



# Exploring the Competencies of Principals in Managing Teachers' Stress and Burnout in Selected Primary Schools of Chris Hani East Education District: A South African Context

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## ABSTRACT

The purpose of this research was to explore the competencies of principals in managing teachers' stress and burnout in selected primary schools in Chris Hani East Education District. A qualitative research method was adopted. A case study research design was employed. A purposeful sampling method was used to select five principals to be participants, each representing conveniently sampled five primary schools based on their proximity to researchers. Upon the receipt of permission from Eastern Cape Department of Basic Education officials and principals, semi-structured interviews were conducted face-to-face to collect data from the participants to solicit in-depth relevant information regarding the phenomenon explored in this research. A thematic approach was used to analyse the collected data from five participating school principals. It emerged that principals, deputy principals and heads of departments are struggling to identify early, teachers suffering from stress, unable to avoid the causes of stress as a result of schools' systematic challenges and are unable to cope with teachers' stress. There are no psychological programmes in place in the majority of public rural schools to capacitate principals with remedial skills to deal with teachers experiencing stress. Principals and teachers should be trained by social workers and psychologists regularly to acquire some relevant psychological programmes and apply remedial skills and services to avoid the cause of teachers' and learners' stress. This research could contribute to motivating the Department of Basic Education officials to inculcate the skills to principals and teachers for early identification, monitoring and managing the phenomenon explored in this research.

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## INTRODUCTION

Teachers are one of the formal primary sources of relevant and impactful knowledge, requisite skills and values for well-rounded learners to be holistic, future-ready for the labour market and impactful to their societies. The above-mentioned attributes of ready-made learners are realistic when teachers deliver their lessons optimally, efficiently and effectively for the learners to achieve the prescribed and expected learning outcomes (LOs) in the designed and approved curriculum to be offered in learning environments. On that note, teachers have quite an important role in taking responsibility to teach

appropriately using appropriate teaching modalities characterised by learner-centred approach for their learners access the right knowledge, and required skills such as 21<sup>st</sup> century digital skills and good morals, especially in this time of common cases of gender-based violence, misbehaviour and drug abuse.<sup>1</sup> The teachers who find themselves facing stressors like drug abuse being used by their children and relatives have their health negatively impacted, which affects their professional performance in delivering lessons, managing classrooms and attending classes satisfactorily. A study conducted by Jōgi asserts that teachers' stress is a response that depends on stressors in the school environment and teachers' coping skills, which might reveal burnout.<sup>2</sup> Similarly, Kyriacou asserts that teachers' stress is broadly described as the experience by a teacher of unpleasant, unhappy and negative emotions, such as anger, anxiety, tension, frustration, or depression, resulting from various aspects that consequently could impact their work as a teacher.<sup>3</sup> By extension, it implies that when teachers are unable to cope and deal with the challenges around them, they become stressed and in a state of burnout. They tend to be affected cognitively, psychologically, assertively and physiologically when they are stressed.

It is worrying to have teachers experiencing stress in schools, especially those who are employed to teach at primary grades. Those learners in a classroom handled by a teacher under stress are not likely to access the quality education as their affected teachers could fail to complete the syllabus because of their regular absenteeism and anger, which could be emanating from the family violence, and a toxic environment either at home or school. The above claim is confirmed by Jōgi et al., who posit that teachers' self-reported stress or physiological factors are related to the quality of teacher–learners' interactions and learners' learning outcomes.<sup>4</sup> The intervention of the principals becomes the key to managing the teachers with stress and burnout in selected primary schools. The background above triggered the researchers to explore the competencies of principals in the management of teachers' stress and burnout in selected primary schools. This research would contribute to capacitating principals with relevant skills in identifying teachers experiencing stress and burnout at an early stage and empower them in developing and executing appropriate intervention measures to mitigate or prevent the occurrence of stress in teachers. The researchers aim to find out what causes stress and burnout in South African teachers in primary schools of the Chris Hani East education district, which requires the urgent attention and competencies of principals in managing the teachers' stress and burnout. Primary schools, according to the South African education system, refer to schools having grades from grade R to grade 7. In the following section, the literature on the causes of stress, principals' understanding of the implications of stress and burnout of teachers, and strategies in place to manage the teachers experiencing stress.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

In this section, the causes of stress and burnout among teachers and the implications of principals' limited skills for early identification of teachers suffering from stress and burnout are discussed.

