



**Teachers' perspective on their readiness for  
experiences of overcrowded classrooms:  
Reflections from Kenya and South Africa**

**Vol 7, 2025**

## Published By

The Unit for Distance Education, Faculty of Education  
University of Pretoria, Groenkloof Campus  
Cnr of George Storrar and Leyds Street, Pretoria, South Africa  
Web address: <https://upjournals.up.ac.za/index.php/tetfle>  
Email address: [tetflemanager@up.ac.za](mailto:tetflemanager@up.ac.za)  
ISSN 2788-6298 (Online)

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The Teacher Education through Flexible Learning in Africa (TETFLE) and other developing contexts online journal is a refereed, open-access e-journal that publishes original research on distance teacher education in Africa. TETFLE aims to create a platform for researchers and practitioners on glocal matters that relate to distance teacher education on the continent. Publications cover issues of content, pedagogical consideration, technology and management in distance education. Exemplar papers with rigour showing research evidence are most appreciated.

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 **TETFLE** TEACHER EDUCATION THROUGH  
FLEXIBLE LEARNING IN AFRICA  
**JOURNAL**

Official publication of the Unit for Distance Education  
Faculty of Education  
University of Pretoria  
Web address: <https://upjournals.up.ac.za/index.php/tetfle>  
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## **Teachers' perspective on their readiness for experiences of overcrowded classrooms: Reflections from Kenya and South Africa**

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**DOI:** <https://doi.org/10.35293/tetfle.v7i1.5413>



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## Abstract

Governments in sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) have increasingly pushed for Education for All (EFA), however, with little effort to expand the necessary resources, which raises concerns over teachers' abilities to handle overcrowded classrooms. Through the perspectives of Africentric and resilience approaches, this paper explores teachers' perspectives on their training, readiness, and experiences of overcrowded learning environments. It is important to understand their experiences holistically and how teaching processes and learning outcomes are affected. Through a qualitative approach, this study sought teachers' views on their training and how prepared they were for their experiences in overcrowded learning spaces. A purposive sample of 11 foundation phase teachers (four from South Africa and seven from Kenya) were invited to participate in the current study. Thematic analysis was utilised to process the qualitative data collected through focus group discussions, observations, conversational and semi-structured interviews. The findings indicate that teachers perceived lack of acknowledgment to their 'plight' in handling many learners, contrary to official teacher-child ratio. Concerns on teacher training lacking in actual experiences of large classrooms that have diverse learners while using minimal infrastructural provisions emerged. However, teachers' perceptions that difficult circumstances were opportunities for better learning outcomes was indicative of their readiness, being creative in teaching and resilient, while those who perceived large class sizes as overwhelming and having lower learning outcomes were also resilient in their functions as teachers. This study makes suggestions for a holistic approach to addressing concerns of teachers in crowded classrooms which includes teacher training, upskilling, infrastructural development, updating policies in teacher recruitment and peer teaching, resource generation, and use of modern instructional approaches to teaching among others.

**Keywords:** Learning outcomes; overcrowded classrooms; teacher perceptions; teacher readiness; teacher resilience; Africentric perspectives.

## Introduction

Globally, learners' enrolment in schools for basic education is increasing, and most of such enrolment is happening in sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) (Antangana, 2022; Evans & Mendez Acosta, 2021; Fredriksen, 2023). Learners attend schools to gain better life opportunities and become productive humans in their respective countries. Rising from the Dakar Framework for Action of 2000 (Kuroda, 2024), together with the resolutions of the World Declaration on Education in Jomtien conference of 1990, which advocated for education for all (EFA) through increased enrolment, retention, and achievement, most SSA countries responded with an increased focus on learner access to education. There was an increased enrolment of learners from pre-primary to secondary schools, leading to the persistent challenge of overcrowding in classrooms at foundation levels (Fredriksen, 2023; Le Fanu et al., 2022). According to the United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), public schools in rural and urban settings over the years have had a learner-teacher ratio surpassing 50:1 (UNESCO, 2024). This is because, the quest of most SSA countries is to increasingly have a literate, productive population to advance their countries' development through an educated resourceful human capital.

Classrooms are considered overcrowded when they have more learners than the stipulated numbers, depending on individual countries' specifications. Some countries have experienced much higher learner-teacher ratios of 92:1, 87:1, 100:1 and above, examples being Ethiopia, Congo, Chad, Kenya, Malawi, and South Africa (Graham, 2023; Nyathi, 2026; UNESCO, 2024). Although classroom crowdedness raised many concerns with a focus on learners' outcomes, teaching strategies, general learning environment, and policies that drive education, teachers' readiness to handle large crowds of learners (Cummins, 2023; UNESCO, 2024), and their views regarding their work environment challenges are often overlooked. It is quintessential to understand the holistic experiences of learners and their teachers' resilience in overcrowded classrooms, as this affects teaching processes and learning outcomes, especially in specific subject areas such as Mathematics, given their distinct attributes, as alluded to by Baloyi et al. (2023).

Facilitation of teaching and learning in overcrowded spaces have a likelihood of overstressing teachers. In a study conducted in Kenya by Otwate et al. (2025), in South Africa by Meier and West (2020), and Graham (2023), overstressing teachers in terms of classroom management, learner support, instructional processes and assessments



present several challenges ranging from poor school environment, insufficient infrastructure, accommodating a multitude of learners with diverse learning needs, to a general lack of learning and instructional materials leave teachers with little resources from which to fulfil their professional mandate. Consequently, the overstretched teachers develop a negative attitude and neglect their learners, leading to poor learning outcomes. Those whose learners have better learning outcomes are found to creatively reinvent themselves to succeed in strenuous learning environment (Muhati-Nyakundi, 2023). Based on a qualitative study conducted in Kenya and South Africa, this paper explores teachers' perceptions on their training, preparedness, experiences of handling overcrowded learning spaces and resilience through their subjective experiences of handling overcrowded classrooms.

