Teacher Quality As a Defining Factor of Student Academic Performance in Schools: The Case of a District in South Africa

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ABSTRACT

There does not seem to be a singular, all-defining factor justifying the poor performance of students across the globe, but what is indisputable is that many scholars have attributed the poor performance of students to teacher quality. This suggests a clear correlation between teacher quality and student performance. The researcher implemented a contingency theory that centres on creating a relationship between schooling processes and outcomes. An ethnographic design grounded in the interpretative paradigm and premised on the qualitative research approach was adopted to explore how societies and individuals function in their natural environment to facilitate learning.

Through purposive sampling, 12 participants were drawn from two local municipalities in a district of South Africa to take part in individual interviews. The analysis was done concurrently using ATLAS ti and thematic analysis. The findings suggest that claims of the impact of teacher quality on students' academic performance are indeed not overemphasised. However, they also show a systematic correlation between learner performance and teacher professional development rather than teacher quality alone. The study concludes that stakeholders must take full responsibility for learning by making holistic efforts towards teacher development and professionalism which are vital as long as teaching and learning remain an evolving practice.

Keywords: Learner performance; Social Injustice; Teacher quality; Teacher professional development; Teaching and learning

INTRODUCTION

The issue of poor performance in schools in South Africa (SA) and beyond is said to be a contested terrain characterised by social injustice and other related challenges. Despite robust compelling reasons like social injustice resulting from historical imbalances and parental factors, teacher quality remains the most talked about issue by scholars. For instance, Towers, Rushton, Gibbons, Steadman, Brock, Cao, and Richardson (2023) stress the prescriptive techniques that concentrate on legislative fixes for ways to increase teacher quality and professionalism; Bipath, Venketsamy and Naidoo (2019) talk about high levels of absenteeism by teachers; Lauermann and König (2016) investigate teachers' self-efficacy and professional development and in an older but relevant source, Shepherd (2013) points to the quality of instruction. While researching the General Household Survey of 2009, Shepherd (2013) found that for most of the South African households who do not send their children to nearby available education institutions, roughly 13% ascribed this to the poor quality of teaching as the primary factor which undoubtedly correlates with teacher quality. Despite this emphasis, it is suffice to say that the poor performance of students is not limited to teacher quality.

After more than two decades into the post-Apartheid era, the level of inequality in schools seems far from being settled as learners[1] still perform very poorly in some township and rural schools. Bayat, Louw and Rena (2014) argue from an opposite viewpoint that student poor performance has little or nothing to do with where the learner lives because students in urban areas also perform poorly. In the face of this challenging situation, Van den Branden (2016) alludes to a more complex epistemological reality – that the quality of a school system cannot exceed the quality of teachers. That includes considering the low teacher effort and time lost through abusive absenteeism for sick leave (Bipath et al., 2019) that mostly happens on Fridays and Mondays. In relation to teacher absenteeism, Bipath et al. (2019) believe that if teachers are rewarded for consistently being present and are penalised for consistent absenteeism, the problem might be addressed. From the foregoing theoretical and empirical evidence, the paper seeks to determine the extent to which teacher quality and other teacher-related factors influence teaching and learning for effective student learning outcomes.

BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

According to Shepherd (2013), high-quality teachers tend to be those who are both highly motivated and accumulate more subject knowledge. For teachers to be motivated requires some degree of belief in their self-efficacy. This makes learning in general an encompassing body of knowledge for all who value it. In SA, Gallo (2020) found that education during the apartheid era was characterised by the under-development of human potential in general, but specifically for blacks to provide cheap labour on the mines and farms belonging to the rich white minority. As a result, Gallo (2020) demonstrates that

SA needs qualified teachers and other professionals in scientific fields who could transform the education system. To this end, the government has since made education and positive learning outcomes a priority by investing a significant amount of the state budget, an estimated R441.5 billion, to the sector of learning and culture (National Treasury, 2022). It thus explains why curriculum transformation is intended to be more than a vehicle to transmit new post-apartheid values of social justice, human rights and respect for cultural diversity and the environment (DoBE, 2011). It is also intended for effective implementation of the curriculum and other developmental strategies aimed at empowering young people and enhancing student academic performance across various learning disciplines.

Therefore, in identifying the causes of under-performance in schools, emphasis must not be ambiguously placed only on the areas of social injustice and especially teacher quality. Rather, prominent questions could be asked to try to establish a correlation between the causes, such as how teacher qualifications differ, the reasons behind the differences, and their effect on teaching and learning. Only through this measure can the development of an effective policy that addresses the problem of under-performance be done.

