

Causes of Overcrowded Classes in Rural Primary Schools

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ABSTRACT The provision of quality education to all South Africans remains a commitment of South African democratic government since its inception in 1994. One of the milestones to achieve this is to provide adequate classrooms to more than 11 million learners in South African public schools who continue to receive education in overcrowded classrooms. Different societal organisations are calling upon the Department of Basic Education to address the shortage of classrooms in public schools. The provision of education in overcrowded classrooms has a negative impact on the performance of both educators and learners. The overcrowded classrooms, which are a common sight in many rural schools, create an obstacle in progressive activities of classroom teaching learning process. The research aims to investigate causes of overcrowded classes in primary schools in rural areas. Seven primary schools under Mamaila Circuit in the Mopani District were selected to form part of the research. From each school, two educators were sampled purposefully to participate in the research. The research was qualitative in nature and face to face semi-structured individual interviews were administered to participate in order to collect data. The findings of the study reveal that overcrowded classes are caused by lack of infrastructure such as classrooms. Some of the causes of overcrowded classes are having one school serving big community; the Department of Basic Education (DBE) takes long to build classrooms or to repair those that are damaged; the shortages of teaching staff and; principals who are looking to increase the enrolment of their school so that their salaries can be enhanced.

INTRODUCTION

South Africa inherited a fragmented and racially divided education system founded on the policies of apartheid (South African Ministry of Education (SAMOE) 2005). The main aim of such policies was to discriminate against certain racial groups, and this resulted in an unequal education provision in terms of race and religion. Many rural Black regions were left with inadequate and poor schooling resources. This condition makes it difficult for proper education to take place in such regions.

The democratic dispensation has committed itself to redress past imbalances in the education system by creating an environment that is conducive for the provision of quality education to all South African citizens. On 29 November 2013, the Minister of Basic Education, Mrs Angie Motshekga published a legally binding *Norms and Standards for School Infrastructure* document (Department of Basic Education 2013). It stipulates, among others, the provision of safe classrooms to schools with a maximum of 40 learners per classroom.

The issue of learner-educator ratios has been hotly debated between South African educator professional bodies and government. It was eventually agreed that the ratio would be 40:1 at primary level and 35:1 at secondary level (Equal Education 2014). However, in some schools, educators still have overcrowded classes than this to teach. Overcrowded classes are a common sight in many rural schools. This creates an obstacle in the progressive activities of classroom teaching and learning process and the achievement of instructional objectives. Instruction in a large group is a challenging task to any educator who interacts with learners inside the classroom. It is against this background that the research sought to identify challenges that educators face in teaching overcrowded classes in rural primary schools.

Overcrowded Classrooms

Many studies have shown that classroom overcrowding is not only a South African problem. According to Haddad (2006), many educators all over the world find themselves working

in primary school classrooms that are overcrowded. Educators with overcrowded classes will obviously experience more problems than those with smaller classes. The overcrowded class issue is one of the major challenges affecting low learning achievements in rural schools (Nakabugo et al. 2006). Overcrowded classes of over 40 pupils tend to be anonymous, that is, learners are, in most cases, attended to as a group and not as individuals, and attention to individual pupils' needs is usually difficult (Nakabugo et al. 2006). In one of schools in the Eastern Cape, nearly 205 learners cram into one classroom. They sit shoulder to shoulder in a poorly ventilated classroom, where five learners share a desk which is supposed to seat two learners (Savides 2016).

Teaching overcrowded classes has been found to adversely affect morale, motivation and self-esteem of teachers (Obanya et al. 2005). Although many educators could manage a class of almost any size successfully, this could often be at the expense of the educators' well-being and the range of learning experiences offered to learners (Nakabugo et al. 2006). Savides (2016) states that one teacher said that: "This class is too big. While you are teaching in the front, others are making a noise at the back. You have to make sure that you control the class and you can't even identify the learners by name because there are more than 200." Many educators of overcrowded classes feel they spend too much time in organizing and managing class activities and not enough on meeting the needs of individual learners.

The national studies conducted in the United States show that reducing class size can significantly narrow the achievement gap between under-performing learners and those performing at or above grade level (Hiller and Thomson-Bennet 2006). Other benefits achieved through reducing class size are long-term learning benefits that translate into consistent academic achievement and lower rates of teenage pregnancy and incarceration (Hiller and Thomson-Bennet 2006).

Overcrowdedness in Perspective

Obanya et al. (2005) state that a large class is one in which one feels uncomfortable, and signs of a large class can be:

- The class is significantly larger than you are used to; and
- The resources can no longer cope with the number of learners if you desire individual attention of the learners.

Managing Overcrowded Classes

Managing an overcrowded class presents a sizable obstacle to many educators (Shah and Inamullah 2012). An overcrowded class has a potential to create an obstacle in the progressive activities of classroom teaching and learning process. Overcrowding has a variety of disruptive consequences for learner behavior (Shah and Inamullah 2012; Marais 2016). Educators spend most of their time demanding the attention and concentration from learners on classroom management activities to regulate learners' activities in a proper way. Instruction in a large group is a challenging task for any educator who is involved in a teaching and learning process inside the classroom effectively (Phillips 2011).

