

Complexities Of, And Pragmatic Measures To Leading Teaching And Learning In Overcrowded Classrooms: A Case Study Of Four Secondary School Teachers

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The democracy of South Africa is anchored in the republic's constitution, which emphasizes the rights of all citizens, including children. Among these rights is the fundamental right to basic education. Thirty years into democracy, overcrowding in public schools remains a significant challenge in South Africa, primarily resulting from insufficient schools within communities. This study sought to explore teachers' experiences in leading teaching and learning within the challenging environment of overcrowded classrooms and the pragmatic strategies they employ to navigate these conditions. The conceptual framework of this research was shaped by two key concepts: teacher leadership and context-responsive leadership. This study employed qualitative research methodologies, specifically semi-structured interviews and direct observation, to extract insights from a purposively selected sample of four educators operating within the specified context. The data collected underwent thematic analysis, enabling the categorization of findings according to the emergent themes identified throughout the research process. The outcomes of this research shed light on multiple complexities that the participating teachers experienced in the overcrowded classroom. This encompasses several issues, including teachers lacking the necessary skills to effectively manage crowded classrooms, insufficient training and support from district officials and the Department of Basic Education as a whole, instances of violence (such as fights in classrooms), elevated noise levels, and cheating among students, all stemming from stress due to cramped seating arrangements and limited space. In light of these findings, it is crucial to implement laws that limit the number of admissions in schools to effectively address overcrowding. Additionally, measures must be taken to enhance the infrastructure of schools that are significantly impacted by this issue. The Department of Basic Education should prioritize the reskilling of teachers and explore other initiatives, such as integrating new teaching technologies and support programs, to enhance skills and instill discipline in overcrowded classrooms.

Key words: Teaching And Learning, Teacher Leadership, Overcrowded Classroom, Leadership, Context-Responsive Leadership

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Introduction

Teachers play a pivotal role in guiding young children towards adulthood by facilitating effective teaching and learning. For this process to be successful, the establishment of a conducive classroom environment is essential, along with several other critical factors. In South African public schools, the recommended learner-teacher ratio is 35:1 for secondary schools and 40:1 for primary schools, as stipulated by the Department of Basic Education (DBE, 2013). Regrettably, this recommended ratio is frequently exceeded in many public schools, particularly in rural areas and townships, resulting in overcrowded classrooms. Reports indicate that learner-educator ratios (LERs) in South Africa can reach alarming figures, with some classrooms experiencing ratios as high as 70:1 (Venketsamy, 2023).

Understanding the historical context is crucial in this discussion. Prior to 1994, South Africa's education system was characterized by racial segregation (Baruth, 2009), which fostered systemic discrimination and resulted in significant inequalities within the educational framework. Although numerous efforts have been initiated to rectify these historical injustices, schools in previously disadvantaged areas have yet to achieve full transformation, reflecting a persistent legacy of inequity in the South African education system. The phenomenon of overcrowded classrooms presents numerous challenges for both teachers and students. For educators, leading teaching and learning in these environments poses significant difficulties. Students often share desks intended for two, resulting in three or four students seated together at a time. This arrangement restricts a teacher's ability to navigate the classroom effectively and monitor student learning. Additionally, an overcrowded environment hinders the teacher's capacity to address the diverse individual needs of their students. As May (2018) notes, overcrowding directly threatens the effectiveness of teaching and learning, leading to decreased student performance, which can subsequently demotivate teachers. These obstacles ultimately compromise the overall quality of education. Moreover, overcrowded classrooms adversely affect students as well. Research by Makielski (2018) indicates that larger classrooms are often much noisier than their smaller counterparts, making it harder for students to concentrate. Furthermore, such environments can lead to increased violence and other forms of bullying among students, as highlighted by Khanyile and Mpuangnan (2024). Thus, the challenges posed by overcrowded classrooms significantly impact both teaching effectiveness and student well-being, underscoring the need for continued reforms to improve the educational landscape in South Africa.

This paper critically explores teachers' experiences in leading teaching and learning within overcrowded classrooms in the King Cetshwayo District of KwaZulu Natal Province, South Africa. The objective is to identify the gaps in promoting effective teaching and learning in these schools. The study highlights that creating and maintaining a conducive learning environment relies on effective reskilling programs, which require the commitment and involvement of all stakeholders in the education system. Given this insight, the researchers underscore the significance of collective action among stakeholders to facilitate effective teaching and learning.