Challenges to Teacher Professional Competence

Language issues in South African schools over the years have been a great cause for concern. As such, the constitution of SA requires that all official languages enjoy equality and esteem by being treated the same without fear or favour (RSA, 1996). , Burns, Jacobs and Yendol-Hoppey (2016) note that most if not all schools in SA currently use only two languages in teaching and learning, notably English and Afrikaans, which places a heavy burden on many SA learners who have other languages as their

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[1] The terms learners and students are used interchangeably to enable the paper to accommodate readers across the globe.

primary medium of communication. To Nuttall (2021), language carries important cultural loads and histories and also shapes how people think and understand the world. In SA the education policy promotes the maintenance of the home language while affording access to the effective use of at least one additional language. Subsequently, most SA children are taught in their mother tongue at the beginning of their formal schooling and later switch to a different language (English) for teaching and learning in Grade 4 which poses a threat to the learning outcomes. Accordingly, Garcia and Cohen (2011) note that when SA Grade 5 children came last out of 40 countries in literacy tests, they were tested in the mother tongue and not a language that they were still learning, thus, cementing the view that besides language, there is a bigger picture that negatively impacts teaching and learning for positive learning outcomes.

According to Carl and Negumbo (2017), learner under-performance in secondary schools has been concomitant with teachers' professional competence in terms of completing the teaching task, a negative attitude to their work and poor pedagogical content knowledge (PCK), sometimes due to lack of training which is mostly attributed to self-efficacy. The problem with teacher quality usually starts when management responds to certain challenges of teacher shortage by hiring teachers with no certificates or experience. This situation arises as a result of the increased need for teachers due to the constant influx of people from rural and township areas to urban and city centres in search of quality education. According to Du Plessis and Mestry (2019) teachers lack the desire to work in rural areas and even if they do, they see it as a starting point for the future. Under such circumstances, Hobbs and Porsch (2021) say teachers could be found teaching subjects which they are not qualified to teach, what could be described as "out-of-field teaching". An example of such a predicament comes as a result of the combination of certain subjects like History and Geography to form what is known as social science; Tabe, Heystek and Warnich (2021) recommend that these subjects must be separated as the best possible way to overcome what Hobbs and Porsch (2021) describe as out of field teaching.

Reconceptualising teacher professional identity (TPI)

Several researchers including Towers et al. (2023), Bipath et al. (2019), Golombek and Johnson (2017) and Lauermann and König (2016) have demonstrated that teaching ability is an important predictor of learner performance, which covers self-efficacy, preparation, PCK, classroom management responsibility and efficiency. In reconceptualising the teachers' professional identity (TPI), Jeynes (2017) says that the role of a teacher in learner achievement is often limited a great deal in urban areas, while the reverse is true for townships and villages. As such, employing the right quality teachers as well as retaining them must be prioritised when dealing with learner performance challenges (Tabe, et al. 2021). This is important as an earlier analysis by Ogundele, Olanipekun and Aina (2014), finds that good teaching entails variables that are beyond the four walls of a classroom such as years of teaching, the number of in-service hours completed, academic and professional qualifications, level of competency and dedication. Should any of these qualities be missing, then what makes one a professional teacher hangs in the balance.

Another factor that defines the professional identity of a teacher is PCK that any effective teacher must adequately possess to enhance teacher quality and learner performance (Olanipekun & Aina, 2014). Because PCK defines how well the subject matter can be taught, it embodies a unique form of teacher professional knowledge which is vital for the TPI

because it guides the teachers' actions when addressing pertinent issues like classroom management. Hence it is needed by every teacher for effective and efficient teaching in complex and diverse contexts. Ogundele et al. (2014) sum up that the problem of TPI lies in two qualities, namely adequate knowledge of the subject matter and pedagogy. Therefore, unless the teacher's PCK is sound, he or she will not be effective in the classroom and students will be likely under-perform or fail.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The link between theory and practice has to be re-imagined by organisations and policymakers in light of recent global events like uprisings and the Covid-19 epidemic. It is clear than there is no best way to lead, organise or make decisions because the most productive outcome often emerges as the need arises. The underpinning theory of this study is the contingency theory (CT) which focuses on creating a relationship between schooling processes and outcomes, as well as the implementation of effective managerial processes for successful learning outcomes. The contingency theory was established because the effectiveness of an organisation like a school depends on contingency factors that can either be internal or external. In the context of this study, the factors or variables would include the availability of resources, teachers' PCK, parental involvement, and teacher efficacy to name but a few. According to Miterev, Mancini and Turner (2017), contingency theory is an approach towards studying organisational behaviour, explaining how internal and external variables influence the design and functioning of an organisation.