## Literature review

Classrooms are traditionally situated as learning environments where teachers and learners share their experiences, fostering knowledge and a sense of inclusion in the learning process. As much as teachers are responsible for holding facilitative roles in learning activities, overcrowded classrooms potentially hamper their effectiveness. Harlem and Mayer (2019) acknowledge that overcrowded classrooms are a worldwide challenge. However, in most schools within the larger SSA, such are viewed as the norm as the learner population increases yearly in response to high population density resulting from push and pull factors, especially towards urban and peri-urban settings. Nevertheless, the issue of teacher demand and supply is rarely given a focus. According to Madiba (2021) and Mashile (2008), there is a grave concern about the alignment of needs and the retention of teachers in the profession in many African countries. This is because, as the learner population increases, teachers of overcrowded classrooms find themselves teaching subjects in which they are not professionally specialised, leading to overworking, unhappiness, and high attrition from the profession.

Other reasons for overcrowding may include fewer schools serving large communities in sections of urban, peri-urban, and rural areas (Matshipi et al., 2017). Urban areas, being suction areas for migrants who search for better opportunities in life, are constantly under pressure due to the increase in population density, as they lack planning in social amenities that target children. These include healthcare, school expansion coupled with acute shortages of teachers supply both in poor urban and rural communities (Okeke et al., 2016), where politicians push for increases in enrolment in schools that have suboptimal infrastructure (Bolman & Deal, 2008). Although support

in acquiring better resources can be achieved through better policies, planning, better budgetary allocation, and proper utilization of funds at various levels of governance, political influences rarely fit into school funding frameworks, as corruption riddles some of the processes of achieving desired teaching successes.

According to Prew et. al. (2011), there are no accountability structures in place when it comes to political interference in teachers and schools through unfavourable policies such as Universal Primary Education (UPE) and EFA, percentages on transition rates and mismatch between availability of resources and growth demands, and policies related to teacher training, recruitment, placement, remuneration, retention, meeting learning needs of learners as is required by law and in a professional manner (International Task Force on Teacher Education 2030, 2021;, and South African Parliamentary Briefing 2025). For example, some African countries were found to have devolved the functions of financing schools and hiring teachers to local communities to provide free education (UNICEF, 2025). Although this approach could be seen as noble in attempts to involve community participation in teaching and learning of their children, there remains challenges in resource allocation, budget constraints, and poor planning. Consequently, this has led to over-enrolment, overcrowded classrooms, and poor remuneration as parents could not afford salaries for teachers and other staff members, leaving learners and the few available teachers vulnerable (Chumo, 2025).

Additionally, teachers of crowded classrooms require parental support by children learning through homework as learning is not only confined to the precincts of a classroom; however, this often fails. According to Seleka and Masoabi (2024) the reasons for such failure include parents' semi-illiteracy and/or being away for work purposes, lack of motivation due to changes in school curricula, insufficient financial resources to pay home tutors or teaching assistants in community libraries, or even sourcing for volunteers. These add to the burden of teachers not meeting learning outcomes at schools for their learners in overcrowded classrooms. Cross and Atinde (2015) opine that, poor human resources, over-crowdedness and poor learning outcomes for many sub-Saharan countries result partly from entrenched colonial and other historical legacies associated with education systems that marginalised and limited learners' access to education, right from lower levels to tertiary levels which leaves teachers and learners very vulnerable.



UNESCO (2017) acknowledges the existence of policies that support teachers in attaining equitable outcomes for learners who are vulnerable in various African countries. Nevertheless, the unending challenge of overcrowding resulting in massification to meet international and contextualised national policy provisions continues to thwart teachers' efforts on efficacy when faced with a large learner population with diverse learning needs. Massification, though primarily associated with higher education (Msiza et al., 2020), is missing in conversations at lower levels of learning and is rarely given prominence, in comparison to higher levels of education. Although high learner-teacher ratios at basic education levels have a significant impact on learning outcomes, with further implications on learning relationships, interactions, and collaboration for learner involvement, assessments, teacher preparations, among others (Osai et al, 2021; Wilson et al., 2007), it should matter that this issue should be given the attention it deserves. Ijaiya (1999) and Osai et. al. (2021) believe that classroom overcrowding diminishes the quality and quantity of teaching and planning for learner assessments and heightens stress among teachers. Additionally, large learner populations who only access fewer learning resources overuse or damage them as they scramble for access. In such cases, the implications for higher standards of learning outcomes from learners are unattainable and remain elusive in mass education at foundation levels.

Assessment of learning is a critical process in learners' progression from one stage to the next. However, this becomes difficult when there is massification at the basic levels of learning, where the ratio of learners to teachers is high. For example, assessment of learners in overcrowded classrooms in Tanzania found over 90 learners per one classroom teacher, significantly affecting both the teaching and learning processes, leading to deficient performance (Kadio, 2023, 2025; Likuru & Mwila, 2022). Furthermore, limited application and implementation of competence-based curriculum and supportive classroom management practices were found not to be easily used to aid the effectiveness of teaching and learning processes, which was minimized as teachers took on heavier workloads meant for two or more people. In such circumstances, teachers' pedagogical approaches are hampered, which contributed to poor learning outcomes in various subject areas, disadvantaging many learners greatly (Olubunmi, 2019).

Language of learning and teaching (LoLT) in multicultural overcrowded classrooms can present further challenges for teachers. According to Mphalele et al.

