

**JOURNAL OF GENDER, INFORMATION AND  
DEVELOPMENT IN AFRICA (JGIDA)**

ISBN: 2050-4276 (Print) ISSN: 2050-4284 (Online)

Indexed at: EBSCO, ProQuest, J-Gate and Sabinet. Also indexed  
and accredited by IBSS

Special Issue, September 2019

Pp 91-103

**Re-Imagining Teacher's Experience with  
Overcrowded Classrooms in the Public Secondary  
Schools in South Africa**

**David Matsepe**

*Department of Research*

*South African Democratic Teachers' Union*

**Mugwena Maluleke**

*Department of Research*

*South African Democratic Teachers' Union*

&

**Michael Cross**

*Department of Research*

*South African Democratic Teachers' Union*

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**Abstract**

The aim of this study is to explore teachers' experiences with overcrowded classrooms in public secondary schools in the Sekhukhune Region of Limpopo Province. The study adopted a qualitative research approach using interviews for data collection with 150 teachers. The overall findings of the study points out that teachers experience numerous challenges during teaching and learning as result of large number of learners in the classrooms. These challenges include failure to stimulate learners' interest, and failure to instill critical thinking and

problem solving activities in learners. The findings of the study are vital significant to South African government in particular and other governments in general with similar challenges for future improvements. The study is guided by the progressivism learning theory to understand the complexity of the overcrowded classrooms in teaching and learning in public secondary schools.

**Keywords:** *Re-imagining Teachers' Experiences, Public Secondary Schools, Overcrowded Classrooms, South Africa*

## **Introduction**

Overcrowded classrooms are noticeable in many public secondary schools in South Africa. These have been attributed to different factors such as managing discipline (Imtiaz, 2014; Mustafa, Mahmoud, Assaf, Al-Hamadi & Abdulhamid, 2014), academic achievement (Bayat, Louw & Rena, 2014; Cortes, Moussa & Weinstein, 2012), time management (Imtiaz, 2014; Mustafa, Mahmoud, Assaf, Al-Hamadi & Abdulhamid, 2014), learners' attention (Benbow, Mizrachi, Oliver & Sais-Moshiro, 2007; Mustafa, Mahmoud, Assaf, Al-Hamadi & Abdulhamid, 2014; Qasim & Arif, 2014), learners' motivation (Ikediaskhi & Amaechi, 2012; Imtiaz, 2014; Khumalo & Mji, 2014), teachers' stress and burnout (Mapfumo, Mukwidzwa & Chireshe, 2014; Opoku-Asare, Agbenatogbe & DeGraft-Johnson, 2014), to mention but a few.

Thus, the study acknowledges and appreciates the above contributing factors although too much emphasis is placed on these factors at the expense of challenges including failure to stimulate learners' interest, and failure to instill in critical thinking and problem solving activities in learners, dimensions that tend to affect teaching and learning as critical factors. The study argues that teachers experienced numerous challenges during teaching and learning as result of large number of learners in the classrooms. These challenges include failure to stimulate learners' interest, and failure to instill in critical thinking and problem solving activities in learners. In trying to understand the effects of overcrowded classrooms on teaching and learning, the study applied progressivism learning theory, using qualitative research approach to allow teachers to express their diverse beliefs and views on effects of overcrowded classrooms on teaching and learning in public schools in the Sekhukhune district of Limpopo province.

## **Re-imagining teachers' experiences vis-à-vis overcrowded classrooms**

This section maps out literature related to overcrowded classrooms vis-à-vis overcrowded classrooms in public secondary schools. In this section, we explore teachers' experiences with overcrowded classrooms in public secondary schools. The study is foregrounded on the assumption that teachers are faced with challenges of overcrowded classrooms which include instructional, management, assessment and discipline problems (Benbow, Mizrachi, Oliver & Moshiro, 2007), to mention but few. Nesane (2008) believes that lack of resources, instructional problems, high workload and discipline problems are some of the constraining factors. Many teachers indicated that managing overcrowded classrooms is complex in general, in particular managing discipline. This is anchored by Shah & Inamullah (2012) who argue that overcrowded classrooms have a direct impact on teaching and learning which put huge stress on teachers. This is in line with Fin (2003) who opines that overcrowded classrooms have negative effects on teacher morale and enjoyment of their work. In the light of Holloway (2008), the study recognises that overcrowded classrooms have effects on teacher's ability to manage time, manage tasks and behaviour. Thus, the problems of indiscipline faced by teachers are rooted from overcrowded classrooms (Levin & Nolan, 1996), which include bullying, inattention, throwing objects, teasing and the use of vulgar language. Some studies have shown that due to overcrowded classrooms teachers spend more time on behavioural management instead of actual teaching and learning (Gibbs & Jenkins, 1992).

