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# UNEARTHING THE EFFECTS OF CLASSROOM OVERCROWDING ON THE QUALITY OF EDUCATION IN PUBLIC SCHOOLS

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## ABSTRACT

The study aims to unearth the effects of classroom overcrowding on the quality of education in government schools. It discusses how overcrowding limits educators from effectively doing their work and elaborates how learners' academic performance is affected due to classroom overcrowding. This descriptive research study describes the effects of classroom overcrowding through real life experiences of educators. Qualitative research method in form of semi-structured interviews was used to collect data from educators, which were selected using purposive sampling. Data collected from interviews was then analysed using thematic analysis method. Findings indicate that classroom overcrowding results to limited access to suitable learning materials, sub-standard assessment, excessive workload for educators, discipline issues, less teacher-learner interactions and effects on learners' academic performance. It was therefore recommended that educators compile study guides for learners to address the shortage of textbooks, formulate inclusive teaching and assessment strategies for diverse learners and government should hire assistants to help educators with other tasks.

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## KEYWORDS

Class Size, Government Schools, Learner-Educator Ratio, Overcrowding, Quality Education

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## **Introduction**

Overcrowded classrooms are likely to be full of obstacles that may prevent educators from effectively doing their work and also deprive learners from receiving proper education. The relationship between class size and education quality is certainly existent, a class consisting of a large number of learners is likely to have numerous disturbances that may hinder the effectiveness of teaching and learning whereas a class with a lower number of pupils does not have many disturbances that may hinder the effectiveness of teaching and learning. Class size may affect classroom practises, which consequently affect learner concentration and interaction with peers and teachers (Wang & Calvano (2022)). The first concern in the study of education effectiveness and cost is class size, it is a continuing issue that has consequences on education production (Bettinger et al. 2017). Classroom overcrowding is perceived by Akech (2017) as a problem that affects effectiveness of teaching and learning process all over the world.

Education quality in an overcrowded classroom may be compromised through deprivation of learners from being active participants in knowledge construction due to circumstances that they are subjected to as a result of overcrowding. The study also discusses how classroom overcrowding may compromise teacher efficiency due to disturbances that teachers experience in overcrowded classes which are likely to hinder them from effectively doing their job, as it was stated by Adamu et al. (2022) that teachers in Northern Nigeria are facing large class sizes that lead to difficulties in successfully teaching learners how to read. This study also discusses how the class size may be a deciding factor on whether learners receive instruction successfully or not during teaching and learning, as it was stated by Salgano et al. (2018) that a smaller class size allows the teacher to successfully deliver instructions to learners in class, meaning that classes with a lower number of pupils are not difficult to manage compared to larger classes.

This study seeks to show the connection between a class size and quality of teaching and learning by unearthing events that take place within an overcrowded learning environment and also exploring factors that exist as a result of having the exceeding number of learners within a classroom. Through conducting semi-structured interviews with educators who teach in overcrowded classrooms, data which is based on the educators' experiences was collected with the aim of exploring the challenges that arise in the learning environment due to overcrowding and also unearthing the impact of classroom overcrowding on learners' academic performance.

## **Objectives**

This study seeks to unearth the effects of classroom overcrowding on the quality of education in government schools. The study uncovers how the quality of education in government schools gets sabotaged by various factors that arise within the learning environment as a result of accommodating the exceeding number of pupils within a limited learning space. The study seeks to explore the challenges that arise within the learning environment due to overcrowding, by discussing unpleasant occurrences that educators encounter when they delivering lessons or doing administrative work in overcrowded classrooms. The study also seeks to discuss how learners' academic performance is affected by classroom overcrowding, various occurrences that hinder learners from performing effectively in their academic work are discussed with the aim of showing how classroom overcrowding affects learners' academic performance.

## **Methodology**

### **Research Method**

This is a qualitative study which is based on people's experiences and viewpoints. Qualitative research is defined by Silverman (2020) as a study that explores people's experiences and its main concern is based on subjective meanings. Qualitative research is also defined by Aspers et al (2019) as an interactive method in which better understanding among the people is achieved by creating important interpretations of events as a result of getting closer to the phenomenon. The ability to gain access into people's minds is what distinguishes the work of the researcher in a qualitative study (Silverman, 2020). The data collected is based on what transpires in real life situations of educators and learners who are affected by classroom overcrowding, therefore the study is qualitative because it explores what educators and learners experience in overcrowded learning environments.

