Siphokazi Kwatubana & Vivian Molaodi

Leadership Styles that Would Enable School Leaders to Support the Wellbeing of Teachers during COVID-19

Abstract

In times of crisis, people look up to their leaders and expect that they would minimise the impact of the crisis at hand. Leaders in such situations must grasp and address the crisis while maintaining a sense of normality. In this research, we drew on data from a literature search to answer the following question: What can be learnt from studies on teacher wellbeing during the COVID-19 crisis, that can help us to determine the leadership style needed to support teacher wellbeing? A literature search was conducted to create a database of articles that focused on teacher wellbeing during the COVID-19 crisis and school leadership. The following four keywords/phrases were used during the search: crisis management in schools; crisis management during COVID-19 in schools; leadership styles for crisis management; and leadership styles in support of teacher wellbeing during crisis situations. The review included both national and international studies. This paper highlights two leadership best practices for navigating teacher wellbeing challenges posed by the coronavirus pandemic, namely distributed leadership and compassionate leadership.

Keywords: COVID-19, teacher wellbeing, school leadership during crisis situations, leadership styles

Introduction

It is agreed that school leadership in times of crisis differs from leadership required under normal circumstances. The COVID-19 pandemic has manifested as a multifaceted crisis that calls for exceptional leadership. This pandemic has disrupted schooling globally. Although the outbreak of COVID-19 has not exclusively been a public health crisis, it has been a serious psychosocial issue for teachers. Teacher wellbeing has been greatly impacted by this pandemic due to its devastating effect at a personal level, social distancing and remote learning. According to the South African Council for Educators (SACE, 2020), the unprecedented COVID-19 pandemic has brought fear, grief, threat, disillusionment and concerns to the education system and the teaching profession in particular. These have had a bearing on teachers. Teacher wellbeing is important because it contributes to work satisfaction and productivity and, most importantly, has a positive influence on student wellbeing and academic achievement (Spilt, Koomen & Thijs, 2011). This research focused on teacher wellbeing as work related and domain specific, as opposed to general wellbeing, which is about open, engaged and healthy functioning. Work-related teacher wellbeing refers to individuals' positive evaluations of and healthy functioning in their work environment (Van Horn et al., 2004). Good leadership that will enable followers to be more responsive to change is needed now more than ever. We believe that school leaders must have cultivated a new set of leadership competencies for dealing with the COVID-19 crisis, which

they never have encountered before, in order for them to support teacher wellbeing. Leaders influence those around them in order to reap maximum benefits. However, evidence on school leadership practices in a pandemic is non-existent; this is unprecedented territory with few education signposts, points of reference, or recent experience to draw upon. As leadership is about influence, this research includes principals, deputy principals, heads of departments (HoDs), and senior teachers in its definition of school leaders.

Understanding factors affecting teacher wellbeing during the COVID-19 crisis to determine the leadership styles required to support teacher wellbeing is important: poor wellbeing can have serious consequences for the teaching profession if not attended to. For example, it can lead to teachers leaving the profession, which can be financially costly for schools and the educational system (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2017) and detrimental to student achievements. Researchers acknowledge that teachers work in difficult circumstances that can negatively affect their wellbeing. Teachers face competitive demands even under normal circumstances, which can lead to stress and anxiety, and this situation is worsened by crises. There is an increasing awareness that employee wellbeing is vital for any organisation. As earlier indicated, when the wellbeing of teachers is not attended to, it becomes a challenge that compromises the quality of education. In this paper, we argue that school leaders should have distinct leadership styles in order to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Most studies that have been conducted in South Africa focus on digital transformation of education during COVID-19 (Mhlanga & Moloi, 2020; Mahaye, 2020). A study on teacher wellbeing by Mungroo (2020) suggests certain coping strategies that can mitigate the effects of the pandemic. Earlier research on teacher wellbeing advocate for self-care strategies. Others recommend adaptability, which entails adjusting thoughts, actions, and emotions to effectively navigate new, changing, or uncertain situations (Martin et al., 2012). Self-care is important; however, the burden of ill-being cannot be put entirely on teachers. Teachers should be supported at individual and collective levels. This research adds to the debate on understanding the kind of leadership that is needed during crisis situations.

