



## Factors influencing teachers' self-efficacy at a rural school during the COVID-19 era

Kwanele Masondo

Department of Education, South Africa

Primary author: [zethembemasondo@gmail.com](mailto:zethembemasondo@gmail.com)

**Abstract**— This study explored factors influencing teachers' self-efficacy and how teachers' self-efficacy could be improved in the workplace during the COVID-19 pandemic. This study employed a qualitative approach to show how the worldwide COVID-19 pandemic affected classrooms in a rural school in South Africa. People had to adapt to a new way of life to prevent the spread of the disease. COVID-19 created enormous challenges and changes in educational systems. Over and above the changes, the rural schools suffer from issues inherited from the disadvantages of apartheid marginalisation. Teachers face many challenges, increasing their stress levels and forcing them into early retirement. Some teachers remain positive, committed, and inspired despite the challenges. These positive and enabling factors influence these teachers to work harder and believe they can overcome obstacles. Finally, this study will aid in exploring the enabling factors and the depth of their influence.

**Keywords:** Self-Efficacy, Enabling Factors, Teacher Self-Efficacy, Rural School, COVID-19 Era

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### I. BACKGROUND TO THE STUDENT

IN 2001, the Department of Basic Education in South Africa focused on building an inclusive education to address the most pressing needs among learners and thus enhance their ability to learn effectively. The South African government made efforts to reform policies. These indicated that every South African learner should have access to learning and teaching, similar facilities, and equal educational opportunities (Republic of South Africa, 1996b). Unfortunately, some learners in South Africa will likely not have their educational needs met because their schools are situated in rural areas. "Public schools in rural areas are categorised by various factors that negatively impact the provision of quality education" (Du Plessis & Mestry, 2019). In rural schools, many factors influence teacher self-efficacy, directly and indirectly influencing the school's ability to attain its goals. Self-efficacy beliefs affect teaching practice, the attitude toward the educational process, and, therefore, the quality of teaching and learning (Achurra & Villardon, 2012, p. 367). Many studies have researched teachers' self-efficacy and highlighted different factors that could affect teachers' self-efficacy and the need to be enhanced (Mukuna & Aloka, 2020). Shazadi, Khatoun, Aziz, and Hassan (2011) revealed that gender, academic qualification, work experience, and locality significantly affect self-efficacy. However, age and professional qualifications positively affected teacher self-efficacy (Shazadi et al., 2011). Most rural schools lacked primary resources such as water, sanitation, and electricity. These factors could adversely impact effective teaching and learning (Du Plessis & Mestry, 2019). Nieuwenhuis, Beckman, and Prinsloo (2013) mentioned environmental influences, which include bars or taverns or liquor stores near the school, drug dealers, no fencing, and unavailability of telephones to report emergencies, fighting, vandalism, harassment, and sexual offenses, could limit the growth of values in

education and impact negatively the self-efficacy of teachers. The literature reviewed for this study revealed that the location, the state of schools, the competence of teachers, and gender could directly impact self-efficacy. However, there is a gap in the available data because no research has been conducted on spiritual diversities among stakeholders as a factor that could affect teachers' self-efficacy. Begum (2020) indicated that teacher self-efficacy has been shown and linked to numerous significant educational consequences such as determination, passion, assurance of instructional performance, accomplishment, motivation, and self-efficacy beliefs. Therefore, this study delved deeper into rural schools and teachers to expand on existing knowledge regarding the factors that influence efficacy, including spiritual diversity, and how it impacts teacher self-efficacy in rural schools.

There are many experiences that teachers in rural schools go through that expose the factors that directly negatively impact teachers' self-efficacy. Firstly, the mere location of the school in a rural area is a factor that negatively impacts teacher efficacy because accessing these schools is problematic and strenuous. The roads are gravel roads that fill with mud in the rainy season. The teachers and learners use a lot of energy to reach the school. Those who travel by car constantly must have their cars fixed due to the impact of the harsh terrain on their cars. This factor affects the teacher financially and further deters the eagerness to execute lessons fully. These beliefs leave a teacher with learners who know for a fact that they will not comprehend the minimum content of a subject required to succeed in a particular subject. Lack of technological resources makes a teacher unable to compete with other teachers working in schools from urban areas. In many rural schools, violence is not a stranger among learners and sometimes among teachers. Therefore, teachers work in dangerous situations that associate their place of work with fear rather than delivering subject content effectively. Incompetence among teachers leaves these schools with no choice but to hire underqualified teachers and consequently limits the

teacher's ability and potential.

