

Emergent Stress from the Management of Learning Environment in Selected Primary Schools in the East London Education District, South Africa

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ABSTRACT

Educators are experiencing high levels of stress when managing learning environment in primary schools. It is against this backdrop that the study looks at emerging stress from management of learning environments for effective teaching and learning in selected primary schools in South Africa. The study used survey design with mixed method approach to examine seventy-six intermediate phase educators for quantitative while five participants were selected for interviews. The study found that distraction in the classroom, teacher work load, learners' misbehaviour, teaching time and learners' underperformance in class are factors responsible for increased stress for teachers in the intermediate phase. The study concluded that gender, age, school location, teaching experience, race, nationality and employment type did not significantly influence educators' stress level. It was recommended that school syllabus should be made attractive to teachers without losing its quality and contents.

KEYWORDS: Educators; Learning environment; Management; Stress

1.1 BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

Learning environment, as defined by Ersozlu and Cayci (2016, p.144), is an environment which improves learning, motivation and joint function. From this definition, learning environment for a learner could be described as the set-up, the physical environment in which the learner study, how space has been utilised, the resources, the furniture layout. In another words, learning environment is what the classroom is made up, the general feelings within the classroom, the physical equipment that form part of the learning environment and, also the manner and the interaction teacher have in the classroom. Within this context, there is a need for teacher to establish a learning environment in which learners will feel supported in their learning, feel safe and respected. Learners also are to take responsibility for their actions or inactions when it comes to management of classroom learning environment in schools (Austin & Omomia, 2014; Sieberer-Nagler, 2016).

Egeberg, McConney and Price (2016) believe that a classroom that is chaotic and poorly managed because of the teacher's poor classroom management skills is unlikely to enhance teaching and learning in schools; and this obstructs the establishment of good learning environment (George, Sakirudeen & Sunday, 2017, p. 43). Likewise, Adeyemo (2012, p.368) said educators who have problems with behaviour management and classroom discipline are frequently ineffective in the classroom. Temli-Durmus (2016, p. 1950), wrote that, "Learners cannot learn in chaotic and badly managed classrooms".

According to Egeberg, McConney and Price (2016), classroom management problems that are related to management of learning environment lead to teachers' stress and burn out. Further, if a teacher is unable to communicate classroom order in an appropriate manner, this can hinder learning. Rice and Dogri (2002) as cited in Ngiri (2014, p.4) noted that learners are not easy to teach especially when they are in their transition from childhood to adulthood. According to this author, intermediate learners struggle with much insecurity like self-identity, self-concept and self-esteem among other things. The author additionally suggests that teachers need to plan their teaching strategies in such a way that will meet learners' needs socially, academically and emotionally (Ngiri, 2014). Inevitably, classroom management problems could be associated with physical, planning, time, relationship and behaviour management contributing to poor classroom management in schools. Within this regard, classroom environment has been conceptually and practically conceived as a place where learning takes place.

However, despite the importance of classrooms in managing effective teaching and learning, most classrooms, especially in the sub-Saharan African countries are poorly arranged and situated in noisy and crowded environments. In South African school contexts, teacher as a manager of the class guides learners in learning and behavior, teacher controls the learning environment and they lead learners to be successful individually and as a group (Marashi & Nassab-Azizi, 2018). As stipulated in South Africa norms and standards for educators, SASA (2000):

Educators will mediate learning in a manner which is sensitive to the diverse needs of learners, including those with barriers to learning; construct learning environments that are appropriately contextualized and inspirational; and communicate effectively showing recognition of and respect for the differences of others. Educator must demonstrate sound knowledge of subject content and various principles, strategies and resources appropriate to teaching in a South African context.

In the light of the above-mentioned problems, research is needed to find out how educators do manage their classrooms for effective teaching and learning in schools. This study examines the stresses that educators faced in the course of managing learning environments for effective teaching and learning in selected primary schools in East London Education District in the Eastern Cape Province, South Africa. Therefore, the overarching goal of this study is to provide knowledge that would help in improving the educators' management of the learning environment in South Africa.

1.2 OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The main purpose of this study is to examine the stresses faced by educators in managing the learning environments for enhanced teaching and learning in selected primary schools in the East London Education District, Eastern Cape Province, South Africa. The specific objectives of this study are to:

- a) Examine the stresses the educators faced in the course of managing the learning environment for enhanced teaching and learning in selected primary schools.
- b) Evaluate how the educators deal with stresses associated with managing learning environment for enhanced teaching and learning in schools.

