

Exploring Public-School Educators in Navigating Their Professional and Personal Challenges in Lusaka, Zambia: A Hermeneutic Phenomenology

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Abstract: This study aims at public-school educators in balancing their professional and personal challenges. Using a hermeneutic phenomenological approach, the research seeks to understand how educators cope with workload, resource constraints, student behavior, and personal life, responsibilities while maintaining their well-being and professional efficacy.

Public-school educators face numerous challenges, including heavy workloads, inadequate resources, low compensation, and emotional stress. These challenges often lead to burnout, reduced job satisfaction, and poor work-life balance. Despite various policies and interventions, educators continue to struggle, affecting both their performance and student outcomes. This study addresses how educators navigate these issues and develop resilience.

The Objectives was to explore the professional and personal challenges faced by public-school educators.

This study provides insights into the real-life struggles of educators, helping policymakers, administrators, and stakeholders develop targeted interventions. Understanding these challenges can lead to improved teacher retention, mental health support, and enhanced professional development programs.

A qualitative research design employing hermeneutic phenomenology was used. Thematic analysis was conducted to identify patterns and key insights from participants' lived experiences. The study involved 15 public-school educators from Lusaka secondary schools, selected using purposive sampling to ensure diversity in experiences and backgrounds.

It was discovered that educators face significant stress due to workload, inadequate resources, and personal responsibilities. Many rely on peer support, time management strategies, and intrinsic motivation to cope. However, a lack of institutional support exacerbates their struggles.

Public-school educators require enhanced institutional support, improved working conditions, and mental health programs to sustain their effectiveness and well-being.

Recommendations:

1. Implement teacher support programs focusing on mental health and well-being.
2. Provide adequate resources and manageable workloads.
3. Encourage professional development and mentorship opportunities.
4. Bolster regulations that support work-life balance.

Keywords: Public-school educators, professional challenges, personal struggles, hermeneutic phenomenology, work-life balance, teacher well-being, resilience.

I. Introduction

Public-school educators often face significant challenges that impact both their professional and personal lives. These challenges include increasing workloads, administrative demands, student behavioral issues, and societal expectations (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2017). Additionally, educators must navigate their personal lives while maintaining professionalism and commitment to student success (Day & Gu, 2010). Understanding how educators experience and interpret these challenges can provide valuable insights into their well-being and professional longevity.

Hermeneutic phenomenology, rooted in the philosophical traditions of Heidegger and Gadamer, offers a methodological framework. This approach emphasizes the interpretation of personal and collective experiences, allowing for a deeper understanding of educators' struggles and coping mechanisms (Van Manen, 2016). By examining their narratives, this study seeks to illuminate how educators make sense of their professional and personal challenges and how these experiences shape their teaching practices and personal lives.

The significance of this study lies in its potential to inform policy and practice in educational institutions. Understanding the complexities educators face can guide administrators and policymakers in developing strategies to support teacher well-being, professional development, and work-life balance (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012).

Through in-depth qualitative analysis, this research endeavors to provide meaningful insights into the complex realities of public-school educators.

Statement of the Problem

Public-school educators face a complex interplay of professional and personal challenges that impact their well-being, job satisfaction, and effectiveness in the classroom. The teaching profession is widely recognized as demanding, with educators often navigating high workloads, administrative pressures, and the emotional labor of addressing students' diverse needs (Ingersoll & Strong, 2011). Additionally, personal challenges, including work-life balance, financial constraints, and mental health concerns, further complicate their experiences (Beltman et al., 2011). The intersection of these challenges requires deeper exploration to understand how educators interpret and make sense.

Despite extensive research on teacher burnout and job satisfaction (Maslach & Leiter, 2016), there is limited qualitative inquiry into how public-school educators navigate both professional and personal struggles through their own interpretative lens. A hermeneutic phenomenological approach offers a framework to of educators, shedding light on how they construct meaning from their challenges and cope with their realities (van Manen, 2016). This study provides insights into the resilience strategies educators employ and the institutional support systems that influence their professional journey.

Research Objective

To explore public-school educators as they navigate the professional and personal challenges inherent in their careers amidst challenges.

Significance of the Study

The findings can guide policymakers, administrators, and educational bodies in identifying areas where support is most needed. The study can shed light on areas where educators feel underprepared or overwhelmed, thereby informing the design of more effective training programs and resources that align with real-world teaching demands (Borko, 2004).