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Many researchers have utilised the self-efficacy theory for several decades since its development by Alfred Bandura. It has been instrumental in explaining associated successes and failures in many research faculties. However, this literature review focuses on factors influencing teachers' self-efficacy at schools during COVID-19 and culture and spirituality in rural schools as factors that also influence the teachers' self-efficacy in those schools.

### Conceptual framework

Self-efficacy is people's judgments of their capabilities to organise and execute courses of action required to attain designated types of performance (Bandura, 2011). In this study, self-efficacy is how people perceive if they can accomplish a goal, considering competencies and the environment. Teacher self-efficacy is a teacher's belief or conviction about teaching competence from a strong sense of self-adequacy and personal insight (Batool & Shah, 2018). In this study, teacher self-efficacy determines whether a teacher will ensure effective learning and teaching for excellent results, considering the school's location, culture, gender, spirituality, and competence. Du Plessis and Mestry (2019) refer to rural schools as schools in generically remote and underdeveloped areas. In this study, rural schools were found to lack the infrastructure to make them conducive to teaching and learning.

Bandura formalised the notion of perceived competence as self-efficacy, defined it clearly, and embedded it in the theory of how the theory of self-efficacy develops and influences behaviours (Maddux, James, & Kleiman, 2020). Self-efficacy is a personal belief in one's capability to organise and execute courses of action required to attain designated types of performances (Artino, 2012). The current study explores factors that may influence this belief in teachers as they are human beings and have their behaviours influenced by external and internal factors. According to Mukuna (2021), the adversities in rural schools include adjusting to cultural environments. The author states that adjusting to culture may contribute negatively or positively to a teacher and their work being a success or failure. Other teachers reported attempts to track down the students they stopped hearing from (Sawchuck & Samuels, 2020). The researchers were enlightened that dropout and absenteeism were recognized problems as schools closed and reopened. This might have also given way to more substance abuse, teenage pregnancies, and a high depression rate among students.

### Factors influencing the teachers' self-efficacy at schools during Covid-19

According to the literature review, many factors influenced teachers' self-efficacy during COVID-19. These factors include technology, substance abuse, and marginalisation of rural schools in blended pedagogy due to a lack of equipment and infrastructure. Culture also influences teachers' efficacy in and outside the classroom. Schools in South Africa, especially in rural areas, have been impacted by many factors that have the potential to influence teachers' self-efficacy. The COVID-19 pandemic caused unparalleled worldwide disruptions (Mostert, Gulseven, & Williams, 2021). Social distancing was enforced in over 109 countries worldwide in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, and the temporary closure of schools was implemented to implement social distancing (Tadesse & Muluye, 2020). To avoid total curriculum disruptions, some governments introduced technology-based pedagogy to ensure learners could access learning materials while staying home. It required blended learning, including technology (Tadesse & Muluye, 2020).

Some teachers reported being busier than before the school buildings closed, as they were expected to be present and be available to interact with students online throughout the day (Jones and Kessler). Other teachers reported attempts to track down the students they stopped hearing from (Sawchuck & Samuels, 2020). This suggests that there was an increase in the number of dropouts. Students were negatively

affected by poor connectivity, inappropriate equipment, and other access issues (Jandric et al., 2020). Rural learners in South Africa faced unprecedented challenges adjusting to a new mode of life and learning, the latter characterized by the predominant use of online learning management systems and low-tech applications (Dube, 2020). South Africa has 11252 schools in rural areas across the country; of these, 3060 are secondary and 8192 primary schools. Most of these schools are in the Eastern Cape, KwaZulu-Natal, and Limpopo, mostly rural provinces. These three provinces alone are home to around 72% of rural children in South Africa (Hall, 2019). Many theories have been proposed to explore factors that influence teacher's self-efficacy. Much literature confirms that rural schools allow researchers to explore different factors that influence the teacher's self-efficacy. The environments of cultures require people to acquire skills or to adapt to survive. The adversities in rural schools include adjusting to cultural environments (Mukuna, 2021). This suggests that culture may be a factor that may influence a teacher's self-efficacy. The physical location of the rural schools may be characterised by features that may affect a teacher's self-efficacy. Public schools in rural areas are characterised by various factors that negatively impact the provision of quality education (Du Plessis & Mestry, 2019).

