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Drawing on the Locus of Control Framework to Explore the Role of School Leaders in Teacher Well-Being

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Abstract

This scoping review explores the role of school leadership in the improvement of teacher well-being by utilizing the Locus of Control (LOC) Framework identified by psychologist Julian Rotter in 1954. The internal and external environments impacting teacher well-being were explored, and the specific responsibilities of school leadership were identified. The literature reports that while teachers are responsible for many aspects of their well-being, school leaders can improve a teacher's mental health and create a positive school culture by taking responsibility for factors external to the teacher's LOC. This paper outlines school leadership responsibilities in actively implementing strategies to improve staff well-being in the school environment.

Recommended Citation

Introduction

This review paper outlines the wide-reaching implications for school leadership teams and teacher well-being. To provide detailed insight, we used the Locus of Control (LOC) framework developed by Julian Rotter in 1954 to underline the impact that school leadership has on the well-being of teachers. This framework was initially recognized in the corporate business setting, where companies have acknowledged their role in implementing strategies to actively enhance staff well-being, which was proven effective (Karimi & Alipour,

2011; Rasheed-Karim, 2020). Since the emphasis is now on schools to be businesslike—with their own strategic plan and budget (Mestry & Naidoo, 2009)—the LOC framework is relevant to investigate the impact of school leadership on teacher health. The LOC framework distinguishes between the external environment (out of **the individual's control) and the internal environment (within the individual's control).** This paper focuses on only one element of the external environment: the school leadership team.

Teacher well-being has been a focus of scholarly articles over the last 20 years, according to the Association of Independent Schools NSW. Researchers have found that teacher retention rates have been on a downward trend (McCallum et al., 2017). According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics (2021), 296,616 full-time equivalent schoolteachers were educating approximately four million students annually across Australia. Acton & Glasgow (2015) reported that 25%–40% of teachers contemplate changing their career path within the first 5 years of their teaching career. Safe Work Australia, in 2020, noted that 8% of WorkCover claims by teachers were linked to mental health concerns (Corbett et al., 2021).

It is presumed that schoolteacher mental health concern statistics have worsened since the COVID-19 pandemic due to the changed work conditions and school closures during 2020–2021, which may have led to increased stress. This increased stress led to staff well-being needs being at the forefront of the school leadership agenda.

To counteract the teacher shortage, teacher well-being has also been identified as part of the government teacher summit on August 12, 2022, where the Education Minister, the Honorable Jason Clare, MP, outlined his concerns about the teacher shortage due to decreased retention rates and burnout (Clare, 2022a, 2022b), which have also been identified as part of the *Interim Report* published in September 2022 by the Australian Government Productivity Commission.

To offset the decline of teacher availability, an improved external teacher environment needs to be created, where each educator feels valued and looked after by the school leadership team. As Simon Sinek and Richard Branson (from the business sector) have observed, looking after the individual employee not only increases staff morale and well-being, but also raises profits. **Sinek and Branson's** main philosophy is that employers need to look after their staff members, who then care for t**he company's customers, which** then results in satisfied clients (*Inc.*, 2016; Sinek, 2016). This positive "chain of logistics" can be easily mirrored in the school setting—where improved teacher well-being will result in more positive teacher-student relationships and improved student outcomes (Zuninio, 2017).

While teachers can address many aspects of their well-being, according to the LOC theory, the external environment is generally out of the **teacher's** control and needs to be managed by the school leadership team (Kristiansen et al., 2012). Important aspects, such as the overall school culture, organizing teacher resources, identifying job demands, and offering professional development, are all part of this external platform. When these factors are not supporting teacher well-being, they become "environmental stress(ors**)"** (Liu, 2020, p. 1395) for the teacher. There is an inverse relationship between the two. The higher these stressors are, the lower the staff well-being becomes.

This paper outlines the required actions of the school leadership team to improve the school culture and subsequently the external environment. With the adoption of the LOC framework, the leadership team may enable overall improvements in staff well-being, resulting in enhancements in staff retention rates and student outcomes.

Locus of Control Framework

The LOC framework, developed by Julian Rotter in 1954, distinguishes between the Internal Locus of Control (ILOC) and the External Locus of Control (ELOC; Rotter, 1966). The ILOC describes how a person experiences a

reward for a particular behavior. Feedback, part of the LOC framework, is part of the reinforcement that encourages a change in behavior, which is internally motivated as part of the ILOC. "Internals" (ILOCs) are identified as individuals who tend to present with a high degree of accepting feedback from colleagues and/or superiors, are more focused, and can more easily identify solutions toward a given problem (Strauser et al., 2002). In comparison, "externals" (ELOCs) are more focused on the outside environment. People who show more ELOC tend to believe that their actions are beyond their control, which results in outside influences directing the "externals" to follow instructions without questioning them (Ng et al., 2006).