Understanding educators' challenges is directly linked to improving student outcomes. When teachers are supported professionally and personally, deliver effective instruction, contributing to positive student performance and overall school success (Hattie, 2009). Ensuring teachers are not only capable in the classroom but also well-supported in their broader roles.

Theoretical Framework

Exploring public-school educators in navigating their professional and personal challenges using hermeneutic phenomenology as the methodological approach is rooted in the philosophical traditions of Hermeneutics and Phenomenology and draws on the works of key theorists such as Martin Heidegger, Hans-Georg Gadamer, and Paul Ricoeur. Hermeneutic phenomenology enables a deeper understanding of lived experiences through interpretation and meaning-making processes.

Hermeneutic phenomenology seeks to explore how individuals make sense of their experiences. Unlike traditional experiences, hermeneutic phenomenology emphasizes the interpretation of these experiences through a dialogical process between the researcher and the participants.

Martin concept of "being-in-the-world" (Heidegger, 1962). This idea implies that people cannot be comprehended in a vacuum, and that the educational environment, cultural norms, personal lives, and professional responsibilities all influence educators' experiences.

Hans-Georg Gadamer (1975) argues that understanding where the researcher's horizon and the participants' horizons meet to co-create meaning. This aligns with exploring educators' experiences through dialogue, where their professional and personal lives intersect.

Paul Ricoeur (1985) introduced where individuals understand their identity through the stories they tell about themselves. This is particularly relevant for educators, as their professional challenges and personal struggles are often articulated in stories that shape their self-concept and professional identity.

The hermeneutic phenomenological approach to public-school educators explores their unique perspectives and challenges they face. This framework views educators not only as professionals but as individuals whose personal lives are interwoven into their roles within the school environment. The challenges they navigate are not isolated but are influenced by social, cultural, and institutional factors.

In this context, narrative inquiry can be employed to gather stories from educators, allowing them provide insights into struggles and how these experiences shape their professional practices.

This theoretical framework helps establish a solid foundation for exploring educators' lived experiences through the hermeneutic phenomenological lens, guiding the research design and methodology.

II. Literature Review

The complex and demanding roles of public-school educators are influenced by a multitude of professional and personal challenges. These challenges range from classroom management, curriculum demands, and student behavior to personal work-life balance and emotional stress.

Classroom Management and Student Behavior

Teachers often encounter issues with student discipline, motivation, and engagement (Jones & Jones, 2013). These challenges can impact teachers' well-being and effectiveness.

Curriculum and Policy Changes

Educators must adapt to evolving curriculum standards, educational policies, and standardized testing, often creating tension between personal teaching philosophies and institutional mandates (Penuel, Gallagher, & Sherer, 2017).

Personal Challenges and Work-Life Balance

The emotional demand such as labor, coping with student trauma, and managing personal stressors, has been well-documented (Hargreaves, 2000). Hermeneutic phenomenology reveals the emotional complexity teachers experience in balancing their personal lives and professional responsibilities (Frost & O'Neill, 2020).

Navigating Professional and Personal Identity

Teachers often experience tension between their roles as educators and their personal identities (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009). This tension affects teacher's effectiveness in the classroom.

Impact of Support Systems on Educators' Challenges

Institutional and social support systems, such as peer collaboration, play significant roles in helping teachers navigate their challenges. A strong support system can reduce feelings of isolation and contribute to professional satisfaction (Ingersoll & Smith, 2003).

It is sufficed to say that, understanding the professional and personal challenges that educators face is crucial for improving teacher well-being and enhancing educational outcomes.

III. Methodology

Hermeneutic phenomenology is suitable for this research because it seeks to interpret and make sense of individuals' experiences.

Research Design

The research focuses on gathering in-depth insights into the experiences of educators. Hermeneutic phenomenology allows educators; reflect on their emotions, decisions, and reflections over time (Van Manen, 2016). This approach emphasizes interpretation and meaning-making, rather than purely descriptive analysis.

Sample Size and Selection Criteria

A purposive sampling strategy was used to select participants who are public-school educators currently working within the school system. The study includes 15 educators to ensure a comprehensive range of experiences while allowing for deep, meaningful analysis (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Inclusion criteria include

- Educators who have experienced both professional and personal challenges in their roles.
- Participants willing to engage in reflective interviews about their experiences.