### **Research Design**

The design of this study is 'descriptive research' which aims to describe the events as they occur and experiences of certain individuals. The purpose of a descriptive study is to describe specific events or situations by studying them as they happen in nature and the researcher does not manipulate any variable but only describes them (Siedlecki, 2020). Descriptive research generates data that give description of the events from a personal perspective (Kim et al, 2017), meaning that the researcher is more concerned with understanding the individual experience of a person in its unique environment (Doyle et al, 2020). This study describes what transpires in overcrowded classrooms through collecting data from educators that have experience in teaching classes that contain exceeding number of learners. Through the description of events that occur in overcrowded learning environments, the study is able to answer the research question whether classroom overcrowding affects the quality of education and also demonstrate the connection between two variables which are: classroom overcrowding and quality education.

### **Data Collection**

Semi-structured interviews were used as a method to collect data from participants. A semi-structured interview is described as an empirical interview that is utilised often for qualitative research purposes, though it follows a protocol and has structure, it also allows space to explore additional information from the interviewee's responses as the interview unfolds (Magaldi et al, 2020). In order to explore the effects of classroom overcrowding on the quality of education as per aim of the study, semi-structured interviews were used to collect data from educators who teach in overcrowded classrooms, where they gave details on their experiences regarding classroom overcrowding.

### **Data Analysis Method**

For data analysis, the Thematic Analysis method was used. Thematic analysis is a method that involves identifying, analysing and reporting the patterns within data that was collected in the research study, the method is for categorising and defining data in details (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Thematic analysis is also described by Kiger & Varpio (2020) as a method for labelling data which includes interpretation in the process of selecting codes and creating themes. After data was collected from interviews, initial codes were generated, themes were reviewed and labelled.

### **Literature Review**

Overcrowded classrooms usually have inadequate learning materials. This is supported by (Chonjo 2018) by stating that the rise of learner population have caused shortage of resources such as: tools for teaching science, geography, audio visual aids, kits for physical education, models and artefacts. In the absence of these resources it is possible that the education provided to these learners may be sub-standard. The findings by (Meier et al, 2020) showed that most educators considered lack of resources as one of the impacts of classroom overcrowding in their schools and described it as a continuous struggle for educators.

Challenges related to classroom overcrowding may also lead to sub-standard assessment, as it was stated by (Loh Epri, 2016) that large class size impacts the amount of time spent on setting assessment tasks, marking and providing feedback. Challenges related to assessment in overcrowded classrooms that teachers may face are the limitation of valid assessment with the aim of classroom management, maintaining consistency and quality of marking, observing cheating and too much marking loads (Matshipi et al, 2017).

The effectiveness of teaching and learning can be directly affected by educators' workloads (Chirimi, 2016). This is supported by (Zydzianaite, 2020) by stating that excessive workloads for educators can affect the teaching quality, educators' work life and learner achievements. Beyond the actual duties that educators have in the classroom they are also assigned to several administrative work, which is the situation that can erode the quality of teaching (David et al, 2019).

Among the issues caused by classroom overcrowding is poor time management, as (Marais, 2016) states that teaching in an overcrowded classroom can negatively affect an educator's ability to manage time. This is in line with what (Imtiaz, 2014) stated, that teachers who teach in overcrowded classrooms dedicate a lesser amount of time to teaching and combined reading and writing tasks, because they spend more time doing administrative work, which results to loss of time for teaching. The research conducted by (Marais, 2016) supports this with the findings that most educators indicated that they do not have enough time to give proper feedback to learners after assessments since they are unable to properly monitor and observe activities that are done in class.

Educators' work is very complex and requires them to often multi-task, therefore this hinders them from engaging on activities related to professional development, reflection on their work and other activities that can enhance their effectiveness as educators (Pacaol, 2021). The study by (Eroglu et al, 2021) listed 'high workload' as one of the barriers that contributed to educators being hindered on professional development, as some of the educators who were participating in this study emphasized that high workloads and lack of time prevent for them from professional development.

