parents	Monitoring learner behaviour, attendance, and progress	Extends behavioural accountability beyond the classroom
School	SMTs	Professional guidance, workshops, classroom visits, and organizational support	Strengthens teachers' capacity to manage classroom challenges
Professional	Curriculum Advisors	Instructional guidance, monitoring, and professional support	Provides additional expertise for improving classroom practices
Community	Community members	Educational resources and supervision of school activities	Supplements limited school resources and supervisory capacity
Structural	Overcrowding and inadequate resources	Large classes, limited learning materials, and restricted teacher mobility	Limits individualized attention and requires adaptive management
Organizational	Heavy workload and limited professional development	Administrative demands and insufficient training opportunities	Constrains teachers' capacity to sustain effective classroom management

Table 3 shows that the interaction between multi-level support and persistent structural constraints shapes classroom management. Support from parents, School Management Teams (SMTs), Curriculum Advisors, and community members provides complementary forms of behavioural, professional, instructional, and material assistance. These supports extend teachers' capacity beyond what individual classroom practices alone can achieve. However, overcrowded classrooms, inadequate learning resources, heavy workloads, and limited professional development constrain their effectiveness. Such conditions restrict teachers' ability to provide individualized attention, maintain instructional continuity, and respond consistently to learner needs. The findings therefore indicate that classroom management is not solely an individual teacher responsibility but a shared process shaped by institutional and community support and embedded in broader structural conditions. Teacher adaptability can mitigate some of these challenges, but it cannot fully compensate for persistent systemic constraints.

Classroom observations and documentary evidence showed that structural constraints significantly shaped classroom practice. Classes with more than 50 learners restricted teacher mobility and limited opportunities for individualized attention. Shortages of textbooks and instructional materials forced teachers to improvise learning resources, while attendance records, lesson plans, and assessment documents showed substantial administrative responsibilities despite large class sizes. These findings suggest that structural pressures shaped teachers' daily decisions and required constant adaptation. Overall, classroom management in overcrowded rural schools operated across multiple levels. Teachers applied instructional, behavioural, relational, and adaptive strategies, supported by SMTs, Curriculum Advisors, parents, and community members. However, these mechanisms remained constrained by overcrowding, resource shortages, workload, and discipline challenges. Thus, teacher agency was necessary but insufficient, as effective classroom management depended on institutional support and structural conditions.

Discussion

The findings show that effective classroom management in large classrooms depends on integrating instructional and behavioural strategies rather than applying isolated management techniques. This finding supports previous research by Kiggundu and Nayimuli (2009), who emphasized structured teaching practices, lesson organization, and clear instructional procedures in maintaining classroom order. Similarly, Emmer and Sabornie (2015) highlighted the importance of establishing rules, routines, and reinforcement systems to regulate learner behaviour (Moosa & Moodley, 2024; Raswati & Purnamaningsih, 2025). However, while previous studies have often examined instructional organization and behavioural regulation as separate components of classroom management, the present study demonstrates that these dimensions function simultaneously and are mutually reinforcing. In large rural classrooms, teachers maintain discipline through behavioural control while preventing disruption through effective lesson planning, active learner engagement, and efficient instructional organization. This finding extends Patall et al. (2024), who emphasized the importance of integrating motivational and instructional processes, by showing how instructional structures themselves become behavioural management mechanisms in challenging classroom contexts.

Furthermore, the findings regarding peer-assisted learning and cooperative learning reinforce the social constructivist perspective, which emphasizes learning through social interaction, collaboration, and shared knowledge construction (Hung, 2025). Previous studies have primarily positioned cooperative learning as a pedagogical approach to improve academic outcomes; however, this study extends this understanding by showing that peer-supported learning also serves as a classroom management strategy. In overcrowded classrooms with limited teacher attention, peer interaction distributes learning responsibilities, increases

learner participation, and reduces behavioural challenges. Therefore, this study contributes to classroom management literature by showing that pedagogical strategies can simultaneously maintain order, increase engagement, and optimize limited instructional time.

The findings on relational and adaptive classroom management are consistent, identifying positive teacher–learner relationships as a fundamental element of effective classroom management (Rengi, 2023). Consistent with previous studies, this research found that empathy, respect, encouragement, humour, and effective communication enabled teachers to maintain learner engagement without relying primarily on punitive approaches. However, unlike previous research that often treats relational management and instructional adaptation as separate domains, the present study shows these practices are interconnected, particularly in resource-constrained rural classrooms. Teachers had to respond simultaneously to learners’ emotional needs, maintain classroom participation, compensate for limited teaching materials, and manage time constraints. This finding extends Chang and Saong (2026) by showing that teacher adaptability is not merely a response to instructional limitations but is closely embedded within relational practices. In this context, classroom management represents a continuous process of balancing interpersonal responsiveness and contextual problem-solving rather than simply controlling learner behaviour.