1.3 STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Previous studies on classroom management have shown that "poor learning environments in school contribute to learner irregular attendance and dropping out of school, teacher absenteeism, and poor state of learners and poor ability of teachers to engage learners in active learning and the teacher

and learners ability to engage in meaningful teaching and learning'' (NEPA, 1996 as cited in National Policy for Equitable Provision of an Enabling School Physical Teaching and Learning Environment, 2010, p.7, 27). In addition, educators spend around 40% to 75% of available instructional time in activities other than instructions (NEPA, 1996). Padayachie's (2013, p.3) study reveals that 'the major factor influencing the opportunities for learners to learn is time-on-task which relates to the amount of time that learners spend engaging with the curriculum. Time-on-task is dependent on the quality of both classroom and behaviour management. Conversely, disciplined environment proved to be conducive to good teaching and learning (Modisaotsile, 2012). Poor learning environment has posed serious problems in enhancing teaching and learners' performance in schools (George, Sakirudeen & Sunday, 2017). Hence, an effective classroom management is required in creating a supportive learning environment.

Studies revealed that most classrooms in black communities in South Africa are overcrowded (Modisaotsile, 2012; Padayachie, 2013). Overcrowded classroom is a hindrance to classroom management and classroom discipline specifically. Larger classes are noisier and more prone to pushing, crowding and hitting that can affect negatively on classroom management. Crowded classrooms are big reason of poor classroom management (Akin, Yildirim and Goodwin, 2016). Teachers lose valuable lesson time while attending to other activities instead of teaching because they spend most of their lesson time trying to control the learners (Mustafa, Mahmoud, Assaf, Al-Hamadi & Abdulhamid, 2014). Also, in South Africa, most classrooms are characterised by a wide variety of cultural backgrounds and language differences (Modisaotsile, 2012). This is believed to provide teachers with more educational challenges and stress. The above mentioned issues might lead to stressful situations for the educators. Other educational and environmental situations that may pose stress to educators include inattentiveness in classroom, not following teacher's orders, how teachers can establish mutual relationship with learners without taking advantage of teacher's kindness for granted. Therefore, the study examined the stresses faced by educators in managing the learning environments for enhanced teaching and learning in selected primary schools in the East London Education District, Eastern Cape Province, South Africa.

1.4 RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Main research question is: What are stresses faced by educators in managing the learning environments for enhanced teaching and learning in selected primary schools in the East London Education District, Eastern Cape Province, South Africa? The following are sub-questions that will guide this study:

- 1) What are the stresses the educators faced in the course of managing the learning environment for enhanced teaching and learning in selected primary schools?
- 2) How the educators deal with stresses associated with managing learning environment for enhanced teaching and learning in schools?

2.1 LITERATURE REVIEW

Studies revealed that the major problems associated with managing the learning environment in schools include discipline, violence, students' motivation, handling students' social and emotional problems, little or no support from parents, working with special students and management issue. Moreover, aspects, such as attention deficiency, lack of motivation, chatting, not following instructions, complaining about classmates, misusing the teaching materials, learners' stubbornness, non-participation in lessons, and social emotional problems culminate into stressful situations

among educators (Adeyemo, 2012; Akin, Yildirim & Goodwin, 2016; Egeberd, McConney & Price, 2016; Ngiri, 2014; Postholm, 2013; Sieberer- Negler, 2016; Unal & Unal, 2012; Zondi, 1997).

Within this context, Egeberg, McConney and Price (2016, p. 1) reported that “classroom management which include both instructional and behavioural management as a major issue for teachers, school leaders, system administrators and the public”. They further demonstrate that behaviour problems are important factors causing stress and burnout for both beginners and experienced teachers. Austin and Omomia (2014, p. 313) also verified that the beginners are quick to express their concerns over lack of competence in handling disruptive behaviours of learners, and this leads to stress and burnout. Similarly, Adeyemo (2012) found that the disruptive behaviours commonly identified by teachers are bullying, hitting, name-calling, sleeping in class, prolonged, chatting, excessive lateness, unexcused exit from class, verbal or physical threats to a learner or teacher, and eating in the class.