In fact, there is abundant literature on teachers' experiences with overcrowded classrooms, though focus is on challenges such as instructional, management, assessment and discipline problems. As such, they do very little in understanding the magnitude and complexity of the teachers' experience with overcrowded classrooms. We thus argue that too much emphasis is placed on these factors at the expense of challenges including failure to stimulate learners' interest, and failure to instill in critical thinking and problem solving activities in learners, dimensions that tend to affect teaching and learning as critical factors. Subsequent to teachers' experiences with overcrowded classrooms is the conceptualisation of class size.

## **Conceptualising classroom size: national and international contexts**

This section provides a conceptualisation and clarification of class size in general and in the South African context in particular. The definition of class size differs from one author to another. Some they use it interchangeably with overcrowded classrooms and for this study it is basically mean the same concept. As per DBE (2014) the official class size for public schools in South Africa is 30:1 learner teacher ratio and anything beyond that constitutes overcrowded classrooms. This is in line with the National Centre for Education Statistics (NCES) (2000) that overcrowded classroom is characterised by large number of learners in the classroom. On the one hand, Buchunan & Rogers (1990) view overcrowded classroom as when there is 80 or more learners in one classroom. However, Enerson (1997) attached overcrowded classrooms to the situation wherein there are 100 or more learners in one classroom.

Given the above definition, it is evident that large class sizes pose challenges for teaching and learning. Thus, average teacher ratio of Brazil and Mexico is 24:1 whereas Hungary, Poland, Italy and Norway have an average learner teacher ratio of 11:1. These ratios denote a number that is way below countries like China, Indonesia and Korea and Japan which have average ratios of between 35:1 and 55:1 (UNESCO, 2005). The research also depict that class sizes in European countries have a smaller learner teacher ratio as opposed to Asian countries. It is also evident that the learner teacher ratio is extreme in public schools than it is in private schools across the different countries, in particular South Africa. Santiago (2001) believes that teacher shortages and overcrowded classrooms are worsening in countries like New Zealand, Sweden and Germany. It is for this reason that class size is one of the factors that parents look at when choosing a school for their children. Mchunu (2009) argues that average learner teacher ratio in South Africa has decrease from 34:1 in 2004 to 31:1 in 2014. However, large class sizes are still constraining factors in South African public schools. Research has shown that large class sizes are constraining factors in many rural schools. It is reported that 60% of black schooling takes place in rural areas (UNESCO, 2005. In this section, the discussions by various authors demonstrate similar challenges, which affect teachers' abilities and capabilities to cope and manage overcrowded classrooms in public

secondary schools at the expense of stimulating learners' interest, and instilling critical thinking and problem solving activities in learners.

### **Significance of the study**

This study explores teachers' experiences with overcrowded classrooms in public secondary schools in the South Africa. It also recommends possible solutions to teachers' experiences with overcrowded classrooms in public secondary schools. These recommendations will hopefully contribute to overcome teachers' experiences with overcrowded classrooms. The study is equally important because it can add to the existing knowledge base on the domain of teachers' experiences with overcrowded classrooms, especially in public secondary school level. The results from the study can help policymakers in other countries with similar challenges of overcrowded classrooms, in particular South Africa to make informed decisions about reform in public secondary schools. Furthermore, it will inform the DBE to devise necessary interventions to overcome challenges of overcrowded classrooms in public secondary schools. Above and beyond this, the study will hopefully improve the practice of teaching and learning, thereby contributing to the success of public secondary schools. Finally, it will also serve as a springboard for other researchers to carry out in-depth studies in the domain of teacher's experiences with overcrowded classrooms.

