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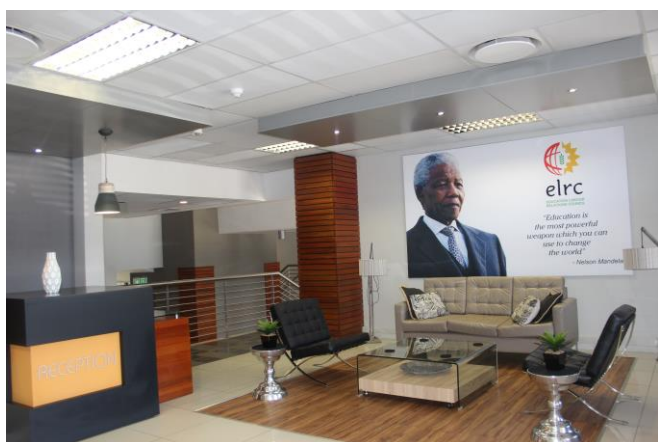
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CELEBRATING 30 YEARS OF GAINS IN EDUCATION

By Bernice Loxton



The ELRC is celebrating its 30th anniversary this year and over the 30-year period, Parties to the ELRC have ensured 14 years of sustained labour peace. This is done through the rapport established over the years between labour parties and the Employer (Department of Basic Education). These sound relations culminated in significant collective agreements for the sector and the Council has ensured monitoring of implementation at the provincial level.

The Council has concluded 65 national agreements over the years, and one significant agreement is Collective Agreement No. 2 of 2020: *Quality Management System (QMS) for school-based educators*. The agreement serves to enhance accountability and professionalism in the education sector. In line with the agreement, it is the responsibility of the principal to ensure that all

educators are appraised within the required timeframes.

In keeping with the efforts of parties to the ELRC to harmonise the workplace, the Department of Basic Education in collaboration with teacher unions publishes the Personnel Administrative Measures (PAM) with regular updates, the last of which was in 2022. The PAM is a consolidation of the terms and conditions of employment for educators, which includes all regulations, policies and agreements relevant to the sector. The Council ensures the implementation of the agreements contained in the PAM at the provincial level.

This ensures fair conditions in relation to grading norms, workload and other administrative areas such as allowances and leave measures.

A fair, equitable and harmonised workplace is a breeding ground for sound relations to flourish and feed into the broader objectives of government.

One key objective that is also outlined in the National Development Plan (NDP), is Early Childhood Development. The Council's work in relation to Grade R started in 2017 with its Education Indaba that brought together the Department of Basic Education, Provincial Education Departments and teacher unions to deliberate on key education issues to ultimately improve learning and teaching in schools. The Indaba started an ongoing dialogue on issues related to Grade R and PPN. The focus of the

Council's current work in relation to Grade R is on the upgrading of un – and underqualified practitioners.

All these efforts serve to regularise the system and fulfil the vision of the NDP, to ensure that teachers are recognised for their efforts and professionalism and that teaching becomes a highly valued profession.

As one of its core functions, the work of the Council in relation to dispute resolution and dispute prevention, includes a key area that is a national concern. The special disputes that the Council deals with seek to protect the rights of the learner, as enshrined in the Constitution of our country. The Council fulfils a dual role by also protecting the rights of educators. Collective Agreement No. 3 of 2018: *Providing for compulsory inquiries by arbitrators in cases of disciplinary action against educators charged with sexual misconduct in respect of learners*; guides the processes of Council in dealing with special disputes that involve the learner as victim or witness. The ongoing training workshops that the Council provides and its advocacy campaigns are geared towards empowering educators and reminding them of the professional and legal standards to which they are bound in order to avoid bringing the profession into disrepute.

Parties to Council concluded this agreement to also address the broader issue of Gender Based Violence (GBV) in the country. This agreement and the Council's initiatives to educate communities on their responsibility to report suspected abuse of children, ensures that the *in loco parentis* relationship between the learner and teacher is respected. This ensures effective learning and teaching.

Over the years, the work of the Council has transcended its mandate to maintain labour peace in public education. It has played a pivotal role and continues to play a proactively role in strengthening the social contract between government, teacher unions and civil society to create a conducive environment for improved quality in teaching and learning.