This suggests a need to be empowered through a timely teacher professional development plan (TPDP) in dealing with internal and external contingency factors like the lack of LTSMs, poor PCK, violence against

teachers, and parental involvement. This is of huge importance because, as Carl and Strydom (2017) claim, the South African Education system since 1994 has increasingly placed so many expectations on teachers to contribute towards transforming schools into more autonomous, professional and collaborative teaching and learning working environments. Unfortunately, Carl and Strydom (2017) opine that due to financial constraints, staff development programmes provided at the provincial level as indicated in the PAM document, are irregular and repeatedly take the form of crash courses to familiarise teachers with current policies for implementation.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Complementary strategies that engaged with learner performance in schools through a qualitative study were adopted. The methodology was chosen considering the purpose of the study, the information needed and available resources. In line with the nature of the study, the researcher identified individuals who were accessible, willing to provide the necessary information and capable of shedding light on specific phenomena or issues under study. The data collection was strictly through 12 individual interviews comprising 4 teachers, 4 Heads of Department (HoD) and 4 school principals across 4 schools. Participants were drawn using the non-probability purposive sampling method through a deliberate choice based on the qualities of the participants as pointed out by Etikan, Musa and Alkassim (2016). The data collection was informed by DeJonckheere and Vaughn's (2019) view that the first step in the research is to identify individuals who are accessible and willing to provide information. As such, the participants from the participating schools were not statistically a representation of the target population but rather a small group selected for reasons given above. For ethical reasons no school was named.

Participants were allocated pseudonyms and or codes for example T1S1 interpreted as Teacher 1 School 1 etc. This was done for all the categories of participants. In addition, the participants signed an informed consent form before the interviews were conducted to ensure their confidentiality, free will, and identity protection as part of the ethical protocols. It is also important to note that the selected schools served mostly poor communities with a range of problems including inaccessibility, inadequate infrastructure, overcrowded classrooms, and vacant educator positions, all of which have a significant impact on learner achievement (Bayat et al. 2014). The analysis was done concurrently using ATLAS ti version 8.4 and thematic analysis by allocating codes, detecting relationships and categorising the findings according to various themes.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The main objective of this study was to ascertain how teacher quality and other teacher-related factors influenced teaching and learning as well as student learning outcomes. Data analysis led to the creation of similar categories based on the sub-questions that were asked. These categories were represented on an orthogonal tree diagram using Atlas ti. version 8.4. The intention was to ensure that there was a consistent flow of ideas and chronology during the presentation and discussion phase. The different categories are presented in Figure 1.
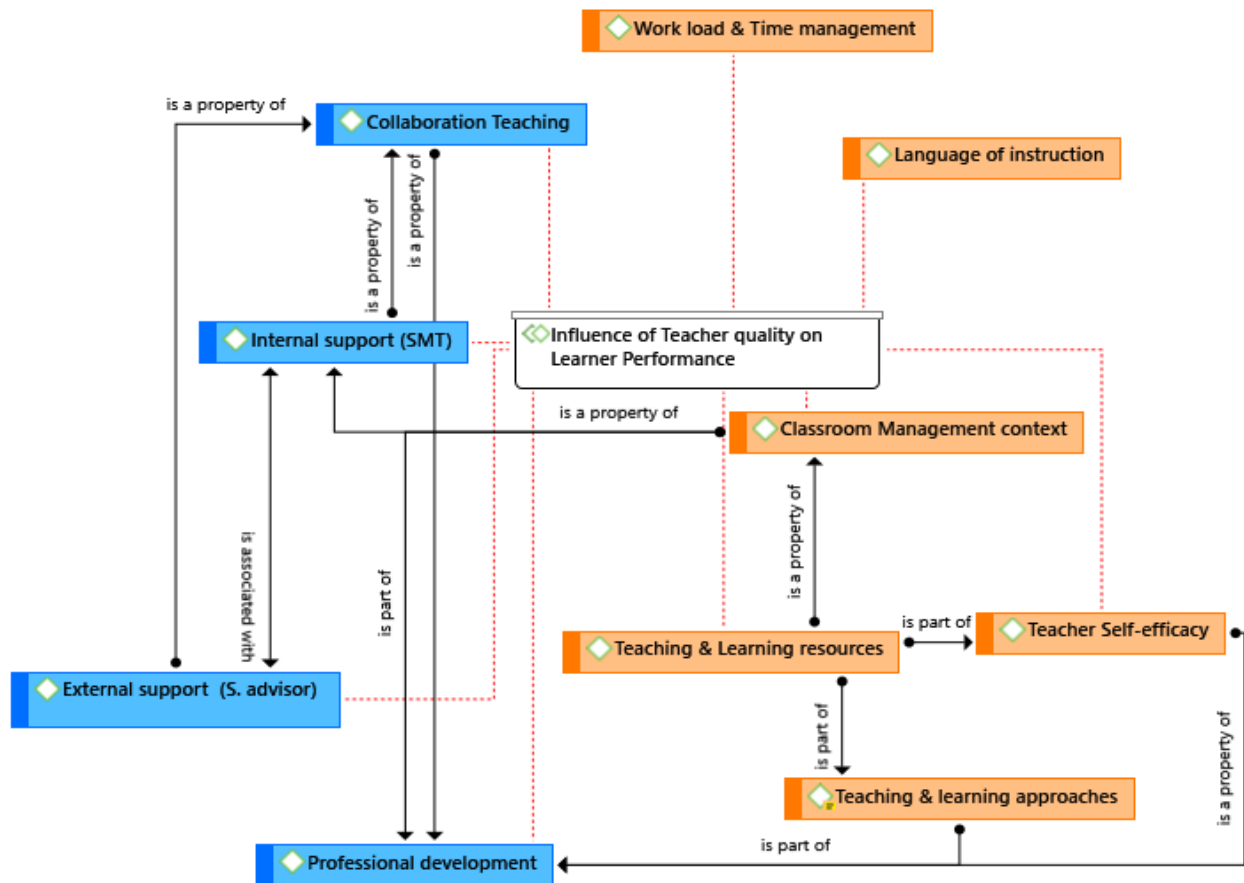

