

Perception and Management of Stress by South African Foundation Phase Teachers

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Abstract

The prevalence and management of stressors experienced by rural-based foundation phase teachers in South Africa were examined in this study. Quantitative and qualitative measures were used to gain more insight into stressors experienced by teachers. A questionnaire with open-ended and closed-ended questions was used to collect data from n=119 participants. The results of the study indicated that many foundation phase teachers experienced a wide variety of stressors. There was also an indication that whilst some teachers do have the necessary skills to cope with the stressors that they experienced, within their teaching and learning environment, using various techniques such as: exercise, spirituality and planning other participants struggled to cope and required support. Recommendations were made in order to assist those teachers who were unable to manage the stressors they experienced, limitations of the study discussed and avenues for further research are also presented.

Keywords: stress, stressors, prevalence, management, prevention

Introduction

Teacher stress has become a widely researched topic in many countries worldwide. Researchers have attempted to identify stressors and the management thereof at various levels: in the foundation phase; at pre-school where learners enter school without the necessary social and emotional skills to involve themselves positively in learning settings, creating major stress in the teaching and learning environment; or having teachers teach a subject for which they were not trained (Kyriacou, 2001; Mulaudzi, 2018; Thompson & Raikes, 2007).

In their study of learners' competencies in Grades R to 3, McClelland, Morrison and Holmes (2000) state that teachers reported that most learners could not adhere to instructions or study on their own without becoming distracted. Studies which followed (Lee, Grigg &

Donahue, 2007; Barbarin et al., 2006; Qi & Kaiser, 2003) confirmed the empirical findings that most foundation phase learners have early reading difficulties and cannot achieve the required reading skill criteria as stipulated by the No Child Left Behind programme before third grade. Half of the learners who participated in the study were found to be struggling with concentration, especially those who came from a poor background with a resultant stressful teaching and learning environment.

Studies by Blase, Blase and Du (2008) and Geving (2007) reported that poor student behaviour, absence of administrative support and the excessive load of duties (which new teachers are required to complete but do not possess the necessary expertise for effective task-management) as the main contributing factors to teacher stress. Teacher stress can be seen as potentially damaging to the classroom environment and as a result, the teacher might react with hostility towards learners if work has not been done, or done incorrectly. Kyriacou (2001) notes that a neglected area of research is the impact of the teacher-pupil interaction in the classroom environment. This impact could have negative repercussions for both the learner and teacher.

According to Maphosa and Shumba (2010), since corporal punishment in South African schools, and the spanking of children in the home by parents/guardians have been abolished, this has further aggravated conduct problems in children and created higher stress levels for the teacher. In their research on the development of early childhood teachers and classroom-based interventions, Brouwers and Tomic (2000) and Raver et al. (2009) suggested the provision of mental health consultants in order to help teachers implement reforms and policies to cope with learners' conduct difficulties.

Organizational stress was ranked as the major stress among primary school teachers in the Delta state of Nigeria in a study by Akpochafo (2012) where teachers were found to be concerned mostly with salaries, fringe benefits, and promotion aspects. Teachers in South Africa were found to have similar issues, staging national strikes (Rossouw, 2012); highlighting the organizational needs of teachers.

A non-governmental organization named Equal Education, and the Minister of Basic Education failed to agree on the implementation of basic norms and standard for all schools in South Africa and revealed that education support services, especially for foundation phase schools, are under-resourced and unable to deal with the large number of learners and therefore, their barriers to learning are not being addressed effectively (John, 2013). The Minister of Basic Education, Angie Motshekga, mentioned that early childhood development was one of the

expected outputs in the Strategic Plan 2011-2014 (Department of Education, 2011) and that teacher development would be strengthened. This article reports on a study to determine the prevalence and management of stressors experienced by foundation phase teachers in rural Mbombela schools.

The investigation was conducted with the following objectives in mind:

- To ascertain how foundation phase teachers in rural Mbombela schools experience stressors as a result of their teaching and learning environment.
- To establish if foundation phase teachers in rural Mbombela schools have the necessary skills required to manage stressors experienced as a result of their teaching and learning environment.

Theoretical framework

Occupational stress is experienced worldwide, in both developed and developing countries and with it comes a variety of concerns for the person involved (e.g., health, economic, behavioural). Occupational stress (Fortes, Tian & Huebner, 2020) as a result of a toxic work environment with elements such as poor control, high work demands, lack of information, extreme pressure and low decision-making latitude, contributes to the overall high job discontent, absenteeism, low morale, loss of energy and poor communication.