Another example of the Council's commitment to ensuring quality learning and teaching in public schools on a sustained basis through collaboration with education stakeholders, is the Labour Management Partnership Programme that was launched a year ago on 21st and 22nd February 2023.

The Partnership Programme offers a unique opportunity to influence positive change and progress in the classroom, which ultimately translates in improvement of the national matric results. This work can already be seen through the case study conducted in 2022 on the effectiveness of a school-teacher union partnership to facilitate school improvement, at a secondary school in the northern parts of KwaZulu-Natal. The matric results improved exponentially post the implementation of the school-teacher union partnership.

The Council is positive that with the implementation of the Labour Management Partnership Programme, the same success will be recorded in public schools throughout the country. The results recorded in the United States on the impact of collaboration on learner achievement are evidence that it is possible to influence countrywide improvement through labour partnerships. The Plan for 2024 is to launch the Programme at the district level throughout the country.

Recognising the currency of every voice in the Labour Management Partnership Programme, particularly the teacher's voice in decision-making, will also ensure that the integrity of the teaching profession is restored.

The incredible gains for education attained over the years through the dedication and support of Parties to Council, has laid the groundwork for even greater future accomplishments.

The Council's plans for the 2024/25 financial period remains focussed on the wellbeing of our educators through ongoing advocacy that is aimed at safety in schools and celebrating teachers and their valuable contribution to society.

May the next 30 years herald a season of great triumphs for education under the ELRC banner!

21st Century South African teachers in turbulent educational waters

By Botha, de Jager & Evans

Introduction

The high prevalence of teacher stress and consequent annual resignation is one of the causes of the education crisis in South Africa (Msila, 2007; Naidoo, 2017). Lack of funding (Carelse, 2018), insufficient teacher qualifications, overcrowded classrooms (Jansen & Blank, 2014); unruly, disruptive learner behaviour; learner diversity where learners from different cultures, population groups, and intellectual abilities share a classroom; and a lack of support from management and parents have all been cited as reasons for this teacher attrition. Further, bad working conditions, discipline issues, an excessive workload, and time demands all contribute to high levels of emotional and physical stress (Klassen et al., 2012; Rechtshaffen, 2014). Moreover, the experiences of teachers with these issues affect their relationships with learners, making effective teaching demanding and challenging (Engelbrecht et al., 2003).

Dibakwane (2019:34) pointed out that teachers must teach “despite threats of attacks directed at teachers by learners and parents” in her report for a recent South African Council for Educators training session on teachers’ rights, responsibilities, and safety. The media, such as the *Daily News* and *News24*, constantly report on acts of violence, physical attacks, and even murder committed by learners in what was once a safe and secure environment.

The challenges that teachers must shoulder lead to “widespread concern for teacher wellbeing, with stress and trauma studies in educational contexts figuring alongside those of other professions such as nursing, policing and firefighting” (Naidoo, 2017:23). According to Long et al. (2017), many teachers have lost their way, and some may

temporarily lose their purpose and commitment. As a result, the sense of calling or vocation and the related identity of a professional teacher have been weakened. Long et al. (2017:11) raised crucial questions, such as: “Is it fair to place sole responsibility for quality education on teachers?” and “Why are teachers being bombarded from all directions?” “Are teachers still in control, and are they still respected?” and the final question, which deserves an answer: “Will teachers remain committed to their profession and energised while they are repeatedly chastised and underutilised?” As Frias (2015:2) rightfully asked, “As a culture, why do we disregard teachers’ social and emotional well-being?”

That last is a relevant question because few studies in South Africa focus on teacher wellbeing and, specifically, on how teachers could be supported and equipped to deal with these challenges. The aim of this article is to fill that gap by highlighting key factors that could improve the well-being of teachers in South Africa, identifying factors that have a negative impact on teacher well-being, and determining why teachers continue to teach despite the challenges they face.

This research is underpinned by Samuel and van Wyk’s (2008) force field model (FFM) of professional development as well as Seligman’s (2011). PERMA (positive emotion, engagement, relationship, meaning, and accomplishment) model of well-being.

