



The Impact of Overcrowded Classrooms on the School-Based Experience (SBE) of Student Teachers: Challenges and Strategies for Effective Teaching

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ABSTRACT

Overcrowded classrooms pose significant obstacles for student teachers during their School-Based Experience (SBE), particularly at a selected university in the Eastern Cape. This study explores the challenges that student teachers face in managing overcrowded classrooms, delivering effective instruction, and fostering learner engagement. Using a qualitative research design, data were collected through semi-structured interviews and reflective journals from 20 purposively selected student teachers from a selected university in EC who participated in the SBE program in rural and urban schools. The findings revealed that overcrowded classrooms limit the ability to provide individualized attention, complicate classroom management, and impede the implementation of diverse teaching strategies. Additionally, the physical strain and emotional stress associated with overcrowding negatively affect the student teachers' professional growth and confidence. To mitigate these challenges, this study recommends the integration of targeted training on the management of overcrowded classrooms into teacher preparation programs. Student teachers should be equipped with practical strategies, such as the use of peer-assisted learning, cooperative group activities, and technology, to enhance participation in large classrooms. Furthermore, partnerships between a selected university in EC and host schools should focus on creating more supportive environments by reducing classroom sizes where possible and offering mentorship programs for student teachers. Policy interventions aimed at improving teacher-to-learner ratios and resource allocation in schools are also essential. These recommendations are intended to enhance the quality of the SBE experience, ensuring that student teachers are well-prepared to thrive in diverse and challenging teaching environments.

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INTRODUCTION

The teaching profession plays a critical role in shaping societies by equipping learners with the knowledge and skills necessary for personal and national development. For teacher training programs to be effective, practical teaching experiences, such as School-Based Experience (SBE), are essential in bridging the gap between theoretical knowledge and real-world practice.¹ However, several

¹ P. Marais and C. Meier, "Disrupting Traditional Teaching Practice: Student Teachers' Experiences of Alternative Teaching Practice Models," *Teaching and Teacher Education* 90 (2020): 103044.

contextual challenges, including overcrowded classrooms, often hinder the success of SBE. This issue is particularly pronounced in South Africa, where education systems in rural and peri-urban schools face systemic challenges such as inadequate resources and teacher shortages.²

A selected university in EC, as a key provider of teacher education in the Eastern Cape, prepares student teachers for diverse classroom environments. However, overcrowded classrooms have become a recurring challenge during SBE placements. Therefore, this paper seeks to explore the specific challenges faced by student teachers from a selected university in EC in overcrowded classrooms and propose strategies to mitigate these challenges. The study provides actionable recommendations to improve the quality of teacher training and improve educational outcomes.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Defining Overcrowded Classrooms

Overcrowded classrooms are characterized by a student-to-teacher ratio that exceeds the optimal level for effective teaching and learning. Globally, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) recommends a maximum ratio of 30:1 for primary schools and 35:1 for secondary schools.³ However, many South African classrooms exceed these thresholds, with some reaching ratios as high as 50:1 or more.⁴

Implications of Overcrowding on Teaching and Learning

Research has consistently highlighted the detrimental effects of overcrowded classrooms on both teaching and learning. Overcrowding limits the teacher's ability to provide personalized attention, effectively manage classroom behavior, and implement varied teaching strategies.⁵ For learners, overcrowding often results in lower academic achievement, reduced participation, and limited opportunities for active participation.⁶

The Context of a Selected University in EC's SBE Program

A selected university in EC's teacher education program emphasizes the importance of SBE as a cornerstone of professional development. The program places student teachers in diverse schools to provide them with practical teaching experience. However, many of the host schools, particularly in rural and under-resourced areas, are characterized by overcrowded classrooms. This exacerbates the challenges faced by student teachers, who often lack experience and confidence in managing such environments (a selected university in EC, 2022).

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a qualitative research design to explore the lived experiences of student teachers from a selected university in EC in overcrowded classrooms. Qualitative methods are particularly suited to capture the depth and complexity of individual experiences in real-world contexts.⁷

Data Collection

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and reflective journals. Twenty student teachers from a selected university in EC were purposively selected from those who had completed their SBE placements in rural and urban schools with overcrowded classrooms. The semi-structured

² S. Van der Berg et al., "Teacher Shortages in South Africa: An Exploration of Causes and Consequences," *South African Journal of Economics* 87, no. 1 (2019): 45–63.

