

# Room to teach?



The realities of teaching in South Africa  
and the limits of teachers' professional roles

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Heleen Hofmeyr

RESEP, Stellenbosch University

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# 50%

of surveyed teachers indicated a desire to leave  
the profession.

Hofmeyr et al. (2024)

What makes teaching difficult to sustain?

What do teachers say about their work?

What support would make that work more manageable?

# Listening to teachers

1,513

survey respondents  
across all nine provinces

## Interviews

80 teachers' accounts of the  
demands of daily work

# The learning demands inside the classroom

## 8 schools

50 teacher interviews  
99 lesson observations

Grades 8 and 10 in the Eastern and Western Cape

# Two pressures on teachers' capacity to cope

## **CURRICULUM AND LEARNING**

Low and widely varying learning levels alongside a tightly paced curriculum

## **TRAUMA AND PROFESSIONAL ROLES**

Supporting learners affected by trauma beyond the role teachers are trained for

# Preparation for the classroom

71%

Teaching learners who  
cannot keep up

66%

The teaching load

53%

The number of learners  
in the classroom

# Low learning levels and variation within a class

## Low levels

Many learners have not mastered the knowledge their grade assumes.

## Wide variation

Learners in the same class need different amounts and kinds of support.

# Very low Mathematics marks in one school

86%

of Grade 9 learners scored  
in the 0–20% band  
in Term 2 Mathematics

# Large variation in learning outcomes nationally

4+

**years**

The range of literacy achievement in South Africa by the end of Grade 4

Much of the variation sits *inside* schools

80%

20%

between schools

of achievement variation occurs within schools

# Annual Teaching Plans set the weekly pace

Annual Teaching Plans (ATPs) specify weekly topics and assessments.

Monitoring prioritises keeping up with coverage over checking mastery.

The curriculum assumes knowledge that many learners have not yet acquired.

# Teaching children who are far behind grade level

"We are facing a problem where kids cannot read and write and on top of that the Department will then tell you that you must make sure that the children are passing...."

"I go slowly. I don't try to cover the ATP. We end up lagging behind."

Source: Jaffer, Galant & Hofmeyr (2026)

# The pressure to cover and the need to catch up

## Keep the prescribed pace

Many learners move on without understanding.

## Slow down and revisit the foundations

The class falls behind the required curriculum coverage.

# Remediation spills beyond the school day

68%

of interviewed teachers described  
extra classes for learner support

Catching up becomes additional work outside normal lessons.

“We’ve tried and we’re exhausted.  
We’ve tried afternoon classes.  
Kids are tired. You are also drained.”

34 of 50 teachers. MILAPS interviews, not a national survey.

# Trauma adds demands beyond teaching

In communities affected by violence and traumatic events, learners bring needs that extend beyond academic support.

Teachers encounter those needs in the classroom and can carry the emotional strain home.

“Therapy and teaching pull in different directions, and a teacher told to do both at once can ultimately do neither properly.”

**Barbara Oakley**

# Care can extend beyond teachers' training

Teaching involves care, noticing difficulties and helping learners reach support.

Trauma assessment and therapy require appropriately qualified professionals.

Teachers need someone to turn to when needs exceed their professional role.

# What the evidence supports

A conflict between curriculum pace and learning needs.

Accounts of extra work, exhaustion and emotional strain.

# A workable division of responsibility

## **TEACHERS**

- Establish predictable routines
- Teach classroom participation
- Respond without humiliation
- Notice persistent difficulties
- Make learning accommodations
- Use referral pathways

## **PSYCHOLOGISTS, COUNSELLORS AND SOCIAL WORKERS**

- Assess mental-health needs
- Provide counselling or therapy
- Assess risk within professional scope
- Develop appropriate care plans
- Coordinate care with families and services

Care in teaching includes recognising the limits of one's professional role.

# Real support requires working referral pathways



Clear referral and safeguarding procedures



Access to psychologists, counsellors and social workers



Consultation for teachers supporting affected learners



Communication and follow-through after referral

# Support must address curriculum demands too

Time within the school day for structured remediation

Pacing that allows teachers to respond to learning gaps

A manageable curriculum load

Monitoring that attends to learning as well as coverage

The demands need to match the support

Within teaching

Time and curriculum expectations that allow learners to catch up.

Beyond teaching

Specialist care for needs outside teachers' professional training.

# Thank you

heleenhofmeyr@sun.ac.za