Also, Friedman (2006) cited by Akin, Yildirim & Goodwin (2016) and Postholm (2013) asserted that the greatest frustration teachers experience is that they may be unable to develop good relations with their learners, and that may cause burnout. In South Africa, Zondi (1997) discovered that behaviour management problems exist and educators, especially beginner educators, find it hard to deal with them effectively. This may result to educators leaving the teaching profession (Friedman 2006; Garrahy, Cothran, & Kulinna, 2005; Ingersoll, 2001; Lingersoll & Smith, 2003; Rosas & West, 2009 as cited by Akin, Yildirim & Goodwin, 2016, p. 772). Egeberg, McConney and Price’s (2016, p. 13) study found that behaviour problems in the classroom is a significant factor in the stress and burnout for both novice and experienced teachers. The authors further suggested that knowing and understanding young people, their needs and underlying motivations for their behaviours will help to inform a teacher instructional and behavioural approach to classroom management. Also, Postholm (2013, p. 390) noted that inability of teachers to develop good relations with their learners cause burnout.

3.1 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

In this section, approaches and techniques employed in the conduct of the study were discussed and analysed. This study adopted a mixed methods research approach, which is a technique for integrating both quantitative and qualitative data (Creswell, 2014). Creswell and Clark (2011) define mixed methods research as those methods that include at least one quantitative method (designed to collect numbers) and one qualitative method (designed to collect words) where neither type of method is inherently linked to any particular inquiry paradigm. Teddlili and Tashakkori (2009) further sheds more light on the definition of mixed methods research. According to these authors, mixed method research involves the collection or analysis of both quantitative and/or qualitative data in a single study in which the data are collected concurrently or sequentially, are given priority, and involve the integration of the data at one or more stages in the process of research.

Therefore, mixed methods approach was adopted because neither method (qualitative or quantitative) is individually sufficient to explain the details of ‘Emergent Stress from the Management of Learning Environment in Selected Primary Schools in the East London Education District, South Africa’.

3.2 Research Design

The study adopted a mixed method research design in which 76 intermediate educators and five heads of intermediate educators from study participants were purposively selected for quantitative and qualitative methods respectively to examine the stresses faced by educators in managing the learning environments for enhanced teaching and learning in selected primary schools in the East London Education District, Eastern Cape Province, South Africa. Mixed method research design was adopted because there was the need to gather both quantitative and qualitative data in order to understand stressful situations faced by the educators in the course of managing learning environment for effective teaching and learning.

3.3 Population and Sampling Procedures

As mentioned above, mixed method research design was adopted. The study participants were 76 intermediate educators for quantitative method (questionnaire) in which 5 heads of intermediate phase educators from study sample used for qualitative method (interview). These participants were selected from both public and private primary schools within East London Education District, Eastern Cape, South Africa.

During sampling, the researcher personally visited East London Department of Education, from where a number of 768 was confirmed as the total number of intermediate phase educators in East London Education District. Further, there are (64) operational public ordinary primary schools, (9) ordinary combined schools, and (6) private schools in the East London Education District.

The table below is the summary for the study population.

Table 1: Population and Sampling Procedures

Types of school	Number of schools	Total number of intermediate phase teachers	Total in sample (Approximately 10%)
Private	6	64	6
Public (ordinary/combined)	73	704	70
Total	79	768	76

Source: (ECDoE): EMIS, (2017)

3.4 Instrument, Validity, Reliability and Methods of Data Analysis

The researcher administered self-made instrument tagged “Educator Management of Learning Environment Structured Questionnaires (EMLESQ)” to 76 intermediate educators that were purposively selected for this study. Also, an interview guide of 16 questions was conducted on 5 head of intermediate phase educators. The researcher consulted experts after developing the questionnaire and interview questions and made necessary revisions, and piloted the questionnaire and interview schedules before the actual data collection. This was important to ensure in-depth and thorough data collection with the use of questionnaire and semi-structured interview questions. Member check through checking both the data and the interpretations with study participants was considered.

As discussed above, the researcher personally visited all the selected schools to administer questionnaires. In order to measure stress level among intermediate phase educators in selected primary schools in East London, the researcher constructed 17 items instrument. Using standard statistical procedure described by Cronbach, the reliability of these 17-item questions was 0.5. These items were tested and validated through (Cronbach's Alpha) the result of the analysis revealed that out of the 17 items only 7 items were validated. That is, only 7 items actually measured the stress level among the intermediate educators in selected primary schools in East London.