### **Theoretical framework**

This study is based on the progressivism learning theory as postulated by the American Philosopher and Educator, John Dewey (1859-1952). The theory is focused on the experiential learning that manifest within a social context. Dewey believes that doing does not happen in isolation. As Skilbeck (1970) posits when an individual thinks, he/she becomes aware of a certain problem, ultimately the individual becomes conscious of the problem, then he/she will be able to relate the problem to wider situation. The next step involves suggesting ideas of coming up with solution to overcome the situation. As in the case of teaching and learning, Westbrook (1999) argues that for Dewey, learners are active beings who learn by confronting the problematic situations such as overcrowded classrooms that came out in the course of their activities. In

this regard, learners must be provided with problem solving activities for learning to take place (Dewey, 1961).

Dewey believes that teachers should help their learners become critical thinkers because only through this skill they will be able to learn to reason and make informed decisions pertaining to the environment wherein they find themselves. It is for this reason that generating opportunities to exercise judgment and making decisions is a basic means to instilling critical thinking skills to learners against the existing situation. He asserts that a good teacher connects the subject matter to the needs and desires of the learners, so that they can see the connection between the material taught and their lives (Dewey, 1961).

To understand how teachers in public secondary schools conduct learning and teaching with large number of learners in the classrooms, the study is guided by three dimensions of the progressivism learning theory alluded by Dewey: first, a need for learners' participation in the learning process, second, a need for the stimulation of learners' interest and curiosity to learn and third, a need for the promotion of critical thinking and problem solving in learning (Dewey, 1985). Thus, teachers supposed to provide opportunities to learners to maximise their participation in the teaching and learning process. In this way, teachers could stimulate learners' interest and curiosity to learn and provide them with opportunities to develop critical thinking and problem solving skills against the existing situations.

## **Methodology**

The study adopted qualitative research approach. Data was collected through interviews to allow teachers to express their diverse beliefs and views on their experiences with overcrowded classrooms on teaching and learning in public secondary schools. This is supported by Myers (1997) who points out that qualitative approach enabled teachers to express in their own words how they experience the effects of overcrowded classrooms on teaching and learning in public secondary schools. Thus, the realities expressed by teachers in the study represent their socially constructed meaning of their experiences in the overcrowded classrooms in public secondary schools. Subsequently, content analysis method was used for purpose of data organising, analysing and interpretation. The first stage was to reduce data by transcribing interviews and grouping information from interviews. Following was data coding to assist in

coming up with themes. The themes allowed us to identify patterns, which mostly indicated challenges brought by overcrowded classrooms on teaching and learning. Eventually, we drew and verified conclusions emerging from the themes.

Purposive sampling method was used to select 150 teachers that provided rich and in-depth information. This is confirmed by Patton's (2002) who indicates that purposive sampling assist to choose cases that are in line with issues under the study, the method allowed to target schools that experience the challenges of large number of learners in the classrooms and the teachers who are expected by the government to perform their duties in a normal way. It is worth noting that most of the schools visited are Quintiles 1, 2, and 3 schools. These quintiles represent deprived schools that are prioritised to receive resources and declared to be non-fee-paying schools by the government (Murtin, 2013).

In the case of research ethics, informed consent was obtained from each educator in the study in order to ensure that they understood what they would be doing and to verify their willingness to partake in the study. This is supported by Creswell (2002) who maintains that participants must be made aware that they are free to participate in the research or withdraw at any time if they wished to. The participants were assured of their rights, including the right of consent, protection from disclosure of information, and respect for their privacy. SADTU office at Sekhukhune Region communicated with teachers to ensure their willingness to participate in the study. All research participants voluntarily participated and not forced to take part in the study. Throughout the process participants were given assurance that they will not be exposed to any risk, embarrassment, unusual stress, or any demeaning treatment. Anonymity and confidentiality were promised and maintained. In addition, participants were given assurance that their identities will remain anonymous throughout the study.

