

## ***Educators' Perspectives of Emotional Support in South African Schools Amid COVID-19***

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The IAFOR Conference on Educational Research & Innovation 2022  
Official Conference Proceedings

### **Abstract**

The COVID-19 pandemic disruption in South Africa resulted in the Department of Basic Education (DOE) implementing measures to salvage teaching and learning in primary and secondary schools. While these measures are critical to strengthen teaching and learning in schools, the emotional well-being of educators who are drivers of teaching and learning are given less attention which can have serious consequences on the well-being the learners they are teaching. Evidence suggests that educators who lack intrapersonal, interpersonal and stress management skills or have not been developed to acquire these skills can impact negatively on learning and the overall emotional and social competence of their learners. Within this context, this study explored the primary educators' perceptions on the effects of the pandemic on the emotional well being and emotional support provided by the DOE. Conservation of Resources (COR) Theory informed this study. A case study was conducted using semi structured interviews. Overall, 30 educators were sampled as participants using a purposive sampling technique. All interviews were recorded, transcribed verbatim, and analyzed for thematic contents using the thematic content analysis framework. The findings revealed that the DOE gave minimal emotional support to educators and instead increased their stress levels. It is recommended that the DOE should address the emotional development for primary educators focusing on stress management and intrapersonal skills to ensure the improved quality of teaching.

Keywords: Emotional Support, Conservation of Resources Theory, Stress Management, Intrapersonal Skills, Educators

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## **Introduction and Background**

The COVID-19 pandemic disruption is a global phenomenon that forced most countries to shift their education systems in order to combat the risks brought by the disruption. In South Africa the disruption also resulted in the Department of Basic Education implementing measures such as, modification of the curriculum and transition to online teaching, using radio and TV programmes to salvage teaching and learning in both primary and secondary schools. While these measures were implemented the role of educators also changed and extended. The educators' role also expanded to that of an academic and non-academic support. Part of this nonacademic support role involves providing social and emotional support to students (Philipo, 2009). The change and expansion of the role of educators brought by COVID-19 increased rates in teachers' stress and burnout. In most countries including South Africa, educators were called upon to support students' academic development and well-being throughout this shift, while also navigating adversity and stress in their own lives (Collie, 2020). These, as (Ransford, 2010) alluded, can in turn significantly influence educators' effectiveness.

Furthermore, while the measures to combat the effects of COVID-19 are critical to strengthen teaching and learning in schools, the emotional well-being of educators who are drivers of teaching and learning are given less attention which can have serious consequences on the well-being the learners they are teaching. More so, in South Africa the context of which this study was located, many primary school educators have not had the benefit of being trained or developed emotionally (Engelbrecht, 2004). Evidence suggests that educators who lack intrapersonal, interpersonal and stress management skills or have not been trained or developed to acquire these skills can impact negatively on learning and the overall emotional and social competence of their learners (Clipa, 2017).

Various studies examined and reported on the effects of COVID-19 with regard to teaching and learning and professional life of educators globally (Kaden, 2020; Ashbury & Kim 2020) thus providing insight into how the pandemic affected the Educational environment. However there are few studies on effects of the pandemic on the emotional well-being of educators and emotional support provided by the Educational Departments. This study made an effort to close the gap by examining primary school educators' perceptions on the effects of the pandemic on the emotional well-being and emotional support provided by the Educational Department in one Province in South Africa.

Studies on how COVID-19 affected the emotional well-being mostly focused on students and parents and not educators. The study by Ozer (2020) provided insight into how the Turkish government established a psycho-social support system involving specific helpline and guides in order cope with the negative psychological effects of COVID-19. The psycho-social support focused on students and parents. The support involved psychological counselors responding to the helpline calls to help the students and parents to cope with undesirable effects of COVID-19.

Although the study by Groarke, et al.(2020) focused on emotional well being of people in general, its findings suggested that supportive interventions should prioritize younger people and those with mental health symptoms leaving. Educators also grapple with issues of trauma, grief and loss in both their professional and personal lives that affect their emotional well-being negatively. This indicates that educator emotional well-being also needs attention, to improve school performance. Konu, Viitanen, and Lintonen (2010) as cited by Simmomns, et

al., (2019) emphasized that without teachers' well-being it is hard to build up students' well-being." Thus it's vital to provide emotional support to educators.

### **Emotional Support and Social Support**

Emotional support can be defined as the verbal and nonverbal processes by which one communicates care and concern for another, offering reassurance, empathy, comfort, and acceptance. It may be a major factor contributing to the effectiveness of self-help groups, within which members both provide and receive emotional support, and to attachment, in which the caregiver provides emotional support to the child. (APA Dictionary of Psychology). House, et al., (1988) classifies emotional support as a component of social support. Social support involves other categories such as informational, and tangible support. Social support may be regarded as resources provided by others, as coping assistance or as an exchange of resources (House, et al., 1988). Moreover, informational support involves support in the form of advice-giving, or in gathering and sharing information that can help people know of potential next steps that may work well. Tangible support includes taking on responsibilities for someone else so they can deal with a problem or in other ways taking an active stance to help someone manage a problem they're experiencing. These social support categories were necessary for providing insight into emotional support in this paper.