## III. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

### Self-efficacy theory

#### Background to the theory

According to Maddux et al. (2020), Bandura formalised the notion of perceived competence as self-efficacy, defined it clearly, and embedded it in the theory of how the theory of self-efficacy develops and influences behaviours. In the 1960s, an alternative approach to human behaviour was introduced. An approach viewed as the result of the interplay between personal, behavioural, and environmental factors rather than an unconscious process with psychodynamic roots did not consider deviant behaviours a disease or symptom (Lisa et al., 2013).

#### Principles and assumptions of the theory

According to Flammer (2015), self-efficacy theory refers to the individual's capacity to produce important effects. Flammer (2015) further states that people who know they can make a difference feel good and take the initiative; those who perceive themselves as helpless are unhappy and are not motivated to act. The theory is of recent origin. According to Maddux et al. (2020), interest in beliefs about personal control has a long history in Philosophy and Psychology. The theories of self-reflectance motivation, achievement motivation, social learning, and helplessness are just a few of many theories that have sought to explore relationships between perceptions of personal competence and human behaviours and psychological wellbeing. Self-efficacy helps to determine how much effort individuals will expend in an activity, how long they will persevere when faced with obstacles, and how resilient they will be in the face of adverse situations (Mookkiah & Prabu, 2019). Therefore, the execution of a task depends on one's perceived ability to perform. However, this does not imply that the ability is not present; if one does not perceive themselves as capable, then the task cannot be executed to one's full potential.

#### Relevance to the study

The theory of self-efficacy, as developed by Bandura, is relevant to this study because it explores how teachers perceive their abilities to administer and execute education to their full potential, resulting in the upliftment of the community through education and excellence. Officials can view teachers as non-compliant because they do not produce magnificent end-year results. However, many teachers in rural schools do not experience the fulfillment of the goal to achieve a good pass rate due to psychological, environmental, financial, and possibly physical and social factors that hinder teachers from believing they can achieve such goals. In addition, the study explored the spiritual factor as a hindrance to whether it could make teachers believe that they possessed capabilities that could lead to the desired goals. Teaching is one of the most prominent professions in the world. All other

professions of the society have their roots in teaching (Khorshid, 2015). The teacher's self-efficacy is a component that determines the productiveness of learners and their inspiration to achieve excellent results. South African teachers in public, rural schools still largely experience their work environment as challenging. They mentioned overcrowded classrooms and social issues routinely experienced by learners. Teachers turned to spirituality as a resource to deal with issues that could not be professionally addressed (Martin, 2020). Many researchers have utilised the theory of self-efficacy to explore their field's failures and achievements and measures to promote high self-efficacy in people.

#### IV. OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDENT

This study explored factors influencing teachers' self-efficacy and how teachers' self-efficacy could be improved in the workplace during the COVID-19 pandemic.

#### V. METHODS

##### Research approach

This study adopted a qualitative approach. According to Maree et al. (2020), qualitative research is concerned with understanding the processes and the social and cultural contexts which underlie various behavioural patterns and is mostly concerned with exploring the why questions. According to Rahman (2016), the qualitative approach describes participants' feelings, opinions, and experiences. This approach was helpful as it dealt with participants' experiences and actions (Rahman, 2016). It was advantageous because it allowed the researchers to work with a universe of meanings, motives, aspirations, attitudes, values, and beliefs that correspond to a deeper space of relationships, processes, and phenomena that cannot be reduced to the operationalisation of variables (Queiros, Faria & Ameid, 2017). This approach was suitable because it helped to archive data bound by time, making accessing high-quality data and interpreting them in light of current issues challenging (Sherif, 2018).