Research Tools

The primary research tools included semi-structured interviews and reflective journals. The semi-structured interviews provide flexibility in exploring each participant's unique experiences while maintaining focus on the key research questions. The reflective journals will allow participants to document their thoughts and reflections over time, offering additional insights into their lived experiences (Kvale, & Brinkmann, 2009).

Data Generation Procedure

Data was generated through in-depth, semi-structured interviews conducted with each educator. The interviews lasted for 1 hour, taking place in a comfortable, private setting to ensure participants' openness and confidentiality. Additionally, participants will be asked to maintain reflective journals over a period of 2 weeks, capturing their thoughts and reflections on their professional and personal challenges.

Interviews were audio-recorded with participants' consent, transcribed verbatim, and anonymized to protect confidentiality (Seidman, 2013).

Data Analysis and Interpretation

Data will be analyzed using thematic analysis. This involves identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns (themes) within the data (Braun and Clarke, 2006). The analysis will follow the steps of:

1. **Familiarization with the Data:** Transcribing interviews to gain content.
2. **Generating Initial Codes:** Identifying initial codes that represent key elements of the participants' responses.
3. **Searching for Themes:** Organizing the codes into broader themes related to the educators' challenges.
4. **Reviewing Themes:** Refining and reviewing themes to ensure they represent the participants' lived experiences.
5. **Establishing and Labeling Themes:** Finalizing themes and ensuring that they clearly articulate educator's challenges.

The hermeneutic interpretation involved interpreting these themes. Data was analyzed using hermeneutic analysis, focusing on the interpretation of participants' lived experiences. The analysis followed the guidelines set by Van Manen (2016), involving the identification of key themes, patterns, and meanings across the data. The process included reading and proof reading the transcripts and journals, engaging in a reflective process of interpreting participants' experiences. Themes were generated iteratively, with continuous interaction of data and researcher's reflections.

Trustworthiness

Lincoln and Guba's (1985) criteria was used to make sure the research is reliable:

Credibility: Prolonged engagement and member checks (participant validation) was used to ensure accuracy.

Transferability: Thick description was used to understand the context.

Dependability: An audit trail was maintained, including detailed notes and transcripts, to ensure transparency and consistency.

Confirmability: Reflexivity incorporated, where the researcher acknowledges and reflects on their potential biases and influences.

The following strategies were employed:

Member checks: Review the preliminary findings to ensure accuracy and authenticity of the interpretations.

Triangulation: Data from the interviews and journals was cross-checked to ensure reliability and depth of the findings.

Reflexivity: The researcher maintained a reflective journal to document their feelings.

Ethical Considerations

According to APA (2017) ethical considerations are central to this research.

Participants were fully informed about the research process, their role, and the confidentiality of their data. All participant information was kept confidential, and pseudonyms will be used in reporting data. Participation will be voluntary, with no coercion. Participants were informed to withdraw without any consequences.

Given the potentially sensitive nature of the subject matter, educators will be informed of available counseling or support resources if needed. The researcher maintained an objective stance, while acknowledging the influence of personal interpretations during the analysis.

Participants were fully informed about their role, and their rights, including consequence. All participant data were kept confidential, and any identifying information was removed from the transcripts and reports. The research design and process was submitted for approval to the relevant ethics committee.

IV. Findings and Discussions

In this section, the key discussions, and the implications of these findings are analyzed in relation to existing literature on teacher well-being, professional development, and work-life balance.

Heavy Workload and Time Constraints

Educators face excessive workloads due to large class sizes and insufficient staff, leading to physical and emotional exhaustion.

Participant 1 said that,

“A lot of instructors experience burnout as a result of juggling their teaching, lesson planning, and administrative responsibilities” (P1, 12.02.2025).

Burnout is a common result of teachers' struggles to balance teaching, lesson planning, and administrative duties due to high workloads (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2017). Overwhelming workloads cause burnout and job discontent among educators (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2018). It can be quite difficult to balance administrative, grading, and lesson planning responsibilities. Chronic burnout reduces teacher effectiveness and increases absenteeism. Schools must address staff shortages and promote work-life balance (Mumba, & Chikopela, 2021).

Low Salaries and Financial Stress

Teachers report dissatisfaction with remuneration, struggling to meet basic needs. Financial constraints demotivate educators, affecting performance and morale.