(2022), foundation phase teachers in South Africa experience difficulties in teaching mathematics due to the multilingual learners in their classrooms. The mismatch between LoLT and realities of learners' home languages is likely to exclude many in learning processes in overcrowded classrooms (Sibanda & Tshelha, 2025). In such cases, instead of a language being a resource tool in the transmission of language, it becomes a barrier, unless the teacher creatively exercises code switching to lend content to context specific to the practices of translanguaging. In countries that play hosts to refugees in their regions such as Kenya and South Africa, this can present another complexity to teachers' layered challenges of impossible classroom population. As young learners struggle to learn new languages of LoLT in their host countries to an extent of being semi-lingual, bilingual, and multilingual, they may face difficulties with cognitive academic proficiency and many other dilemmas as they try to adjust to styles of teaching (Cummins, 1979; Ndibalema, 2024). These too become teachers' problems if territorial learners are more, and from different countries with different languages. Worse still, if parental involvement is less in supporting learners experiencing difficulties in language transitions of LoLT because of migrating, teaching, and assessing such learners among others can be challenging. Although some may argue that assistive technologies have the potential to support teachers in mediating language barriers in learning and teaching processes in crowded classrooms, the digital divide remains across SSA (Adeniran et al., 2023; Mello, 2025).

## Teachers training in SSA.

The demand for trained teachers for the ever-increasing needs of large classroom population across Africa is not in doubt, especially after the introduction of universal free primary education (UNESCO & Right to Education Initiative, 2019). However, it should be noted that the average proportion of qualified teachers in SSA has decreased as schools continue to recruit untrained teachers and volunteers to meet the learning needs of learners (Bennell, 2025; Schotgues, 2022). It is widely believed that the training of teachers ensures positive learning outcomes as they get equipped with professional knowledge in theoretical and philosophical foundations, varied pedagogical approaches to diverse social, cultural, and complex learning contexts, content knowledge, and curricula design that suit multiple learning situations, among others. Fehrler et al. (2019) believe that not all qualified teachers in SSA guarantee quality teaching and learning outcomes. Skills support and sound practices beyond qualifications are essential to ground teachers in their profession. Furthermore, studies



indicate that teachers in parts of SSA score poorly on their own learners' tests regardless of their training levels, which casts doubt on their mastery of both the content and pedagogical knowledge, let alone how to handle learners in diverse learning contexts including overcrowded classrooms (Bennell, 2025; Geduld, 2019). Therefore, as much as statistics may indicate a high teacher training in countries such as Nigeria, Kenya, Ethiopia and South Africa, the quality of training, placement and support while in-service session and continuing education as lifelong learners in a rapidly changing learning and teaching environment with swelling learner population is an area of growth for resilience in the profession (Muhati-Nyakundi, 2023).

### **Overcrowded classrooms in Kenya.**

Like many other African countries, overcrowded classrooms in Kenya have been attributed to policies such as UPE and Free Primary Education (FPE), which do not extend the capacity to accommodate additional learners and teachers. In 2003, the government of Kenya introduced the FPE, where learners were not required to pay any school fees or extra levies. The push for increased enrolment came with an unprecedented level of over 1.3 million additional learners to the existing enrolment (Republic of Kenya, 2005). Learners' population was raised from 5.9 million children in 2002 to 7.2 million in 2003; by 2010, this figure had risen to 8.6 million (The Teacher Service Commission [TSC] 2015; 2019). This overflow of children in schools where there was a teacher-to-learner ratio of 1:92 was extended to the low private schools as well as those run by the community-based organisations, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), faith-based organisations, and informal schools (Muhati-Nyakundi, 2023; Mutisya, 2020). As the enrolment increase was experienced, the number of teachers was not effectively increased to manage large numbers of learners. Consequently, no new classrooms that were the only learning spaces to accommodate learners were added, leading to overcrowding.

In addition, the cessation of employing teachers with claims of low government budgetary allocation, closure of schools due to insecurities such as the al-Shabaab insurgency in some areas, together with complexities that emanated from unprecedented policies such as delocalisation of teachers which ensures that senior teachers worked away from their immediate home environment (Okutu, 2022), left many learners without teachers due to understaffing. Consequently, this forced the merging of schools and learners into a few classrooms, contributing to large class sizes with fewer teachers. Mugo et al. (2011) reported that the average classrooms had a

teacher-to-learner ratio above 1:65, and Mutisya (2020) further reported an increase to 1:92 due to teacher shortage. Although the Teacher Service Commission (TSC) data (TSC, 2017) projected recruitment of more teachers to 99 045 against an existing number of 56 928, little effort had been made by the year 2023, as there were over 300, 000 registered teachers who were still unemployed, with annual learner enrolment increase exponentially (Nation Newspaper, June 2022). As a result, overcrowded classrooms with very few teachers were directly related to insufficient resources experienced, with poor learning outcomes due to the inability to acquire requisite competencies for progression (Chepkonga, 2017). Additionally, in circumstances where a 100 percent transition policy was applied in schools from one grade to the next, added to the challenges of overcrowding, raising more complex stress experiences for teachers' abilities to achieve the desired learning outcomes effectively. All the above presented both real and potential negative impacts on teachers' wellbeing (Muhati-Nyakundi, 2023).

## Overcrowded classrooms in South Africa.

Classrooms in South Africa are considered overcrowded when the learner-teacher ratio exceeded, which is 40:1 in primary schools and 35:1 in secondary schools (Marais, 2016). According to Venketsamy (2023), overcrowding in classrooms is a reality as there are cases where the learner-teacher ratio goes to as high as 70:1. Although The Centre for Development and Enterprise (2015) prediction was to have 456, 000 teachers by 2023 in order to have a learner-teacher ratio of 31:1 for primary schools and 26:1 for secondary schools, it was evident in 2024 that this was not achieved. Policies such as the Universal Free Primary Education, democratisation of schools, and high repetition rates in Grades 1-3 were cited as responsible for overcrowded classrooms at the foundation phase levels (Department of Education, 2008). In addition, Marais (2016) noted that some classrooms were too small to oversee large learner class sizes, where sound learning initiatives could be experienced. This places extremely high demands on the teachers. Additionally, high repetition rate for struggling learners and new admission of learners in the smaller foundation phase classrooms were found to cause overuse of schools' spaces, overcrowding, inadequate infrastructure, lack of resources including teachers (in-school factors) and other social factors such as: poverty; lack of parental involvement; health and protective concerns; insecurity in communities resulting from service delivery protests and gang violence and recruitment into militia groups which adversely affect teaching and learning experiences (out-of-school



factors) (Department of Education, 2014; Maringa et al., 2025; Ngidi & Ntinga, 2025). Consequently, teachers were predisposed to exceedingly high stress levels.