##### Research Design

This study used a case study as a research design. According to Yin (2018), case study research design is a research strategy that helps us understand phenomena in real-life situations. This design was valuable in this study for answering complex real-world questions (Tetnowski, 2015). Bouchard, Hollweck, and Smith (2016) suggested that any research in the form of a case study has a functional and legitimate role in doing evaluations, which is part of the research objectives. According to Yin (2018), the case study design utilises existing information sources such as people and interactions between people within the scope of the case. However, its limitation is that the findings and recommendations that case studies provide can be neither confirmed nor refuted in terms of utility and integrity because of the nature of the case study, and one cannot generalize from a single case study (Krusenvik, 2016).

This study employs the interpretivism paradigm. According to Ryan (2018), interpretivism contends that truth is subjective, culturally, and historically situated based on lived experiences. In this paradigm, researchers can never be separated from their values and beliefs, which will inevitably inform how data is collected, interpreted, and analysed (Ryan, 2018). According to Pham (2018), with interpretivism, researchers gain a deeper understanding of the phenomenon and its complexity in its unique context instead of trying to generalise the base of understanding for the whole population. However, criticism of the interpretivism paradigm is that its ontological view tends to be subjective rather than objective. Therefore, research outcomes are easily affected by researchers' views (Pham, 2018).

##### Participants

Four participants were purposively selected from a school in the Thabo Mofutsanyane district, Free State Province, South Africa. There were three females and one male. The participants resided in the Thabo Mofutsanyane district. Their homes were far from the community. They

were all equipped with at least two years of teaching experience. The most experienced participant has been teaching for 35 years. Three participants possessed a Bachelor of Education as a professional teaching qualification, and one had an honours degree in education. They taught different subjects, including Mathematics, History, English, Life Orientation, Physics, and Life Sciences. Their ages ranged between 28 and 50.

##### Instruments

This study employed semi-structured interviews for data collection. According to Dejonckheere and Vaughn (2019), semi-structured interviews are an effective method for data collection when the researcher wants to collect qualitative, open-ended data to explore participant thoughts, feelings, and beliefs about a particular topic and to delve deeply into personal and sometimes personal issues. These techniques were useful as they helped to gather information from key informants with personal experiences, attitudes, perceptions, and beliefs about the topic of interest. These techniques have limitations as they require more time and effort to transcribe data (DeJonckheere & Vaughn, 2019). Semi-structured Interviews usually entail analysing a massive volume of notes and sometimes many hours of transcripts.

##### Data Analysis

Thematic analysis is a method for systematically identifying, organizing, and offering insight into patterns of meaning (themes) across a dataset (Braun & Clarke, 2012). Braun and Clarke (2012) also mentions that thematic analysis is used because it identifies what is common to how a topic is talked or written about and makes sense of those commonalities. According to Braun and Clarke (2012), the steps of thematic analysis include familiarisation with the data, where audio files are transcribed into texts to be read and understood to adequately categorise the analysed data appropriately. Secondly, generating initial codes includes coding interesting features in the data systematically across the data set and collating data relevant to each theme. The third step is searching for themes, where codes are collated into potential themes, gathering all data relevant to each theme. Step four involves reviewing the themes, where the procedure entails checking if the theme works with the coded extracts and if the entire dataset generates a thematic map. The following step involves defining and naming themes. The sixth and final step is the production of the report. This is the final opportunity for analysis, selecting appropriate extracts, discussing analysis, relating to the research question or literature, and producing the written report.

##### Ethical Considerations

Approval was obtained from the University of the Free State Department of Education. Principals sought permission to access the schools' premises to conduct the research. The participants' privacy was respected in this study, and pseudonyms were used instead of the participants' real names. Data were treated as confidential. No personal information about the participants was disclosed in the research. Participants were informed about their right to withdraw their participation at any point without any penalties. Participants signed informed consent forms to participate in the study. This study was conducted during the COVID-19 epidemic, and all preventative protocols were observed to protect participants from infection.

#### VI. RESULTS

##### Biographic results

Participant 1 was a 34-year-old female teacher at a Secondary school in the Thabo Mofutsanyane district with less than one year of teaching experience. She is an African, and her highest qualification was a Post Graduate Certificate in Education.

Participant 2 was a 61-year-old female teacher employed at a primary school in the Thabo Mofutsanyane district with 37 years' teaching experience. She is an African culture, and her highest qualification was a Bachelor of Education Honours degree.