Large class sizes may cause workload to rapidly increase which is one of the key factors that contribute to stress for teachers (Afzal et al. 2019). High stress levels may sometimes result to highly competent teachers leaving the profession due to concerns about their health (Alhammad, 2019). This is in line with what was stated by (Adhikari, 2020) that educators' morale may possibly diminish due to stress (Adhikari, 2020).

### **Findings and Discussions**

Findings presented are from the data that was collected from the narratives of educators who teach in overcrowded classrooms, the data was organised into three main themes which are: effects on the quality of education, challenges that arise within the classroom and effects on learners' academic performance.

#### ***Limited access to learning materials and resources***

The findings indicated that due to high number of learners in a classroom, learners have to share textbooks which results to chaos. Sharing textbooks and other learning materials results to eruption of conflict among learners because everyone wants to have access to textbooks and other learning materials, therefore there will be so many disputes regarding the distribution of textbooks and other learning materials. It was indicated that limited learning materials also costs time because before the lesson begins, educator has to organise learners into groups so that they can share limited learning materials and also monitor the distribution of textbooks to ensure that there is fairness. It also emerged that a lot of chaos erupts as a result of sharing textbooks because they end up fighting over these books. The other educator also indicated that if it happens that there are learners who couldn't get textbooks, they usually lose focus and decide to do their own things because they feel excluded from the learning process.

The findings presented here show classroom overcrowding as a factor that contributes to shortage of learning resources. These findings align with what Loh Epri (2016) said: that inadequacy of learning materials is something common in schools with overcrowded classes. From the findings that were presented, it can be concluded that the issue of learning material inadequacy also costs educators so much time because they always have to start by overseeing the distribution of textbooks before starting the lesson. These findings are in-line with those of Meier et al (2020) that most educators considered a lack of resources as one of the spinoffs of classroom overcrowding in their schools and described it as a continuous struggle for educators. In the absence of these resources, it is possible that the education provided may be sub-standard, as it was also stated by Loh Epri (2016) that learners who attend schools with inadequate learning materials and resources are handicapped in their educational accomplishments. The inadequacy of learning materials due to classroom overcrowding may lead to various occurrences in the classroom that are regarded as hindering factors towards the achievement of quality education.

#### ***Sub-standard assessment***

Findings were that: when the classroom contains an exceeding number of learners, it becomes difficult for the educator to maintain balance when it comes to assessment, applying various assessment methods becomes impossible due to a large number of learners, therefore only assessment methods that are convenient are used in order to save time and for the sake of curriculum coverage. Findings were that educators have limited time for curriculum coverage while there are so many learners to accommodate, therefore they may end up giving learners sub-standard assessment or not properly apply various assessment methods to accommodate diverse learners because they always consider if they will have enough time to cover all content.

The findings presented indicate that class size can be a determining factor on the quality of assessment, as it was stated by Meador (2019) that the possibility to successfully developing proficiency on standardised assessments decreases as a result of increased numbers of learners enrolled in a class. This means that when there are too many learners enrolled in the class, educators are likely to be unable to give learners proper assessments and they hardly get enough time to apply all necessary assessment methods to ensure that learners are assessed according to their diverse abilities. Due to numerous disturbances related to overcrowding that usually arise within the classroom, educators are unable to properly administer some of the assessment tasks



and they eventually abandon proper assessment procedures, as it was stated by Ntsala (2021) that some educators become overwhelmed by the situation of over-crowdedness and therefore eventually avoid other assessment requirements.

#### ***Excessive workload for educators***

Findings were that when there is an exceeding number of learners in the classroom, educators become subjected to excessive workload because additionally to teaching, there are other administration tasks that they should do and marking of tasks. It also emerged that educators have to take work home and time to rest is very limited. Excessive workload also makes it difficult for educators to do follow up and proper feedback after assessments. Other educator remarked that the huge amount of scripts and exercise books that they have to mark and some administrative work come with a lot of pressure which results to committing a lot of errors when marking or recording scores due to exhaustion.