## **Discussions of findings**

The discussion of the findings primarily emanates from the voices of teachers, which are discussed, interpreted and interfaced with literature. The results of the study are organised into two main themes identified from the participants, namely, effects of overcrowded classrooms on stimulating learners' interest; and effects of overcrowded classrooms on engaging in critical thinking and problem solving activities in learners

### **Effects of overcrowded classrooms on stimulating learners' interest**

The first theme emerging out of data was teachers' reflections on the effects of overcrowded classrooms on stimulating learners' interest. Most of the teachers indicated that overcrowding complicate process of teaching and learning since it was difficult for them to stimulate learners' interest to learn as suggested by the progressivism learning theory. The analysis also suggest that large number of learners in one classroom significantly influence discipline during teaching and learning process because teachers failed to stimulate learners' interest to reading, writing, discussions and demonstrations. The findings are in support of the views of Oliver (2006) who states that overcrowded classrooms have created a stress for teachers making it difficult for them to handle the learning needs of learners. The observations are born out by Heard (2011) who argues that getting to know learners is a very crucial part that will assist in understanding them better. In the same vein, this finding is in line with the work of Imtiaz (2014) and Mustafa et al., (2014) who observed disciplinary problems in classrooms as a serious challenge for teachers. Furthermore, the analysis suggest that the overcrowded classrooms tended to be chaotic and unmanageable in that disruptive behaviour reduced the efficiency of lesson delivery since the teachers' activities did not connect learning to learners' background knowledge, which according to progressivism theory is the prerequisite to the learning process. Finally, the analysis suggests that in some schools learners looked bored, inattentive and uninterested in the lessons.

### **Effects of overcrowded classrooms on engaging in critical thinking and problem solving activities in learners**

The second theme from the findings was the effects of overcrowded classrooms on engaging in critical thinking and problem solving activities in learners. From the data analysed, the findings revealed that most of the teachers were of the opinion that there were infrastructure backlogs due to overcrowded classrooms which led to them failed to put in place activities that embraced critical thinking and problem solving skills in learners as the prerequisite of the progressivism learning theory. In the same vein, the findings is in line with Ipinge (2005) who observes that large classes hinder the achievement of learning objectives and reduce the completion of learning activities . The analysis showed that

overcrowded classrooms significantly affect effective teaching and learning process since the activities such as group works, discussion and think-pair-share are not well monitored by teachers given the large number of learners in the classrooms. This finding concurs with Khan & Iqbal (2012) who suggested that educators need to think creatively about how to make learning friendly and effective in the overcrowded classrooms and how to create positive learning environments. The analysis showed that the overcrowded classrooms negatively affects academic achievement of learners and it is regarded as major contributor for poor results in public schools because teachers did not provide space for learners to think individually first before pairing them with colleagues to share their thoughts. This is justified by Cortes, Moussa & Weinstein (2012) who anchored that the fact that class size affects learner performance because learners in the small classes obtained more marks than their counterparts in the large classes because teachers failed to enforce critical thinking and problem solving as the prerequisite of the progressivism learning theory as allude by Dewey.

## **Conclusion and recommendations**

The study was undertaken to explore teachers' experiences with overcrowded classrooms in public secondary schools in South Africa. The study identified different dimensions that were categorized under two interrelated themes that emanate from the content analysis of the data as stated in the discussion of findings. The study was framed on the assumption that teachers are faced with challenges of overcrowded classrooms which include instructional, management, assessment and discipline problems. It is argued that other scholars neglected dimensions of stimulating learners' interest as well as engaging in critical thinking and problem solving activities in learners that play a pivotal role to understand teachers' experiences with overcrowded classrooms in public secondary schools in general, in particular South Africa. In light of the findings, when classrooms are overcrowded, teachers will not have sufficient space for instructional activities. Given the analysis, it is evident that overcrowded classrooms are not conducive for teaching and learning remain one of the most serious challenges to be solved. This will motivate learners to increase their involvement in the classroom situation. In such classrooms, disruptive behaviour could be curbed. The study recommends that the government must allocate sufficient funding

for infrastructure. The provision of sufficient classrooms will allow teachers to use teaching methods which require more space. Learner interest and involvement in the classrooms activities will increase the level of successful attainment of learner outcomes. This will allow quality education for all.

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