Participant 3 was a 30-year-old male teacher employed at a

Secondary School in the Thabo Mofutsanyane district with four years' of experience. He is an African Zulu man, and his highest qualification is a Bachelor of Education degree.

Participant 4 was a 32-year-old female teacher at a High School. She had five years' experience teaching, with a Bachelor of Education as her highest qualification. She described herself as a Sotho African lady.

### **Thematic results**

#### **Understanding self-efficacy**

The responses from participants showed that their understanding of self-efficacy could be a belief in the individual capacities to achieve a task or a goal successfully. It could also be a judgment of whether a task could be completed successfully because you consider all that could be a hindrance or assistance before you even embark on your goal. The statements from three participants illustrate the following:

*"I think self-efficacy is individual's belief in their capacity to act in ways necessary to reach specific goals"* (Participant 1).

*"Self-efficacy determines whether I can or cannot achieve a goal or task that has been or I have set before myself considering my capabilities and the environment I am from"* (Participant 4).

*"Well, to my knowledge, self-efficacy is the belief whether as a person I can or cannot achieve what I set as my goal"* (Participant 3).

#### **Factors that influence teacher's self-efficacy**

##### **Hindering factors**

The participants' reactions revealed that they experienced various negative factors influencing their self-efficacy. Statements from two participants lean towards learners' attitudes, resulting from the culture of the environment and fellow learners being a negative factor:

##### **Lack of ambition**

*"The negative influence for one is this area and its culture. This place is not positively influencing children in this place because there is a serious lack of ambition in many of these learners and the community members at large"* (Participant 4).

*"These learners want to barely pass matric and work whichever job they can find, like driving taxis and working at a clothing factory to earn the minimum wage or live on government hand-outs like grants and ladies' living 'baby daddies' support money"* (Participant 4).

*"This makes learners lack a culture of excellence. Criminal gangs, teenage pregnancy, and lack of ambition negatively influence teacher's self-efficacy"* (Participant 4).

##### **Learners' attitudes**

*"...the learner's attitude towards work forms the culture indifferent towards school work excellence"* (Participant 4).

##### **Substance abuse**

Most learners influence each other to use drugs and embark on sexual activities, which boost teenage pregnancy and drug abuse, which may lead to violence, which negatively influences my self-efficacy in this school as a teacher.

Age was mentioned as a factor that also contributed to or affected the self-efficacy of the older teachers in the rural school because of the physical dynamic of the rural landscape; one participant explains:

##### **Lack of support**

*"Another factor is when I retired at 60, I felt very old for this job. This school is situated on a place that is a hill, and walking from class to class was very tiring, so I became reluctant to go to class."*

*"I was absent from time to time because of my blood pressure and diabetes. I went to see a doctor often because I was easily stressed by the situations I saw or heard from these children"* (Participant 2).

##### **Poverty**

Poverty was also raised as a factor associated with the rural area because it affects teaching and learning as learners cannot focus when they worry about what to eat.

One participant highlighted poverty:

*"Poverty, my child, is an influencer. This school is rural, and these children are from low-income families. Many of them do not even have shoes or decent school uniforms to wear. It breaks many of these children's self-esteem, and they drop out because they do not look like other children. Others only come to school to eat. They cannot wait for break time; many do not even focus in class"*

(Participant 2).

#### **Lack of experience of novice teachers**

Lack of experience in newly appointed teachers is a factor that influences self-efficacy because there are things that they may need to know before they can become fully confident that they can execute and achieve their goals. Participant 4 mentioned this as a factor:

*"Lack of experience being in such an area and teaching makes it also hard for me because this culture still shocks me; seeing girls in high school being married to old men and dropping out of school makes me think these children will not see me as a positive influence"* (Participant 4).

Interestingly, participant 3 raised a point regarding the management of a school not being open to new ways of doing things as a contributor to a teacher's self-efficacy. Participant 3 stated the following:

*"Secondly, management can also have a hand in the teacher's self-efficacy. They do not relate to new methods that we have as young teachers. If a principal does not understand how you teach, they do not wait to see results to see if it works. What works is what they know. It forces us to go back to old ways of doing things; the school has no money for lab equipment or even a projector because they do not handle funds effectively"* (Participant 3).