Theoretical framework

In this paper, we explore teachers' experiences in leading teaching and learning in overcrowded classrooms. The analysis is grounded within the context-responsive and adaptive leadership constructs.

Context-responsive theory

The management of teaching and learning in overcrowded classrooms presents considerable challenges for educators, particularly due to the diverse backgrounds of students. This paper is embedded in context-responsive theory, which highlights the necessity for educators to comprehend the specific dynamics of their operating environment. In this framework, the issue of classroom overcrowding directly influences the educational experience; hence, this research intends to apply context-responsive leadership theory to assist educators in effectively navigating the complexities associated with overcrowded conditions, thereby enhancing their pedagogical efficacy through a nuanced understanding of their context. Recent scholarly contributions, including those by Day and Gu (2014), suggest that a context-responsive approach in leadership is essential for investigating the strategies that educators employ in overcrowded settings to enhance student performance. Educators who possess the ability to recognize and adeptly respond to their unique contextual factors are likely to achieve significant success (Hattie, 2018). The works of Day and Gu (2014) and Leithwood et al. (2019) further emphasize the imperative of understanding the specific circumstances within which individual educators operate.

Khanyile et al., (2024) contend that effective leadership is contingent upon both the personal attributes of leaders and relevant situational factors, such as task structures, positional authority, and the competencies and attitudes of team members. Furthermore, they advocate for the importance of training teachers to adapt their methodologies to the prevailing conditions through motivation and continual professional development. In alignment with this view, Thomas and Ruhl (2021) posit that aligning distinct leadership styles with contextual variables can yield beneficial outcomes. Leithwood, Harris, and Hopkins (2020) echo this sentiment, asserting that successful leaders in underperforming schools implement leadership practices that correspond with each phase of school improvement efforts.

The context-responsive leadership framework articulated by Gay (2018) incorporates several critical principles: the efficacy of a leader is predicated on student achievement, learners must develop a critical consciousness to challenge prevailing societal norms, and educators must prepare students to navigate community expectations. To optimize outcomes in overcrowded classrooms, teachers must draw upon local knowledge and engage with community expertise, while also actively involving students in social initiatives that foster collective empowerment (Arnot et al., 2019). This study specifically addresses the escalating issue of classroom overcrowding, positing that context-driven theory is pertinent as it affects both teacher behavior and the selection of instructional strategies that are most suitable for overcrowded environments (Denscombe, 2017). This observation underscores the pivotal role of leadership in facilitating transformative behavioral changes among educators.

Further, context-responsive leaders, as articulated by Dempsey and O'Reilly (2021), are adept at advocating for the perspectives of students from diverse backgrounds, recognizing the socio-political dimensions of their environments, assuming responsibility for educational transformations, embracing constructivist teaching paradigms, and building upon students' prior knowledge and beliefs to enhance their learning experiences. Scholars such as Villegas and Lucas

(2021) assert that educators must be cognizant of their positionalities within their teaching environments and the contextual factors that influence their practice to effectively instruct and manage overcrowded classrooms. Consequently, operating within these challenging conditions necessitates that educators emerge as agents of change to improve student outcomes. Enright et al. (2021) assert that context-driven leadership equips and supports school leaders especially those operating in overcrowded classrooms with the requisite skills to adapt to shifting demographic challenges. Such an approach is vital for assuring quality education (Reynolds, 2020). Context-driven theory, as expressed by Hattie (2021) and Dempsey and O'Reilly (2021), stresses that teachers engaged in instruction within overcrowded settings should concentrate on critical domains of professional development and instructional effectiveness.