Figure 1. Factors Influencing Effective Teaching and Learning

From the figure above, it is observed that there is a holistic interplay of variables or contingency factors to enhance teaching and learning. These contingency factors though interrelated were shaded using orange and blue to indicate different forms and levels of correlation. Though variables like workload and language seem to stand in isolation, a further interpretation could guide the researcher to an early conclusion. That is, over 4 of the variables point to teacher professional development

rather than teacher quality or self-efficacy. The data obtained per different variables were analysed and presented below with the aid of the contingency theory.

Teacher Professional Development

Organisational management influences beliefs, opinions and approaches towards enhancing positive outcomes. In schools as organisations, there are essential activities like professional development for teachers which can empower the teacher's teaching ability while minimising the threat of under-performing teachers. Some professional development activities obtained from the findings include effective monitoring of especially novice teachers by both internal and external mentors through constant meetings and participant observation, organising workshops and circuit meetings as well as ensuring teachers' participation in intensive camps.

In a one-on-one interview, a participant acknowledged that an instructional leadership role was diverse because "one has to be a psychologist, a parent, a teacher, and a lawyer in trying to raise the curiosity of the learners" (T2S3). This suggests that teaching entails multi-functional activities which require some degree of training through intensive teacher development programmes. In the Department of Education, it is expected that at the level of the district, the subject advisor is looked upon by teachers as the subject specialist. Therefore s/he is expected to make regular visits to the school to ensure that policy implementation through teaching and learning takes place. As affirmed from the teacher's perspective,

> *It is the responsibility of the subject advisers to consult with them by regularly visiting the school to understand the challenges that the school encounters regarding teaching and learning and then look for solutions (T1S1).*

Therefore, the monitoring role of the subject advisor remains imperative because besides offering professional support service (PSS), there is also a teacher development centre (TDC) that offers extra training for the teachers. Despite this, the other regrettable feature of monitoring as part of professional development is that there are not enough instructors for the majority of rural and township schools, making the internal curriculum monitoring process impracticable. The statement "I cannot monitor myself" (T4S4) made by one of the participants must be taken seriously by stakeholders, who should make regular school visits and, where appropriate, give principals and HoDs full authority to oversee the execution of the curriculum. Given the above, another participant pointed out the following:

> *We do have a teacher development centre (TDC) here which is responsible for teacher training. Now in terms of training and development, we rely on teacher development programmes (P1S4).*

Additionally, participant H2S4 emphasised that these training workshops were not intended to train individuals on becoming teachers but rather to provide ongoing training to refresh teachers as well as furnish them with new strategies of teaching and learning. A synthesis of empirical findings with existing literature according to Carl and Strydom (2017) suggests that due to the unavailability of physical resources like funds, staff development programmes which are provided are irregular and often take the form of crash courses to familiarize teachers with current policies for implementation rather than the actualisation of teaching and learning. Hence, the contingency theory plays a role in this study on the basis that professional development as an external contingency factor affects the quality of teaching and learner outcomes.