4.1 PERCEIVED STRESSFUL SITUATION AMONG EDUCATORS

The tables below presents the perceived stress level among intermediate phase educators in selected primary schools in East London Education District in the Eastern Cape Province South Africa.

Table 2: The 7-item stress level measurement scale

How often have you been upset because of the failure to reduce the noise level in the classroom?	0.786
How often have you been worried because of the failure to encourage all students/pupils to participate in the learning activities?	0.811
How often have you been distressed in the course of addressing the special needs of students/pupils with emotional or family problems?	0.706
How often you have been troubled in the course of restraining naughty students/pupils in the classroom?	0.817
How often you have been pestered when some students/pupils fail to do their class works in the classroom?	0.738
How often you have been stressed in the course of managing different/students with different personalities and needs in the same classroom?	0.645
How often have you felt difficulties were piling up so high that you could not overcome them in the course of classroom management?	0.527

Cronbach's Alpha reliability coefficient 0.845

The confirmatory factor analysis (Table 1 and Figure 1) indicated that the 7-items were unidimensional and items loaded well on the single factor (stress level among the educators).

Table 3: Factor loadings of the 7-items stress level measurement scale

Items	**Factor loading
How often have you been upset because of the failure to reduce the noise level in the classroom?	0.788
How often have you been worried because of the failure to encourage all students/pupils to participate in the learning activities?	0.811
How often have you been distressed in the course of addressing the special needs of students/pupils with emotional or family problems?	0.716
How often you have been troubled in the course of restraining naughty students/pupils in the classroom?	0.806
How often you have been pestered when some students/pupils fail to do their class works in the classroom?	0.734

How often you have been stressed in the course of managing different/students with different personalities and needs in the same classroom?	0.623
How often have you felt difficulties were piling up so high that you could not overcome them in the course of classroom management?	0.486

The above result were used for further analysis has shown in the sub-consequent tables on stress. The mean stress level reported was 19.97. The item-total correlations were greater than 0.50 for each of the 7 items comprising stress level scale (see Table 2). The 7-item scale yielded a high reliability coefficient of 0.845 indicating a high level of internal consistency.

