

Teachers' Views on Workplace Adversities: A South African Perspective

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Abstract This paper explored teachers' views on workplace adversities in one district of education in South Africa. Life is fraught with challenges and teachers are no exception. Teachers face various workplace challenges and some of these challenges may be the mundane occurrences of everyday life, while others may seem insurmountable. Each of these challenges requires teachers to adapt, rather than succumb to perceived adversity. The ability to adjust to challenging circumstances is essential for human development and teaching is no exception. For example, teaching profession demands that teachers continuously develop their skills and aptitude to changing workplace environment such as workplace adversities. Workplace adversity is understood to be the primary reason teachers fail to flourish in the workplace and eventually leave the teaching profession. The major elements of workplace adversity in teaching are negative and dissatisfactory working conditions, the work environment and the daily challenges faced by teachers during their work. An interpretive qualitative research method was undertaken. Participants in this study were nine teachers (5 women and 4 men) 100% black, age ranged from 26-43 years and were purposively recruited. Data was collected by means of a semi-structured interview and was analysed thematically using open codes. The findings of the study revealed that school teachers face workplace adversities, such as, poor management, sanitary problems, demands from parents and lack of collegiality.

Keywords Teachers, Workplace, Adversities, Profession, Teaching

1. Introduction and Background

The major elements of workplace adversity in teaching are negative and dissatisfactory working conditions. The phenomenon of workplace adversity also includes the impact on physical, mental, and emotional health and well-being [1]. Workplace adversities as experienced by teachers are not perceived in the same way from one country to the other, from poor remuneration to lack of safety, for example, some teachers may decide to leave the teaching profession because of job insecurity or poor remuneration [2]. Perceived low wages are a source of frustration in teaching and teachers feel that they are undervalued in their workplace [3][4].

In South Africa, research shows that some teachers experience violence from learners, parents and amongst other colleagues, superiors and from their family members [5]. Some teachers are exposed to physical violence at work, while others have experienced non-physical violence such as threats. There are many cases of bullying and physical harm caused to teachers at work [6]. Furthermore, [4] cites shortage of teachers, high rate of absenteeism and staff turnover as other contributing factor for workplace adversity.

[7] points that shortage of teachers in many schools is the result of many newly appointed teachers who are hesitant to teach in rural areas or small towns or to relocate to schools where there is shortage of teaching staff. Similar

view is expressed by [8], stating that a sizable number of qualified teachers in Lesotho, Mozambique, Tanzania, Malawi, and Uganda are resistant to teach in far flung areas. Again, [9][10], advice that there is a need to support and motivate newly qualified teachers to work in different areas.

Teachers work in environments of organisational change that can contribute to negative health outcomes for workers [11][12][13][14]. Furthermore, [15], stress that frequent organizational changes such as new management, curriculum changes lead to resistance and anxiety that can take shape as illness. High levels of stress among teachers and other underlying health challenges such as Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV) and Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome (AIDS) are accounted for high levels of teacher absenteeism at schools [16] [17][18].

In Nigeria, Kenya, Zimbabwe and Lesotho poor planning and resourcing of schools can be experienced by teachers as a challenge, a barrier to teaching and access to quality education [19][20][21]. [22][23][24][25] point that South African education landscape pose similar workplace adversities experienced by teachers elsewhere in African counties, such as, lack of functional libraries, absence of Information, Communication and Technology (ICT) services, lack of inclusive education, schools where learners learn in mud classrooms and violence infested learning environments. Teaching and living in a culturally diverse communities need teachers who can teach learners in an inclusive classroom [26][27]. Not all teachers are able to design teaching lessons that are inclusive and this may cause stress and disillusion for many of them [28][29].

Goal of the study

The aim of this research study was to explore the views of teachers on their school workplace adversities they teach. To provide support to teachers, there is a need to understand teachers' workplace adversities that they daily face.

2. Method

Qualitative research design was used as it allows the study to better shed light on the phenomenon from multiple perspectives [26]. The limitation of this research is that it is difficult to generalise the findings [27][28]. The researchers spent a considerable amount of time with the participants, thereby recording details about their workplace adversity [4][29].

Participants were teachers based in primary (5) and secondary (4) schools. Their ages ranged from 26-43 years). The teachers who were selected to participate in the study were from the schools that were reported to have low academic achievements and low teacher morale [30][31][32].