Support and Collaborative Teaching

The support of learning and collaborative teaching as observed in the figure above are among the most interrelated and unique activities that can assist a teacher to facilitate teaching and learning for successful learner performance. In every educational environment support and collaboration amongst all stakeholders within and outside of the school is of paramount importance. Regarding internal support and collaboration as seen earlier, it often comes in the form of moral and financial support. During an interview, the following means of support and collaboration were identified: internal collaboration with the School Management Team (SMT), the formation of WhatsApp groups to facilitate communication among teachers and collaboration with parents who double as members of the School Governing Body (SGB). To one of the participants, therefore, though there is some level of moral and financial support received from the SMT through the principal as the curriculum leader, it is always insufficient:

> What I am trying to say is that the support I am getting from both the principal and deputy and to some extent, HoD is not that much or impressive enough. But the principal is trying to avail himself almost every Saturday during our extra lessons with the grade 12 for moral support (T4S1).

Similarly, to T2S1 the principal often compensates teachers who choose to organise extra lessons over the weekends with money for petrol. It remains clear that organising extra lessons is often voluntary usually without any form of monetary gain. In this manuscript, one identifies the role and importance of collaborative teaching, but more especially curriculum leadership which calls for plans to be executed to achieve the said objectives. However, it is important to reiterate the role of contingency theory which emphasises the role of variables like motivation as a form of support to facilitate the work of teachers rather than depending on their self-competence alone. This is further in line with Tabe et al.'s (2021) suggestion that the principal is at the centre of school management and as such works in close collaboration with other members of management and governance like SMTs, SGBs and teachers to enhance teaching and learning.

Externally, an important kind of support is collaboration with teachers from neighbouring schools. External support takes the form of inter-school teaching, the Professional Support Forum (PSF), Integrated Quality Management System (IQMS) and script moderation. Moreover, neighbouring schools based on geographical location support each other using collaborative teaching of challenging topics as well as sharing resources like previous question papers. As picked up from the different participants, teachers prefer to deal with their challenges in teaching by networking with other neighbouring schools rather than involving a professional like the subject advisor who also has as part of his or her responsibilities the role of supporting teachers in that regard. That explains why one of the participants says:

> When we are at the PSFs people don't want to talk, they will just keep quiet. They can't even ask a question despite knowing very well that they have problems in particular areas of their subjects (H1S3).

Thus, as district representative of the department, besides assisting teachers in integrating ICT into teaching and learning as indicated by Chigona (2017), it was verified that it is equally the responsibility of the subject advisor to visit under-performing schools and assist with problematic topics through workshops that could either take the form of PSF or IQMS. Unfortunately, novice teachers who mostly need these forms of support fail to make maximum use of them.

Teaching and learning resources

The teaching and learning resources as part of the processes that contribute to the enhancement of learner performance are made up of both human resources in terms of personnel and learning resources in terms of LTSM. The human and learning resources in this context are attributed to contingency factors such as the availability of teachers to teach in rural areas and the availability and use of material resources such as textbooks, funds and classrooms to accommodate learners. While some participants lamented the lack of LTSM, others expressed a high degree of pleasure. However, for others, the issue is one of inadequate resource management. In other words, this situation varies from one school to the other. A participant expressed anger during an interview:

> *Sometimes we can spend about half a year without textbooks, and they will be saying they are waiting for the department to send the books, but it takes time for them to arrive* (T4S2*).*

This however proved to be contradictory when another participan,t though acknowledging the unavailability or timely delivery of textbooks, added that the problem with most schools was mismanagement of the resources in that some of the learners do not return the textbooks (P1S2). In an interview the participant reiterated that:

> *The department tends to distribute equally; however, as you know even though on paper it's supposed to be equal, we have observed that in the urban areas, there are more resources than in the rural areas for several reasons including mismanagement.*

An analysis of the views of different participants further supports the notion that resources are distributed evenly and fairly, apart from the fact that for fee-paying schools, extra allocation of resources by parents through the SGB is made available to augment what the school already has. Unfortunately for most schools in and around township areas, they have access to only one resource which could jeopardise the quality of teaching and learning. Hence Du Plessis and Mestry (2019) recognise that there is a strong likelihood that learners' poor performance is caused mostly by a lack of access to resources. This particularly buttresses the argument that teacher quality alone cannot determine the teaching and learning outcomes but rather a combination of the different contingency factors.

There is however a huge disparity in the availability of teachers and the lack of PCK of staff. Of course, this reflects the danger learners encounter because the classroom where learning and teaching should take place has been transformed into a training ground for novice teachers in most schools in and around rural areas. In corroboration of the findings, Du Plessis and Mestry (2019) say that teachers often lack the zeal to take up positions in rural areas. This dissatisfaction is supported by a participant when he says:

> *The issue is we have a serious challenge with teachers across the subjects as most of them did ordinary BA or BSc whereas the subjects need to be desired in terms of discipline as a teacher* (P1S1).