The findings indicate that excessive workload can affect the effectiveness of teaching and learning. For educators who are responsible for large size classes, some duties are doubled because they are dealing with many pupils, meaning that excessive workloads for educators can affect the teaching quality, educators' work life and learner achievements (Zydzianaite, 2020). Beyond the classroom duties that educators have, they are also assigned to several administrative tasks, which in sum total can erode the quality of teaching (David et al, 2019). These findings imply that the effectiveness of both the learning and teaching processes in a variety of ways is likely to be hindered as educators are required to engage on various tasks that may consume plenty of their time because they hardly get enough time to engage in productive activities that are part of teaching and learning.

#### ***Poor time management by educators***

From the educators' point of view, being responsible for a large size class takes a toll on the educators ability to manage time because the amount of work that they are responsible for consume their time and they end up not being able to balance their time expenditure. The disruptions that occur within an overcrowded learning environment make it difficult for the educator to cover everything when delivering a lesson because some of the time is spent on dealing with these disruptions.

Due to excessive workload makes it difficult for educators to dedicate enough time in constructing activities that are broad enough to accommodate learners of different intellectual levels. Educators are also unable to return learners' scripts after assessments early for proper feedback. It also appeared that some topics on the lesson plan may end up not being covered because there are many learners that require individual attention and repeating some of the content is sometimes needed so that no learner would be left behind.

The findings of the study indicate that dealing with a huge number of learners makes it difficult for educators to perform all their key tasks in due time because they are usually occupied, this is in line with what was stated by Matsepe (2019) that classroom overcrowding does affect the educator's ability to manage time. Due to excessive workloads, educators usually miss deadlines for post-moderations after assessments because there are many scripts to mark; they also struggle to stick to what is written on weekly lesson plans; some topics end up not being covered because there are many special cases that need to be attended to, so educators sometimes end up repeating lessons instead of moving on to the next ones.

#### ***No adequate time for educators' professional development***

Findings were that, besides the workshops that are organised by the department of education, there are none other opportunities that educators get to initiate their own programmes where they would develop themselves as professionals due to their busy schedules. It emerged that when it comes to professional development, time is the main issue because educators who are responsible for large numbers of learners usually take work home and also work overtime, meaning the only free time that they have is for resting and doing their personal activities but there is absolutely no time for engaging on other activities for professional development.

Educators need to engage in activities that would develop them professionally and help them gain more knowledge regarding the teaching profession and work ethics. It is unlikely that educators will find enough time to engage in developmental activities, due to their busy schedule. Educators who have large size classes do not have adequate time to be engaged in self-initiated activities and external programs that develop them professionally due to their busy schedule.

These findings suggest that educators who have large classes do not find adequate time to engage on activities that would develop them professionally and enhance their knowledge about the subjects that they

teach. Educators' work require them to be involved in various professional development activities, therefore classroom overcrowding comes with huge workloads that hinder them from engaging on activities related to professional development, reflection on their work and other activities that can enhance their effectiveness as educators (Pacaol, 2021).

#### ***Low teacher morale as a result of high stress levels***

The findings showed that in an overcrowded classroom many disturbances are likely to occur, especially when the educator is delivering a lesson, as a result of those disturbances educators end up being under a lot of pressure and stress which may affect their morale. It also emerged that educators who teach in overcrowded classrooms often go through frustrations and end up being demoralised in a way that they hate waking up every morning to attend to work. The other educator stated that seeing a group of learners engaging on other activities that are unrelated to the lesson while in front of the class trying to deliver a lesson can really damage one's soul.

Educators often experience anxiety when they are going to class because they anticipate a lot of stressful situations. Having to deal with an overcrowded class may subject the educator to so much stress due to multiple issues that arise within the class which leads to them having so much anger inside in a way that they sometimes lose control of their emotions. It also appeared that dealing with a large number of learners also lowers the educator's confidence, because there are events that occur in the classroom which they cannot control or manage and that results to them doubting their capabilities as professional educators.

These findings suggest that going into a congested classroom that is full of disruptions and so much noise can be very stressful for educators; the frustrations that they go through seem to demoralise them in a way that they even end up hating their work. Classroom overcrowding has badly impacted educators' confidence and their professional satisfaction (Osai et al, 2021). Educators' negative attitude was recognised as a consequence of classroom overcrowding, and such attitudes have a direct impact on motivation and commitment to quality teaching (Meier et al, 2020).