Participant 2 said that,

“One major issue is inadequate compensation, which has an impact on their wellbeing and motivation. Teachers in public schools frequently struggle financially, which affects their morale and job satisfaction. Teachers in public schools frequently struggle financially, which affects their morale and job satisfaction” (P2, 20.02.2025).

Teachers in public schools frequently struggle financially, which affects their morale and job satisfaction. Teachers in public schools frequently struggle financially, which affects their morale and job satisfaction (Darling-Hammond, 2020). Many educators lack adequate compensation, which has an impact on their wellbeing and motivation (OECD, 2019). Teachers frequently have to look for other occupations in order to support their family due to financial restrictions. Due to low pay, many instructors are forced to look for other employment, which hinders their ability to advance professionally (Darling-Hammond et al., 2019). Financial stress affects morale and motivation, often forcing teachers to seek secondary income sources (Banda, & Zulu, 2022). Calls for timely and competitive compensation to retain talent (Mwansa, 2018).

Classroom Management Challenges

Teachers struggle with indiscipline and large class sizes, affecting classroom management.

Participant 3 said that,

“Large class sizes disruptive student behavior, lowers educational efficacy and causes stress,” (P3, 12.02.2025).

Lesson planning, grading, and personal obligations are all challenges that teachers face (Evers et al., 2016). A prevalent issue that lowers instructional efficiency and causes stress is disruptive student behavior (Marzano, 2018). There is need to advocate for increased guidance and discipline policies (Phiri, 2019).

Student Performance Pressure

Schools face shortages in textbooks, teaching aids, and digital tools.

Participant 4 said that,

“Measures of responsibility based on students' success on standardized examinations cause stress for educators” (P4, 12.02.2025).

Berliner (2018) supports this claim by adding that accountability measures based on students' success on standardized examinations cause stress for educators. Educators improvise materials, which compromises lesson quality and limits learner engagement (Chansa, 2021).

Mental Health Challenges

Chronic illnesses and lack of healthcare access lead to absenteeism. Teachers frequently report stress, anxiety, and emotional fatigue.

Participant 5 said that,

“Teachers' job satisfaction and psychological well-being are impacted by high levels of stress and worry” (P5, 12.02.2025).

Teachers who experience high levels of stress have anxiety and depression, which can impact both their personal and professional lives (Baker et al., 2020). Teachers' mental health and job satisfaction are impacted by high levels of stress and anxiety (Greenberg, Brown, & Abenavoli, 2016). The absence of school-based counseling services exacerbates their vulnerability (Zulu, & Kapijimpanga, 2024). There is need to improve teacher healthcare services (Chanda, & Mwale, 2022).

Work-Life Balance Difficulties

Educators frequently miss work due to untreated chronic health issues.

Participant 6 said that,

“Many educators found it difficult to strike a healthy work-life balance, frequently forgoing personal time in order to fulfill work-related obligations. As a result, emotions of irritation and exhaustion intensify” (P6, 12.02.2025).

Due to job obligations, a sizable percentage of educators reported feeling cut off from their personal lives. Teachers find it difficult to juggle the demands of their jobs with their personal and family lives (Bianchi & Milkie, 2018). Inadequate health care access compromises educator attendance and student performance (Chileshe, & Mwansa, 2021).

Limited Parental Involvement

Parents and communities often fail to support educational efforts.

Participant 7 said that,

“Teachers' efficacy and pupils' academic success might be hampered by a lack of parental support” (P7, 12.02.2025)

A lack of parental support can hinder students' academic progress and teacher effectiveness (Epstein, 2018). A weak home-school link impairs student discipline and learning continuity (Lungu, & Phiri, 2020).

Curriculum Rigidity

Inflexible curriculum confuses teachers who lack proper orientation. Sudden curriculum changes without sufficient orientation burden educators.

Participant 8 said that,

“It is detrimental for teachers to feel constrained by inflexible curricula that do not permit flexibility in their teaching strategies” (P8, 12.02.2025).

Teachers' creativity and flexibility are restricted by rigid curriculum structures (Priestley, Biesta, & Robinson, 2015). Increased adaptability in curriculum design may improve the educational experiences of students. Rigid curricula that do not include flexibility in teaching approaches make teachers feel constrained (Pinar, 2019). Educators feel unprepared, leading to confusion in lesson delivery and reduced learner outcomes (Phiri, & Tembo, 2020). Effective instruction is hampered by inadequate instructional resources and badly maintained facilities (UNESCO, 2022).