### Causes of Stress to Teachers

Researchers like Galanakis, Alexandri, Kika, Lelekanou, Papantonopoulou, Stougiannou and Tzani (2020) assert that most Greek primary school teachers suffer from a lack of resources, accompanied by long working hours, drilling the young ones or toddlers to know how to handle the lead pencil, reading words and adhering to correct spelling and arithmetical skills.<sup>5</sup> In their study, it is divulged that the teachers with stress ended up having reduced professional work productivity, toxic relationships with colleagues and learners, as well as health-related issues.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Mevlut Gunduz, "What Are the Teaching Responsibilities of Being a Teacher?," *Educational Research and Reviews* 11, no. 8 (2016): 623–29.

<sup>2</sup> Anna-Liisa Jōgi, Eija Pakarinen, and Marja-Kristiina Lerkkanen, "Teachers' Physiological and Self-reported Stress, Teaching Practices and Students' Learning Outcomes in Grade 1," *British Journal of Educational Psychology* 93 (2023): 211–26, 211.

<sup>3</sup> Chris Kyriacou, "Teacher Stress: Directions for Future Research," *Educational Review* 53, no. 1 (2001): 27–35.

<sup>4</sup> Jōgi, Pakarinen, and Lerkkanen, "Teachers' Physiological and Self-reported Stress, Teaching Practices and Students' Learning Outcomes in Grade 1," 211.

<sup>5</sup> Michael Galanakis et al., "What Is the Source of Occupational Stress and Burnout?," *Psychology* 11, no. 5 (2020): 647–62.

<sup>6</sup> Galanakis et al., "What Is the Source of Occupational Stress and Burnout?"

In a study conducted in the United Kingdom (UK) by Okoroma and Robert-Okah, it was affirmed that effective management of human and material resources for the achievement of educational goals in learning institutions like schools, colleges, and universities is one of the key performance areas (KPA) of principals.<sup>7</sup> It is, therefore, critical that principals are capable of identifying and understanding factors that could negatively impact educational operations in schools, teachers' and learners' academic activities, and parents' roles. Additionally, it is highly expected that the principals are competent and contribute to enhancing other school activities, such as staff and learners' welfare.<sup>8</sup> It can be learned that the quality of education in schools is closely linked to the principals' understanding or skills to identify, eliminate and curb the factors that have the potential to cause stress to teachers.

It is further emphasised by Okoroma and Robert-Okah that poor relations, unfair workload distribution among staff, and inadequate material resources are likely to contribute to stress on teachers.<sup>9</sup> It should be noted that if the environment is not conducive for learning and teaching, as mandated by schools, the quality of education tends to be adversely affected.<sup>10</sup> In such a situation in schools affected by the highlighted factors above, the learner enrolment is likely to be impacted negatively as parents admire schools with harmony, good teaching and learning, as well as good relations prevailing among the school stakeholders, namely principals, teachers, learners, parents, communities and Department of Education officials. In a study conducted in Ireland, Darmody and Smyth assert that school principals are the key factor in shaping a school climate that supports learners and teachers.<sup>11</sup> The above assertion seems to suggest that principals should be thoroughly aware of the causes of stress and burnout for teachers for scholarly teaching and improved learning.

Darmody and Smyth state that research on teachers has revealed that stressful jobs can nevertheless offer personal satisfaction.<sup>12</sup> The job could be stressful to teachers if they are not in a comfortable environment in their lives due to several factors, such as not being motivated by their principals for the good work done by them. This assertion seems to suggest that teachers expect motivation from their management for the good work done by them. Additionally, if principals ignore the good teachers' performance in their profession and behaviour, the teachers could get stressed as they would not know how much or what they should do to satisfy their managers to solicit motivation; instead, they are likely to get stressed for not being praised for the good work they are doing. It can be concluded from the above assertion that stress and dissatisfaction are closely related, and to eliminate or counteract the stress on teachers, principals, or the Department of Education should provide a harmonious and conducive environment by promoting motivation for all the good work done by teachers. Motivation could improve the teachers' practice and, by so doing, the teachers are likely to attain satisfaction from their job, thus lessening or avoiding the occurrence of stress on teachers. If teachers are found to be underperforming in their key performance areas, the principals should make a provision for capacity building to make their teachers confident in their teaching practices.

### **Principals' Understanding of the Implications of Stress and Burnout on Teachers**

According to Jacobson, all learners need teachers who are both highly qualified and emotionally prepared to give them the tools they need to succeed.<sup>13</sup> In another study conducted by Amalu and Bekomson, it was shared that principals and teachers should know that there are four types of stress teachers often experience in their profession.<sup>14</sup> They mention the four types of stress namely: chronic

<sup>7</sup> N S Okoroma and I Robert-Okah, "Administrative Stress: Implications for Secondary School Principals," *Educational Research Quarterly* 30, no. 3 (2007): 4.