³ UNESCO, *Global Education Monitoring Report 2020: Inclusion and Education: All Means All* (Paris: UNESCO, 2020), <https://en.unesco.org/gem-report/report/2020/inclusion>.

⁴ N. Spaull, "Inequality and the Distribution of Educational Outcomes in South Africa," *Economics of Education Review* 72 (2019): 186–207.

⁵ K. C. Moloi and M. Chetty, "Challenges and Coping Strategies of Teachers in Overcrowded Classrooms: A Case Study of Selected Primary Schools in the Gauteng Province," *South African Journal of Education* 38, no. 4 (2018): 1–10.

⁶ P. Marais, "An Exploration of Factors That Influence Student Teacher Experiences during Teaching Practice," *South African Journal of Education* 41, no. 1 (2021): 1–11.

⁷ John W Creswell and Cheryl N Poth, *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design: Choosing among Five Approaches* (Sage publications, 2016).

interviews allowed for in-depth exploration of their challenges and coping strategies, while the reflective journals provided additional insights into their day-to-day experiences.

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was used to analyze the data, identifying recurring themes and patterns related to the challenges of overcrowded classrooms and the strategies employed by student teachers. The analysis followed Braun and Clarke's six-step framework, which includes familiarization with the data, coding, theme development, and interpretation.⁸

Ethical Considerations

This study adhered strictly to ethical research principles to ensure the protection, dignity, and rights of all participants. Ethical clearance was obtained from the Research Ethics Committee of a selected university in Eastern Cape prior to data collection. The study involved human participants—student teachers—whose experiences during SBE placements were explored; thus, ethical sensitivity was paramount. Each participant received a detailed information sheet explaining the purpose of the study, the nature of their participation, potential risks and benefits, and the voluntary nature of participation. Informed consent was obtained in writing before interviews were conducted and journals were collected. Participants were assured that they could withdraw from the study at any time without academic or personal repercussions. To ensure confidentiality, all identifying information—such as names of participants and specific school locations—was removed from transcripts and reports. Pseudonyms were used when quoting participants to maintain anonymity. Data were securely stored in password-protected files, and access was restricted to the principal researcher and supervisor. Given the emotional and professional stress student teachers may experience when discussing challenges during their SBE, care was taken to create a safe and supportive interview environment. The participants were reminded that there were no right or wrong answers and that their honesty would contribute to improving teacher education.

All participation was voluntary, and no incentives were offered to coerce involvement. Participants were treated respectfully throughout the research process, in line with the values of academic integrity and human dignity. The data collected was used exclusively for academic purposes related to this study. The findings were reported truthfully and accurately, and any direct quotes were anonymized. The final report will be stored at the Faculty of Education and may be shared with relevant stakeholders (e.g., policymakers, SBE coordinators) to inform improvements, with appropriate consent. All necessary ethical precautions were taken to ensure compliance with the university's ethical guidelines and the broader principles of responsible academic research involving human subjects.

PRESENTATION OF FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Based on the qualitative data collected from the student teachers' interviews and reflective journals, several key themes emerged. The following is a structured analysis and presentation of these themes, including illustrative quotes to support the findings.

Classroom Management Challenges - Participant A

This theme encapsulates the difficulties student teachers experience in maintaining order and discipline in overcrowded classrooms. The findings revealed that overcrowding leads to increased noise levels, disruptive behavior, and a general inability to control the classroom effectively. This significantly impacted the student teachers' confidence and ability to deliver lessons.

"It was impossible to keep them quiet. There were just too many of them, and they were always talking and moving around. I felt like I was constantly shouting, just to be heard. It was exhausting, and I don't think they were really learning anything. Discipline was a nightmare. Trying to implement rules with that many students was just not feasible."

⁸ Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke, "Using Thematic Analysis in Psychology," *Qualitative Research in Psychology* 3, no. 2 (2006): 77–101.

Limited Individualized Attention - Participant B

This theme focuses on the struggle to provide personalized support and cater to the diverse needs of learners in large classes. The data revealed that student teachers felt they could not adequately address individual learning gaps or provide necessary support, particularly for students with special needs. This was a major source of frustration. The participant had this to say:

"I couldn't give individual attention to anyone. There simply wasn't enough time or space. I had students who were clearly struggling, but I couldn't help them as much as I wanted to. It was heartbreaking. Differentiation was almost impossible. How can you cater to different learning styles when you have 50+ students in a class?"