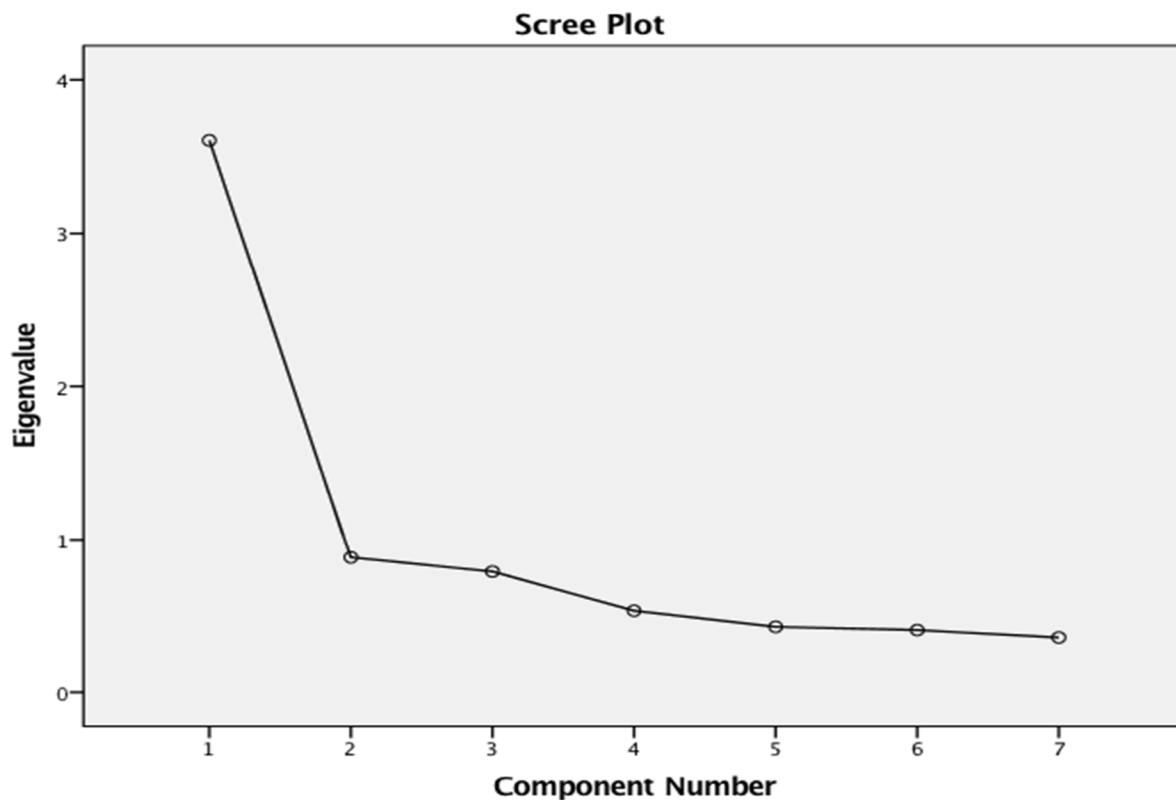


Figure 1: A scree plot showing eigenvalue and factor loading.

On interview schedules, the researcher spent adequate amount of time in the study site in order to build trust with the participants. The researcher also adopted an interactive data coding process, persistent observation, detailed transcriptions, and researchers' notes in order to make sure that the data collected were valid and reliable (Teddle & Tashakkori, 2009). The questionnaires were analysed using SPSS; while interviews were analysed using content analytical technique.

4.2 DATA PRESENTATION AND ANALYSIS

The 7-items yielded a total score of 35. With a score of 1-24 categorized as low to moderate level of stress and score of 25-35 considered as a high level of stress. As shown in Figure 1, one in five educators reported high stress level.

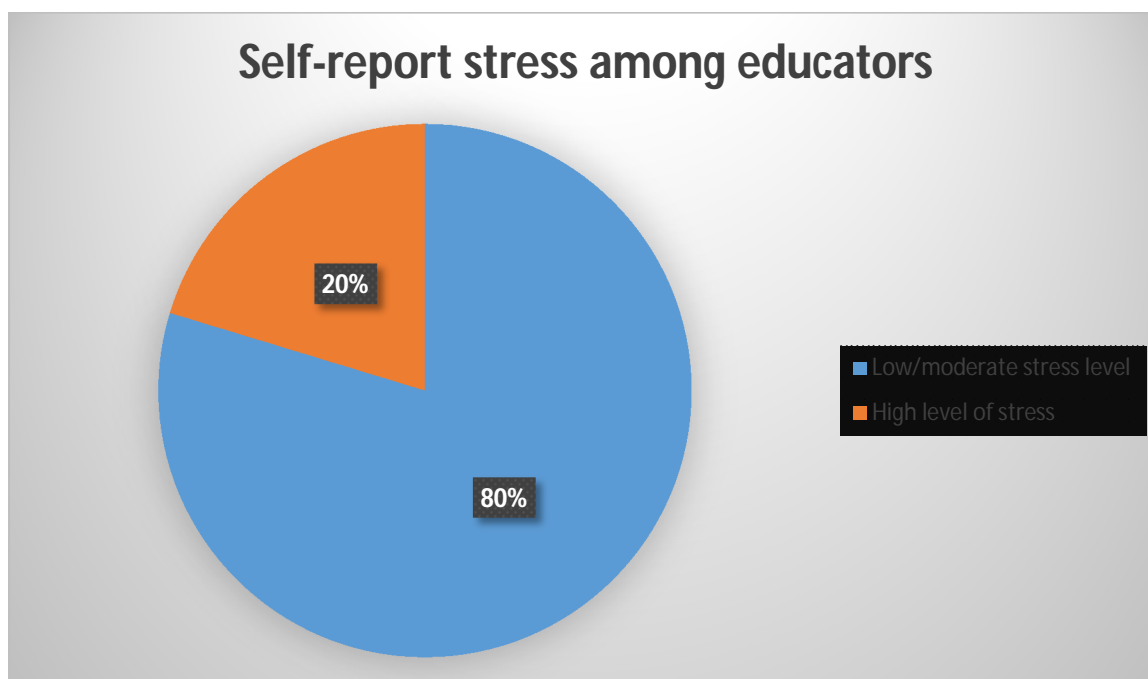


Figure 1: Self-reported stress level among educators

Table 4: Association between demographic factors and self-reported level of stress among primary school educators