The FFM of professional development

The first theory, the FFM, was initially designed to investigate the factors that influenced the professional development of student teachers. It can also be used to determine which forces affect the well-being of teachers. The FFM uses “the analogy of an electron in a charged force field where it is being pulled and pushed by various forces” (Samuel & van Wyk, 2008:140). Different fundamental forces determine push and pull, factors also known as positive and negative influences in the teaching practice (Samuel, 2008). For this article, the model explains different forces that may determine teachers’ experiences and that might subsequently encourage or deter

the decision to retain their positions in the teaching profession. Individual identity is influenced by varying interpretations of the forces' full effect. These forces can manifest in the following categories: contextual, institutional, programmatic, and biographical.

This framework was chosen in order to give a voice to teachers to showcase their teaching experiences and to determine the strengths and obstacles embedded in the profession. The goal was to identify what factors energise and motivate teachers to remain in the teaching profession despite the numerous challenges. This theory guided the researchers in understanding the various factors that enhance teacher well-being and why teachers keep teaching despite the challenges they face.

The PERMA model of well-being

The second theory used for this research was the PERMA model of well-being, developed by Martin Seligman (2011). This model identified five elements that contribute to well-being.

The first is positive emotion, which suggests that if one concentrates on positive emotion, happiness will follow. This element focuses on remaining positive in the face of one's history, and present and future prospects (Seligman, 2011). The second element is engagement, which refers to a psychological bond with a certain cause, activity, or work environment (Khaw & Kern, 2014). The next element is relationship, which can be defined as a sense of belonging within relationships, and is associated with favourable outcomes such as less depression and greater overall health (Tay et al., 2013). The meaning aspect relates to "feeling connected to something larger than the self" (Khaw & Kern, 2014:23), and can be regarded as a sense of purpose in life. The last element is accomplishment, which refers to accomplishing goals and receiving recognition. That last is also a personal element because one's achievements bring a sense of success (Butler & Kern, 2016). These elements emphasise emotional or internal forces influencing well-being, whereas the FFM emphasises external variables influencing teacher wellness.

The merging of the two models

A closer look into the FFM indicated that the model focused primarily on external forces that were beyond the teacher's control. Even the FFM's biographical force involved fixed variables such as culture, religion, race, and so on. As a result, it left room for a second model to address the possible gap, hence, the PERMA model was added to account for subjective, personal elements that the teacher can manage. The researchers thus combined the two models to serve as a lens for assessing and understanding teacher well-being.

In exploring how the current classroom context affects the well-being of teachers in South Africa, the selected codes and categories fell within the different forces of the FFM and PERMA model. As mentioned earlier, the FFM addresses primarily the external factors that influence teacher well-being, whereas the PERMA model addresses the internal factors—the biographical forces.

The influence of professional benefits on teacher well-being

The impact of professional benefits on teachers' well-being developed as a contextual force category. Professional benefits relate to all the advantages connected with teaching as identified by participants. The emerging codes included job security, salary, and fringe benefits.

Being a teacher provides individuals with a sense of safety. Knowing that they have a job despite the country's socioeconomic situation is reassuring. Hussain and Saif (2019) defined job security as employee concern about losing a job or losing a desired employment need, such as a lack of advancement opportunities, current working circumstances, and long-term career options. Feeling safe or belonging in the teaching profession is closely related to the salary teachers receive at the end of the month, and discourages teachers from leaving the profession.

Although the participants did not indicate that their incomes were adequate or satisfactory, they did mention the security of having a consistent monthly income. In other words, earning

consistent wages, even if lower than desired, provides teachers with financial certainty at the end of the month. Seventy-four per cent of participants reported that they spent more than seven hours at school, excluding time spent at home on marking, preparing for classes, and administration. Therefore, teacher wages at the time of the research did not correspond to their average working hours per day. According to the literature and research data, one of the main reasons for teachers leaving the profession is low salaries.