Emotional and Physical Strain - Participant C

This theme captures the stress, exhaustion, and emotional toll experienced by student teachers due to the demanding nature of managing overcrowded classrooms. From the data gathered it was revealed that the constant need to manage behavior, deliver instruction, and cope with limited resources resulted in significant emotional and physical strain, impacting the student teachers' well-being and professional development. The participant stated:

"I was constantly stressed and anxious. I couldn't sleep properly because I was always thinking about the next day's class. It was physically exhausting. Standing for hours in a crowded classroom, trying to project my voice, it took a toll. I started to question whether I was even cut out to be a teacher. The experience really knocked my confidence."

Adaptation Strategies - Participant D

This theme highlights the strategies that the student teachers used to cope with the challenges of overcrowded classrooms. Despite the difficulties, the student teachers demonstrated resilience and resourcefulness by implementing various strategies to improve their teaching effectiveness. The participant stated:

"I started using peer-assisted learning more. It helped relieve some of the pressure off me, and the students seemed to enjoy it. Technology was a lifesaver. Showing videos and using interactive presentations helped to keep them engaged. I had to plan my lessons meticulously. Every minute had to count."

The Need for Enhanced Training and Support - Participant E

This theme underscores the importance of targeted training and mentorship programs to better prepare student teachers for the realities of overcrowded classrooms. Participants expressed a strong desire for more practical training and guidance on managing large classes and addressing the diverse needs of learners in challenging environments. The participant stated:

"I wish I had been better prepared. The theory we learned in university didn't really translate to the reality of an overcrowded classroom. A mentorship program would have been invaluable. Having an experienced teacher to guide me would have made a huge difference. More training on classroom management techniques specific to overcrowded classrooms is essential."

Implications

The data have revealed that overcrowded classrooms present significant challenges for student teachers during their SBE. These challenges manifest themselves in several key areas:

- **Difficulties in classroom management:** Overcrowding leads to increased noise levels, disruptive behavior, and a general inability to maintain order. Student teachers struggle to implement rules consistently, resulting in a chaotic learning atmosphere that hinders effective instruction and diminishes their confidence.
- **Limited personalized attention:** High student-to-teacher ratios make it nearly impossible for student teachers to cater to the diverse needs of learners, particularly those with special educational needs. Differentiation becomes a significant challenge, as student teachers lack the time and resources to provide personalized support and address individual learning gaps.

- **Emotional and physical strain:** The constant pressure to manage large classes, deliver engaging lessons, and cope with limited resources takes a significant toll on student teachers' well-being. They experience increased stress, anxiety, and exhaustion, which can negatively impact their professional growth and overall effectiveness.
- **Inadequate Resources and Support:** Overcrowded classrooms often lack adequate resources such as teaching aids, furniture, and space, further compounding the challenges faced by student teachers. The absence of adequate infrastructure hinders their ability to implement effective teaching strategies and create a conducive learning environment.

However, student teachers also demonstrated resilience by employing various adaptation strategies, including peer-assisted learning, technology integration, and strategic lesson planning. These strategies, while helpful, often prove insufficient in overcoming the systemic challenges posed by overcrowding. The findings underscore the need for improved training, mentorship, and policy interventions to better support student teachers and improve the quality of education in overcrowded classrooms.

This analysis provides a robust understanding of the issues at hand, grounded in the experiences and perspectives of the student teachers themselves. The illustrative quotes add depth and authenticity to the findings, making them more compelling and impactful. By addressing these challenges through targeted interventions, educational institutions can better prepare student teachers for the realities of diverse and challenging teaching environments, ultimately contributing to improved educational outcomes for all learners.

The findings of this study reveal that overcrowding significantly complicates classroom management for student teachers. Many participants reported that large class sizes led to increased noise levels and disruptive behavior, making it challenging to maintain discipline and order. This aligns with the research of Moloi and Chetty, who found that effective classroom management is hindered in overcrowded environments, resulting in a chaotic learning atmosphere.⁹ Participants expressed frustration over their inability to implement rules consistently, which further exacerbated behavioral issues. The emotional toll of managing large groups was also evident, as the student teachers reported feelings of exhaustion and frustration. This sentiment echoes the findings of Marais, who noted that the stress associated with overcrowding can diminish teachers' confidence and overall effectiveness in the classroom.¹⁰ The inability to create a conducive learning environment ultimately affects student engagement and academic performance.