<sup>8</sup> Okoroma and Robert-Okah, "Administrative Stress: Implications for Secondary School Principals."

<sup>9</sup> Okoroma and Robert-Okah, "Administrative Stress: Implications for Secondary School Principals," 4.

<sup>10</sup> Okoroma and Robert-Okah, "Administrative Stress: Implications for Secondary School Principals."

<sup>11</sup> Merike Darmody and Emer Smyth, "Primary School Principals' Job Satisfaction and Occupational Stress," *International Journal of Educational Management* 30, no. 1 (2016): 115–28, 115.

<sup>12</sup> Darmody and Smyth, "Primary School Principals' Job Satisfaction and Occupational Stress," 116.

<sup>13</sup> Donna Ault Jacobson, *Causes and Effects of Teacher Burnout* (Walden University, 2016), 5.

<sup>14</sup> Melvina Amalu and Achi Bekomson, "Stress Management among Teachers: Implication for National Development," *Management, Systems and Multidisciplinary Perspective*, January 1, 2020, 344–57.

stress grinds away both the emotional and the health of the individual leading to breakdown and even death; acute stress usually does not cause severe or permanent damage to the body; traumatic stress results from a catastrophic event or intense experiences such as a natural disaster, sexual assault, life-threatening accident, or participation in combat and episodic acute stress is where the individuals experiencing this type of stress are very chaotic, out of control and always seem to be facing multiple stressful situations.<sup>15</sup> This study is of the view that principals and teachers who are aware of these stressors could be better equipped to recognise stressed teachers early on and provide timely and effective remediation.

Stress is currently a phenomenon that must be recognised and addressed in various professions because of the complexity of present-day society, including schools and the teaching profession.<sup>16</sup> Teachers, daily, complain about the work-related stress they experience. Such work-related stress causes job compassion fatigue.<sup>17</sup> Thus, when teachers are suffering from depression as a result of stress and burnout, surely, the quality of teaching and learning could be adversely affected. It is likely that such teachers could miss out on school as they often visit medical doctors, and some might end up being hospitalised to cover the stress and or depression. It is clear in most cases that once the teachers are absent, the possibility of finishing the syllabus is compromised. The incompleteness of the syllabus has the potential to affect the quality of teaching and learning for both parties, namely teachers and learners, especially the latter party.

## METHODOLOGY

The researchers used the interpretivist research paradigm to acquire a comprehensive understanding of the experiences and insights of five selected teachers from primary school teachers about their principals' competencies in managing stressed-out and burned-out teachers.<sup>18</sup> In simpler terms, each primary school was represented by one teacher to participate in this research. This kind of selection was done to solicit the experiences of different teachers about their principals. In the researchers' view, primary school (from grade R to grade 7) education is important for the academic journey of children till to their tertiary education and career paths or job opportunities. Hence, if the children fail to access proper and quality basic foundations for their elementary education, they tend to struggle in their academic journey at their highest grades and or studies. The teachers seemed to be relevant participants for this phenomenon as they would divulge the realist experiences about their principals' competencies in avoiding the occurrence of stress to teachers, especially those arising from the school's systemic challenges, as well as managing teachers suffering from stress. A qualitative research method was adopted to attain an exploratory in-depth knowledge of the phenomenon being explored based on five conveniently selected primary school teachers working under five different principals in terms of managing teachers experiencing stress and burnout.<sup>19</sup>

Semi-structured interviews, having an interview schedule guide with open and closed-ended questions aimed at addressing the research objective, were used as the data collection method. This afforded the researchers an opportunity to better understand the principals' unique perspective rather than a generalised understanding of a phenomenon.<sup>20</sup> In addition, semi-structured interviews with open and closed questions allowed for an insight into participants' thoughts and allowed them the freedom to explore ideas.<sup>21</sup>

<sup>15</sup> Amalu and Bekomson, "Stress Management among Teachers: Implication for National Development."

<sup>16</sup> Kitila Mkumbo, "Prevalence of and Factors Associated with Work Stress in Academia in Tanzania.," *International Journal of Higher Education* 3, no. 1 (2014): 1–11.

<sup>17</sup> M. A. J. Olivier and D. J. L. Venter, "The Extent and Causes of Stress in Teachers in the George Region," *South African Journal of Education* 23, no. 3 (2003): 186–92.

<sup>18</sup> Husam Helmi Alharahsheh and Abraham Pius, "A Review of Key Paradigms: Positivism VS Interpretivism," *Global Academic Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences* 2, no. 3 (2020): 39–43, 39.