Adaptive leadership theory

Adaptive leadership has emerged as a crucial theoretical framework for educational institutions striving to effectively navigate the complexities associated with managing overcrowded classrooms. Recent literature emphasizes that adaptive teacher leadership is informed by factors such as environmental readiness, motivation, and the capacity to address intricate situations (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2019). According to Yulk (2010), adaptive leadership requires educators to adjust their behaviours based on the specific challenges presented within overcrowded educational settings, fostering a more responsive approach. The dynamic nature of leadership is underscored by the understanding that it is a complex process arising from interactive relationships among individuals (Yulk, 2010). Leadership is viewed as transcending individual capabilities, emerging from collaborative interactions, tensions, and the exchange of perceptions and understandings (Yulk & Mushad, 2010). Furthermore, research by DeRue & Ashford (2010) reinforces the concept that effective leadership is inherently context-dependent, and adaptive leadership specifically facilitates the emergence of innovative outcomes such as resilience and enhanced learning environments (McClevey, 2021).

In the context of this study, adaptive leadership is particularly relevant as it provides strategies for navigating the multifaceted challenges associated with overcrowded classrooms. The demands presented by overcrowding and other contemporary educational issues necessitate leaders who exhibit openness and flexibility in the face of change (Khan, 2017). Within this framework, teachers play a critical role in leading learning processes and supporting one another in adapting to environmental shifts. Adaptive leaders empower educators and students to collaborate in overcoming challenges and striving for excellence (Heifetz, 2009). Moreover, fostering motivation among both teachers and learners is essential for creating an educational environment conducive to effective teaching and learning. This study posits that mutual motivation among teachers will cultivate an atmosphere of collaboration that enhances the overall educational experience. As schools are increasingly recognized as complex adaptive systems, the necessity for collaborative problem-solving becomes paramount when addressing issues like classroom overcrowding (Bien, Marion & McKelvey, 2007).

The principles of complex adaptive theory focus on strategies and behaviors that foster creative learning and adaptability within organizations, particularly when optimal conditions are established (Marion, 2020). This theory comprises three foundational pillars: administrative leadership, adaptive leadership, and enabling leadership. Uhl-Bien (2020) explains that administrative leadership focuses on structured roles related to planning and coordinating activities, while adaptive leadership emphasizes the ability to recognize and respond to emerging changes within an institution. Enabling leadership facilitates the development of systems that promote creative problem-solving, adaptability, and learning. Recognizing the complex nature of leadership in overcrowded classroom settings highlights that such challenges cannot be effectively managed by an individual alone. Instead, successful leadership relies on the collective efforts of diverse educators functioning cohesively as a team. Thus, adaptive leadership theory serves as a vital resource for organizations navigating transitions in the 21st-century educational landscape by enhancing their collective capacity to adapt to change.

To achieve these objectives, it is essential for teachers to cultivate sustainable professional learning communities where they work collaboratively to advance their educational institutions. Such communities thrive on members' recognition of their professional identities while addressing the challenges presented by overcrowded classrooms, ultimately contributing to the institution's success in fostering positive learning environments (Zepeda, 2021). Achieving this goal requires educators to engage in research, collaborate, and support one another in their commitments to ongoing professional development. Consequently, it is recommended that professionals within complex adaptive systems specifically in overcrowded schools embrace flexible approaches and commit to continuous learning processes.

Research questions

- What are the leadership practices enacted by teachers leading teaching and learning in overcrowded classrooms?
- What are the challenges experienced by teachers leading teaching and learning in overcrowded classrooms?

Literature review

Leading teaching and learning in overcrowded classrooms remain a pronounced challenge for educators, given the diverse backgrounds of both teachers and students. Recent research emphasizes the necessity for context-responsive leadership, which requires educators to have a deep understanding of their specific teaching environments. The

implications of overcrowded classrooms are profound, affecting the dynamics of both teaching and learning; thus, context-responsive leadership plays a pivotal role in guiding educators' approaches to such challenges by enhancing their awareness of the educational landscape. Studies by recent scholars, such as Tschannen-Moran (2018), highlight that a context-specific approach to leadership is essential for understanding the strategies educators deploy in overcrowded classrooms to promote student performance. Educators who are adept at recognizing and responding to their contextual realities often see improved outcomes (Kirkland & Jones, 2020). Furthermore, scholars like Dempster et al. (2019) underscore the importance of leaders understanding the contextual factors affecting their professional roles. Recent investigations suggest that educators working in overcrowded settings must adapt their methods to fit specific situational demands, focusing on targeted motivation and tailored professional development (Darling-Hammond, 2020). Kurland & Hasson (2021) argue for the need to align leadership styles with the unique challenges of educational contexts, which is further supported by research indicating that effective leaders modify their practices based on the stage of improvement needed within their schools (Leithwood et al., 2020).