Student Diversity and Inclusion Challenges

Participant 9 said that,

“Teachers face difficulties adapting instruction to meet diverse student needs, including those with disabilities” (P9, 12.02.2025).

According to Florian (2019), who concurs with revelation, teachers encounter challenges while modifying their lessons to accommodate a range of student demands, including those of students with impairments.

Teacher Shortages

Participant 10 said that,

‘Many schools suffer from a lack of qualified educators, increasing workload for existing staff’ (P10, 12.02.2025).

A dearth of qualified teachers plagues many schools, adding to the workload of current employees (Sutcher, Darling-Hammond, & Carver-Thomas, 2019).

Coping Strategies for Stress

Participant 11 said that,

“Teachers should handle stress by practicing mindfulness, exercising, and getting support from their peers” (P11, 12.02.2025).

According to Jennings and Greenberg (2018), instructors utilize peer support, exercise, and mindfulness as stress-reduction strategies.

Lack of Administrative Support

Teachers feel overwhelmed by non-teaching duties.

Participant 12 said that,

“There is insufficient leadership in schools to reduce teacher stress and job discontent” (P12, 12.02.2025).

Teachers find it challenging to properly handle classroom issues when they don't have the backing of their supervisors (Buchanan, 2015). Excessive documentation and compliance responsibilities reduce instructional time and contribute to stress (Schleicher, 2018). Effective school leadership reduces teacher stress and discontent with their jobs (Leithwood & Sun, 2018).

Social Expectations and Teaching Roles

Participant 13 said that,

"Beyond their responsibilities as educators, teachers are supposed to serve as mentors, counselors, and role models" (P13, 12.02.2025).

Teachers frequently bring work home, which interferes with family time and personal wellbeing, making work-life balance a serious challenge (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007). Relationships and family life are negatively impacted by teachers' frequent sacrifice of personal time (Kinman et al., 2011). It's still difficult to balance personal obligations and instructional duties (Bianchi & Milkie, 2010). In addition to their teaching responsibilities, teachers are supposed to serve as mentors, counselors, and role models (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2020).

Teacher Burnout and Attrition

Participants 14 said that,

"The demands of their job, including workload, administrative responsibilities, and emotional toll, often left educators feeling overburdened. The difficulty of striking a balance between student behavior, parental engagement expectations, and the demands of standardized testing while teaching" (P14, 12.02.2025).

School stability is impacted by high turnover brought on by burnout (Ingersoll, 2018). Teachers in public schools frequently deal with high workloads, which can result in burnout and a decrease in job satisfaction (Hakanen, Bakker, & Schaufeli, 2006). Instructors said they have trouble with extracurricular activities, lesson planning, and administrative tasks.

Coping with Student Trauma

Indiscipline among learners is a common challenge.

Participant 15 said that,

"Educators deal with students facing trauma, requiring emotional resilience" (P15, 12.02.2025).

Teachers must be emotionally resilient since they work with traumatized students (Alisic, 2018). Classroom management and instructional time are negatively impacted by disruptive student behavior, which is still a major problem (Marzano, Marzano, & Pickering, 2003). Teachers frequently find it difficult to strike a balance between upholding discipline and fostering a supportive learning environment. Managing misbehavior in the classroom might cause stress and lower work satisfaction (Aloe et al., 2014).

V. Conclusion

There are complex and multifaceted nature of challenges that public-school educators face. A systemic approach should include improving work-life balance, providing more robust support systems, and ensuring that educators have access to relevant professional development opportunities. By acknowledging and responding to educators, schools and policymakers can create more sustainable and supportive environments for both teachers and students.

Recommendation

Public-school educators face numerous professional and personal challenges, from classroom management and student engagement to work-life balance and mental well-being. Here is some Policy Recommendation for navigating these challenges effectively:

1. To increase competent teachers' motivation and retention, implement housing allowances and performance-based pay incentives.
2. To avoid burnout, government to implement flexible work schedules or temporary sabbatical programs for long-serving teachers.
3. Provide professional development CPD that is incorporated with wellness modules, particularly those that address stress, time management, and resilience.
4. Reduce the amount of paperwork and non-teaching duties teachers must perform by introducing administrative support personnel and digital resources.
5. Establish peer support groups and counseling services in schools, as well as recurring mental health examinations for educators.

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