The last code refers to the benefits of the teaching profession, such as four vacations each year. A teaching career is especially appealing to mothers because it allows them to spend more time with their families. Existing literature supports that, stating that women made up 72,5% of the teaching population in South Africa (Skosana, 2018). The four paid vacations are not to be confused with free time. Most teachers spend their vacations catching up on administration, preparing for the following term's classes, or attending DBE-approved workshops (Simic-Muller, 2018).

Job security, remuneration, and fringe benefits could all serve as pull forces within this category, whereas only remuneration might serve as a push force, driving teachers away from the profession.

The influence of learners on teacher well-being

Learner growth, behaviour, and encouragement as well as learner absenteeism serve as forces influencing teachers' decisions to leave or stay in the profession and thus their well-being.

Participants expressed a strong desire for their learners to achieve, pass, or reach their goals. One of the most important reasons why teachers like their jobs is to help learners flourish.

Making a difference in a learner's life, and witnessing a learner pass or achieve a goal is motivating. Although participants stated that they did not always see the gratitude and influence they had, they were aware that it was present in the lives of some learners.

Learner misbehaviour contributes to a negative work environment, and was mentioned by most participants. Discipline problems experienced by teachers can be attributed to the diversity of learners, socioeconomic environments, literacy levels, disrespect, and other variables such as the gender of the teacher and different teacher characteristics. However, learner behaviour can also act as a pull force. Learners' words of encouragement tend to reward teachers and give them an incentive to stay in the profession. Learners appreciating their teachers by saying, "thank you," or praising them encouraged the teachers to continue teaching.

The last contributing factor within this category relates to the high absenteeism rate of learners. Learners' persistent absenteeism has a direct impact on teacher well-being because it creates a situation in which the teacher must spend extra time to facilitate the learning content that the learner missed when absent. This adds to teachers' already overburdened schedule.

Learners' growth and positive behaviour contribute to the reasons why teachers stay in the profession, and improves their well-being, but absenteeism and poor behaviour push teachers away from the profession and have a negative impact on their well-being.

The influence of stakeholders on teacher well-being

The second category involved the role of stakeholders and refers to a school's management team (SMT), the Department of Basic Education (DBE), and parental involvement. Participants did not frequently refer to the management of the school, but the cases where it was mentioned were positive in the sense that the participants explained that most principals and heads of department had an open-door policy and that they felt that the SMT did what it could to manage the school to the best of its ability. Moreover, when participants referred to the SMT, phrases like "being appreciated" or "being acknowledged" surfaced. When teachers feel that their work is being recognised, they tend to work harder, and this serves as motivation for them.

The data analysis revealed that parents were the main contributing factor adversely influencing teacher well-being. Throughout the data sets, participants referred to a lack of parental involvement, limited parental support, uneducated parents, and unsatisfactory communication between teachers and parents. The two most frequently mentioned factors that fell under parental involvement, were the unemployment of parents and uneducated parents. Uneducated, in the scope of this article, means that parents either did not complete their school career or that they were illiterate. A high unemployment rate among parents/caregivers leads to poverty-stricken households. It is difficult or even impossible for illiterate parents or caregivers to give academic support. Even though parental support is one of the institutional forces that affect teacher well-being, the literacy levels of parents are a challenge that will not change soon.

When teachers are not supported, they are more likely to leave the school or the profession altogether. To support a person is to provide them with necessities for survival, or to keep their spirits or bravery up in the face of adversity (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). Parental support or lack thereof should be considered. To begin with, uninvolved parents are less likely to motivate their children to meet academic requirements, advise their children about inappropriate behaviour, and support teachers when learning issues occur.

The influence of school environment on teacher well-being

Given South Africa's multicultural, multiracial, and multilingual character, and the big divide in socioeconomic classes, the reality of different school environments with different traditions, values, and challenges is understandable. The codes identified within this theme overlap, but are presented here as school environment and socioeconomic factors. The concept, school environment, in this article refers to all the characteristics within a specific school including safety, atmosphere, and overcrowded classrooms. Firstly, the safety of the school environment was mentioned in the data as an answer as to what influenced teacher workplace well-being. This data is supported by the Teaching

and Learning International Survey (National Center for Education Statistics, 2018), which stated that South Africa was the country with the highest frequency and variety of school safety incidents among all countries and economies participating in the survey. Secondly, participants reported a positive school atmosphere as a factor that enhanced their well-being.