The Self-Worth Theory looks at what stressors teachers perceive as threats to their self-worth. The basic intent to motivational initiative is the upholding and endorsing of self-worth (Covington, 2000; Butler, 2007). Within the school context it explains the stressors that teachers perceive as threatening, the behaviour to control damage or to uplift self-worth and the efficiency of the protective strategies of self-worth. It provides a motivational model for the teacher. Studies (Kelchtermans, 2005; Zembylas, 2003) have shown that teachers are vulnerable in terms of their self-worth due to the pressures of societal, moral, social and professional expectations of exemplary modelling that teachers should always maintain. The teaching role of teachers is seen as of great importance, and a perceived attack on it may be viewed as a threat and deemed stressful (Kelchtermans, 2005; Friedman, 2000). Scholars (Kelchtermans, 2005; Zembylas, 2003; Friedman, 2000) have described how this perceived threat to the teaching role would be assessed as threatening in connection to self-worth (for example, learners' misconduct, teacher performance measurement scales, regular school and students' ratings, etc.). Perceived self-worth is highly prized within the teaching profession and teachers value the positive role model ascribed to their careers, so it is appropriate to enable them to establish coping mechanisms in assessing threatening challenges. Covington (2000)

proposes the Self-Worth Theory application to address stressors linked to self-confidence. This theory may help to prepare teachers from feeling embarrassed, losing respect to important others, appearing incompetent which may threaten their self-esteem.

Goal Theory examines the elemental aspect of the integrative to preserve self-worth and protect the teacher's identity as a role model (Covington, 2000; Parker, Martin, Colmar & Liem, 2012). Goal Theory provides relevant components for the mastery of orientation, self-worth threat or failure avoidance through problem focused or emotional focused behavioural responses which affect a teacher's experiences of burnout or engagement. In the failure-avoidant orientation, the Goal Theory seeks to reduce likely occurrence and the fear of failure (Martin & Marsh, 2003; Covington, 2000). Teachers focusing on the task of preservation of self-worth through improving their competencies are more likely to enjoy the task if they are not viewed as incompetent by community members. Teachers can draw up goals to achieve, especially in rural schools since they are viewed as much need community leader's qualities and do not need to be weighed down by stressors. Goal Theory maintains that success and competence depend on effort, and that obstacles can be eradicated through efforts (Covington, 2000; Dweck & Leggett, 1988).

The Transactional and Coping theory is one of the integrative models of occupational stress hypothesized by Parker et al. (2012) and described as the process aspect which combines three areas of connectivity: process, context and components (Parker et al., 2012). The stressors were identified by Ivancevich and Matteson (1980) as physical environment, individual levels which include: roles and career development variables, group level based on relationship, organisational level which includes climate, structure, task features and job plan and extra-organisational factors. Transaction and Coping theory highlights the transaction between person and environment over time (Parker et al., 2012; Cooper et al., 1988; Cox & Mackay, 1981). The approach to stress and burnout considers the role of incorporating individual differences to underlying psychological variables and processes initiated in reaction to the teaching context that can encourage a stable pattern which could assist a person's inclination to use particular coping tactics to perceived challenges (Parker et al., 2012). Numerous factors which are referred to as stressors may be linked to occupational stress. Through the application of the transactional and coping within the Integrative model, the inclusion of teachers' stress reduction in training and intervention would assist teachers to better cope with job stressors. This may result in improved efficacy which may spill into the classroom.

Literature review

Concept of stress

Stress is explained as psychological and physical strain or tension generated by physical, emotional, social, economic or occupational circumstances, events, or experiences that are difficult to manage or endure. When the individual has resources to cope with the demands, this may be seen as a challenge, when the demands surpass the resources available, they are then viewed as stressors and the stress response is triggered (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Varvogli & Darviri (2011) looks at stress as an increase in demand that is made upon the individual's mind and body. The inability to adapt becomes evident, physically and/or mentally and may manifest as symptoms of stress.

Teachers' responsibilities include preparing for the lesson, classroom teaching and management, instilling good morals, as well as extracurricular activities (Travers & Cooper, 1996), so the responsibilities of teachers includes being surrogate parents, social workers and teachers. This may weigh heavily upon a teacher who works in unfavourable conditions such as poor infrastructure and inadequate resources especially in rural schools (Mulaudzi, 2018).

In general, individuals will have a cognitive, behavioural, emotional, and physical response to both eustress and distress. These responses are directly related to the individual's capacity to cope with the presented stressor. In an individual's cognitive appraisal; how we interpret, a stressor is directly related to the individual's resources for coping or psychological capital as mentioned by Zhang, Zhang and Hua (2019).

International studies on stressors in the teaching and learning environment

The prevalence of teachers experiencing high levels of stressors is endemic worldwide. International studies that look into stressors experienced by teachers appear to indicate that this is a common phenomenon worldwide. The subject of teacher stress seems to have attracted much attention (Kyriacou, 2001, Paranandam & Kamarudin, 2019; Ramberg, Låftman, Åkerstedt and Modin, 2020). The nature and intensity of stressors may vary across countries individual schools. Teachers' experiences of stressors may also vary due to their own appraisal of the stressor. However, there seems to be a common trend on the stressors experienced by teachers. Dunham and Varma (1998) and Bottiania, Durana, Pas and Bradshaw (2019) in their studies on stress in teachers, looked at the major categories of the sources of stress that have been consistently found to be widely present such as learner misbehavior, job demands, work overload, poor relationships with fellow colleagues and school principal, poor working conditions, inadequate resources and poor promotion prospects. Learner misbehaviour is

mentioned repeatedly by researcher as one of the major stressors experienced by teachers. Marais and Meier (2000), Dunham and Varma (1998), Blase, Blase, and Du, (2008) and Geving (2007) report poor student behaviour as a contributing factors to teacher stress and that teachers who report behavioural problems are more likely to experience stress. Blase (1986) identified learner misbehaviour as a major contributor to the stressors experienced by teachers associated it with teachers having to play different roles of babysitter, or ruthless authoritarian and this can cause responsibility overload.