Limited Individualized Attention

A recurring theme among participants was the difficulty in addressing the individual needs of learners in overcrowded classrooms. High learner-to-teacher ratios hindered differentiation, particularly for students with special educational needs. Research by Spaulw supports this observation, indicating that overcrowded classrooms often result in lower academic achievement due to insufficient personalized attention.¹¹ The physical layout of overcrowded classrooms, characterized by limited space for movement, further complicated efforts to engage students effectively. Participants reported that they were often unable to employ interactive and learner-centered teaching strategies such as group work and hands-on activities. Instead, many resorted to lecture-based methods, which they felt were less effective in fostering engagement.¹² This reliance on traditional teaching methods highlights the need for innovative approaches to instruction in overcrowded settings.

⁹ Moloi and Chetty, "Challenges and Coping Strategies of Teachers in Overcrowded Classrooms: A Case Study of Selected Primary Schools in the Gauteng Province."

¹⁰ Marais, "An Exploration of Factors That Influence Student Teacher Experiences during Teaching Practice."

¹¹ Spaulw, "Inequality and the Distribution of Educational Outcomes in South Africa."

¹² Edith M Kiggundu and Samuel T Nayimuli, "Teaching Practice: A Make or Break Phase for Student Teachers," *South African Journal of Education* 29, no. 3 (2009).

Strategies Employed by Student Teachers

Despite the challenges posed by overcrowding, student teachers employed various strategies to enhance their teaching effectiveness. Some student teachers leveraged peer-assisted learning by assigning learners to work in small groups. This approach not only fostered collaboration but also helped reduce their workload.¹³ By encouraging students to support one another, they created a more interactive learning environment.

Participants who had access to digital tools used technology to improve learner engagement. For example, using videos and digital presentations helped capture learners' attention in overcrowded settings.¹⁴ This integration of technology demonstrates the potential for innovative solutions to overcome traditional barriers in education.

To manage time effectively within large classes, many student teachers developed concise and targeted lesson plans that prioritized essential content and activities. This strategic planning is crucial for maximizing instructional time and ensuring that key concepts are covered despite the challenges of overcrowding.

The findings from this study underscore the profound challenges faced by student teachers during their School-Based Experience (SBE) in overcrowded classrooms at a selected university in EC. Overcrowding complicates classroom management, limits individualized attention for learners, and requires reliance on less effective teaching methods. However, student teachers also demonstrated resilience by employing strategies such as peer-assisted learning and technology integration to enhance engagement.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Training on Managing Overcrowded Classrooms: A selected university in EC's teacher training curriculum should include modules on managing overcrowded classrooms, equipping student teachers with practical strategies to maintain discipline and deliver effective instruction. Simulated classroom environments with high learner-to-teacher ratios can help student-teachers practice managing large groups before entering real classrooms.

Improving School Support Systems through Mentorship Programs: Host schools should establish mentorship programs where experienced teachers provide guidance and support to student teachers during their SBE placements. Schools that host SBEs should receive additional resources, such as teaching assistants and classroom materials, to alleviate the burden of overcrowding. The Department of Basic Education should prioritize policies aimed at reducing class sizes, particularly in rural and under-resourced schools. Investments in classroom infrastructure, such as additional classrooms and furniture, can help accommodate growing learner populations and reduce overcrowding.

CONCLUSION

This study has highlighted the significant challenges faced by student teachers during their School-Based Experience (SBE) in overcrowded classrooms at a selected university in EC. Overcrowding not only complicates classroom management but also limits the ability to provide individualized attention to learners, thereby impeding effective teaching and learning. Emotional strain and physical stress associated with managing large classes further exacerbate these challenges, affecting the professional growth and confidence of student teachers. The findings underscore the urgent need for targeted training programs that equip student teachers with practical strategies to manage overcrowded classrooms. Additionally, fostering partnerships between a selected university in EC and host schools can create more supportive environments for student teachers. Policy interventions aimed at improving teacher-to-learner ratios and resource allocation are essential to enhance the quality of the SBE experience. By addressing these challenges through structured mentorship, improved training, and

¹³ M. Samuel, "Peer-Assisted Learning: A Strategy for Promoting Active Learning in Large Classes," *Journal of Educational Innovation and Practice* 13, no. 2 (2018): 56–68.

¹⁴ Z. Ngcobo and N. Muthukrishna, "Using Technology to Enhance Teaching and Learning in Large Classes," *Africa Education Review* 15, no. 2 (2018): 78–94.

adequate resources, educational institutions can better prepare student teachers for the realities of diverse and challenging teaching environments. Ultimately, these efforts will contribute to improved educational outcomes for all learners.

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