One participant also mentioned that she faces a problem that pertains to how learners lack the basic skills to help them pass their respective subjects because primary schools do not teach these learners to write and read effectively. Barriers are not picked up and dealt with:

*"Factor number one would be students' learning skills. The school I teach in is a rural school and a high school, meaning that a learner has, to some degree, the skill to learn the information I give. I do not have to teach the child to write their name. If a child possesses skills to learn, she meets me halfway in the teaching and learning process, positively influencing my self-efficacy. However, in my school, a few learners have that skill, meaning I have to teach in a way that will accommodate those who cannot easily comprehend the content. Time becomes ahead of me, and I do not see myself accomplishing my goal"* (Participant 1).

#### **Strategies**

Three of the participants highlighted that there is a need for different organizations to develop programmes that could assist learners in turning around the problems that exist in the environment:

*"Have programmes to teach learners about careers and the lives these careers promise to people who dedicate themselves. This might build learners a culture of ambition and hard work. That might help teachers feel like they have learners who match their goals and build positive self-efficacy"* (Participant 4).

*"Different programmes to instill respect, hope, the culture of excellence and positivity in learners"* (Participant 3).

*"Introduce programmes to help them understand peer pressure and its consequences"* (Participant 1).

Participant 2 indicated that it would be difficult to devise a strategy to combat the age factor. She also mentioned that the school could use agents to help learners with food and uniforms.

*"The age factor that one is difficult to overcome because everyone will get older and sick and retire. That is just how it is"* (Participant 2)

Participant three thought that extramural activities would go a long way in strengthening the bond between learners, teachers, and the school management team.

#### **Reflection**

All participants revealed a clear understanding of the term self-efficacy. Most participants linked it to an individual's capacity and trust to achieve a goal. Secondly, participants unpacked their personally experienced factors that influence their self-efficacy as teachers. Three out of four participants mentioned that the culture of excellence is lacking in their rural-located schools. The culture of institutions in the environment is difficult to fathom, and as a teacher, you teach a married teenager. Other factors like old age linked to ill health and difficulty in mobility were mentioned by one participant, and not seeing eye to eye with the school management team was also a problem for one participant. The development of programmes to further teach learners about a culture of excellence and seeking a bright future was suggested as a solution by most participants.

## VII. CONCLUSION

The purpose of this article was to convey the findings which emerged from the interviews which were carried out. As the purpose of the study was to explore the factors that influence teacher self-efficacy in a rural school, participants did unpack factors that influence their self-efficacy in their respective schools, and it was clear that there were many factors that teachers saw as an influence to their ability to carry out their work goals. It was also clear that the environment and culture significantly influence a learner's life and perspective, influencing teaching and learning. Participants also showed that they understand in similar terms what self-efficacy is. Finally, most participants came up with similar solution strategies, which showed that schools need different agents to conduct workshop and teach learners about culture and the consequences of negative influences in life.

Teachers' self-efficacy is a significant factor in the education system of our country. Schools in rural areas seem to have many challenges that influence teachers' self-efficacy, and the contributing factors are mainly negative. Most revolve around how the prevailing culture in an environment contributes to a child's behaviour in class. The prevailing culture in the environment further determines whether learners see the importance and power of education. This factor suggests that teenage pregnancies and crimes committed by young people are generational behaviours. This implies that there is a need for government departments to send their agents to teach young men and women about the consequences of crime, teenage pregnancy, gangs, etc. These agencies could include correctional services departments, social agencies, and other communal agencies that inspire communities that support education. Rural schools also need to be supported with infrastructure and new-age teaching aids so that teaching and learning can be as good as in urban areas, and these factors require the government to intervene. Finally, the school stakeholders must always collaborate to function properly. The older generation of teachers must be open to new ideas. This research aimed to explore factors influencing teachers' self-efficacy in rural schools. It investigated how education excellence is impacted by the location of a school, which in turn influences whether teachers feel capable of executing their duties. The research questions were executed through a qualitative approach through semi-structured interviews. This allowed for a broad and in-depth exploration of rural teachers' personal experiences, allowing for factors to be widely and deeply explored. Finally, the data collected portrayed the experiences of rural teachers, showing the prevailing environmental culture as a factor that explains the factors that influence the teachers' self-efficacy.

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