Therefore, besides the implementation of policies formulated at the level of the department, the SGB and SMT ought to take up the responsibility to facilitate the work of teachers by taking into consideration contingency factors like teaching qualifications and experience during recruitment.

Teacher Self-efficacy

Another highly contested area closely related to the previous one is that of teacher self-efficacy and quality. Raised by both teachers and principals the point of departure takes the form of blame-shifting by teachers to learners over the cause of

poor performance, the lack of passion for learning and the fact that teachers themselves live some distance away from their place of work. Strongly associated with the attitude of teachers in blaming learners for their poor performance is teachers' lack of PCK. Interestingly, though a teaching and learning theory like the humanism learning theory empowers learners to have control over their learning and be accountable for their outcomes, it equally highlights the fact that this cannot take place without the involvement of teachers who must give learners the direction they deserve. Therefore, instead of blame-shifting, teachers should take equal responsibility for the poor performance of learners where applicable. In an interview participant P1S4 said:

> *They will be frustrated and always blame the learners. But when we account at the provincial level, they say you mustn't say anything about the learners, talk about yourself.*

The phrase "what did you do right or wrong as a teacher to help your learners" remains quite inspiring. This is because, although teachers require support from other stakeholders like the SMT and SGB alike to enhance their teaching and learning ability as well as professional development, they can determine to what extent positive outcomes could be reached by implementing their knowledge of quality teaching strategies which they acquired through the years. Thus, besides creating a relationship between school processes and outcomes, it is the responsibility of the teacher to be aware of internal and external contingency factors that can impact learner performance through a commitment to their work. This correlates with a hypothesis by Wennegren (2016) that the starting point for improving teaching and learning in the classroom is when the teachers begin to take responsibility for the learning outcomes of their learners which entails changing their attitude from one which blames their situation on external factors to one in which they feel in control and able to

improve by being innovative and exhibiting positive energy.

The classroom management context

Among the various responsibilities of a teacher is the need to ensure that their classroom is well organised and ready for teaching and learning to take place. The question relating to this variable was particularly for teachers and HoDs who were directly involved in teaching and learning. It has over the years been a common cause for concern for schools in and around township areas to be suffering from the problem of overcrowding (Lauermann & König, 2016). Overcrowded classrooms do not only impact teaching and learning but could equally negatively influence the performance of learners. During one-on-one interviews, participants spoke extensively of their dissatisfaction resulting from overcrowded classroom situations and how teachers struggle to address this. One of the participants said:

> *At times it frustrates you because you're having a class that is full to the brim and you cannot take full responsibility because grade 12A is merging with 12B due to the lack of classrooms. So, you cannot have time to fast-track learners unless during extra classes (T1S3).*

Under such circumstances as mentioned above, the teaching and learning approach would likely need to adapt which would not be beyond the reach of a teacher who has undergone full professional development and training. This explains why besides content delivery, having proper PKC of a subject which entails adequate preparation emotionally and psychologically before getting into the class is of the utmost importance. To participant P3S4, proper preparation serves as *"a starting point to motivate the learner because the learners are being motivated by the way knowledge is imparted to them"*.

The above submission depicts the role and importance of the contingency

theory in a study of this nature where teachers are expected to impart knowledge even amid contingency factors that may work negatively against their teaching and learning practice. Thus Lauermann and König (2016) in cognisance of existing classroom management problems say that despite having received extensive pre-service training, teachers are still reported to be underprepared in classroom management and behavioural intervention strategies. A step deeper into the problem of teaching and learning from a comparative point of view according to another participant P2S2 was:

> *You won't see a white teacher in the camps, like spring camps or autumn camps. But you will see black teachers there with uncompleted ATP's (Annual Teaching Plans) and I am expected to go back to that topic whereas we are here to revise what has been done so that it must be assessed.*

Consequently, rather than the issue of race, what the author finds thought-provoking in the above allusion is the issue of self-discipline and observing the code of conduct by teachers in attaining quality teaching and learning which has an impact on learning outcomes. It is important that teachers continuously undergo professional training for as long as learner behaviour continues to evolve.