Stresses associated with overcrowded classrooms have been cited as one of the many reasons teachers are leaving the teaching profession in South Africa for greener pastures. This is because there are few interventions targeting retention of teachers, a situation that has seen as many as 18 000 to 22 000 teachers leaving the profession against 15 000 graduating teachers every year (Simkins, 2015). Bennell (2025), Biyela (2019), and Nyathi (2026) note that high stress levels resulting from overcrowded classrooms are a contributing factor to severe cases of absenteeism, high resignations, psychosomatic illnesses, and other unbecoming behaviours. Such a situation makes the teaching profession unattractive, leading to higher attrition rates, especially for younger professional teachers (Pitsoe, 2013). Shibiti (2020) believes schools have large teacher deficits and a higher learner population that accounts for indiscipline in lower grades. Indiscipline finds its way into higher grades, where learners initiate violence and aggression towards the few teachers available to teach them. Singh (2024) is of the view that under-identification of learners with poly-victimization, a common trend in overcrowded classrooms in primary schools, is part of the complex structural and cultural factors that contribute to learner aggression towards teachers, as there are poor psychosocial support systems, and disregard for effective interventions.

## **Theoretical perspectives**

An integration of Africentric perspectives of social ontogeny, wellbeing, resilience, and constructivism were lenses used in the current study. According to Nsamenang's African social ontogeny, human development is seen in the context of their eco-cultural environment through stratified age cohorts (Nsamenang, 2006). Furthermore, children are expected to be socialised into responsible, intelligent members of their society through a curriculum of personhood facilitated by older siblings, peers, and elders (who include teachers). The curriculum utilised consists of daily tasks that must be accomplished, whether cultural, social, economic, or otherwise, with everyone doing their part, which ensures inclusivity, a sense of community, responsibility, belongingness, and success. This view, according to Chawane (2016) and Tchombe (2019), adds to the overall advancement of the African society, where everyone is viewed as important and has the potential to participate in the flourishing of their people. However, individuals must first acknowledge their roots and be actively engaged in their communities' overall development through their roles. Given the

dynamism of social ontogeny in Africa and the need for children to flourish in society, for the purpose of the current study teachers were considered, in this context, as integral contributing agent to the advancement of their society through socialising and educating children successfully.

Deci and Ryan (2008) view wellbeing subjectively in terms of quality of life, while Ungar (2018), Masten et al. (2022), and Luthar and Cicchetti (2000) view resilience as a process that includes an individual's contextual (both promotive and protective) resources that enable them to navigate challenging life circumstances. Teachers' resilience and wellbeing can be associated with their psychological state that keeps them motivated in challenging circumstances, with a balance between work enthusiasm and work exhaustion (Aldrup et al., 2018). This means that teachers experience negative and positive emotions in their professional lives. Day and Gu (2013) also posit teachers' resilience as maintaining a balance between agency and a sense of commitment in a teacher's daily life as they have exposure to a barrage of challenges in their profession. For them to perform according to expectations of their profession, teachers are required to adapt and resiliently cope with stressors (Boatsi & Van De Merwe, 2024). Some are prone to giving up as others continue extending their services to learners despite the odds against them, which sometimes surpass their negative experiences (Muhati-Nyakundi, 2023). Bradley et al. (2018) and Harcher and colleagues (2021) also believed that teachers' professional work requires constant reflection and adjustments to their competencies despite the challenges they face, and they experience significant positive imbalances where positive and negative emotions co-exist.

Constructivism, which has its origins in Bruner (1961), Piaget (1970), and Vygotsky (1962) perspectives, advocates for learning processes that are actively engaging with teachers as facilitators in stimulating processes that provide experiences that promote knowledge co-construction, collaboration, sharing, and learners working in small groups for better learning outcomes. The experiences teachers facilitate should encourage authentic and multiple perspectives where learners can collaborate and own the knowledge they construct and share with reflexivity (Tam, 2010).

For the purposes of this current study, the teachers' role in their eco-cultural environment as facilitators who are doing their part in laying the foundation of the future of their society through co-constructing knowledge in overcrowded was focused on. The following questions guided this study: a) How did the teachers'



training prepare them to adequately oversee overcrowded classrooms? b) How are teachers experiencing their overcrowded classrooms, and what other training have they received to do so? and c) What keeps them in their day-to-day work of handling the overcrowded learners?

## Methodology

This contextual and exploratory qualitative study sought, in part, the phenomenological experiences of teachers in foundation phase overcrowded classrooms in Kenya and South Africa. This was for the purpose of understanding their lived experiences as they manage the most crucial phases of learning in schooling systems. The participants, who were foundation phase teachers, were purposively sampled from three schools in peri-urban areas of Nairobi, Kenya, and two schools in Johannesburg, South Africa. The peri-urban areas are often associated with large population densities as they are suction zones for migrants from rural areas, often characterised by overcrowded, unplanned informal settlements, that host people of exceptionally low economic statuses and with diverse cultural backgrounds. These areas are not recognised by urban planners, which is also reflected in informal school establishments and in enrolments. The targeted teachers included those teaching pre-primary (PP2) to Grade 3 in Kenyan schools and those from Grade R to grade 3 in South African schools. Eleven teachers participated in the current study, seven from Kenya and four from South Africa. The researcher adhered to ethical considerations. Informed consent was obtained from the participating teachers, who were informed of their right to withdraw from participation without negative consequences. Contact numbers were provided for additional or extended support should any participant require them.