### **Theoretical Framework**

In understanding the effects of COVID-19 on the emotional well-being of educators and emotional support given to educators during COVID-19, the study utilized the Conservation of Resources (COR) theory as a lens. COR theory is both a stress and motivational theory that outlines how individuals and organizations are likely to be impacted by stressful circumstances, what those stressful circumstances are likely to be, and how individuals and organizations act in order to garner and protect their resources. The COR theory postulates that stress is likely to occur when individual resources are threatened, when resources are lost and when individuals invest resources and do not reap the anticipated rate of return (Hobfoll & Shirom, 1988).

Individual studies and meta analyses have found COR theory to be a major explanatory model for understanding the stress process at work. Applications of COR theory to burnout, respite, and preventive intervention were detailed. Studies have shown that resource loss is a critical component of the stress process in organizations and that limiting resource loss is a key to successful prevention and post-stress intervention (Westman, et al., (2004). In the context of this study the primary educators had to make a rapid transition from normal to multi-modal teaching. There are individual resources that were threatened and lost due to COVID-19 that caused stress. Understanding primary educators' perceptions of the effects COVID-19 had on their emotional well-being and the emotional support given to them justify the relevancy of the COR theory for this study.

### **Principles of the COR Theory**

#### **Principle 1. The primacy of resource loss**

The primacy of resource loss is based on the notion that that resource loss is disproportionately more salient than resource gain (Hobfoll, 2012). Simply put, it is psychologically more harmful for individuals to lose resources than it is helpful for them to

gain the resources that they lost (Halbesleben, et al., 2014). This principle as Halbesleben, et al., (2014) assert, has several important implications. It suggests that losses at work will have more impact than similarly valued gains (e.g., a loss of pay will be more harmful than the same gain in pay would have been helpful). It also suggests that employment-related resource gains will take on greater meaning in the context of resource losses.

## **Principle 2. Resource Investment**

The second principle of COR theory is that people must invest resources in order to protect against resource loss, recover from losses, and gain resources. These two principles, then lead to 3 major corollaries of COR theory and one critical finding that has emerged from the literature and which follows from these 3 corollaries.

**Corollary 1.** Those with greater resources are less vulnerable to resource loss and more capable of orchestrating resource gain. Conversely, those with fewer resources are more vulnerable to resource loss and less capable of resource gain.

**Corollary 2.** of COR theory states that those who lack resources are not only more vulnerable to resource loss, but that initial loss begets future loss. This is a critical aspect of the theory, because it predicts that loss cycles will occur quickly and powerfully. Further, at each iteration of loss in the sequence, the cycle will gain in strength and momentum.

**Corollary 3.** Mirrors corollary 2, stating that those who possess resources are more capable of gain, and that initial resource gain begets further gain. However, because loss is more potent than gain, loss cycles will have more impact and more accelerated than gain cycles.

Finally, it both follows theoretically, due to the lifelong nature of loss and gain cycles across people's lifespans, that resources (or their lack) tend to aggregate in what we have come to call resource caravans. Thus, resources aggregate in resource caravans in both an immediate and a life-span sense.

## **Research Aim and Research Questions**

The aim of this research was to examine the educators' perceptions on the emotional support amid COVID-19

This research addressed the following questions:

- What are the educators' perception of the effects of COVID-19 on their emotional well-being?
- How do primary school educators perceive the emotional support amid COVID-19?

## **Research Methodology**

The study adopted the qualitative case study design with an aim to provide an in-depth understanding about the impact COVID-19 had on educators' emotional wellbeing and support measures provided by the department of education In South Africa (Creswell, 2010). The study also adopted an interpretive paradigm in order for researcher to understand the individual primary school educators and their interpretation of the world around them (Cohen, Manion & Morrison., 2007). The interpretive paradigm also enabled researchers remain within the boundaries of the "frame" to cover the main features of the research design

## **Sampling**

Non-probability sampling in the form of purposive sampling was used to select 30 educators as participants for this study. For the purpose of this study I employed purposeful sampling, as it is appropriate to research where the investigator wants to discover, understand and gain insight and therefore must select a sample from which the most can be learned (Merriam, 2017).

## **Data collection Instruments procedures and analysis**

Data collection instruments involved semi-structured interviews. Educators who teach in the primary schools, were asked to participate in the interview after they had been given information about the study. I used probes to provide a better understanding and obtain deeper information about the effects of the pandemic on educators' emotional well-being and emotional support they received from the DoE. Interviews were conducted over a period of four weeks. Adhering to the COVID-19 protocol educators were invited for telephonic interviews through emails. All participants were assured of strictest confidentiality and that the information they provided would not be divulged to anyone. Each interview was recorded and lasted from 30 to 40 minutes. Thematic analysis as suggested by Creswell (2012) was used in analyzing data for this study. Data were organized and categorized into themes and interpreted accordingly.