More recently, Farmer (2020) referred to violence within schools as a serious stressor. This factor is becoming more commonplace internationally and in 2014 National Center for Education Statistics found that 5.8% The United States of Americas 3.8 million teachers had been physically attacked by a student (Lee, Grigg, & Donahue, 2007).

Murphy (1995) mentions that stress can be the result of any number of situations in the workplace. He demonstrated the following as categories for workplace stressors:

- Workload; which includes hours spent at work, as well as the work environment.
- Work relationships; such as poor relations co-workers.
- Career development; which entails advancement issues
- Responsibility within organisation; such as role ambiguity.
- Organisational structure and climate, management and communications styles.

In a study of teacher characteristics as predictors of poor teacher-student relationships by Yoon (2002), teacher stress was found to predict the number of learners with whom they had a negative relationship. Harmful relationships between teachers and learner smay affect the classroom environment negatively, creating a stressful environment in which to work, whilst Friedman and Farber (1992) found a correlation between a teacher's low self-concept and burnout in a study conducted in Israel on professional self-concept as a predictor of teacher burnout. It is assumed that the teaching and learning environment should be one that is fulfilling to the teacher who is considered to be grooming future leaders. If it is not fulfilling to the individual then it could result in poor self-concept, which could further exacerbate the stress experienced by the teacher.

South African and international studies on stressors in the teaching and learning environment

The education system in South Africa has experienced numerous changes with regards to the curriculum (Gumede & Biyase, 2016). This may pose a threat to the teacher's self-efficacy in

terms of job performance. Teachers may be overwhelmed by the added workload and extracurricular duties that they need to perform, such as sport and cultural activities.

In their study in Tshwane, Crafford and Viljoen (2013) found teachers experienced various major stressors and this profile is almost comparable to results Dunham and Varma (1998) found in a study conducted in London: lack of time to get through work, learner behaviour, discipline and attitude, as well as overcrowded classrooms.

Another cause for concern in South Africa, according to Engelbrecht and Snyman (1999) may be inclusive education and mainstreaming of learners with special needs. This may prove a challenge for teachers who are not equipped with the needed disposition and skills that may enable them to handle difficulties that arise. Biggs and Tang (2007) highlight studies conducted in the Philippines, Jamaica, and Brazil where early cognitive and social-emotional stimulation of a child in the foundation phase prepared them for optimal functioning later in life. Young learners need attention and warmth from their teachers and children need love, security and emotional warmth (Koen & Ebrahim, 2013, Whitebread, 1996). Proper support is necessary, but this may prove challenging for a teacher who is overwhelmed by stressors such as student diversity and inclusivity, an overcrowded classroom (Wang, Zhang, Lambert, Wu & Wen, 2020) or a large workload.

Ngidi and Sibaya (2002) established that the degree of stress experienced by teachers in KwaZulu-Natal was higher compared to other countries. The study was designed to measure the degree of stress in a rural setting. In their study of stressors and stress symptoms of Life Science teachers in North Tshwane schools, Crafford and Viljoen (2013) found that the major stressors were lack of time to get through work, learner behaviour, discipline and attitude, as well as big classrooms. Bottiania et al. (2019) also observed that students' disruptive behaviour played a role in teachers' levels of stress.

Poverty was found to be a major problem for many pupils in Zambian primary schools (Baggaley, Sulwe, Chilala, & Mashambe, 1999) and was considered to be a source of stress for some teachers as poverty and lack of resources (Bottiania et al, 2019) may result in difficulties during the teaching and learning context. Rural South African schools face a similar situation (Timaeus, Simelane, Letsoalo, & Jukuda, 2011; Equal Education, 2011). The foundation phase learner in South Africa entering school may not be ready for formal schooling as they appear to not have the necessary skills to learn effectively. The learners' behaviour and mental disorders may also prove challenging to the teacher. Many learners in rural areas come from impoverished backgrounds. This may negatively affect their learning in the classroom.

The condition of schools in rural areas

South Africa is still a developing country and a large number of people are still living in poverty, with poor infrastructure and inadequate resources a reality for schools in rural areas (Timaeus et al., 2011) and this may exacerbate teacher stress. Gardiner (2008) states that poverty and poor infrastructure are reflected in the quality of education available in rural schools.