Data was collected through conversational interviews in classrooms during breaks when teachers had time in their busy schedules to participate in the study and observations. According to Swain and King (2022), conversational interviews create a greater ease of communication and often yield more naturalistic data. The researcher observed and took notes on specific aspects such as teacher-learner relationships, management of classroom learning processes, pedagogies used, and teachers' experiences while teaching the overcrowded classrooms. Lingua of *Sheng* (a mixture of English and Kiswahili languages) was used in Kenya, while urban isiZulu was used in South Africa to encourage free expression during conversations with teachers. This was advantageous as it helped in breaking down communication barriers that often lead to loss of information in translation when English is used.

Where translations were required for clarity, especially in Johannesburg where the researcher who was proficient in the said spoken languages, a research assistant who was proficient translated the conversations. Collected data were first transcribed, thereafter the researcher familiarized themselves with the contents, followed with coding and identification of themes guided by Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic content analysis. This was collated with the observation notes.

## Findings

### Teachers' information

As this was an exploratory qualitative study, the findings were not for comparison but to provide insights into teachers' experiences of overcrowded classrooms. The ages of participants in South Africa ranged from 20 to 45 years. This had an impact on teachers' qualifications as they were exposed to different National Qualifications Framework levels at various stages of training. The qualifications ranged from a higher postgraduate certificate in education and one teacher having in-service training in South Africa. The ages of the in Kenyan participants ranged from 25 to 55 years with qualifications including Primary Teacher certificates (P1), Bachelor of Education (BEd) in Early Childhood Development and Education (ECDE), to Master of Education (MED), as indicated in Table 1 below. Pseudonyms were used to report the findings and anonymise the participants in compliance with ethical considerations.

**Table 1. Biographic information of teachers.**

Teacher 'Name'	Gender	Age	Grades	Teacher Training
Teacher 1 (SA)	F	20-25	Grade 1	BEd Foundation phase.
Teacher 2 (SA)	F	40-45	Grade 1	Advanced Certificate in Education (ACE)
Teacher 3 (SA)	F	30-35	Grade 3	Postgraduate Certificate in Education (PGCE)
Teacher 4 (SA)	F	20-25	Grade 2	
Teacher 5 (KE)	F	50-55	Grade 1	P1 Certificate
Teacher 6 (KE)	F	25-30	Grade 3	P1 & BEd



Teacher 'Name'	Gender	Age	Grades	Teacher Training
Teacher 7 (KE)	F	45-50	Grade 2	P1 & Higher Diploma
Teacher 8 (KE)	F	45-50	Grade 1	P1 certificate
Teacher 9 (KE)	F	30-35	Grade 2	P1, BEd & MEd (Incomplete)
Teacher10 (KE)	F	25-30	Grade 3	BEd (ECDE)
Teacher 11 (KE)	F	40-45	PP2 (Deputy Headmistress)	BEd (ECDE)

All the teacher participants in the sample were females, and as observed, male teachers were nonexistent at the foundation phase levels where most classrooms were overcrowded. Table 1 above indicates the age ranges and the professional qualification teachers held.

Classroom learner enrolment as observed in registers and displayed on schools administration buildings ranged between 40 -130 pupils in Kenya, and 21 - 78 in South Africa, against few teachers as indicated in two sample images below from two Kenyan Schools. In Kenyan preprimary (PP2) and primary schools (PS), it is mandatory to display lists of learners' and sometimes staff population. This is not expected of the South African Schools who use registers only.



Figure 1: Two examples of teacher-learner classroom population

## The training and preparation for overcrowded spaces.

Training is important for a profession such as teaching as it equips teachers with requisite skills in handling tasks professionally in their work environment. There was an indication that some teachers were happy to have received training for reasons ranging from being inspired by parents who were teachers, to having role models in their teachers whom they admired.

Teacher 2 (SA):

*... my father was a principal. He is very much part of who I am now. Then, I loved how Teacher Elizabeth taught us and really wanted to be like her. I trained as a teacher and am naturally happy working with many pupils...*

However, some reported that the training did not offer adequate preparation to experience a large learner population in classrooms.

Teacher 6 (KE):

*I knew when I was on teaching practice, there were some schools with many kids. I just wanted to pass with good grades, get employed and earn money. ... It was a shocker when I came to this Kijiji (poor peri-urban area). Reality hit me. These children are way too many to for me (gesturing) one teacher to handle.*

The above sentiments indicate in part a range of experiences and although the teacher was trained, the reality of an overcrowded classrooms was unexpected.

As observed, there was barely any room for teachers to move around and check on learners as they were huddled together in small classrooms. In one case, Grade 1 and Grade 3 learners were in one classroom managed by one teacher, who taught each set of learners in turns. This was disturbing and added to the confusion of learning and class management.

Teacher 1 (SA):

*I have these two grades in here... yho! Only someone like me can survive this madness. ... there is no space, they can real stress. I did not expect this will be what I will deal with, but what to do?*

It also emerged learners from neighbouring counties or countries contributed to the challenges of overcrowding in classrooms



Teacher 3 (SA):

*They are not from here. But they keep coming and we just welcome them, because we love kids. Some are from another country, the home language is not easy for them to learn in, we struggle with them until they read, write and speak.*

Teacher 10 (KE):

*I think we are an international school. There are many others from our neighbouring countries. Anytime one is brought it is like starting all over again...*

A comparison between training and practice on the job suggested some gaps in preparing teachers fully for overcrowded classrooms.

Teacher 10 (KE):

*... there is little to no comparison... I thought I had all skills. ... but for this .... it is different.*

Teachers who had long service reported having started their profession with small numbers of learners and kept adjusting to the numbers.