Literature review: Factors affecting the wellbeing of teachers during the COVID-19 pandemic

Even before COVID-19, teachers worked under poor environmental conditions, including poor infrastructure, overcrowded classrooms, lack of resources and high workload, which are causes of teacher distress (Mungroo, 2020). Additionally, long before COVID-19 disrupted schools, some teachers were already at risk of burnout. COVID-19 seems to have aggravated the situation as the paragraphs below indicate.

The issue of social distancing, which was unplanned, made teachers' work change drastically so as to accommodate the current situation (Kaden, 2020). Social distancing was enforced in over 109 countries across the world in response to the COVID-19 pandemic; this resulted in the introduction of technology-based pedagogy by some governments to ensure that learners had access to learning materials while staying at home (Mahaye, 2020). The efficiency of transitioning to remote learning is dependent on learner and teacher preparedness, overall learner support infrastructure and technology tools. Developing countries reported

challenges integrating digital resources into educational practice, which demanded significant effort from teachers, causing insecurity in teaching habits and routines. Digital illiteracy and inequality in access to technology is a major concern in African countries. Although the government of South Africa ensured the availability of electronic readers via all major cell phone networks as well as the 2Enable app as a freely downloadable educational platform with more than 2 000 electronic readers in the indigenous languages of the country (Department of Basic Education, 2020), some pupils still did not have access due to poverty (Mhlanga & Moloi, 2020). Teachers cannot solve these problems of inequity immediately. This sudden shift from face-to-face teaching to remote learning affected teacher wellbeing as it demanded great efforts in teaching habits and routines. Teachers had stable working patterns before COVID-19; remote teaching caused a deviation from their working patterns. Moreover, teachers were dealing with these issues on their own; social isolation and reduced usual social support may have had a negative impact on their mental health and wellbeing. According to Dabrowski (2020) the abrupt lack of contact due to COVID-19 affects teacher emotions. Teachers experience a sense of loss not seeing their students in person, resulting in a kind of grieving in some teachers who generally were not being acknowledged or supported.

Working from home has added more responsibilities as teachers must balance work with personal life. Dabrowski (2020) argues that this affects teacher wellbeing negatively because they are "on call" day and night. The challenges with increased workload were due to changes in their teaching patterns (i.e., the shift to online teaching and the need to master technological strategies). Teachers did not have time to prepare for this sudden change. Lockdown resulted in many hours of work, causing challenges owing to the obstacles created by work-life imbalance. Leisure and family time are reduced. Sensible work-life balance can become impossible to maintain in such situations on account of unplanned heavy workload.

There was a concern about teachers over the age of 60 and those with comorbidities. The Department of Basic Education reported to have measures in place to accommodate teachers who were at high risk, had comorbidities, or were over the age of 60. Temporary teachers were employed to help with additional classes. Anxiety amongst teachers grew as schools were perceived as sites of infection. Fears of being infected worsened after some schools were temporarily shut in June when coronavirus cases were reported (Isilow, 2020). In South Africa, teachers who were on comorbidity absence, over the age of 60, and had been working from home, returned to work in September 2020 as the country moved to lockdown level 1. Teachers aged 60 years and older could be breadwinners due to the high unemployment rate in the country. As they are a vulnerable group, fears of being infected could worsen their health. Feelings of anxiety and fear could trigger negative emotions in those teachers.

Lack of personal protective equipment (PPE) and often poor hygiene measures in most disadvantaged schools aggravated anxiety and fear among teachers. Not all schools have facilities with access to water and ablutions where learners can regularly wash hands, which increases the risk of teachers getting infected. Data show that children may be carriers and spreaders of COVID-19, so teachers' health and wellbeing may be compromised if they are not provided with PPE. According to the *Mail and Guardian* (Macupe, 2020), some schools in KwaZulu-Natal, one of the

provinces of South Africa, could not open in June 2020 after the hard lockdown was lifted as PPE was not delivered on time. Although data on transmission in schools are sparse, the lack of PPE was a cause for concern to teachers due to a risk to their physical health.