Management of stressors in the teaching and learning environment

Stress is inevitable in the teaching and learning environment and most often perceived as negative, but Van der Bank (2001) suggests that it should not be removed entirely from the work environment, but instead be managed in a way that will minimise the negative effects it might have on teachers. With stressors already observed to be emanating from different sources, the management should also be multi-dimensional. A more holistic approach to the management of stress would be welcome. Wainwright and Calnan (2002) recommended an approach to the management of stress that which starts with identifying the source of the individual's stress to enable therapeutic intervention. Since individuals experience stressors differently due to their disposition, individual therapeutic interventions need to be tailored accordingly.

Mental health practitioners (e.g. psychologists, social workers, or counsellors) have a crucial role to play in assisting teachers learn how to cope with work related stressors to bring about the diagnosis, intervention and treatment of stress related problems. Unfortunately, mental health practitioners may not always be readily available in rural settings. Brouwers and Tomic (2000) and Raver et al. (2009) in their research on the development of early childhood teachers and classroom-based interventions suggested the provision of mental health consultants in order to help teachers implement reforms and policies to cope with learners' conduct difficulties. Kipps-Vaughan (2013) suggests the implementation of teacher wellness programs within the school environment for a positive outcome in the reduction of stress, burnout and absenteeism in teachers, positive self-efficacy, job satisfaction and a general improvement in the teaching and learning environment which will allow teacher to attend to the needs of learners.

Cooley and Yovanoff (1996) focused on physiological coping strategies for stress management and recommended the following: Aerobic activity (any form of activity that increases the pulse rate, e.g. swimming and jogging), biofeedback (an electronic measurement of mind-body functions and the practice of controlling these functions and muscle relaxation);

self-regulated progressive relaxation that allows for the individual to experience a state of extreme restfulness.

Davies, Ellison, Osborne and West-Burnham (1990) propose a stress management strategy with two stages to be used at an individual level or school level: Stage A, which entails recognition and analysis of the problem, and Stage B, which is focused on planning and generating alternative solutions. Any successful stress management programme should be designed to bring about change in the perception, appraisal and management of stressors. The teacher should feel strengthened and better able to cope with stressors. This may lead to a decline in absenteeism, greater job dissatisfaction and improvement in health-related problems.

Research methodology

Research methodology refers to the methods, techniques and procedures that are employed in the process of implementing the research design or plan and underlying principles and assumption that underlie their use (Babbie, 2010). Terre Blanche, Durrheim and Painter (2011) explain that the research design, which is descriptive, is a plan for collecting and utilising data so that preferred information can be acquired. A mixed-method was used, employing both qualitative and quantitative methods, which was relevant to collecting facts needed to understand the topic and this includes: “viewpoints, data collection, analysis, inference techniques for the broad purposes of breadth and depth of understanding and corroboration” (Schoonenboom & Johnson, 2017, p. 108).

Description and selection of participants

A probability sampling method that utilizes some form of random selection was used (De Vos, 2011). Two education circuits (i.e., White-Hazy and White River) in Ehlanzeni district were randomly selected from a list provided by the Department of Education, Mpumalanga province. Fourteen schools (14) and a total of 150 participants (n=150) were also randomly selected. Each participant received a number to ensure anonymity and confidentiality. The data for the study were collected through the use of questionnaires from foundation phase teachers and heads of departments. A total of 119 questionnaires were returned.