Workload and time management

Another important focus of this paper is on the workload and time management of teachers which negatively influence their commitment to teaching and learning. Data from the various interviews held with the teacher participants suggest that teachers are overloaded with other responsibilities in the form of meetings, training and administrative responsibilities rather than implementing the curriculum in the classroom. Based on the interrelated nature of the variables it is evident that this is one of the areas that could be manageable should there be proper professional

development for the teachers in schools. As such managing the available time for teaching and learning becomes challenging as it requires some degree of training. This is what Jacobson-Lundeberg, (2016) meant when he wrote that the desire to provide quality education to learners required a vital transformational approach in the education system where learners are faced with 21st Century challenges.

Regarding how workload affects teaching and learning and subsequently learner performance, it was clarified during interviews with teacher participants that the problem of workload is not just because of many non-teaching responsibilities, but rather because they have many classes to teach and more than one subject. In an interview with participant H3S4 he said:

> *Teaching more than one subject from Grades 8, 9, 10 and 12 is one of the challenges. I had a case where the teacher taught History from Grades 10-12, English from 10 - 12 and Setswana from Grades 8 - 9, so overcrowding, and over-loading of the teachers.*

This was further complemented by P1 when he said in his entire school with three History classes (Grades 10, 11 & 12), there was only one History teacher who also doubled as a Life Science educator. This speaks of the urgency to train, certify, appoint and redistribute teachers, across schools. The relevance of the contingency theory in this argument lies in the fact that awareness is being created through these identified contingency factors which should be addressed for teaching and learning outcomes to be enhanced. Fortunately for one of the participants, the issue of time is the least of her worries because, though she sometimes absconds from classes she makes up for the time lost. The unfortunate part however is that she must make use of another available time slot which is often very long to complete the ATP to the discomfort of the learners. This is a situation that another participant (T1S4) describes as "pacing oneself" or better still

as explained by Coe, Aloisi, Higgins and Major (2014), rushing at a later stage to complete certain sections of the syllabus.

Therefore, there is a need for the department to facilitate the work of teachers through constant professional development as education continues to evolve. Teachers for their part must not focus on the performance of administrative and managerial responsibilities alone, but also on the creation and implementation of managerial processes (contingency theory) thereby facilitating teaching and learning.

Language of instruction and communication

To begin with, it is important to indicate that the language of instruction and communication are two different areas of interest that were captured during the data analysis process. The problem of language has long been associated with learner performance though with little or no effort towards addressing the conundrum effectively. Language of instruction is a commonly acknowledged challenge to teaching and learning, but this study was able to validate that the language barrier to teaching and learning would hardly be resolved in schools if the primary factor which is the language of instruction and communication is not addressed. Corroborating this idea, Olanipekun and Aina (2014) recommend that there is a prior need for the teaching and learning of English to be improved which can commence with the teachers through professional development courses. This conforms to the analysis that there is indeed a palpable lack of proficiency in the language of teaching and learning for both teachers and learners.

In SA where there are eleven languages of communication, schools through the SGBs must choose their language(s) of instruction. Besides the use of a language of teaching and learning as a matter of policy, mastery of that language requires constant training or usage before both the teachers and learners can achieve mother tongue fluency. Most often, these schools and their stakeholders would go for English as a medium of instruction while making maximum use of their broader communication skills through code-switching. This has become common practice for the 4th industrial revolution (4IR) classroom but the risks for rural schools are usually not considered. An additional justification is on the basis that some of these schools would choose English as a medium of instruction and communication in trying to neutralise the challenge that learners face in the learning process and examinations. A related challenge was identified by Planas and Setati-Phakeng (2014), who suggest that under such circumstances, some stakeholders would turn to focus more on the constitutional obligation of recognising languages rather than the content and its processes. Accordingly, participant H2S2 said:

> *I can say that the main problem with our learners is they don't have a command of the English language. There's this thing that we call code-switching. But most of our teachers code-switch up to 80% or 70% in Setswana[2] and just 30% is English which is a disadvantage to the learners.*

As argued above it may be common practice for most schools to use the mother tongue in teaching and learning at the elementary stage and beyond. This is enshrined in Section 29(2) of the Constitution which accords every South African the right to receive education in the official language(s) of their choice in public institutions where that education is reasonably practicable (Maluleke, 2019). Consequently, the issue of code-switching is often abused by some teachers as indicated above which might result in a negative impact on the examination scores

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[2] Setswana is one of the 11 South African languages used for teaching and learning as directed by the constitution.

and learner performance. This results in dissatisfaction of the teacher participants who believed that learners from rural schools were at a disadvantage when compared to urban schools because their language of instruction which was mostly the home language which was different from the language of testing during examinations. In more specific terms one of the participants said:

> *This is one of the challenges; either you are going to make sure that every learner is allowed to learn in their mother tongue, or you are going to give them English from the very beginning (elementary) so that by the time they come to a higher level, they are ready to learn in English (P4S4).*

In a fusion of findings, however, this study agrees with existing literature such as Olanipekun and Aina (2014) who believe that improving learner performance requires the teaching and learning of the English language to improve. Others like Garcia and Cohen (2011) in their survey involving over 40 countries reveal that language is not a barrier to learner performance as learners still performed poorly even when tested in their home language. Be it as it may, it remains an undeniable fact that the poor language foundation that is laid for the learners at the General Education and Training (GET) phase sets a shaky foundation which goes beyond under-performance from secondary through tertiary institutions where communication among peers and the lecturer is strained.