<sup>19</sup> Alharahsheh and Pius, "A Review of Key Paradigms: Positivism VS Interpretivism."

<sup>20</sup> Omolola A Adeoye-Olatunde and Nicole L Olenik, "Research and Scholarly Methods: Semi-structured Interviews," *Journal of the American College of Clinical Pharmacy* 4, no. 10 (2021): 1358–67, 1358.

<sup>21</sup> Josipa Petric et al., "Improving Preoperative Breast Reconstruction Consultations: A Qualitative Study on the Impact of Personalised Audio-Recordings," *BMC Women's Health* 21, no. 1 (2021): 389.

It should be noted that the semi-structured interview sessions were conducted face-to-face with all the sampled principals who volunteered to participate in this research. From the lessons of Schober, the researchers embraced conducting face-to-face interviews with the participants based on the fact that it yields quality responses, as there are no challenges of network connectivity, as is common in telephonic conversations.<sup>22</sup> Upon the receipt of the permission form and approval of the Eastern Cape Department of Basic Education office and principals to conduct this research in their schools, audio recordings and note-taking to supplement each other were used during the interviews as data collection techniques. The audio recordings aided the researchers in the data analysis phases by providing them with plenty of replay opportunities to obtain and examine the gathered data. On the other side, researchers such as Petric et al. view audio recordings as a means to benefit the participants by allowing them to listen to and confirm what they have responded to the questions posed to them by interviewers.<sup>23</sup>

Permission to conduct the study in the schools was sought through hand-delivered letters prepared by the researchers to the Department of Education and principals. Considerations such as informed consent, voluntary participation, respect and anonymity of participants were observed throughout the study. They were assured that no real names of individual participants were to be reflected in the results of the study, and participants were assured of the strictest confidentiality and anonymity in the study. The participants were also guaranteed that the information shared with them would not be identified by the readers as to where it was gathered. Additionally, to avoid being known by readers, the letters of the alphabet were used to represent the five teachers. In this research, to maintain anonymity, the teacher from School 1 was represented by Teacher A, the teacher from School 2 by Teacher B, the teacher from School 3 was termed as Teacher C, Teacher D stood for School 4, while School 5 was represented by Teacher E. To conclude, it should be noted that all the participants were female teachers. This might be as a result of the many female teachers employed in the majority of primary schools in South Africa.

## PRESENTATION OF FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The data established various issues that cause stress among teachers. Two of the issues which ran through all the responses received are discussed in this section. They are a) Ineffective Conflict management and b) Non-availability of systems in place to empower principals to possess identification skills for teachers with stress.

### a. Ineffective Conflict Management

Managing the tension existing among the stakeholders in schools requires the involvement of all parties concerned with the quality of education. According to Clase et al., the success of a country's education system depends to a large extent on the mutual trust and cooperation existing between all partners.<sup>24</sup> They further confirmed that tension stifles the education process and needs to be addressed urgently. It should be noted by all parties that the existence of learning institutions is meant to bring about change in societies, uplift the living standards of communities and societies, impact relevant knowledge, provide requisite skills such as of 21st-century, inculcate values and create harmonious relations to stay peaceful side by side without compromising someone's rights and use the resources responsibly. As per Clase et al., it appears that when there is tension in organisations such as schools, all the benefits or purposes will be a futile exercise.<sup>25</sup>

<sup>22</sup> Michael F Schober, "The Future of Face-to-Face Interviewing," *Quality Assurance in Education* 26, no.2(2018): 290–302.

<sup>23</sup> Petric et al., "Improving Preoperative Breast Reconstruction Consultations: A Qualitative Study on the Impact of Personalised Audio-Recordings."

<sup>24</sup> Pieter Clase, Jacobus Kok, and Martyn Van der Merwe, "Tension between School Governing Bodies and Education Authorities in South Africa and Proposed Resolutions Thereof," *South African Journal of Education* 27, no. 2 (2007).

<sup>25</sup> Clase, Kok, and Van der Merwe, "Tension between School Governing Bodies and Education Authorities in South Africa and Proposed Resolutions Thereof."

Teachers A, B and C stated: “*It is too complex because some principals do not know how to handle conflict in the schools. And it is not easy, it depends on personality and willingness to cooperate. And it is quite difficult because it needs a lot of valid and credible evidence.*”

It can be concluded that a lack of management skills on the part of principals is contributing to stress on the parties, dysfunctionality and conflict in school activities. Research conducted by Masitsa indicates that principals with insufficient or non-existent school management skills may encounter management problems that impede academic success.<sup>26</sup> The effectiveness of a principal’s management is probably the most important factor contributing to improved academic performance. It is further advanced by Masitsa that principals with good management skills could motivate their teachers and learners.<sup>27</sup> Motivated teachers are an inspiration to learners, while motivated learners lessen the burden on their teachers. This suggests that principals need to be trained in management skills so that they can be able to manage the stress on teachers properly.