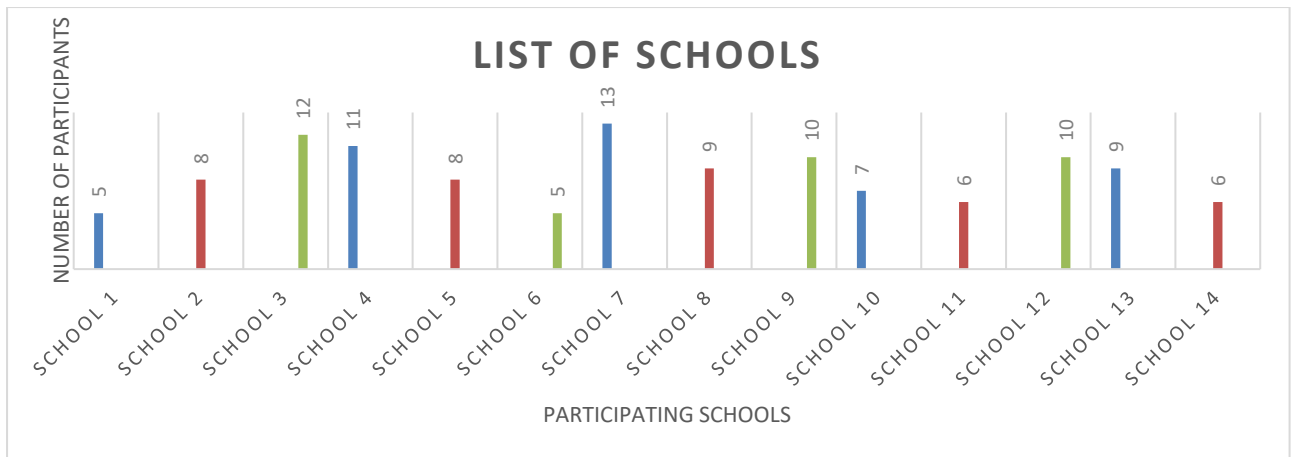


Figure 1: List of participating schools

Questionnaire design and administration

Leedy (1998) states that questionnaires basic function is to collect data and should be planned or designed to fulfil a definite research objective. The questionnaire was carefully constructed to facilitate maximum responses and obtain detailed information. The questionnaire was designed in English to accommodate both open-ended and closed-ended questions, in an attempt to establish current trends (Welman, Mitchell & Kruger 2005; Jackson, 2008). The questions with possible pre-determined responses required participants to tick boxes with their responses and a blank space was available for a range of answers that may fall outside predetermined responses.

The questionnaire was made up of four sections (i.e. Sections A, B, C and D). Section A consisted of biographical details of the participant, section B focused on concerns that teachers may experience as a result of personal stressors, section C concentrated on the concerns that teachers may experience as a result of work environment stressors and section D emphasised how teachers handle stress and burnout. Sections B and C comprised of closed-ended questions and all the questions in section D were open-ended questions. The researchers provided participants with their contact details to discuss concerns regarding the study or the questionnaire. Participants completed the questionnaire and the researchers collected the questionnaire. The researchers handed out 147 questionnaires to participants to complete within a week and 119 questionnaires were returned.

Data analysis and interpretation

"Quantitative research collects and analyses data into numbers which, when manipulated, represent empirical facts in order to test an abstract hypothesis with variable constructs"

(Neumann 2003, p. 440). Jackson (2008, p. 88) observes that “the quantitative researcher characteristically starts with a hypothesis for testing, observing and collecting data, statistically analysing the data, and drawing conclusion.” For easy understanding, the qualitative data acquired for this study will be presented in simple tables and examined using simple graphs and figures. De Vos et al. (2011) and Babbie and Mouton (2008, p. 378) describe qualitative analysis as the “non-numerical examination and interpretation of observations, for the purpose of discovering underlying meanings and patterns of relationships.” The qualitative data collected were coded into categories and themes, and then presented in text, tables and/or figures (De Vos et al., 2011). To analyse the qualitative data, the researcher read the questionnaires thoroughly to recognise themes that were common among the participants. Colour was then used to code the data into themes. The data were presented in the form of tables and text (De Vos et al., 2011). Terre Blanche, Durrheim and Painter (2011) explain that when applying thematic analysis, different categories would appear, which would give way to answers to the research questions. These categories may then be coded before the final interpretation is done.

Findings

Demographics

The participants in this study were all females and in three different age groups ranging from 21 to over 51 years in age. There were no participants in the 21-30 year age group. The participants were grouped as follows: 46% were between 31-40 years of age, 36% were between 41-50 years of age, and about 18% were older than 51 years.

The highest percentage of participants in this study was married (46%), 36% were single, 9% separated, and 9% widowed. The majority of respondents (55%) revealed that they had good health, with 36% of the participant reporting average health and the lowest percentage was those who reported poor health (9%), so if this is a true reflection then poor health was not a significant problem for participants. The majority of participants (82%) mentioned that they did not suffer from any chronic illness, while only 18% indicated that they suffered from chronic illnesses, (e.g. diabetes, ulcers, arthritis and hypertension) which require medical intervention.

A small percentage of the participants (9%) had obtained postgraduate certificates as their highest qualifications, whilst 9% had undergraduate university degrees, 55% had college diplomas and 27% had obtained grade 12. Teaching experience was the next demographic variable explored and there were 46% of the participants with 6-10 years of teaching

experience, 18% had 11-15 years and 21 and above years of teaching experience each. Participants with 1-5 years and 16-20 years of teaching experience obtained the lowest percentage of the total population which was only 9% each. The majority of the participants (64%) had chosen teaching as a first preference in terms of their career options. However, 36.36% of the participants indicated that teaching was not their first preference and they had chosen teaching as an alternative career option; levels of commitment may differ if teaching was not one's preferred career option.

With regards to earning potential, 37% of the participants indicated that they earned below R7000 per month. Participants who earned within the ranges of R7000-R14000 and R14001-R21000 made up 27% each. Socio-economic stability was another stressor and needed to be factored into the variables.