According to recent frameworks proposed by scholars like Wiggins and McTighe (2019), successful context-responsive leadership is underpinned by three critical propositions: the academic success of leaders is intertwined with that of their students; fostering critical consciousness is vital for students in challenging environments; and educators must prepare students to navigate and confront societal expectations. To achieve successful outcomes in overcrowded classrooms, teachers are encouraged to integrate culturally relevant pedagogies and actively engage with the community, enhancing student empowerment through social initiatives (Ladson-Billings, 2020). The urgent issue of increasing classroom overcrowding highlights the relevance of context-driven leadership in shaping educators' responses and guiding the selection of appropriate pedagogical strategies (Zhao, 2021). It is clear that leadership has a significant impact on individual behaviors within educational settings. Recent studies reaffirm that class size significantly affects educational quality and student outcomes (Finn & Achilles, 2020). Context-responsive leaders are characterized as advocates for diverse student perspectives, exhibiting awareness of the socio-political contexts surrounding their work, and engaging in transformative, constructivist educational practices (Zaretta Hammond, 2020). Additionally, recent research posits that effective teaching and management in overcrowded classrooms hinge on educators' deep understanding of their roles within their specific contexts (Mitchell & McCarthy, 2020).

Overall, context-driven leadership provides school leaders with the tools to adapt to the realities of overcrowded classrooms, thereby enhancing the potential for delivering quality education (Harris, 2021). Teachers in these environments should prioritize equitable educational opportunities, focus on effective teaching practices, arrange services optimally, and navigate policy mechanisms toward better outcomes (Zeichner, 2021). This concentrated focus enables educators to adopt teaching methods that integrate sociocultural perspectives into the school culture, fostering innovation in staff development and collaborative efforts, ultimately ensuring high-quality instruction through community engagement (Fullan, 2020). Therefore, context-responsive leadership is vital in navigating the complexities of teaching and learning in overcrowded classrooms, emphasizing the need for a team-oriented approach that promotes collective responsibility and consensus-building (López & Ensor, 2021).

Methodology

Four teachers within the King Cetshwayo District of KwaZulu-Natal Province were the participants of this study, which utilized a qualitative methodology. Specifically, the study targeted the two Secondary schools. The group consisted of two teachers from each school. The participants were selected with a purposive sampling technique to gather the teachers' experiences in leading teaching and learning within the challenging environment of overcrowded classrooms and the pragmatic strategies they employ to navigate these conditions, as outlined by Henning et al. (2004). The researchers used semi-structured interviews to collect data, which followed the framework suggested by Leedy and Ormrod (2010). The interviews were conducted using a set of predetermined questions, with room for further questioning to delve into the participants' reasoning and obtain additional clarifications. Permission was sought from the school administration before the data collection process commenced. The semi-structured interviews were conducted across three sessions, each spanning around 45 minutes. The participants provided their consent for their responses to be recorded during the sessions, which were later transcribed into a notebook. To analyse the data, a thematic approach was utilized, following the guidelines by de Vos et al. (2011), which involved the identification and classification of significant themes based on their characteristics. To simplify the analysis process, distinct codes were allocated to all four participants, such as #T1 to #T4. These codes functioned as unique identifiers during the entire analysis process. Their use made it easier to categorize and present the data in accordance with the themes that emerged.

Results and discussion

The results and discussion present the teachers' experiences in leading teaching and learning within overcrowded classrooms. Under this broad theme, five sub-themes generated include teaching method enacted by teachers in overcrowded classrooms; support for teachers from the school management team; challenges associated with overcrowded classrooms and code of conduct as a control measure used by teachers in overcrowded classrooms.