Teacher 4 (SA):

*... I decided this is my job. I love what I do. Numbers mmmmmh (sighs) .... I evolved, adjusting here and there. Now I am good, and I manage better.*

Teacher 7(KE):

*... in my first posting here, I had a class of 24 pupils... I knew every child by name... things changed over the years. I can't know all these kids by name. I never prepared to teach this number... This has nothing to do with how I trained.*

Teacher 2 (SA):

*This community had less kids at the time I come here... I felt lekker... the kids are many now. ... DSD and DBE used to give us workshops, but not anymore.*

## **Management of classrooms and teacher- learner relationships.**

From observations made, it was apparent that teachers had a difficulty maintaining what was considered good classroom control, sustaining the attention of many students especially after taking break-time snacks, and meaningfully engaging learners in learning activities leading up to lunch hour. There was a challenge in communication, and some teachers had to shout to quieten learners. In other circumstances, they used songs related to what was being taught to help learners follow what the teacher

was communicating. Children danced, others had percussion instruments, such as drumming desks, for a few minutes to gain control of their lessons. This brought some semblance of order and fun to the teaching and learning process for a short while.

Teacher 2 (SA):

*Settling many of these kids in the class needs one who understands how to manage them. Before I start, we do Mickey Mouse things...dance round and round, stand like a banana, chill like a cucumber ... things like that to put them in the mood (of learning). ... they drop from taxis with music in their heads ...this is a problem... we have to make them dance a bit (laughs).*

Teacher 11(KE):

*sometimes it can be trouble ... you get kids scratching each other, fighting, screaming... you solve case upon case wasting teaching time... I have to look for some fun things like singing to break this....*

Other teachers resigned to classroom noises and chose to only contain learners who in most cases were engaged in uncoordinated activities inside the classroom, as they continued to mark their workbooks.

Teacher 5 (KE):

*...I just let them be as I do other things. At least marking is one task done. You shut out noises but still have to be in the middle of it to function... You can't do much.*

It was obvious that, teachers' ability to personalise interactions with learners as they managed learning was hampered by their classroom circumstances. This potentially placed some learners at risk of neglect especially those with learning difficulties. As one teacher expressed:

Teacher11(KE):

*... to be honest, there is no one-on-one... no time, no space to do what I want to do as a teacher or could wish to do with pupils. But we try. I cannot easily know who is weak, who needs help, but again how many can you help ... may be in tests... that's when you know the weak ones, but again for some it can be already late ...*

## Pedagogies used in teaching and learning in overcrowded classrooms.

From observations made, the overcrowded classrooms left few options for teachers to be creative around their teaching and learning approaches, as resources and spaces were limited. Most teachers used recitals, chorales, and memorisation with little



attention to individual learners. The styles of teaching varied from one overcrowded learning environment to another. It was worse where two or more grades were held together in a classroom as one teacher expressed:

Teacher 1 (SA):

*Experience has shown me... I plan my lessons, I have the workbooks, ideas on class activities... something happens with one kid in this section or the other... or several kids, and you are forced to go with what works. Things like groups can't work for some young ones... they lose focus quickly.*

With massification of learning happening in overcrowded classrooms and the pressure of having learners qualify for the next grade level frustrate teachers in using sound pedagogical approaches such as critical thinking, group or pair work and other sound teaching practices especially with the advent of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) which are also unavailable in under-resourced schools.

Teacher 6 (KE):

*... some of the learners need to be given exercises that challenge them. But how do you practice with groups, pair reading, debates, role play, some leading others with so many of them? When will you check each one of them, or each group? ... we don't have fancy equipments like the private schools ...*

Assessing learning is a pedagogical approach. A teachers reported using assessments that disadvantage many learners, which was indicative of how children were not encouraged to operate in higher cognitive functions as this was very demanding on the teachers.

Teacher 7 (KE):

*Tests must be standard; you can have one or two hard questions. ... only the bright learners require that. So, you are forced to think, give easier test and not disadvantage the majority, but again you end up disadvantaging the bright ones.*

## **Overcrowded classrooms as the available workstations.**

A crowded classroom may not be appealing to teachers, however, one participant viewed a workstation as an area where teachers meet their 'clients', as they have very few other choices. It was observed that, foundation phase teachers, in both countries, had to stay in their classrooms unlike the intermediate phases or primary sections

where teachers came into and out of classrooms. Such teachers even shared staff rooms which were located away from their classrooms. For foundation phase teachers to stay in their workstations/classrooms was a means to ensure they keenly monitored children's activities, including their safety and wellbeing during interactions with one another, and during feeding times. Teacher 6 termed this as *"stressful...we work like horses to make it happen, sometimes on a daily basis,... when can you be ready... how can you be ready...all eyes must be out... any naughty kid, any accidents, fighting at food time, any injuries, and parents can sue ... it will be like my name is spoilt, if anything. I answer the queries, not the principal to answer-[able to]... I must be watchful all the time. This is my office where I work, and I am alone"*.

Teacher 3 expressed feeling a sense of duty to the many children she handled and looked forward to interacting with them every day of the week despite tough times. "This is where I work... but some of the things we go through we can't say ... there is this song we sing... "my mother was a domestic worker, my father was a garden boy, that's why I am an educator because education changes the world. So, I ready for them every day here and do it to change their world." Teacher 3 felt she could help change the future of learners by being steadfast in her work. This is because her parents did not have the same opportunity to achieve what she did.

In the same vein, Teacher 3 felt she was teaching the learners for future generation.

*"... I think .... I am a parent; I think of my sister and brother's kids .... I think of my own child, grandchild and that someone is not giving up on them because I cannot do it myself. We don't have much. All these things make me get up to come to school... to this classroom for these kids."*

Teacher 9 also expressed

*"... I can't abandon them, if I do not care who will take care of them? I have made peace with the circumstances..."*

This sentiment indicates a redefinition of teachers' role in a subjective reflection expressed in the way they experienced their learners in overcrowded workstations and the motivation in a continued effort to offer services despite the challenging work environment.