Table 1: Background stressors

| Background Stressors | Discussion |
|-----------------------------|---|
| Financial Concerns | Participants expressed concern over financial issues and revealed that the majority (46%) were extremely stressed about their financial situation. None of the participants indicated their financial concerns as not stressful. This is an indication that financial concerns were a universal concern amongst all participants in this study. |
| Home/Personal Circumstances | Moderate levels of stress were experienced by little less than half the participants (45%), with 27% indicating that they found their home circumstances very stressful and 18% explained their home circumstances to be extremely stressful. The minority (9%) indicated that they were not stressed at all. Home circumstances appeared to be a more stressful environment for the majority of the participants (91%) in this study. |
| Housing Issues | Participants' housing concerns proved stressful with 46% of participants mentioning that they were minimally stressed, while 36% were moderately stressed, and 9% were very stressed. This could be as a result of poor or inadequate housing or lack of support when attempting to source housing, since many teachers teach away from home. |
| Social Issues | Various social issues were raised: finding time to spend with friends and family could be very stressful especially if participants have a profession that places serious time constraints on them. Participants felt that it was particularly difficult to find time to spend with family and friends and 37% of the participants found this activity very stressful, while 27% reported that it was moderately stressful and 18% of the participants reported that finding time to spend with friends and family was minimally stressful. Some participants (64%) also indicated that they find their intimate relationships stressful, with participants admitting to experiencing some form of stress (minimally stressful, moderately stressful or very stressful) in their intimate relationships. The majority of the participants (55%) indicated that concerns about their in-laws |

| | |
|--------------------------------------|---|
| | were very stressful, and 27% of participants experienced no stress when interacting with their spouses' family. More than two thirds of the respondents experienced some form of stress where their in-laws were concerned. Participants' ability to form and maintain solid relationships with close, trusted family members or friends could impact on professional performance. |
| Unpleasant Work Conditions | Unpleasant working conditions also created some degree of stress for participants. Unpleasant working conditions were very stressful for some participants (37%), while others (36%) found it moderately stressful and 27% indicated that unpleasant working conditions were minimally stressful. |
| Support from Department of Education | Support was often not forthcoming for the majority of participants (81%) who agreed that support-related issues from the Department of Education resulted in varying levels of stress. Linked to support was the availability of teaching resources and whilst the lack of sufficient teaching resources did not result in high levels of stress amongst all participants, it did produce some measure of stress in more than two thirds: 55% of participants experienced minimal stress, 9% claimed it was very stressful, another 9% indicating it was extremely stressful and 27% experienced no stress at all. |
| Opportunity for Progression | All the participants also found the inability to progress further in terms of their career stressful at fluctuating levels. Most (55%) found the lack of promotional prospects minimally stressful, whilst 36% found it very stressful and the rest (9%) were moderately stressed by their inability to access promotional opportunities. |
| In-service training | Participants indicated that there was insufficient in-service training provided, but were not substantially stressed by their lack of preparedness. Participants indicated that inadequate in-service training was minimally stressful (46%), moderately stressful (27%) and 9% of participants found inadequate in-service training not stressful at all. |
| Discipline | With the abolishment of corporal punishment teachers have had to consider alternate means of disciplining learners in the classroom and behaviour management has become very difficult. Marais and Meier (2000) also concur that the behaviour of children is one of the most stressful aspects in the teaching and learning environment. Although corporal punishment had been abolished many years ago (The Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, 1996, and The South African Schools' Act, 1996), teachers are still unsure of discipline measures that do not include physical punishment (Maphosa & Shumba, 2010) and participants revealed that they were moderately stressed (46%), very stressed (27%) and minimally stressed (27%) because senior staff do not provide support with discipline issues. |

Emerging themes

Experience of stressors

This section sought to answer the first research question, which examines foundation phase teachers' experience of stressors as a result of their teaching and learning environment in rural Mbombela schools. Participants were asked how often they experience stressors and provided with the following as possible options: "All the time", "Daily", "Every day", "Maybe once a

week", "On Mondays", "Once or twice a month", "Not often", "I don't usually get stressed", "Rarely". These answers were then grouped into **Daily, Weekly, Monthly, and Rarely**. The results are tabulated.

Table 2: Rate of experience of stressors

| Rate of experience of stressors | Number of participants (n=119) |
|---------------------------------|--------------------------------|
| 1. Daily | 66 |
| 2. Weekly | 38 |
| 3. Monthly | 11 |
| 4. Rarely | 4 |

The majority of participants experienced stressors daily, whilst four participants reported that they rarely experienced stressors. Teachers teaching in Mbombela schools experienced their profession as highly stressful. Kovess-Masfesty, Rios-Seidel and Sevilla-Dedieu (2007) also agreed that teaching is a high-risk profession with regards to stressors experienced. The teachers' experiences of stressors may differ, but the results indicate that in general, teachers experience a great deal of stress and not only as a result of their teaching and learning environment.

Overcrowded classrooms

Overcrowded classrooms are commonplace in rural Mbombela schools where the physical infrastructure is unavailable to accommodate the learners. It is interesting to note that only 9% of participants indicated that working in an overcrowded classroom was not stressful. Other participants' responses ranged from extremely stressful to minimally stressful when expected to work in an overcrowded classroom (63%).