Teaching method enacted by teachers in overcrowded classrooms

Overcrowding in schools appears to be a significant obstacle to effectively managing and overseeing the teaching and learning process. Consequently, teachers are compelled to develop effective methods to meet their educational

objectives in congested classrooms. Participants in this study showcased a variety of teaching strategies aimed at ensuring productive instruction in such challenging settings. They identified techniques like question-and-answer sessions, peer teaching, storytelling, and group discussions as the most frequently utilized strategies. For example, T1 and #T3 emphasized that grouping learners and employing direct teaching methods facilitate smoother teaching and learning experiences in overcrowded classrooms, a sentiment echoed by #T1. "I use diagnostic teaching methods, such as question-and-answer sessions, to assess what my students already know and to identify areas where they may be struggling. I also employ the telling method and facilitate group discussions. For students who may take longer to think through concepts, I often rely on questioning techniques to support their learning."

#T3 shares a similar understanding to #T1 regarding the telling method and questioning; however, she emphasizes the use of peer teaching, as learners tend to learn faster and better from their peers. She explains: "I utilize question-and-answer and group discussion methods because individualizing instruction can be challenging. I also provide bright learners with the opportunity to teach their peers while they listen to each other. However, extra time is often necessary, as it can be difficult to complete a lesson on schedule due to the emphasis on questions and discussions." In addition to using questioning and telling methods, T2 suggested incorporating presentations and increasing learner participation as a strategy for managing an overcrowded class. "I combined different teaching methods. Among those methods I can mention telling, group discussion method as a way of involving learners. I also use peer teaching in the form of presentations by learners from their groups. Presentations help to reduce high noise levels as learners are highly engaged and they learn a culture of listening. The issue is that I cannot review all groups in one day, causing delays in the lesson."

Apart from relying on a telling method, T4, a novice educator, appears to be confused and frustrated when her students do not engage with her questioning approach. To maintain a calm and involved atmosphere in an overcrowded classroom, she resorts to assigning more written activities. There seems to be some confusion regarding the best methods to adopt in overcrowded classrooms. However, teachers demonstrate a strong commitment by dedicating extra time to their classrooms, utilizing afternoons and breaks to help students catch up. We have also observed that teachers are actively motivating their students to engage in their schoolwork during lessons. Scholars such as Wiggins and McTighe (2019); and Friedman-Kruss, Raver, Neuspiel, and Kinsel (2014) note that teacher preparedness is severely hindered by the high interruptions stemming from overcrowding. Consequently, excessive enrollment in classrooms leads to teachers becoming overburdened. Our observations indicate that this over-enrollment negatively impacts teaching and learning, resulting in numerous disruptions during class. #T4 pointed out that the performance of some students suffers because they struggle to write or focus on class, largely due to the stress associated with overcrowding. It seems essential for teachers to be reskilled in teaching strategies that are effective in overcrowded classrooms to better navigate these challenging environments.

The National Education Policy Act: Norms and Standards for Educators (Notice 82 of 2000) outlines seven key roles for teachers: mediator of teaching and learning, interpreter and designer of all learning programs, assessor, learning area specialist, teacher as a scholar and lifelong learner, provider of pastoral care, and leader, administrator, and manager of the curriculum. These roles are evident among participating teachers who go above and beyond to develop effective strategies for achieving good results in overcrowded classrooms. Educators in these settings have worked to create a conducive environment despite the challenges of overcrowding by engaging learners through presentations, offering additional activities, employing lecture methods, and utilizing questioning techniques to assess understanding. This demonstrates their commitment to continually learning from the experience of working in crowded classrooms. This perspective aligns with the views of Asodike and Onyeike (2016), who assert that it is the responsibility of teachers to lead and seek ways to facilitate teaching and learning, even in difficult contexts characterized by overcrowding.

Based on the data extracts, it is evident that educators promote the sustainability and enhancement of quality education by employing a variety of teaching methods. This aligns with adaptive leadership theory, which asserts that teachers lead and facilitate learning with flexibility and passion (Khan, 2017; Zhao, 2021). For educators to effectively manage overcrowded classrooms, they must demonstrate both passion and integrity, managing their students with patience. The responses of teachers in this study significantly shape the dynamics of an overcrowded classroom, reflecting their understanding of diverse learning environments as they work with students from various backgrounds (Yulk, 2010). By adapting to their contexts, teachers have achieved considerable success despite the challenges posed by overcrowding, and they are continuously developing in their roles. Furthermore, Reynolds (2015) supports the notion that teachers are guided by their school management teams or leaders to enhance their working conditions, ultimately producing quality results. This influence shapes teachers' behavior in the classroom, fostering a positive learning climate.