The institutional and community dimensions identified in this study are broadly consistent with Mbhiza et al. (2024), who emphasized that broader educational ecosystems and contextual support systems influence rural classroom management. Previous research has highlighted the importance of school leadership, parental involvement, and community participation in supporting teachers; however, this study adds insight by showing that such support operates within structural limitations. The involvement of school management, Curriculum Advisors, parents, and community members indicates that classroom management extends beyond individual teacher competence and is shaped by collective responsibility (Yeganeh et al., 2025). Nevertheless, this study reveals a critical tension between available institutional support and persistent systemic challenges. Although external support helps teachers manage classrooms, issues such as overcrowding, inadequate learning resources, excessive workloads, learner discipline problems, and limited professional development continue to constrain effective classroom management. These findings correspond with concerns raised by the Department of Basic Education (2021) and Spaul (2015) regarding persistent inequalities in educational conditions (Böhmer & Wills, 2025; Medwin et al., 2026). Unlike approaches that portray institutional support as a direct solution to classroom challenges, this study suggests that support mechanisms often function as compensatory strategies rather than addressing the underlying structural barriers affecting classroom management.

Theoretically, this study contributes to classroom management scholarship by proposing an integrated and contextualized understanding of management

practices in large rural classrooms. Previous theoretical perspectives have provided important but partial explanations. Behaviourist approaches explain the role of reinforcement, routines, and behavioural expectations in shaping learner conduct, while social constructivist theory explains the importance of peer interaction and distributed learning responsibility (Cranmore, 2024; Echezona & Ojukwu, 2023; Maflah Alharbi, 2023). However, the findings indicate that neither perspective independently explains the complexity of classroom management in resource-constrained settings. The present study extends these theoretical perspectives by positioning classroom management as an adaptive, multilevel system involving instructional organization, behavioural regulation, teacher–learner relationships, teacher agency, institutional support, and community involvement. This integrated interpretation offers a broader explanation of how teachers sustain learning environments under limited resources, large class sizes, and competing demands (Qangule & Letuma, 2025).

Practically, the findings suggest that improving classroom management requires interventions that operate across multiple levels rather than placing responsibility solely on individual teachers. Consistent with previous recommendations, teachers require professional development focused on cooperative learning, positive reinforcement, relational communication, time management, and creative resource utilization (Damkuvienne et al., 2023; Sekano et al., 2023). However, this study extends existing recommendations by emphasizing that teacher training alone is insufficient without parallel improvements in institutional and structural conditions. School management should strengthen mentoring systems, classroom observation, professional support, and access to teaching materials. At the same time, education authorities need to address overcrowding, teacher shortages, and the availability of Curriculum Advisor support. In addition, parents and communities should be actively involved in learner accountability, discipline development, and school activities. Therefore, this study's principal contribution is demonstrating that classroom management in large rural classrooms is not merely a teacher-level competency but an adaptive system shaped by the interaction among teacher agency, instructional practices, institutional capacity, community participation, and structural realities. This perspective provides a more comprehensive explanation of how effective classroom environments can be maintained within challenging educational contexts.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that effective classroom management in large rural classrooms is an integrated, adaptive, context-responsive process rather than the application of isolated management techniques. The findings show that sustaining effective learning environments requires integrating instructional organization, behavioural regulation, positive teacher–learner relationships, resource improvisation, and collaborative support from schools, parents, and communities.

Theoretically, this study extends conventional instructional and behavioural perspectives by proposing a multilevel framework that situates teacher agency within broader institutional and structural contexts. Practically, the findings suggest that improving classroom management requires coordinated interventions beyond individual teacher capacity, including ongoing professional development in adaptive pedagogical practices, stronger school-based support systems, improved access to instructional resources, and strategies to address structural challenges such as overcrowding and limited educational support. The study also implies that school leaders and education policymakers should recognize classroom management as a shared institutional responsibility and develop context-sensitive policies and support mechanisms for teachers working in resource-constrained rural settings. Despite these contributions, the study is limited by its focus on a single rural secondary school and three Grade 11 teachers, which may constrain the transferability of the findings. Future research should include multiple schools, diverse geographical settings, larger participant samples, longitudinal approaches, and comparative designs to examine further how integrated classroom management practices develop and function across different educational and socioeconomic contexts.

CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

USE OF ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE (AI)-ASSISTED TECHNOLOGY

The authors used ChatGPT as an AI-assisted tool to refine language, improve grammatical accuracy, and enhance manuscript clarity. ChatGPT was not involved in data collection, data analysis, interpreting findings, or developing scientific conclusions. The authors take full responsibility for the originality, accuracy, and integrity of the content presented in this article.

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