## Experiences of stress and the trickle-down effects on learners.

It emerged from interactions that some teachers struggled with work stresses and mental health. This was attributed to the heavy workload, lack of support from principals and headteachers, inability to get adequate resources, blame games for things gone wrong on learners such as small accidents, and their inability to meet learning targets and datelines especially during assessment time. As one explained, it was difficult to remain in the profession for life, while it was revealed that others found a way around or out of it.

Teacher 3 (SA):

*I have seen the way newly recruited teachers with degrees work with these kids. They are not tough like some of us (who are) veterans. These pupils scare them, ...exam time is demanding, ... if kids fail, they are to answer for it... They just stay a term or two and leave, others abscond, .... It affects learners, and we are left to pick up the pieces ... I keep trying I can't give up on them easily.*

Teacher 9 (KE):

*I never imagined ... that I will teach such for the rest of my life ... no! no! I went back for part-time studies to improve my chances .... It was an exit plan; to at least end up teaching another level... or maybe I combine with other things on the side... because I just feel teachers are not taken seriously. How relevant is it for me doing all this (over working)? ... how motivated can you be?*

Pursuit for personal development seemingly had to do with increased opportunities for a better remuneration, which raises concerns on teacher retention and experiences of neglect despite heavy workload handled in overcrowded classrooms.

Teacher4 (SA):

*The salary makes me feel miserable... It is not salary that makes me teach them but why do people work anyway? ... I have to be strategic, build a name, have something on my cv. Then ... (shrugs). You never know, tomorrow I may be a CEO of my own company, NGO or get a better job. Who overworks for peanuts? ...*

One teacher revealed that male teachers could not handle crowded learners, being overwork and survive on the salaries offered especially in urban settings as it was insufficient to cater for their needs and live a dignified life.

Teacher 2 (SA):

*Unless they have a side gig, the men, shame... this salary alone affects their social life ... it extends to them having funny behaviours ... they avoid families, they are embarrassed, and it affects their conduct. They just quit.*

Teacher 8 (KE):

*We have had strikes for years and nothing much changes in our pockets. ... Teachers owe people... they have loans upon loans... some think they would rather abandon learners, operate bodaboda or go to building sites to hustle around instead of spending so much energy with heavy works to earn abusive salaries ... but again what can you do? Jobs are scarce.*

The above sentiments are indicative of challenges and dilemmas teachers deal with, whether to make decisions based on their continuous experiences of teaching many learners in a crowded environment, to abandon them or to juggle between the two. This can have a direct impact on how they teach the learners.

### Teachers' resilience and wellbeing.

Teachers teaching in overcrowded classrooms are predisposed to experience a poor state of mental health for they are unlikely to enjoy their work experiences. A teacher's mental health can have dire effects on learners' outcomes. However, it emerged that although some felt heightened stress levels, they managed it by looking at the bigger picture of what they do with learners.

Teacher 4 (SA):

*At least I have a job ... if I choose to be depressed because of them (learners) they cannot be well taken care of. So, I have to be intentional in my work by arriving in school.*

Teacher 11 (KE):

*Growing up I saw teachers as very important people...I believe I am important doing an important job... I am sure the pupils see me as important. I see doctors, lawyers, engineers, farmers, teachers like me in that crowd of learners. That is something to hold on to and I am satisfied.*



## Discussions

Tapping into the social ontogeny perspective, teachers emerged as socialising agents who facilitated learning (apprenticeship) through their daily engagements with learners in difficult contexts. They also appeared agentic in looking for ways to keep themselves motivated. Teacher training not only lacked preparation in actual experiences of overcrowded classrooms, it also heightened their work expectations upon assuming professional duties, in relation to their actual experiences are. Teachers' job readiness notwithstanding, handling overcrowded classrooms has more to do with numerous extraneous factors beyond their control which requires a balance of their resilience and wellbeing.

Teachers 3,4,7 9 and 11 showed a degree of stealth, creatively constructing their teaching and learning activities as sense of duty (in eco-cultural setting of belonging) for their learners' future, those unable to cope left the profession as indicated by Teacher 3. Hence, the need for support and continuous upskilling of teachers adjustments after assuming their professional duties as they experience transitions in expectations of their ideal profession, contextual realities of crowded classrooms and in their teaching processes is not in doubt.

Work pressures exist as there is a lack of teachers with adequate skill sets that supports their learners' access to quality education at the foundation phase levels in crowded classrooms both in Kenya and South Africa. Although teachers' readiness through training requires that schools should be prepared for them in terms of infrastructural support, there is need to retain teachers and their learners in favourable working conditions. West and Meier (2020) opine that overcrowded classrooms, teacher shortage, and resources must be reimagined as they are not a phenomenon that will easily be wished away. The possibility of neglecting learners with an under-established teacher-learner relationship cannot be easily sustained, as this predisposes learners to school dropout, petty-to-serious social vices associated with peri-urban settlements which is mostly blamed on teachers ineptitude (Muhati-Nyakundi, 2017, 2019). According to Anderson (2023), addressing teachers concerns of overcrowded classrooms requires a holistic approach in their broader education system, its policies, and how they are directly affected in their teacher training and preparation for their professional functions, contexts, and diverse learner population.