## **Results And Discussion**

In examining the educators' perceptions of the effects of COVID-19 on their emotional well-being, it emerged that loss of professional socialization and support, strained professional relationship and anxiety and fear were themes identified from the data analysis.

Firstly the results revealed that educators perceived COVID-19 as having contributed to their loss of professional socialization and support. This loss was as a result of isolation or quarantine and loneliness leading to their emotional well-being being negatively affected. During COVID-19, educators' work routine was disrupted as they had to adapt to rotational system of teaching leading to any form of socialization they had with colleagues diminishing. Furthermore, the encouragement they received when engaging with one another during their planning meetings also decreased leading to stress and burnout. Losing resources such as these as COR theory indicate, became more psychological harmful to these educators .

Secondly the results showed that the pandemic contributed to strained professional relationships. The strained relationships were as a result of school leaders' inability to provide emotional support to colleagues with comorbidities during COVID-19. Educators also perceived the inability of the school leaders to provide emotional support as emanating from their lack of skills. The pandemic brought sudden change in the educational landscape that forced schools to adapt teaching and learning to accommodate the new normal. This exerted pressure on both school leaders and educators to salvage the curriculum. Consequently leading to fear and anxieties they could not managed.

Thirdly, the results indicated that COVID-19, brought fear, panic and anxiety in the teaching and learning environment both to learners and educators. There was a lot of uncertainty as some educators tested positive and nobody knew by then who is next. However as educators they needed to support their learners and one another emotional during these difficult times.

The pandemic has caused substantial stress and anxiety for primary school educators and that mental health and emotional well being impacted their engagement with their learners.

In examining how primary school educators perceive the emotional support in schools amid COVID-19, it appeared that there was inadequate emotional support for educators while substantial informational and instrumentation support were provided.. The results revealed that prior COVID-19 other colleagues and school management teams were sources of emotional support to primary educators in schools. However, amid the COVID-19 these emotional support sources diminished. The expressions of empathy, love trust and care that symbolizes emotional support became inadequate as school management teams were unable to support colleagues with comorbidities. Pandemic brought sudden change in the educational landscape that forced schools management teams to place more work load on the shoulders of colleagues including those with comorbidities in a bid to adapt teaching and learning to salvage the curriculum. Educators also perceived the inability of the school leaders to provide emotional support emanates from their lack of stress management and intrapersonal skills. The school management teams as well as educators lack these skills because they were never developed or trained.

It was also noted that other than emotional support schools were provided with substantial informational support by the Department of Education. Informational support involved offering advice on how to approach a problem as well as useful information and direction (House, 1981). In this study informational support was in the form of the helpline desk and pamphlets distributed in most schools. However informational support may not be useful in and of itself; instead, it helps individuals help themselves (House, 1981). The results in this study revealed that instrumental support consisted of offering tangible assistance or concrete help such as masks and sanitizers tanks stations placed in most of the schools for educators and learners to use in adherence to the COVID-19 protocol.

Based on the aforementioned results, emotional support in South African schools amid COVID-19 seemed to be lacking confirming the view that educators emotional well-being is often neglected. This is corroborated by Sayed, et al,(2021) whose research revealed that educators were also not provided with sufficient psycho-social support to manage their own pandemic-related anxieties. Teachers are a vulnerable population requiring support mechanisms to support both the cognitive and non-cognitive elements of their work.

According to the COR theory, when individuals loses resources at work they are more likely to experience strain in the form of burnout (Hobfoll, 2014). It was noted that educators in this study experienced loss at work in the form of loss of socializing with colleagues (resources) due to isolation or loneliness which in turn impacted negatively on their emotional well-being. Educators also experienced loss in the form of strained professional relationships. The loss of socializing with colleagues and strained professional relationship represent lack of emotional support. According to the COR theory, these are seen valuable resources As the COR theory postulates, when individuals loses resources at work they are more likely to experience strain in the form of burnout and physiological burnout.

Revisiting Principle 1 of the COR theory, which entails The Primacy of Resource Loss, it is noted that insufficient emotional support had greater impact on the educators stress level and the overall emotional well-being. Moreover, resource gains are seen as acquiring their saliency in light of loss which implies that in the context of resource loss, resource gains become more significant. In this study the gain become more significant in the recognition

that the pandemic has caused substantial stress and anxiety for primary educators in schools and that lack of emotional support impacts on the educators' emotional well-being and ultimately their engagement with their learners. Consequently recognizing human value in the form of compassion and care.

### **Implications and Recommendations**

The responses of the participants and the findings of this research showed that were not provided with emotional support during COVID-19 informational and instrumental support was provided instead. It was also determined that the existing developments within the education system are not supporting or developing teachers' stress management, nor intrapersonal skills but are focused on curriculum delivery. The Educational Department should introduce professional development training programmes that equip educators with stress management, intrapersonal and interpersonal skills for resilience and healthy emotional well-being for themselves and their learners. It is recommended that the role of mentoring and coaching in supporting the holistic well-being and ongoing learning and development of educators should be considered. Furthermore Schools should review the role of school based support teams meant only for learners. School based support teams should also be established within schools for both learners and educators..

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