Teaching in a favourable school environment motivated teachers to do their best and kept them in the profession. Lastly, teachers struggled to teach effectively in the overcrowded classrooms that are the norm in township and rural areas. Overcrowded classrooms as a challenge is a combination of an increase in population, a shortage of qualified teachers, and a decrease in funding. These classrooms aggravate existing challenges such as behavioural problems and a lack of individualised attention.

The second category in this theme is the role of the socioeconomic environment on the lived biography of a particular school. Many South African learners attend schools with poor infrastructure, which has a direct impact on academic performance. Many learners in historically poor metropolitan neighbourhoods attend schools that lack resources. In analysing the data on the socioeconomic environment in a specific school setting, it was found that teaching in rural and township schools presented different challenges to teaching in private and urban schools. This does not exempt private and urban schools from these challenges; rural and township school teachers simply experience these challenges more frequently. Although socioeconomic issues were primarily reported as a push force, not all participants faced the problems that the socioeconomic environment presented. Four of the eight participants who served as case studies worked in schools with abundant teaching resources. And those participants reported having data projectors, whiteboards, and interactive resources and an abundance of teaching media as giving them a variety of options for teaching content in a creative way.

The influence of learner diversity on teacher well-being

When discussing the influence of learners on teacher well-being within programmatic forces, special emphasis is placed on the diversity of learners. Learner diversity does not refer to language and cultural differences only but in this context, relates to the impact of the different socioeconomic contexts in which schools are located. Participants revealed that the diversity within the school setting necessitated ongoing adaptation in terms of the way in which learning was facilitated and the classroom handled. Not all learners are on the same cognitive level; furthermore, linguistic barriers between teachers and learners hinder communication between teacher and learner.

According to Palane and Howie (2020), numerous learners are not taught in their native language, a drawback that causes issues with the pass rate and with classroom management. When learners do not understand the content, they become disruptive. The data analysis revealed that the diversity of learners could be taxing teachers' well-being, and that learner diversity may be one of the reasons why teachers leave the field.

The influence of curriculum on teacher well-being

The curriculum and the workload of the teacher are very closely related. Nowhere else is inequality as evident as in the schooling system, and it seems that the current education system is perpetuating this disparity through a "one-size-fits-all" curriculum (Amin & Mahabeer, 2021). Those authors posited that the curriculum should be changed to meet society's needs and warned that "the revised curriculum ignores the contextual distinctions amongst schools" (Amin & Mahabeer, 2021:499). They suggested that the curriculum be trimmed by removing outdated and irrelevant content, and rather focus on content that is important for a particular group of learners, and reorganised by grouping similar topics across subjects to reduce curriculum overload.

When considering that there have been four curriculum changes in the education system since

1994, each one requiring training, orientation, and skills development as well as administrative work to prove competency in curriculum implementation (Govindasamy, 2018:2), it speaks for itself that the changing nature of the curriculum has resulted in an increased workload given that teachers need to prepare new assessments, lesson plans, and material. Teachers feel overwhelmed by assessment plans and struggle to get through the content that needs to be covered per term.

Due to the district or provincial examination papers now being written by most schools, teachers are forced to cover all content, which leads to difficult content not being thoroughly explained, and to struggling learners falling even more behind. In addition to this, the administrative responsibilities of teachers add to their frustration and workload.

According to the literature, the additional effort imposed by the curriculum adds to teachers' workload and therefore generates additional stress, acting as a negative or push factor that has a detrimental impact on their well-being.

Positive emotion

Positive emotion contributes to teachers' well-being. Positive emotion refers to all emotions that one cultivates to improve one's well-being. This element was visible across data sets with many participants referring to their love and passion for the profession. These findings are corroborated by Keller et al. (2014) who stated that teaching is an emotionally rewarding career. And Klassen et al. (2014) argued that teaching is a profession that is strongly anchored in emotional experiences.

The desire to continue teaching was cited by participants as the most compelling reason. In the teaching profession, a deep love for children combined with a desire to help them attain their greatest potential is critical to teacher well-being. The positive emotions that teachers experience act as a pull force that keeps them in the profession and enhances their well-being.