Sound communication with cross-territorial learners in LoLT, both in South Africa and Kenya, adds to layered complexities of overcrowded classrooms. Although

this is rarely thought about, it presents heavy challenges for teachers and learners. For example, the home languages used in South Africa as LoLT and language of conversation and competencies (LoCC) at foundation phase level, and also the official language Kenya which is English and LoCC which is Kiswahili poses a significant challenge on academic proficiency. Policy in both countries suggest that learners be provided with access to education without discrimination (Engelbretcht, 2020; Skelton & Mutu, 2024). However, the language becomes a barrier and teachers who may not mediate French or Arabic language speaking children, as in the case for some schools in Kenya, or Portuguese language speaking children, as in the case of South African schools become frustrated. Consequently, learners experiencing barriers learning in an unfamiliar media of instruction in multicultural, overcrowded classrooms may not be easily identified. This is likely as a result from limited interactions that do not foster robust stimulating activities that call for critical language engagement. As Prayitno (2023) opines, communication and engagement between learners and their educators are impeded more when language is the problem. A careful navigation is usually required, especially if teachers are not equally conversant in their learners' languages. Additionally, sound and modern pedagogical approaches using technology cannot easily be explored in crowded classrooms, as teachers resort to 'standardised' approaches for all children, especially now that there is a push for inclusive crowded classrooms. This to a great extent, compromises the quality of teaching and learning outcomes.

Young, newly employed teachers leaving the profession signals a worrying trend of not producing enough teachers for the foundation phase level in the two countries. Additionally, the absence of male teachers in overcrowded classrooms denies learners specific social skills and the construction of certain knowledge related to males. The teacher attrition rates mean that younger teachers miss out on critical skill sets from older colleagues who have maturer wealth of experience in the profession. Gaps in mentorship and modelling as a natural apprenticeship (Nsamenang, 2006), needs reimagination and must be bridged to save the profession, and sound learning at foundation levels. This is likely to help in learners' personhood and for teachers to play their part in their eco-cultural environment ensuring the co-construction of knowledge is uninterrupted. In the same vein, issues of disruptive, chaotic, and indisciplined learners, safety concerns, feelings of inadequacy, and work-related stress may be well managed with some help for teachers to feel valued by the community or society they serve (Muhati-Nyakundi, 2023). The current study therefore, suggests



that, supporting new teachers by pairing them in peer/co-teaching activities with long serving colleagues, together with the support of sound instructional materials through the school management teams as is the case in South Africa, and board of governors as is the case in Kenya, can boost their confidence, self-worth, sense of belonging and resilience to have a longer service period in the profession. In this regard, newly recruited teachers may likely feel better accommodated when presented with overcrowded classrooms, which may not necessarily be stressful.

As challenges of demand, supply and retention of graduate teachers seem to persist, the burden borne heavily by teachers who remain in the profession should be re-imagined. Governments must have sustainable solutions that are attractive and incentivising to step up to the demands of teaching services. The improvement of learning environment, progressive trends in teacher-learner-parent relationships, budgetary matters, security, and infrastructural adjustments, such as adopting open classrooms instead of small, four-walled, overcrowded rooms, can contribute to better experiences of knowledge sharing, co-construction and in teaching and learning for large class populations. Modern assistive digital technologies can provide a much-needed creative pedagogical introduction to stimulate learners, as it keeps teachers motivated and opens new horizons in learning processes for those who are trained and ready for such. Furthermore, there are very few home languages in Africa that have a digital presence for utilisation in overcrowded learning environments. This is an opportunity that can be tapped into and not be a challenge.

Teachers who have handled heavier workloads, and for many years have shown unique tendencies of resilience, defy the odds as a show of contributing to societal advancement. An understanding of such a more profound sense of professionalism akin to a 'calling', together with their feelings of a sense of responsibility and finding meaningfulness in what they do, is an important area for further exploration in research. The participants' belief that, the future of children in Kenya's and South African was a shared responsibility of communities with teachers doing their part as others did theirs is an explanation of their determination and possessing good abilities to exercise perseverance despite apparent threats to their wellbeing. Makoella (2021) and Muhati-Nyakundi (2023) believe that more research is needed to reveal other gaps that exist in supporting teachers who face challenges in overcrowded inclusive classrooms for positive learning and teaching experiences. Without research evidence from wider empirical data, important issues affecting teachers' training, readiness to

handle crowded learners at lower levels including preschools are likely to lead to higher teacher attrition in the larger SSA as they encounter negative experiences (Unguanyi, et al., 2021). Additionally, sustaining teachers throughout professional practices, whether in classrooms with a low or higher learner-educator ratio, is important and should not be ignored, as schools remain crucial learners' knowledge co-construction, developmental and nurturing sites.

## **Limitations and suggestions.**

The current study was not intended for generalisation as the sample was limited in number, consisted of two geographical areas, and the findings were based on subjective data. Due to logistical constraints, multiple data which could have been used to triangulate and enrich the study outcomes were not collected. However, it is insightful and can be used to spur future expanded studies. Teachers' training notwithstanding, does not guarantee the necessary competencies for overcrowded classrooms, job satisfaction, and quality skilled practices, since working in overcrowded classroom environments requires more deliberate investment in upskilling and continuous on-the-job training for more progressive pedagogical approaches that foster better learner co-constructive engagements. Additionally, having assistant teachers to pair up in class management, interactive instructional materials, and more improved physical infrastructure, among other improvements, support optimal teaching and learning processes. This can also help teachers be more resilient and feel cushioned against work-stress-related challenges that compromise their wellbeing. However, a focus on policies of training, recruitment and retention of teachers, those that prioritise enrolment and maintenance of infrastructure, support for school management boards, and engagement with all stakeholders are required to enable teachers to have positive experiences and offer their best services in overcrowded classrooms. Overcrowded classrooms should not only just be viewed negatively and associated with negative experiences. Instead, the opportunities they present can be explored as this phenomenon is unlikely to be erased in Kenya and South Africa, and the larger SSA. Otherwise, such classrooms, particularly at the foundation phase levels may remain unattractive for younger teachers in the profession, and unmanageable for the long-serving ones.



## Acknowledgements

The author acknowledges the contribution of all the participants in this study. The author also acknowledges Mildren Lang'o for her assistance in data collection in Kenya.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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