Participant 18: *"Overcrowding in the classroom is the most stressful."*

Participant 48: *"Our classes are too big for one teacher. Even the space is not enough. It would help if we had more classes."*

Participant 72: *"Overcrowding of our classrooms is a problem in our school."*

Participant 106: *"I have too many children in my class and I find it very hard to cope with the big class..."*

Participant 113: *"The school needs more classes since the ones we have are not enough for the kids."*

Discipline

All participants found handling discipline in the classroom stressful to some degree, with almost half (46%) of the participants indicating that it was extremely stressful for them and 27% of the participants describing it as minimally stressful, while 18% of respondents indicated that handling discipline was very stressful, and finally 9% of the teachers in the study said that discipline issues was a moderately stressful event. There seemed to be a consensus between the teachers about handling discipline as one of the major stressors in the school environment.

Participant 17: *"The children's behaviour is very stressful."*

Participant 29: *"It's very stressful not to know how to treat the children if they misbehave."*

Participant 83: *"Discipline is very tricky since the new regulations do not allow corporal punishment was abolished by our government."*

Participant 97: *"Instilling discipline is the most stressful part of my job."*

Work overload

The workload that teachers are expected to manage at school has increased over the years and all the participants unanimously agreed that the increase in their workload, either in the classroom or due to extra-curricular activities, has resulted in higher levels of stress. The majority of participants (55%) indicated that the increased workload was very stressful, 27% of respondents found the work overload to be extremely stressful, while 18% indicated that the workload was moderately stressful.

Participant 5: *"There's not enough time to do all the work that is expected from us."*

Participant 19: *"...I sometimes have to take work home with me."*

Participant 66: *"The work can be too much sometimes, especially before exams."*

Participant 70: *"Teaching has too much work..."*

Participant 73: *"I think the workload is the most stressful thing about my job."*

Participant 82: *"It is most stressful to do too much work when you are a teacher."*

Learners with special needs

All teachers in this study found teaching learners with special needs stressful at varying levels (extremely to minimally stressful) and this could be due to a number of reasons mentioned: inadequate in-service training, insufficient teaching material, etcetera.

Participant 1: *"Having learners with special needs in the class is very stressful."*

Participant 41: *"Some learners have special needs, such as the slow learners who struggle to learn."*

Participant 78: *"Slow learners make it difficult to manage the classroom because they need extra care."*

Participant 79: *"I have a couple of hyperactive children in my class. It is very hard for me to teach."*

Participant 115: *"Learners with special needs is the most stressful."*

Skills to manage stress

This section attempts to answer the second research question, which attempts to determine if foundation phase teachers in rural Mbombela schools have the necessary skills required to manage stressors experienced as a result of their teaching and learning environment. The themes that emerged here are presented below.

a. Exercise

The majority of the participants (n=82) used exercise to manage their stress that arises as a result of their teaching and learning environment. The exercise routine varied from one participant to the other, but it seemed to help when they felt the pressure of a hard day at work. It is a positive means of managing stress and should be encouraged.

Participant 37: *"I try to jog in the mornings to clear my mind before going to work."*

Participant 49: *"I exercise when I feel stressed."*

Participant 63: *"Exercise helps me keep my stress under control."*

Participant 65: *"I exercise, eat healthy and drink lots of water."*

Participant 81: *" After going to the gym I usually feel refreshed and my stress goes down."*

Participant 92: *"I do taebo after a very stressful day..."*

b. Spirituality

Participants (n=74) found spirituality helpful in the prevention and management of their stress and used examples of prayer, places of worship and meditation.

Participant 7: *"Going to church and singing always helps when I am feeling stressed."*

Participant 29: *"I pray or talk to my Pastor if I feel stressed."*

Participant 54: *"...reading the bible always helps keep stress in check."*

Participant 60: *"I meditate and try to keep my head clear of all stresses."*

Participant 94: *"Singing gospel songs helps me when I'm down."*

Participant 99: *"Prayer always help me if I feel stressed. I know that when I talk to God, things will be ok."*

Stanley (2011) recommends that teachers' 'connections' or spirituality within stressful educational settings can play a positive role in stress management. He mentions in his study that spirituality helped teachers to maintain efficacy, reduce anxiety and as a tool to connect with students (Stanley, 2011). For many participants in the study, spirituality was a helpful tool in preventing and managing stressors in the workplace.

c. Planning

Other teachers who participated in the study (n=71) mentioned that proper planning helps them prevent stress and avoid stressful situations. This is particularly important as teachers work in an environment that requires good planning in order to avoid unnecessary stress.