### **b) Non-availability of systems in place to empower principals to possess identification skills for teachers with stress**

Participants were asked to respond to the question, Are there some systems in place to capacitate their principals to identify and manage stress affecting teachers in schools? Teacher D responded, “*No, there are no structures placed to look after us and those who are stressed.*”

It is important to note that when there are no systems in place to support and empower principals adequately to avoid the occurrence of stress in their schools, the teachers who are key role players in curriculum offerings tend to suffer. The incompetency of principals needs to be attended to as a means to avoid the exacerbation of the problem in such schools. Bush and Middlewood assert that school managers like principals, deputy principals and HODs should develop structures to listen, support and help teachers avoid the vicious cycle of worthlessness.<sup>28</sup> It must be emphasised to all stakeholders that the existence of learning institutions is meant to bring about change in societies, uplift the living standards of communities and societies, impact relevant knowledge, provide requisite skills such as of 21<sup>st</sup>-century, inculcate values and create harmonious relations to stay peaceful side by side without compromising someone’s rights and use the resources responsibly. The above assertion seems to suggest that if the principals or SMTs are incompetent in avoiding the occurrence of stress, the possibility of poor quality of education could be high in such schools.

One of the respondents advanced that principals or SMTs who are incompetent to solve the tension amongst teachers tend to exacerbate the possibilities of stress to teachers, conflict, as well as poor teaching and learning. On that note, Lambersky, in their study conducted in Canada, principals’ behaviours shape teacher emotions in various ways by influencing their morale, burnout, stress, commitment, and self- and collective efficacy.<sup>29</sup> By extension, it implies that the way the principals resolve the school issues has the potential to affect the organisational culture, which could result in stifling the education process and the needs of staff members, learners and parents. The expression or tone of and the capabilities to listen and involve teachers by principals seem to be vital in creating a learning environment that could eliminate the cause of dissatisfaction among teachers and poor teaching and learning practices in schools. It appears that if the principals lack thereof skills to listen to and identify early their teachers and learners susceptible to stress, it means, therefore, that their competencies to manage such stress could be difficult to materialise. Consequently, the mandate expected in schools, which is to provide impactful knowledge, requisite skills such as digital or 21<sup>st</sup> century technological skills for teaching and learning, ethical values and positive attitudes to learners, could be a futile exercise.

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<sup>26</sup> M G Masitsa, “The Principal’s Role in Restoring a Learning Culture in Township Secondary Schools,” 2005.

<sup>27</sup> Masitsa, “The Principal’s Role in Restoring a Learning Culture in Township Secondary Schools.”

<sup>28</sup> Tony Bush and David Middlewood, “Leading and Managing People in Education,” 2013.

<sup>29</sup> John Lambersky, “Understanding the Human Side of School Leadership: Principals’ Impact on Teachers’ Morale, Self-Efficacy, Stress, and Commitment,” *Leadership and Policy in Schools* 15, no. 4 (2016): 379–405, 379.

## RECOMMENDATION

Principals and teachers should be trained by social workers and psychologists to acquire and apply remedial skills and services for early identification, monitoring and management of stakeholders with problems. It is advisable that the principals should also be subjected to ongoing training to monitor and manage the affected teachers and learners with stress. The Department of Basic Education should come up with relevant psychological programmes for all newly employed principals to be trained on how to identify early teachers experiencing some problems, to monitor and apply the best possible measures to remedy the problem. The pre-service teacher education programmes offered by universities should thoroughly prepare their student-teachers (graduates) to possess the attributes that closely meet the demands of school setups, such as dealing with teachers' stress.

## CONCLUSION

This study has explored the competencies of principals in managing teachers' stress and burnout in selected primary schools in the Chris Hani East Education District. Two issues ran through all the responses received: a) Ineffective Conflict management, and b) Non-availability of systems in place to empower principals to possess identification skills for teachers with stress. Based on these findings, it has been recommended that ongoing programmes such as road shows by psychologists and social workers, and media initiatives including radio shows, television programmes, and newsletters, should be implemented to reduce or mitigate stress among employees. The study concludes that if principals become more competent in managing educational resources and avoid causing unnecessary systematic school stress to teachers, the quality of education in schools and resources would be greatly improved leading to efficient and effective teaching and learning.

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