Engagement

The next element of the PERMA model refers to engagement. To be engaged in one's profession means to be emotionally resourceful and focused. Seligman (2011) argued that when one is doing something one enjoys, one prefers to live in the present moment and is thus completely focused on what is going on around one. In other words, when one is engaged, one is emotionally connected. Moreover, engagement refers to the achievement of challenging tasks by using skills and strengths. Translating these perspectives to the teaching profession, engaged teachers can be defined as people who have discovered their life's purpose through providing a satisfying and fulfilling service.

In analysing the data, it became evident that participants agreed that the diversity within the school setting called for constant adaptation, and posed a challenge regarding the way in which learning was facilitated and the classroom was managed. To empower oneself, one must ensure that one is equipped with skills to take on a challenging situation. This means that teachers could cope with challenges or hardship by seeking counsel and support from management, colleagues, or even by relying on their faith.

Data collected from participants revealed that they found solace in discussing problems with colleagues and valued an open-door SMT policy. Relationships therefore play an important role in the coping mechanisms of teachers, as discussed in the next section.

Relationships

The relationship element in the PERMA model underscores the importance of various relationships in the workplace by highlighting their ability to enhance well-being. According to researchers, those who have supportive and fulfilling relationships have better mental and physical health.

Teaching is a relationship-based profession (Dreer, 2021) and if those relationships are properly managed, they can help retain teachers in the profession and improve their well-being.

Throughout this article, the importance of healthy relationships between teachers and their colleagues, learners, management, and parents has been underscored. When these role players have healthy relationships, it improves the teachers' well-being and gives them a sense of sharing their burdens. Literature, as previously discussed, concurs that the ability to develop meaningful relationships with all stakeholders is necessary for a teacher's wellbeing.

It is evident that various relationships influence the decision whether a teacher decides to stay in, or leave, the teaching profession. As previously stated, the relationship factor is associated with positive emotion.

The final relationship explored was the role religion plays in motivating participants to continue teaching in the face of adversity. Five of the eight participants said that they trusted God to guide them, that they did their best and trusted God to do His part, and that spending time with God drove them on.

Meaning

A human being's primary motivation in life is to find meaning. Meaning is the fourth element in the PERMA model of well-being. Meaning in this article refers to teachers' need to feel valued and worthy, which includes serving something greater than themselves.

Participants widely reported that the teaching profession was rewarding because they felt that they were appreciated. They believed that they were adding value to the future by playing a part in the education of learners. To be acknowledged for working hard and being recognised kept teachers from leaving the profession. Participants referred to the smiles they received from learners, and to past learners greeting them with love and affection when they walked past them in public.

Accomplishment

The last element relates to the importance of accomplishment. Accomplishment refers to achievement, and to mastery or success at the highest level possible within a specific sphere

(Forgeard et al., 2011). When teachers feel they have accomplished their goal, it enhances their well-being and therefore also serves as a pull force. The goals they want to accomplish vary from seeing learners pass, to learners making a success of their lives after leaving school. These accomplishments serve as a driving force to set and reach career goals.

Hence, when asked where participants pictured themselves in five years' time, 46 participants reported that they would still like to be in the teaching profession. Some of them mentioned that they hoped to obtain a higher position within the education sector either as head of department or even as a lecturer at a higher education institution. This finding is reassuring when viewed against the backdrop of all the challenges teachers face in the teaching profession, and is in agreement with a study in which the researchers found that "the career orientation of the teacher is primarily value-driven," and concluded that the realisation of a calling is the most important asset and determinant in teacher training and provision (Steyn & Kamper, 2015:273–274).

The PERMA model's elements serve as positive or pull factors that enhance well-being. When these elements are present in teachers' lives, they experience a greater sense of wellbeing and would be more inclined to stay in the profession.

The opposing forces can drive teachers away from the profession while also adding to the deterioration of their well-being. Although most participants demonstrated a positive attitude towards the teaching profession and had the majority of the elements of the PERMA model present in their lives, some participants did not share this sentiment.