One focus group interview was conducted face to face. It gave the researchers the opportunity to reach participants quickly [33]. The consent letter included the interview questions that gave the participants time to get ready for the interview [34][35]. In this study, the researchers interviewed teachers who experienced workplace adversity in one district of education in the Free State province of South Africa. The interview process span over three months this was because the researchers worked according to time slots and availability of teachers. The interviews were tape recorded with the consent of the participating teachers.

Data analysis

Data collected on teachers' workplace adversity was analysed employing a thematic data analysis. The validity of the themes was supported with the literature control referencing related to the study on teacher workplace adversities [36][37].

3. Findings and Discussions

The themes that are discussed below are the views of teachers of their views on workplace adversities at their schools.

Theme 1: School management approach

School management entails the day to day operation of the school as an organization involving activities such as planning, organizing, leadership and providing direction the school must follow [13]. Effective school management is critical for the success of the school. Teachers are the main players in the attainment of school success. As a result, school principals must provide enabling work environments for teachers. In this study, teachers lamented that they experienced poor management practices at their schools as related by the following teachers:

According to Teacher 2, there is ineffective administrative leadership and little or no emotional and social support for teachers. Teacher 3 and 5 cited the safety and wellness risk for teachers and learners. Teacher 4 observed increasing non-accountability and no proper flow of communication.

Again, teacher 4 mentioned unfair distribution of workload that is making it very difficult for teachers to sustain their work quality [15].

Teacher 2 complained about Management dissatisfactory approach towards other staff members.

"there shortage of teachers is another factor leading to adversity, thus implying work overload for incumbent teachers"

Teacher 2 further explained that:

"the challenge that we are currently facing is the lack of

time due to work overload and non-teaching duties such as paperwork and meetings”.

The excerpts provided above demonstrate that ineffective management of teachers as a human resource creates a sense of hopeless feeling of most of the teachers. Some of the teachers are exploring other avenues and they are getting ready to exit the system.

Theme 2: Teacher collegiality

Another factor mentioned under working environment most teachers are highlighted that there is lack of collegiality so, in other words, the climate is not so democratic, participatory, enabling nor friendly, where teachers are afraid of healthy competition or challenges. This notion supports the previous findings of the South African study which reported on causes or factors leading to adversity [5]. Teacher 6 noted as follows:

“At our schools you will find that the classrooms are overcrowded, making it difficult for us to control learners”.

Furthermore, teachers who were interviewed said they are more likely to leave the teaching profession due to poor teacher status, family constraints or balancing work and family commitments. According to [22], generally risk refers to the factors that interact to increase the individual likelihood of psychopathology or susceptibility to navigate developmental outcome. It relates to any event, conditions or experience that increases the probability that a problem will be formed, maintained, or exacerbated [22][23]. Most teachers reported worse working conditions including poorer facilities, less access to textbooks and lack of administrative support and larger class sizes.

Theme 3: Disharmonious classroom environment

Learner behaviour, especially in the classrooms affects teaching and learning negatively. [24] observes that some learners have little respect for teachers and their fellow learners. This view is supported by Teacher 6 by providing an example of disruptive learners and their violent behaviour towards other learners and some teachers.

“In my school, learners are throwing furniture, punching, kicking, biting others and verbal abuse all the time. Truly speaking, there is nothing that we can do, because there are no policies in place that lead and guide us on what we must do when faced with such situations. These learners are aware that nothing is going to be done to them; hence they continue to disrespect and abuse us like this”.

Ineffective management of classroom environments mentioned by teacher 6 in the above excerpt shows that disruptive learners and lack of support by parents, school management teams and the Department of Education can lead to a crash of confidence in teachers. It may therefore

be construed that job dissatisfaction may be predicted by the exacerbation of these risks. These findings suggest that working conditions should be one target for policies aimed at retaining qualified teachers in South Africa.

Theme 4: Learners with developmental disability

The Department of Education needs to augment the number of teachers who teach learners with developmental disability. They should also create awareness in society to accept learners with special educational needs. Disability is a restriction or an inability to perform an activity in the manner within the range considered normal for a human being, mostly resulting from impairment [28][29]. The study interviewed two teachers who teach learners with special needs and asked about the challenges that these teachers are faced with and how they try to overcome these adversities.