Support for teachers from the school management team.

Teachers leading teaching and learning in overcrowded classroom environments have indicated that their School Management Team (SMT) positively influences their teaching practices. Some teachers in this study regard support from their colleagues as a crucial element needed to effectively navigate teaching and learning in such challenging contexts. However, several participating teachers noted that the support they receive is inadequate. Consequently, they

attribute the high incidence of student misbehavior to the actions of SMT members. This concern was articulated by #T1.

"I can say there is less support because the school management team (SMT) is not always present during one-on-one parent meetings. The SMT members mention that there are too many cases for them to handle, as they have their own workload to manage." To reinforce this idea, #T2 provides an insightful perspective: "I am not receiving adequate support from the School Management Team (SMT). Despite completing the IQMS performance management processes, I have not seen any change. They continue to request subject improvement plans from us, and while we hold one-on-one and departmental meetings, no actions are taken to address the issue of overcrowding. The SMT seems to only intervene in significant cases involving parents, leaving other concerns unaddressed. I have started to question whether the issue lies with me (#T2)".

Participants indicated that School Management Teams are adversely affected by overcrowding. School leaders need to receive ongoing training and development to equip them with effective strategies for managing overcrowded schools (Khanyile et al., 2024). Bottery (2004) further highlights that principals often have to work overtime daily to address the challenges posed by overcrowding. This suggests that if the school management teams do not align with this increased workload, they may hinder educator performance. Teachers have noted that members of the School Management Team (SMT) play a crucial role in maintaining order by ensuring that educators are present in their classes. The SMT needs to create an environment that fosters collaboration among teachers, both within their sub-committees and during departmental meetings (Mestry, 2017). Regular meetings facilitate the sharing of concerns and learning opportunities between teachers and their managers. While some participants expressed dissatisfaction regarding the lack of support from SMT members, others acknowledged that the support provided by the SMT enables them to thrive, despite the challenges they face. #T3, for instance, appreciates the motivational talks and strong supervision from the School Management Team, which helps to maintain order within the school. She expressed her thoughts: "They engage by taking rounds and speaking with the troublesome learners. Overcrowded classrooms are given priority, and efforts are focused on addressing the issues of all troubled students within those settings. Learners affected by drug use are referred to SANCA for rehabilitation. Additionally, the School Management Team invites external speakers to motivate the students." #T4 shares a similar perspective with #T3 regarding the intervention and assistance the School Management Team (SMT) provided. They believe that motivation and parental involvement are essential for maintaining order, which in turn supports good performance. However, #T4 seems to feel overwhelmed by the SMT's interventions, yet she expressed the following: "The pressure from the School Management Team (SMT) is quite overwhelming, with an abundance of meetings. As teachers, we are feeling the strain. There are also class visits conducted to observe and assess teaching and learning. The SMT organizes team-building outings for us to help alleviate stress and re-energize our motivation. Additionally, they promote parental involvement and provide moral support through motivation. However, it is important to note that some learners do not have parents."

The data presented above indicates that the School Management Team is fulfilling its responsibilities by effectively supporting teachers and fostering a community of practice where educators can regularly convene to discuss relevant issues. As noted by Khuzwayo, Taylor, and Connolly (2020) the SMT plays a crucial role in leading, guiding, and motivating teachers, while also providing the necessary support to enhance the progress and effectiveness of teaching and learning.

Challenges associated with overcrowded classrooms

Overcrowding presents a significant challenge for teachers regarding student behavior, which in turn contributes to the emergence of behavioral issues among educators. Teachers have voiced numerous concerns about how learners respond within overcrowded classroom environments. While some educators are pleased to see certain students thriving and engaging positively, others find that some take advantage of the situation, believing they can misbehave without being noticed. Common misbehaviors include high noise levels, littering the floor with papers, and even sleeping due to the heat stress. Managing student behavior is a complex task for teachers. This is what #T1 expressed in relation to the teaching challenges faced. "Most learners respond positively and engage fully in the lessons. However, some students take advantage of this by chatting with their friends while I am teaching. Additionally, some do not write in their workbooks, knowing that I won't be able to check all their assignments due to the large class size".