Educators who teach overcrowded classes have to manage a learner population that is more diverse in age, intellectual ability, interest and motivation. This, however, creates additional challenges for educators and makes greater and different demands on their professional work.

The Impact of Overcrowded Classes on Learner Performance

Most of the problems associated with overcrowded classes relate to the negative effects on learner performance. A United States Department of Education (US) report indicates that a growing body of research demonstrates that learners in small classes in early grades make more rapid educational progress than learners in larger classes, and these gains persist throughout their elementary education (Hiller and Thompson-Bennet 2005). This shows that small classes are very much essential when teaching pupils in elementary classes, as most of them will be lost in large classes.

The number of learners in class can certainly reflect on the percentage pass in the sense that in an overcrowded class, it will be difficult for an educator to be able to interact with every learner (Tamfu 2007). In the case where the number is small, it is easy to check if your lessons are ef-

fective. According to the Teaching and Educational Development Institute (TEDI) (2006), learner numbers limit the teaching methods available to educators, but assessment methods are similarly circumscribed by class size. TEDI (2006) identifies assessment challenges associated with large classes as follows:

- Excessive marking loads;
- Circumscription of valid assessment by the necessity of manageability;
- Monitoring cheating; and
- Maintaining quality and consistency of marking

Although these issues can be problems in assessment for any class size, they are exacerbated in large classes because of the additional limitation and strain on resources (TEDI 2006). Learners placed in small manageable sizes are more likely to be engaged academically and socially. Strong academic and social engagement increases the learners' academic achievement.

The Impact of Overcrowded Classes on Teaching Practice

The range of effective teaching practice for overcrowded classes is often described as limited. Educators teaching overcrowded classes are limited from using a variety of teaching methods such as higher order questioning and other active-learning approaches (Benbow et al. 2007). In overcrowded classrooms, educators may spend most of their time in demanding learners' attentiveness or concentrating on classroom management activities to regulate learner's activities in a proper way. The entire class, including educators, may feel discomfort, and educators may teach and watch the clock to avoid the unfavorable environment of overcrowded classroom.

Shortage of learner-teacher support material (LTSM) can be a problem, with too few copies of textbooks available and the futility of assigning extra work that is not readily available to large numbers of learners (Mulryan-Kyne 2010). The shortage of furniture in an overcrowded classroom becomes a problem for educators to deal with. Overcrowded class teaching has an impact on the effective of teaching and learning.

Managing Discipline in an Overcrowded Class

The phenomenon of overcrowded classes has taken its toll on the education system of

countries around the world. Teachers responsible for overcrowded classes experience problems with regard to applying discipline to their learners. The learners tend to disturb, and the teacher finds it difficult to bring them to order. Tamfu (2001) says exceptions exist in cases where the teacher has a long teaching experience, but the mastery of such an overcrowded class is difficult. The quantity and quality of the interaction in the classroom situation are likely to be adversely affected due to lack of space to move around the class (Tamfu 2001).

Behaviors such as stealing, assault, destruction of property, truancy, defiance, hostility and resentment against authority, failure to make the grade and other forms of misbehavior of learners are very common in overcrowded classes. Dealing with all these forms of ill-disciplined behavior may have a negative effect on the health of educators.

Purpose of Study

The aim of the research was to identify causes of overcrowded classrooms in rural primary schools in Mamaila Circuit in the Mopani District.

METHODOLOGY

In this study, the researchers used a qualitative approach that is phenomenological in nature. The population of this study were educators from seventeen primary schools under Mamaila Circuit in the Mopani District. The study was conducted at seven primary schools in the Mamaila circuit found in Mopani District of the Limpopo province. From each school, two educators were sampled purposefully to participate in the study. From each of the seven primary schools, two educators were sampled purposefully to participate in the study. Only 13 educators participated in interviews instead of 14 educators; one educator failed to take part in the interviews due to ill health. Data for the study were collected with the use of an interview guide that was prepared in the light of the literature review. The participants in the study were interviewed with regard to causes of overcrowded classes. A face-to-face semi-structured individual interview method, with the help of an interview guide was used. The central task during data analysis was to identify common theme in people's descriptions of their experiences (Leedy

and Ormrod 2005). After transcribing the interviews, the researchers took the following steps:

- Statement that relate to topic was identified;
- The researchers looked and considered the various ways in which different participants experience the phenomenon of causes of overcrowded classes.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Table 1 presents the codes, gender and number of teaching experience of participants. Participants were coded as follows: PM- Principal (Male); HOD a-Head of Department; SN-Senior Teacher; CS1-Curriculum Specialist Level 1; PF-Principal (Female); DP-Deputy Principal.