Participant 14: *"I always find that if I plan for my lesson, I am less "*

Participant 19: *"Making sure that I don't procrastinate helps me prevent stress. "*

Participant 68: *"I do my marking as soon as the children are done to make sure that the work load does not get too much."*

Participant 82: *"I submit my work to the HOD before the due date to avoid stress."*

Participant 104: *"It helps to plan in advance."*

Participant 112: *"I plan my time to prevent stress."*

The common themes emerging from the analysis seem to point to positive means of handling stressors. This may be an indication that teachers are equipped with the skills to deal with stressors that arise as a result of their teaching and learning environment. However, not all the participants managed to deal with their stress in a positive manner. Some teachers indicated that they do not have the necessary skills to deal with stressors. These teachers will require some assistance to cope with the stress that they are experiencing. Below are some of the negative responses received from participants:

Participant 25: *"I always withdraw when I feel stressed. I don't want to talk to anyone. I prefer to keep things to myself".*

Participant 32: *"I drink sometimes to drown my sorrows".*

Participant 55: *"I really don't know what to do when my work stress me out. The HOD does not treat us like humans with a feeling".*

Participant 73: *"I would like to talk to someone about my stress, but there is noone".*

Participant 75: *"I sit alone when I am stressed out".*

Participant 92: *"I don't do anything when I am feeling stressed. I must accept that life is tough".*

Support for teachers when they are stressed

The questionnaire asked the participants to state the nature of support they receive from their school when stressed. The majority of the participants reported that no support is provided by their schools when they are stressed. Teachers have to manage the problem on their own when stressed. They support one another, seek the assistance of a psychologist or learn to deal with the stress on their own.

Geving (2007) stresses that lack of administrative support is a major contributor to teacher stress. This was also made evident by the results of the study. Below are some of the responses provided by the participants when asked how they deal with stress experienced:

Participant 7: *"There is no support that is provided by our school. Everyone has to deal with their problems on their own."*

Participant 15: *"No support is given."*

Participant 22: *"We are not supported by management in terms of stress."*

Participant 56: *"None. We are told to sort ourselves out when we are stressed."*

Participant 59: *"I don't think there is any support in my school because when I was stressed I had to arrange to see a psychologist but my school did not do anything about it."*

Participant 84 (HOD): *"We try to enforce a culture of openness and care in our school but so far, there isn't much that we do to support one another when we are stressed."*

The results revealed that teachers are experiencing stressors as a result of their teaching and learning environment. The outcome was overwhelming, with the majority of teachers indicating that they experience stressors daily, and whilst teachers may have some skills to deal with stressors, these are relatively inadequate and teachers feel that they need support from their schools or the Department of Education when stressed.

Limitations of the study

Some circumstances were beyond the researchers' control and limitations are inevitable during the research process; hence limitations were as follows:

- This study was conducted among rural-based teachers in Mbombela, Mpumalanga, so the results may not be generalised to the entire South African population. The prevalence and management of stressors among rural-based teachers may yield different results in other parts of the country.

- The researchers were not always present when participants completed the questionnaire. The research may have yielded different results if a researcher was present to explain or clarify concerns that participants raised.
- The study only had female participants; male teachers chose not to participate and hence had a gender bias.

Recommendations

Based on the study's findings, the following recommendations are made to support the mental well-being of teachers so that the teaching and learning context in rural classrooms are enhanced:

1. Formulating and implementing guidelines that include stress management in the curriculum during pre-service teacher training.
2. Providing regular in-service workshops for teachers with that will equip them with techniques for handling stress.
3. Encouraging capacity-building especially for older teachers, who possibly experience difficulties with the new curriculum.
4. Promoting a culture of transparency and support between school management and teachers.
5. Encouraging support groups at school that meet regularly to encourage teachers to discuss work-related stressors and possible solutions. Ferguson, Mang and Frost (2017) found that teachers often preferred to discuss their stress-related problems with family, friends, fellow teachers, and even the school management, but not their healthcare providers, who should be their first port of call since they are trained professionals.
6. Schools should encourage teachers to use the Employee Assistance Programmes (EAP) and other wellness initiatives that the Department of Education have available for teachers (Provision of mental health care practitioners).

Future research

Avenues for further research that other researchers may consider:

Not all teachers have the necessary skills to deal with the stress that they are experiencing and this may have an adverse effect on the learners. Kyriacou (2001) noted that an area of research that had been neglected was the impact of the teacher-pupil interaction in the classroom environment. A possibility is therefore a study that focuses on the stressful teaching and learning environment and the impact on learners in a rural-urban dichotomy. Another possible

future research topic is an intervention programme in schools to help teachers combat stress, since teachers often do not access mental health services (Farmer, 2020). A pre- and post-intervention c examine various possibilities like exercise and spirituality as options. Also, there is a great divide between public and private schooling in South Africa and an alternate study could be a comparative report examining the nature of stressors reported by teachers at each of these types of institutions.

Conclusion

The amount of time a teacher commits to students and activities (in school and extra-curricular) has an impact on the level of stress they experience. Since many foundation phase teachers experience high levels of stress, it is necessary to advocate for appropriate interventions and supports for teachers at the school, district and provincial level. The mental wellness of foundation phase teachers impacts directly on learners, so it is necessary to ensure that the teachers' mental health needs are met so that they are able to adequately attend to the teaching and learning needs of our children.

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