Teacher 7 emphasized her strife in the following way:

“Oh, my goodness! What I am dealing with daily is so difficult, eh. I am teaching learners with special needs, né. We don’t have teaching material, and this is making our job very difficult. We need learning equipment such as books and teaching equipment such as chalkboards, because I teach different grades. Now I must write and dust, write and dust all the time and these learners are very slow, so I must be patient with them. We don’t know where to get these things – we are just teachers. The government is very slow in terms of delivering equipment for these poor children”.

It is evident from the above that teachers are faced with many challenges. Teachers are forced to be creative and to see to it that the learners are too. This supports the finding made by [29], that teachers should be creative and find their own methods to help learners with special needs. [29] goes on to say that teachers have no choice but to wait for support from the government and it takes a long time to deliver.

Theme 5: Expectations by parents of learners with learning challenges

It seems as if many parents are anxious to see changes or development in their children immediately when they start school. According to [28], special needs educators are an important solution to children learning difficulties. This is sad indeed.

“Teacher highlights that parents come to school every day. They want to see if their children are making progress or not. We know and understand it is not easy for them as well, but these things take time. Parents don’t have patience. They want to see changes now and this is impossible, really”

Teacher 3 added that:

“some parents want their children to be able to read and

write immediately. They complain that their children have been to school for a very long time now and that it seems as if we are not teaching their children"

Teacher 4 was very frustrated when addressing this adversity with how other learners at school treat these learners with disabilities:

"I fail to understand why these learners mistreat disabled learners. I don't blame them really, because they are young and still need to be taught or made aware that these children with disability are also human beings, you see. The older ones are calling them names and it pains every day, because this really affects them in a negative way. I get hurt especially when they cry and refuse to go outside and play with other children. We don't have enough time to eat because we always watch the safety of these learners. I am even afraid to go to the toilet and leave them alone in class"

Teachers concluded that parents want to see their children progressing to the next grade. These parents also need help. Children with disability develop differently than ordinary children, so their learning ability is not the same [29]. Therefore, counselling is needed for these parents as well.

Theme 6: Sanitary challenges in schools

In general, all teachers do not have knowledge of the intervention strategies made by the Department of Education to try and deal with workplace adversity. This view also supports the previous findings in the study conducted by [12][13]. Teacher 9 mentioned that:

"We spent the whole winter with these doors and broken windows. I only took this picture from my class several classes are like this. "There seems to be a problem with the drainage in our school, so management is finding it difficult to fix it currently"

It is evident from the above that teachers' health and that of the learners are at risk. They are at high risk of being exposed to many infections. While this history is pertinent, a reasonable observer might expect that almost two decades after apartheid the worst of the infrastructure deficits would have been eradicated.

"In our school, there is a helper. He tries to make sure that the drain is clean, but it is always full of water and dirty. He is working alone. So, the work is too much for him. He just cannot cope on his own"

"You can even go now to our toilets you will find them in an awkward condition. The toilets don't flush we must use buckets after helping our selves. The sanitation is of poor standards; we even struggle to access toilet paper or simple the hand wash after helping yourself. Some of us have decided not to go the toilets at work and that is imposing a very serious danger to our health as teachers. We did report this to the management of the school but

we did not get any response as the principal is assuming it is us teachers who are causing the toilets to be like that (clapping hands), can you believe it"

"here is the water that is standing in front of our classes daily and it smells so bad that you cannot even eat, causing us throat infections and other sicknesses. Learners are also playing in this water"

According to Teacher 1, there is little intervention on the side of the school management team and the school governing bodies to assist teachers. Most of the teachers are of the view that there is no intervention whatsoever in their schools by the school management team and governing body. Some of the teachers feel that management is contributing to the adversities that teachers are facing.

4. Conclusions

This paper explored teacher workplace adversities which some are natural and cannot be avoided, while others could be avoided as they are human erring. The teachers on their illumination of their workplace adversity provide a hindsight on workplace areas that are likely to compromise the abilities of teaching. It is suggested in this study that management of schools should be aware of workplace adversities to create a humane working environment that enables teachers to realize the full potentials and to develop a keen interest in teaching as a profession. The findings of the research study caution that though teachers can develop their own strategies in overcoming workplace adversities, their capabilities may be constrained and limited by sustained workplace challenges.

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