Table 1: Codes of participants to one-to-one- semi-structured interviews

Participants' codes	Gender	Number of years teaching in a school
PM	Male	24
HODa	Male	20
SN	Female	27
CS1a	Female	25
HODb	Male	21
HODc	Female	18
CS1b	Female	15
CS1c	Male	22
PF	Female	28
CS1d	Female	20
CS1e	Female	30
CS1f	Male	26
DP	Male	28
Total number of participants		13

Causes of Overcrowded Classes in Rural Primary Schools

Participants indicated that overcrowded classes are caused by lack of infrastructure such as classrooms or where the school buildings were damaged by natural disasters such as storms. In some other areas, overcrowding is caused by having one school serving big community. The Department of Basic Education always take long to attend to such a problem. This tends to force learners to attend in one class such as multi-grade classes. Participants had this to say:

PM: *The issue of overcrowding is mainly caused by the fact that most villages are far*

apart from each other and this cause overcrowding because you find that in one village there is only one school and all the learners from the surrounding areas come to attend here.

CS1c: *There is a lack of classrooms that is why we find more that 80 learners crammed in one classroom. In some other classes you find there are no chairs, for instance, to accommodate all the learners.*

CS1e: *The Department of Basic Education is not building new schools even in schools where there have been acute shortages of chairs. Again, the issue of overcrowded classes is caused by the introduction of free education and feeding schemes at schools. You find that learners who have dropped-out from school long time ago are coming back to school, which is something good but the Department of Basic Education, fail to ensure that more classes are added.*

PF: *In my school overcrowded classes are caused by the shortages of teaching staff. The majority of the educators employed here are ad-hoc teachers and as a result, we are forced to combine two classes into one. It becomes a challenge when such a teacher had to teach two combined classes which are of different grades, e.g. Grade 3 and 4.*

DP: *My observations are that there are four main factors causing overcrowded classes in my school. The first factor is that principals are just interested in a large number of learners and therefore just admit any number to boost the higher enrolment of the school. This in turn forces other schools to close or to be combined with others thereby increasing the number of learners in a particular school. The second problem is that in rural areas like in this school there is only one school and parent, due to poverty perhaps are forced to send their learners here as they cannot send them to other schools. The third issue has to do with the failure by the government to employ enough educators in time. And due to this problems school had to resort to combining grades, i.e. multi-grading. Lastly, the slow pace through which our government take to build new classrooms. This is something I do not understand as it has been twenty years since we attain our democracy but still we still have overcrowded classes in schools.*

Chuenyane (2008) states that the issue of overcrowded classes is prevalent in the rural areas of Limpopo, KwaZulu-Natal and Eastern

Cape with the least of such instances being reported in Gauteng. Overcrowded classes are caused by lack of classrooms rather than a shortage of teachers. Other causes of overcrowded classes are schools that were closed for a number of reasons, including migration and other demographics such as ageing communities which forces merging of schools thus resulting in overcrowding (Chuenyane 2008). Overcrowded classes and lack of classrooms has always been blamed on budget constraints, and each year, there are empty promises of addressing such challenges during the oncoming financial years (Masemola 2010). de Waal (2013) describes the issues pertaining to overcrowded classes and lack of proper infrastructure an indication of the reality and existence of vast inequalities that still exist in South African education system. Lack of infrastructure is blamed on two reasons which are: the politicization of education in the way union leaders play politics when they engage with departments; and total lack of accountability in the whole education system (de Waal 2013). Khan and Iqbal (2012) state that the majority of government schools in some of the world countries such as Pakistan and others are overcrowded due to an increased population, limitation of the economic resources, and budget constraints.

CONCLUSION

The findings of the study reveal that overcrowded classes are caused by lack of infrastructure such as classrooms or where the school buildings were damaged by natural causes such as storm. Some of the causes of overcrowded classes are having one school serving big community. The Department of Basic Education (DBE) takes long to build classrooms or to repair those that are damaged; the shortages of teaching staff and; principals who are looking to increase the enrolment of their school so that their salaries can be enhanced. Overcrowded classes place limitations on the quality and quantity of interaction between the educators and learners as well as on the quality of teaching and learning. The findings also cast some doubt on the skills of educators in dealing with problems of overcrowded classes. Indulging in negative reinforcement like punishment is not educationally expedient, and these are direct consequences on inadequate classrooms and furniture.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The Department of Basic Education should make it its prerogative role to build more schools in highly populated villages. If it is not possible to build more schools, then there should be additional number of classrooms to be built and more educators should be employed in order to match educator-learner ratio as prescribed in the policy. The government should encourage stakeholders such as business people, churches and parents to raise funds of building the school infrastructures. Parents should understand that it is their responsibility to get involved in their children's education. The Department of Basic Education should have database of schools that are affected by the problem of overcrowded classes and therefore should be prioritised. Department of Basic Education (DBE) should prioritize the provision of schools' infrastructure and should respond timeously to any requisition pertaining to overcrowded classrooms.

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