Most of the participants reported a lack of support from parents and therefore that relationship element acts as a push force. Moreover, not all participants felt that the profession held meaning for them. Some participants revealed that they were teaching for the sole purpose of providing for their families, or that they taught because there were no other options.

Recommendations for policy and practice

Based on the empirical findings of this article, recommendations are offered to serve as suggestions and to propose options for responding to the article's primary findings.

Firstly, there should be collaboration between the Department of Higher Education and the DBE. Both departments have the education of the country's learners at heart and they should therefore liaise consistently. Secondly, HEIs ought to revisit the curriculum of student teachers to include training in teacher well-being. A thorough study of teacher well-being should be made and should be emphasised as part of teacher training.

Furthermore, the DBE must prioritise the delivery of textbooks and relevant learning materials. The scope of teacher administration needs to be revisited because numerous studies consistently report on the heavy administrative load of teachers, which they find unnecessary and overwhelming. Moreover, South Africa is a nation with learners from diverse backgrounds in terms of race, culture, language, and religion. Teachers ought to have the flexibility to interpret the curriculum in such a way that it applies to the school environment in which they teach. More focus should be placed on different sets of skills, depending on the socioeconomic environment and geographical locations of a school.

When considering recommendations for SMTs, considerations such as parent involvement, teacher support, and the establishment of a personal well-being management plan require attention. Lastly, teachers should empower themselves. Teachers must take responsibility for themselves by developing techniques and coping mechanisms to deal with the challenges they encounter.

Conclusion

Teachers' well-being in South Africa must be prioritised because they are key individuals who can effect meaningful changes in the country's future through their educational roles. As Long et al. (2017:11) asked: "Will teachers preserve their commitment to this vocation and continue to be

motivated and energised despite being constantly blamed and not being supported?”

Despite the numerous challenges that teachers face daily, we believe that the majority of teachers will continue to be dedicated to their career. Teachers will be inspired to stay in the profession if their well-being is considered by various role players and if they are enabled to take ownership of their careers.

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Parental involvement in schooling enhances education

By Umamah Bakharia



A first of its kind survey focusing on learner experiences has found that parental involvement in their child’s education has proven to result in safer environments, high grades and better communication with teachers.

The DG Murray Trust’s Parent Power initiative has conducted the first-ever survey of parental perception of South Africa’s education system by focusing on experiences and the overall happiness of children in schools, instead of grades. These experiences have been captured in five domains that created the Parent Power Index: happiness, safety, confidence in principals, their

knowledge of the school and the power they have as parents.

“The matric results only come at the end of the whole process. However, all these other factors added up can lead to a shift in results. If we have competent principals and if we have a safe environment for our children, they are most likely to be able to learn better and experience school in a better way,” said Andisiwe Hlungwane, project lead for the Parents and Teachers Initiative at the trust.

Hlungwane says the Parent Power initiative aims to ensure that parents are active in the schools their children attend to be comfortable enough to advocate for their children’s needs, such as safety and the quality of education.

“We want parents to see the role that they can play in engaging with their child’s happiness at school,” she said.

The report shows that parents who communicate with the school through SMS, email or Whatsapp are more involved in their child’s education.

But this differs with private and public schools because schools sometimes need to consider the parents’ availability for them to be involved in the education process, said Hlungwane.

“It’s really about how do schools accommodate their parents and their contexts if they really want parents to be involved — there is somewhat of a difference but we need to look at it in a very nuanced way and understand the context that parents are in.”

The report has found that parents who report the school’s classrooms are not overcrowded, believe the school is clean and safe, report knowing that their child understands what is expected of them, have a good school governing body, are more regularly involved in their child’s education and require more information.

The report notes that a lack of parental involvement is attributed to intimidation based on the parent’s personal experience.

“Oftentimes parents come into schools with trauma — so schools need to on their side build a lot of trust with parents and open up

communication so parents can be open and frank with schools and teachers when it comes to their child's work," said Hlungwane.

Parent Power's report, Quality of Education in South Africa Through the Eyes of Parents, which was carried out based on a survey by the Human Sciences Research Council, was launched on 21 July in the presence of schools, parents and partners in North West.

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