In a study conducted by Kim, Oxley and Asbury (2021), uncertainty over government guidance to schools was indicated as a consistent detrimental factor to participating teachers' wellbeing. Currently, the decision to close and open schools depends on the rate of the spread of COVID-19 cases. Frustrations stem from a lack of consultation with the education community and last-minute decision-making. For instance, first there was uncertainty about a "phased approach" to the opening of schools as South Africa was approaching lockdown level 4 during the first wave. Then there was confusion about procedures for dealing with the vast number of learners that each teacher was responsible for. In South Africa, as in all other low-income countries, the learner–teacher ratio is 50 and above. Uncertainty can heighten anxiety. Stress due to how to teach effectively while ensuring social distance and constant sanitisation, could be worsened by a lack of resources such as classes and furniture to accommodate a small number in each class; well-ventilated classrooms; extra teachers; and running water and ablution facilities. In such situations, teachers are unable to plan their lives easily as they do not know when or how changes may occur as a result of unpredictable variations.

In summary, it can be argued that both reopening schools and keeping them closed carry risks that actively require mitigation of teacher wellbeing. In all these instances, there are multiple indicators and multiple causes of the negative effects on teacher wellbeing.

In the foregoing paragraphs, we highlighted the negative effects due to rapid changes in teaching and learning brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic. Firstly, COVID-19 had negative consequences for schools as organisations as they could no longer offer the usual support to teachers. Secondly, social wellbeing was affected as maintaining social connections and relationships became impossible due to lockdown. Social wellbeing is believed to be the key component of a person's overall health. Thirdly, work-life imbalance caused by increased workload contributed to emotional and psychological ill-health.

The type of leadership required to support teacher wellbeing

The lesson we learnt from the data on teacher wellbeing is that the demands on leadership during a crisis include dealing with events of the crisis as they unfold, emotions, and consequences while also trying to stabilise the institution by looking and planning beyond the crisis.

First, school leaders should keep the team together, whether teachers are at school or home, during lockdown. Teachers are used to working in teams and collaborating with other teachers, whether they are planning and strategising or deliberating on problems and challenges the school faces. As teams are essential, especially during the COVID-19 crisis, school leaders must create a platform for teams to flourish. Teamwork during a crisis is vital to strengthen relationships. Focused attention on teamwork is required for teachers to maintain resilience and sustain coordinated performance, which, in turn, can alleviate the stress caused by a heavy workload and work-life imbalance. These teams can be used for multiple

purposes, including ensuring continuity of teaching, support for teachers to manage workload, and social support. Team communication could mitigate social isolation. School leaders' role is twofold: to create an environment for continuation of the teams that were in existence before COVID-19 and to synergise. Teams can communicate using Facebook, WhatsApp chats, video calls and other internet platforms where internet connectivity is not a challenge. As stress levels are high for all in a crisis, the leadership responsibility of these teams can be distributed. The school leader cannot work alone because a top-down hierarchical approach is unlikely to be effective in a volatile, uncertain, and complex environment created by COVID-19. Moreover, school leaders should also look after their own wellbeing. Thus, distributing leadership responsibilities is more effective than other leadership approaches in times of crisis (Berjaoui & Karami-Akkary, 2019). School leaders should be willing to delegate authority, capitalise on expertise within the school, and create infrastructure so as to employ the leadership of a number of teachers.

The current situation is characterised by issues that affect teachers emotionally; therefore, school leaders should lead with compassion and be supportive to teachers. Dealing with teachers who are overburdened with new responsibilities of managing their learners and their own children's work requires a sense of empathy and caring. Such situations kindle feelings of helplessness. Sokal, Trudel and Babb (2020) suggest addressing teachers' thoughts and feelings about remote teaching as well as their exhaustion if their continued progression towards burnout can be mitigated. Continuity of teaching and learning depends on how teachers are supported by prioritising their mental health, nurturing their combined self-confidence, and understanding their workload. Times of crisis call for tough decisions; however, compassion can be a valuable tool for mitigating anxiety and ensuring that the team stays on track. All strategies and actions to teach during and after lockdown will fall short if not accompanied by empathy. Compassionate leadership is important for alleviating organisational stress. This could mean that the school leader should be in contact with each member of the staff (during lockdown), engage in active listening without judging in order to understand what they are experiencing and assist them in creating pathways to a healthy wellbeing. For teachers to carry out their duties and face the pressures caused by the COVID-19 crisis, they need emotional support from their leaders.

Conclusion

The literature review on teacher wellbeing provided an opportunity to understand leadership styles that are needed to support their wellbeing. One of the lessons that can be learnt from the experiences of COVID-19 in 2020 is that fostering belonging and inclusion to unify the school as an organisation is important. Devising means of keeping teachers together, even during lockdown, to assist in navigating times of crisis becomes crucial. Social isolation demands an establishment of a collaborative culture in order to keep sustain teaching and learning activities. Principals mobilise others to lead through collective engagement leading to joint practice. Distributive leadership becomes key in ensuring effectiveness of remote leadership. The distributive leadership in this research is linked to compassionate leadership. It is deemed necessary to tune into and

understanding teachers' emotional makeup and needs, as this is fundamental in supporting personal transitions through well-functioning relationships.