#### ***Violation of work ethics by educators due to pressure***

The findings indicated that most educators who teach in overcrowded classes are usually pushed to the edge by learners' bad behaviour and end up going against work ethics or committing unlawful acts due to being desperate to control the pupils and keep them on their best behaviour. One participant stated that in some days she would be under pressure in a way that she would resort to using scare tactics because all other disciplinary methods that she had tried seemed to be not effective enough to keep learners on their best behaviour.

The most common remark by educators was that they sometimes end up using corporal punishment when things get out of control due to the fact that they become desperate to maintain order. It also appeared that some educators end up saying harsh words to learners who are causing disorder with the aim of humbling them. Learner dismissal was also among the resolutions that educators seemed to take when dealing with chaotic learners, which is unethical and violates the child's right to learn because they will miss whatever that is taught in their absence.

Being subjected to a lot of pressure and stress that comes with dealing with large numbers of learners could affect an educator's reasoning and way of reacting to some of the situations. It is highly possible for some educators to end up acting in a manner that is against work ethics or that violates certain laws, while they are trying to deal with these frustrations and pressure. Sometimes educators resort to using scare tactics or corporal punishment to keep learners disciplined, which is against the law.

Maintaining order in a class that consists of too many learners puts an educator under a lot of pressure because there are too many disruptions to deal with at once, so the educator becomes desperate to quickly resolve these issues and they consider methods that would quickly get learners' attention and make them follow orders without hesitation, which is corporal punishment. Dealing with so many disruptions may also drive the educator to the edge, where he or she ends up using harsh words to reprimand learners who are misbehaving or sometimes use language that is not acceptable in the learning environment.

Findings presented above conclusively suggest that educators who teach in overcrowded classrooms resort to applying scare tactics or corporal punishment because they are desperate to restore order in their classrooms. Educators who are overworked often resort to negative approaches such as such as mockery and yelling when managing behaviours of their learners (Fransis, 2020).

### Recommendations

To deal with the shortage of learning materials, particularly textbooks, compile should compile and print study guides with similar content to that in the prescribed textbooks for the subjects that they teach and distribute them to learners so that no learner would be affected by the shortage of textbooks.

To avoid giving learners sub-standard assessments, educators should try random and prompt assessment activities that would not require much time. Educator may sometimes quickly take a few moments during the lesson to give learners any type of assessment activity to do with an aim of assessing them and measuring their understanding; in that way the educators would be able to explore any assessment method without worrying about time.

To avoid excessive workloads and improve time management for educators, the Department of Education (DOE) should employ educator assistants (EAs) who will be assigned to handle tasks such as marking and other administrative work.

Due to inadequate time for engaging in professional development programs and doing consultations, educators should make use of technology. They should access the internet using their personal computers or smartphones during their spare time and search for information that is relevant to their profession which may help them develop professionally.

In order to reduce chances of being emotionally exhausted or stressed, educators should set work boundaries for themselves and avoid letting their work take over their entire life. It is also recommended that educators get used to doing regular check-ups on their mental wellness by consulting specialists on a regular basis. The Department of Education (DOE) should initiate programmes where educators would freely access anger management classes and therapy sessions so that their minds can always be in a good condition regardless of their unpleasant experiences at work. To prevent educators from violating ethics and laws, The DOE should produce an official written document comprising acceptable ways of reprimanding learners and methods for resolving conflicts, which will serve as a guide for educators so that they do not violate laws or work ethics while trying to maintain discipline.

### Limitations

This study was conducted in only 3 schools within a circuit level, so the findings certainly cannot be generalised to a nationwide level. Only 6 educators were interviewed so therefore their interpretations of the events do not represent those of many other educators employed by the Department of Education (DOE). The fact that only educators were interviewed was also a limitation of the study because educators are not the only role players in the education sector; there are other structures involved, meaning that the findings of the study are one-sided. The method that was used for collecting data was the semi-structured interview, so it might have happened that participants were responding to questions out of bias, or some of their responses may have been influenced by their dissatisfaction with their employer. Some schools are well-equipped and resourceful in a way that overcrowding may not affect the quality of education they offer even if they have high enrolments, meaning that not all schools may be impacted by overcrowding as the findings of the study suggest.

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