Variables	Low/moderate stress (n=55)	High level stress (n=14)	p-value
All participants	55 (79.7)	14 (20.3)	
Gender			
Male	8 (88.9)	1 (11.1)	0.413
Female	47 (78.3)	13 (21.7)	
Age			
21-30	18 (81.8)	4 (18.2)	0.531
31-40	15 (75.0)	5 (25.0)	
41-50	10 (71.4)	4 (28.6)	
51-60	12 (92.3)	1 (7.7)	
Language			
Yes	33 (76.7)	10 (23.3)	0.321
No	22 (84.6)	4 (15.3)	
Types of school			
Public	52 (83.9)	10 (16.1)	0.027
Private	3 (42.9)	4 (57.1)	
School location			
Village/rural area	2 (100.00)	0 (0.0)	
Semi-urban	10 (71.4)	4 (28.6)	0.557
Urban	43 (81.1)	10 (18.9)	
School circuit			

2	5 (62.5)	3 (37.5)	0.253
4	21 (80.8)	5 (19.2)	
6	19 (90.5)	2 (9.5)	
10	4 (57.1)	3 (42.9)	
11	6 (85.7)	1 (14.3)	
Teaching experience			
1-5	18 (85.7)	3 (14.3)	0.501
6-10	11 (73.3)	4 (26.7)	
11-15	5 (62.5)	3 (37.5)	
16-20	4 (100.0)	0 (0.0)	
21 and above	17 (81.0)	4 (19.0)	
Position held			
Educator	45 (77.6)	13 (22.4)	0.566
Head of department	8 (88.9)	1 (11.1)	
Others	2 (100.0)	0 (0.0)	
Types of service			
Permanent	44 (77.2)	13 (22.8)	0.240
Temporal	11 (91.7)	1 (8.3)	
Race			
Black	11 (78.6)	3 (21.4)	0.150
White	38 (80.9)	9 (19.1)	
Coloured	5 (100.0)	0 (0.0)	
Others	1 (33.3)	2 (66.7)	
Nationality			
South Africa	50 (78.1)	14 (21.9)	0.504
Non south Africans	4 (100.0)	0 (0.0)	
Others	1 (100.0)	0 (0.0)	

*** 7 participants did not answer all the questions on stress

As shown in Table 4, gender, age, school location, teaching experience, race, nationality and contract type did not significantly influence educators' stress level. Only school type was significantly associated with stress level. Educators in private schools were significantly more likely to report high stress level compared to those in public schools. This may be because there are more expectations from the teachers in private schools compared to those in public schools. These enormous expectations are more likely to generate high stress level for teachers in private schools.

Also, the above 7-items indicated that the teachers experienced stress while dealing with the learners in the classroom setting or school environment. This finding was supported by the narratives from some participants. For instance, participant (GC) mentioned that, she gets stressed when she is distracted by learners when she is busy with lessons. She said she easily loses focus when she is distracted. She had the following to say;

When the school has programs for the learners, may be they have to go for the assembly or something or for fundraising, the teaching time was out. Teachers lost some teaching time. This adds to stress level on me because I have to cover all of that.

The participant added that another source of stress for her is when a learner appears disrespectful to her. The third source of stress for her which she highlighted was that seeing learners that do not have ability to read or write. According to her, “that adds stress to me because there would be learners that most of the time they just sit there and in my school, we do not really have a program for them. I am worried about these learners”. In addition, Participant (SC) stressed that the major cause of stress is the increasing workload. The participant added that time constraint is another factor that causes stress for her because she does not have time to cover most of her lessons (modules). The third factor that she mentioned was misbehaviour of the learners to teachers. The verbatim below supports this analysis:

The CAP syllabus now is over loaded. Another cause is the time constraints, teachers does not have time to cover most of them. No enough time to test a new content in Language and Mathematics. For example, teacher rush through the work and get it done, if you do it properly you lack behind. In addition, misbehavior of the learners, homework not done, incomplete class work and absent without permission.

For participant (PP), teachers experienced stress because of the high number of learners in the classroom. She said that the most unfortunate thing is that these learners do not want to learn again. The following narrative attested to this contention:

In this school, we got very high number of learners and our classrooms size are small. Another thing, these learners don't want to learn, when I give them work to do from home most of them come back without doing it. So all these situation have been very stressful to us. There are learners that are noisy; they busy talking with each other during the lesson. Some other learners come late to class; some do not come to school at all while some come in the middle of the lesson. They disrupt my lesson by coming late, this adds on stress to me.