References

Berjaoui, R. R. & Karami-Akkary, R. (2019): Distributed leadership as a path to organisational commitment: the case of a Lebanese school. *Leadership and Policy in Schools*, 19(4), 610-624.

Carver-Thomas, D. & Darling-Hammond, L. (2017): Teacher turnover: Why it matters and what we can do about it. Learning Policy Institute. https://learningpolicyinstitute.org/ product/teacher-turnover-report (Accessed 03/07/20).

Dabrowski, A. (2020): Teacher Wellbeing During a Pandemic: Surviving or Thriving? *Social Education Research*, 2(1), 35-40.

Department of Basic Education (2020): Minister Angie Motshekga on Basic Education Sector Plans to Support Learners during Coronavirus COVID-19 Lockdown. https://www.gov.za/speeches/minister-angie-motshekga-basic-education-sector-plans-support-learners-during-covid-19 (Accessed 31/01/20).

Isilow, H. (2020): COVID-19 spreads to schools in South Africa. https://www.aa.com.tr/en/ africa/covid-19-spreads-to-schools-in-south-africa/1887226 (Accessed 31/01/20).

Kaden, U. (2020): COVID-19 school closure-related changes to the professional life of a K–12 teacher. *Education Sciences*, 10(6), 165-178.

Kim, L., Oxley, L. & Asbury, K. (2021): "My brain is like a browser with 100 tabs open": A longitudinal study of teachers' mental health and wellbeing during the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020. https://psyarxiv.com/cjpdx/ (Accessed 21/01/21).

Macupe, D. (2020): Protective equipment for schools in KwaZulu-Natal goes 'missing'. *Mail & Guardian*, 2 June. https://mg.co.za/coronavirus-essentials/2020-06-02-protective-equipment-for-schools-in-kwazulu-natal-goes-missing/ (Accessed 12/12/20).

Mahaye, N. E. (2020): The Impact of COVID-19 Pandemic on South African Education: Navigating Forward the Pedagogy of Blended Learning. https://www.researchgate.net/ publication/340899662 (Accessed 18/10/20).

Martin, A. J., Nejad, H., Colmar, S. & Liem, G. A. D. (2012): Adaptability: Conceptual and empirical perspectives on responses to change, novelty and uncertainty. *Journal of Psychologists and Counsellors in Schools*, 22(1), 58-81.

Mhlanga, D. & Moloi, T. (2020): COVID-19 and the Digital Transformation of Education: What Are We Learning on 4IR in South Africa? *Education Sciences*, 10(7), article 180, 1-11.

Mungroo, M. (2020): Teacher well-being: Coping mechanisms to deal with the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic. University of Kwazulu-Natal School of Education. http//soe.ukzn.ac.za/news/2020/07/teacher-well-being-coping-mechanisms-to-deal-with-the-consequences-of-the-covid-19-pandemic/ (Accessed 22/12/20).

SACE (2020): Teachers' rights, status and ongoing support matters. https://www.sace.org.za/ assets/documents/uploads/sace_49522-2020-05-01-SACE%20Response%20to%20the% 20Minister's%20Address%20Final.pdf (Accessed 28/12/20).

Sokal, L., Trudel, L. E. & Babb, J. (2020): Canadian teachers' attitudes toward change, efficacy, and burnout during the COVID-19 pandemic. *International Journal of Educational Research Open*, 1, 1-8.

Spilt, J. L., Koomen, H. M. & Thijs, J. T. (2011): Teacher wellbeing: The importance of teacher-student relationships. *Educational Psychology Review*, 23(4), 457-477.

Van Horn, J. E., Taris, T. W., Schaufeli, W. B. & Schreurs, P. J. G. (2004): The structure of occupational well-being: A study among Dutch teachers. *Journal of Occupational & Organizational Psychology*, 77, 365-375.

Prof. Dr. Siphokazi Kwatubana, North-West University, South Africa

Dr. Vivian Thuso Molaodi, Post Doctoral Student, North-West University, South Africa