#T2 shares a similar sentiment with #T1 that learners do not write down the class activities, which are used to assess their performance. As a result, slow learners feel deprived and may become angry, confused, or even fall asleep in class. "Happiness cannot thrive in an overcrowded classroom. Not all students are able to participate actively, and some engage in distractions. This situation is particularly unfair to those who face challenges. Fast learners tend to enjoy the material and progress quickly, while their slower peers often feel deprived, reserved, and stuck in confusion. Meanwhile, the teacher, pressured to complete the curriculum, struggles to find the time to address these disparities. As a result, frustrated students may sometimes exhibit rudeness towards the teacher."

Presentations are more effective when learners are engaged. They have limited exploration since they anticipate a presentation after the lecture method. #T4 explained this: "The behavior and conduct of learners is often regulated by

the limitations imposed on their engagement. When opportunities for exploration are restricted, students tend to seek alternative means to maintain their involvement in the learning process. These dynamics underscore the importance of providing ample opportunities for active participation to facilitate meaningful learning experiences". #T3 highlights that the work schedule is compromised due to the large number of learners. Some learners choose to sleep, while others create noise if not addressed individually. "Students do listen, but there are some distractions from noise and commotion created by others. While noise in the classroom can be an issue, using the lecture method tends to minimize these distractions. Although learners do not often engage in written activities, I provide them in order to assess their level of understanding."

The findings of this study indicate that teachers managing teaching and learning in overcrowded classrooms employ various instructional strategies. Despite their use of diverse teaching methods, numerous challenges impede the effectiveness of education. Issues such as learner indiscipline, elevated noise levels, and instances of students sleeping or falling ill are prevalent in these overcrowded settings. These factors create significant obstacles to achieving educational objectives, as high noise levels and academic dishonesty hinder the learning process.

Throughout the observation sessions, it became apparent that teachers dedicate substantial time to organizing students who frequently move around, particularly after breaks. Some students attempt to escape the classroom due to discomfort from the heat. High noise levels are consistently noted, prompting teachers to impose disciplinary measures. In discussions, teachers expressed feelings of inadequacy post-breaks, citing difficulties in maintaining discipline due to the unusual behaviors exhibited by students. However, we found it inspiring that some educators can thrive and find joy in their teaching by implementing firm disciplinary strategies within overcrowded classrooms. In these cases, learners were grouped according to their abilities, seated in organized rows, and displayed a cooperative spirit during class activities.

From the literature, we have learned that teachers who are strategic and context-driven tend to achieve positive results, as they foster effective learning environments (The Employment of Educators Act, 76 of 1998). In this context, "context-driven" educators are those who acknowledge the challenges of overcrowded classrooms and adapt their approaches to respond positively to these conditions (Meador, 2019). A study by Ngokabuenui (2015) indicated that overcrowded classrooms impede progress, making it difficult to manage learners effectively. Participants highlighted various behaviors, such as poor academic performance, tardiness, and theft, that obstruct teaching and learning in such environments. Therefore, it is essential to implement strategies to address these deviant behaviors to facilitate effective teaching and learning in overcrowded classrooms. Additionally, overcrowding poses safety risks for both students and teachers, as incidents of violence and other unacceptable behaviors are more prevalent in these settings.

Code Of Conduct As A Control Measure Used By Teachers In Over Crowded Classrooms

The participants in the study indicated that there is a guiding policy established to regulate the behavior of all learners. This policy serves as a framework for both teachers and students, helping to maintain order and discipline within the school and its classrooms. Its purpose is to foster a safe environment in educational settings. Participants also noted that the code of conduct does not address issues related to overcrowded classrooms, implying that it is uniformly applicable to all learners. Several comments were made regarding the policies intended to guide student behavior, including the remarks from participant #T1: "Yes, there is a code of conduct in place, and offense slips are collected for incidents of misbehaviour. These are documented for each learner involved, and parents are subsequently invited to discuss the issues. There is also a school disciplinary committee that addresses these matters, while the School Governing Body (SGB) has a structured approach to handle discipline". While the code of conduct serves as a guideline for teachers in maintaining order within their classrooms, many educators have pointed out that it does not specifically address the challenges posed by overcrowded classrooms. As a result, it falls on the teacher to effectively implement the code of conduct in such settings. This input was shared by #T2:

"Yes, there is a school code of conduct that is reviewed with students each year. This policy applies to the entire school, but as a teacher in overcrowded classes, I adapt it to help learners understand its purpose. I take the initiative to develop strategies to cope with this situation, as there is no specific policy addressing overcrowded classrooms. I provide additional revisions and extra assignments to enhance performance while reinforcing discipline. Additionally, I value the code of conduct as a guiding policy, and I see disciplinary hearings as essential measures for correcting behavior and managing learners in overcrowded classroom settings. The code of conduct serves as the primary tool for teachers to manage student behavior. Our school has implemented the use of offense slips to maintain a record of student misbehaviour. Teachers, along with grade heads, hold regular meetings to emphasize the importance of using the code of conduct and completing offense slips to effectively track disciplinary records." While #T2 appreciates the existence of a code of conduct as a guiding resource, T4 expresses concern that it offers limited assistance in monitoring behavior in her classes. "Although the code of conduct is present, its effectiveness is minimal or nonexistent. A specific number of offense slips must be collected before a parent is invited, but this system isn't working for me. (She began to cry) It is not effective at all".

The preceding discussion clearly indicates that teachers have established policies to guide them in managing student behavior, which ultimately enhances performance. What struck us about this study is that some educators demonstrate flexibility and succeed in creating a conducive learning environment by utilizing the code of conduct and offense slips

as tools for tracking instances of misbehavior. The importance of the code of conduct as a cornerstone of classroom management in overcrowded settings for effective teaching and learning is underscored (Department of Education, 2008). Additionally, teachers leverage the code of conduct to foster a positive learning atmosphere, which is further supported by parental involvement. This is echoed by Asodike and Onyeike (2016), who suggest that teachers play a crucial role in cultivating a positive classroom environment, even in overcrowded conditions, through effective management strategies. Khanyile and Mpuangnan (2023) highlight the significance of collaboration among School Management Teams, School Governing Bodies, teachers, and learners in fostering discipline guided by the code of conduct. The proper application of this code in crowded classrooms can contribute to the development of a constructive learning environment.

Furthermore, adaptive teacher leadership is essential for educators to effectively implement the code of conduct in over-enrolled classes and monitor student behavior. Although the code of conduct serves as a guiding policy, it is ultimately the responsibility of teachers to bring it to life by motivating learners about its significance (Northouse, 2015). The use of offense slips by educators, as evidenced in this study, aligns with the practice of maintaining simple records to track and address ongoing misbehavior (Khanyile & Mpuangnan, 2023).

Recommendations

Based on this study, we propose actions for the Department of Basic Education, School Management Teams (particularly school principals), and fellow researchers.

The Department should impose limits on student admissions to combat overcrowding in schools and conduct regular visits to ensure compliance. They should improve infrastructure for overcrowded schools, potentially through increased budgets or by providing mobile classrooms. Offering bursaries to teachers can enhance their skills, and re-skilling programs that incorporate new technologies should support effective management of large classes.

School Management Teams should establish support committees for teachers experiencing stress. Principals need to foster motivation and professional development for educators in crowded classrooms. Many teachers reported insufficient support, making it essential they receive assistance to cope with over-enrolment. Collaboration among teachers, students, and Management Teams can lead to improvements in the Code of Conduct.

Future researchers should explore teachers' perspectives on safety in overcrowded schools. This study found that many teachers feel unsafe due to poor conditions and misconduct. Teachers' insights can significantly contribute to creating a better classroom environment.

Conclusion

The research highlights the pressing challenges faced by educators in South Africa's overcrowded classrooms, underscoring the urgent need for systemic reforms in the education sector. The complexities identified, including inadequate teacher training, elevated classroom disruptions, and insufficient support from the Department of Basic Education, call for immediate action. To foster an effective learning environment, it is imperative to implement legislative measures that regulate school admissions and enhance infrastructure. Furthermore, prioritizing the professional development of teachers through reskilling programs, along with the integration of innovative teaching technologies, will be essential. Addressing these multifaceted issues is crucial not only for improving educational outcomes but also for upholding the fundamental right to quality education for all South African children. The commitment to a more equitable schooling system will ultimately strengthen the foundations of democracy and empower future generations.

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