Participant (CP) stressed that her major problem was that, some learners were adamant to do their home works; perhaps because there is nobody that can help them at home. In regard to this challenge, she shared the following:

“I had to help them myself and this creates a big stress to me ...To reduce stress teacher really need to be kind to themselves and to the learners. There is no way one will not be stress out because we are working with little minds that we need to shape”.

However, participant (AC) who was a head of department (HOD) noted that although teaching is stressful, it can be managed by serious and hardworking teachers. She narrated that;

“There are so many lazy teachers. We have teachers who do not plan and the learners we teach today are advanced because we are in the information age. So, when you come to class and you do not plan and you start running around to make copies. That is where stress starts for those lazy teachers. They caused stress for themselves. In a class with lazy teacher, learners will definitely make noise, fight; there is going to be hitting. You see how they caused stress for themselves ... If only teachers could go back to basics; do our planning properly, I think the stress level will reduced”.

In summary, distraction in the classroom, teacher work load (Our syllabus is loaded), learners misbehaviour, losing out on teaching time and learner underperformance in class were found to be major factors that cause and increase stress for the teachers. However, a participant noted that some

teachers cause stress for themselves because of their laziness. These kinds of teachers are more likely to find teaching highly stressful.

5.1 DISCUSSION OF KEY FINDINGS

The study found that distraction in the classroom, teacher work load (Our syllabus is loaded), learners misbehaviour, losing out on teaching time and learner underperformance in class were found to be major factors that cause an increased stress for the teachers. This agrees with the finding of Egeberg et al (2016) who found that behavioural problems in the class are a significant factor of stress for both novice and experienced teachers (see also, Austin and Omomia, 2014, p. 313). However, a participant noted that some teachers cause stress for themselves because of their laziness. Their laziness causes disruption in the classroom which they may not be able to handle at the end of the day. These kinds of teachers are more likely to find teaching highly stressful. This agrees with the existing literature (Friedman, 2006; Garrahy et al., 2005; Ingersoll, 2001; Lingersoll & Smith, 2003; Rosas & West, 2009 as cited by Akin, Yildirim & Goodwin, 2016, p. 772). These authors alluded to the fact that poor management of classroom affects both the teachers and the learners. The consequences are burnout and dissatisfaction among the affected teachers, and this may affective their efficiency in the classroom (Egeberg et al., 2016, p. 13).

5.2 CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The study concluded that distraction in the classroom, teacher workload, learners' misbehaviour, losing out on teaching time and learners' underperformance in class were found to be major factors that cause an increased stress for the teachers. However, a participant noted that some teachers caused stress for themselves because of their laziness. These kinds of teachers are more likely to find teaching highly stressful. Also, on the hypotheses tested in this study, they study found that gender, age, school location, teaching experience, race, nationality and contract type did not significantly influence educators' stress level. Only school type was significantly associated with stress level. Educators in private schools were significantly more likely to report high stress level compared to those in public schools. This may be because there are more expectations from the teachers in private schools compared to those in public schools. These enormous expectations are more likely to generate high stress level for teachers in private schools. Based on the findings, the study recommended the following as ways of reducing teachers' stress in the school settings:

- (1) School syllabus should be made friendlier to the teachers without losing its quality and contents. Contents in the syllabus that are not necessary should be expunged from the syllabus so as not to create unnecessary burdens to the teachers.
- (2) Teachers should be adequately carried along in making decisions that affect the schools. This is because the decisions that affect the school will also affect them, and these decisions may cause new stressors to them. Involving them in making those decisions will enable them to be prepared to cope with the outcomes of such decisions.
- (3) A disciplinary committee should be set-up. This committee should be saddled with the responsibilities of managing and controlling the behaviours of the learners. This committee will relieve teachers/instructors in the area of managing and controlling behaviours.

5.2.1 ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Parts of this article are based on Masters Dissertation of the first author and the study was awarded with 70% and Cum Laude by two external examiners both from the University of KwaZulu Natal Edgewood Campus and University of Venda. Special thanks are due to all my participants from whom I have collected rich information, the school heads for allowing me into their schools and the educators for their time and honesty in answering my research questions without them the findings of this project would not have been possible. Thank you very much for your valuable participation in this study. I also thank the Province of the Eastern Cape Education for granting me permission to conduct research in the East London Education District primary schools. Finally, this project and the article were finance privately. The researcher is currently working on her PhD degree in the University of Fort Hare, South Africa.

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