Teachers' attitude to learning, teaching and other responsibilities.

The attitude of teachers and to some extent learners was observed from two perspectives, namely attitudes to the teaching and learning of certain subjects and secondly towards the execution of other responsibilities. During the interview sessions with the HoDs and principals, they mentioned that some subject areas like social science is often seen as easy to pass or a dumping ground for poorly performing learners in other subject areas and a means to top up the admission point score (APS) for entry into the university. From the foregoing therefore it is almost obvious that the attitudes of teachers contribute to learner under-performance in different forms. In some of the individual interviews it was submitted that,

> *Some subjects like History are simple and therefore do not require so much time to complete the syllabus (T1S2).*

> *Currently, what is happening in most schools with few exceptions is, social science and specifically history is treated as a dumping ground for under-performing learners from other areas (H2S3).*

In further probing this concern, subjects such as Mathematics, Physics and Chemistry were identified by some participants to be difficult subjects that required additional teaching and learning time. This, according to the author, is considered to be one of the contingency factors that prevent a wholehearted engagement of the learners in curriculum delivery. In what seems like a disagreement, Cohen, Ruzek and Sandilos (2018) say that the issue of teaching is dependent on the contingency interactions between teacher and student knowledge, practices, and beliefs, which would likely vary by the content of instruction, and not on the basis that some subjects are easy to pass. Under such circumstances and in acknowledgement of the lack of passion to teach especially in the case of rural schools, the question raised from a stakeholders' perspective is, what could be done to enable teachers to become more engaged rather than having a passive attitude towards teaching? One of the teacher participants interviewed passed the blame onto learners:

They (learners) do not have the passion, interest, and above all the effort, resulting from the fact that they do not plan to study a subject like History at a higher level and therefore under-performance is to be expected" (T3S3).

An analysis of this statement indeed confirms participants' perceptions that Social Science and particularly History is an easy subject to pass. What makes the difference in this instance is how determined the learner is. This explains another view from participants that the ability to pass or fail depends on the learners' mentality to put in twice as much effort as usual, especially for those doing a subject for the first time. It could be deduced from the above, therefore, that it is most likely a common trend for learners to move from a science-oriented background to Social Science and specifically History with the notion that it is an easy subject that one can pass without any real effort.

CONCLUSION

While stakeholders both at the department and school levels continue to ponder the shortage and the need to fill in the gap of teacher shortage in rural and township schools, there is a need to take note of the teachers' current qualifications and the implications for teaching and learning. An investigation by Van den Branden (2016) finds that the assumption that teachers are the cause of under-performance in schools could better be clarified by the view that the quality of an education system cannot be higher than the quality of its teachers. This concurs with evidence within the academic circle that the single most significant means of improving educational systems and learner performance is through outstanding teachers. But how these outstanding

teachers are groomed and developed is also a thing of concern. Moreover, teacher educational qualities progressively come under scrutiny because whatever the teacher does influences the whole process of teaching and learning and subsequently learning outcome. From the theoretical and empirical evidence, the paper determines the extent to which teacher quality influences teaching and learning as well as student learning outcomes.

In identifying the cause(s) of under-performance in schools, emphasis must not be ambiguously placed on the areas of social injustice and especially aspects of the quality of teachers like attitude and self-efficacy. A better response is that prominent questions are raised to try to establish a correlation between the causes, such as how teacher qualifications differ, the reasons behind the differences, the impact on learner performance and what sort of training is required for teacher empowerment. The findings suggest that claims concerning the impact of teacher quality on students' academic performance are indeed not over-emphasised, though reasons are also not limited to that. There is also no systematic correlation between learner performance and the language of instruction. Though teacher quality has been aligned with arguments on teaching and learning and its effect on learner performance, policymakers must come up with a compound solution in an attempt to address these challenges. Therefore, stakeholders must take full responsibility by undertaking drives to enhance teacher development and professionalism which is vital for as long as teaching and learning remain an evolving practice. Another strategy is networking through inter-school teaching to find out how other schools are operating regarding specific subject areas as well as revise the teacher development programme because what you give is what you get.

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