The LOC framework was applied to a range of organizations in order to place staff into positions determined by their dominant characteristics (i.e., ILOC or ELOC; Spector, 1988). Researchers have concluded that internals tend to be more flexible, self-motivated, display higher levels of positivity, and adapt to new situations more easily than externals (Ng et al., 2006). Internals are also known for being more solution-focused, where a higher work–life balance is displayed, and support is sought when needed. Internals also succeed in the workplace by seeking out positive relationships, which enhances the workplace culture and promotes more openness to acquiring new skills, while also focusing on improved relationships with supervisors (Sprung & Jex, 2012). In contrast, externals lean towards tasks where fewer skills are required and less proactivity is needed. Externals enjoy more repetitive jobs (Ng et al., 2006).

The LOC framework has also been linked to occupational stressors, where staff are unable to navigate the demands of their external environment—the workplace (Spector, 1988). Factors such as headaches, anxiety, depression, and burnout, can be experienced by schoolteachers, and these issues result in higher staff absenteeism and, eventually, staff turnover.

Stress reducers, such as using relaxation strategies and activities outside of the workplace (e.g., taking a day off, going for a walk, or joining a gym), were proven to help the internal employees overcome these symptoms (Karimi & Alipour, 2011; Kebbi, 2018). Since internals are more proactive than externals in their management of challenging situations, internals can reduce stressors more easily and can counteract signs of pressure better than externals (Karimi & Alipour, 2011).

According to Chen and Silverthorne (2008), externals report lower job satisfaction levels than internals due to experiencing higher stress levels. Hence, job performance is expected to be higher for internals (Chen & Silverthorne, 2008). Research also shows that externals feel more comfortable in a predominantly ELOC culture where they are guided to complete their tasks, whereas internals experience a sense of control and comfort in a predominantly ILOC business culture, where they can be part of the decision-making processes (Karimi & Alipour, 2011).

The leadership team–employee relationship is also influenced by the LOC. Depending on the workplace culture, either a more ELOC or ILOC environment is experienced. By keeping this in mind, the recruitment process needs to follow suit by either hiring more internals or externals in alignment with the culture of the workplace. Factory staff, for example, often reflect a higher percentage of employees with higher ELOC characteristics (Shivers-Blackwell, 2006).

It is recommended that leadership positions are filled with more staff displaying higher levels of internal LOC levels due to their intrinsic motivational levels, higher work outputs, and focus on finding solutions (Ng et al., 2006). Ng et al. (2006) suggest that more research is required, as there is potential for the LOC framework to support a more positive relationship between the managerial and employee levels. Some actions to address the needs of the ELOCs, such as personal development programs, recognize the support provided to ELOCs to learn characteristics that were identified as advantageous to ILOCs (Ng et al., 2006). It has also been identified that staff are able to display a "bi-local expectancy" (April et al., 2012), a term that describes staff who display equal parts of ILOC and ELOC.

By displaying a positive mix of the ILOC and ELOC characteristics, highly motivated staff members can work independently but can also accept guidance from their manager. It must be pointed out that although managers realize they can only control parts of their environment (with other aspects being controlled for them), their passion and motivational levels in the workplace will support them in maintaining a positive outlook (April et al., 2012).

Personal motivation levels, which include positive and negative self-image, were also linked to the LOC framework. Ng et al. (2006) view motivation as a tool that increases the ability to learn, resulting in "a sense of empowerment" (p. 1061). Having the ability to reflect positively displays a higher level of ILOC. In contrast, negative self-talk results in less control, which is more often displayed by externals. This can result in lower well-being levels and fewer achievements of personal goals (Ng et al., 2006).

Rasheed-Karim (2020) has linked teacher well-being to the LOC framework and reports that teachers display higher levels of ILOC when staff members feel confident in controlling their decision-making. This sense of empowerment supports their internal characteristics. Positive relationships with colleagues, students, and the school leadership team further assist the internals in experiencing higher levels of teacher well-being and job satisfaction (Rasheed-Karim, 2020). However, it has also been noted that more experienced teachers—although being internals—are often unable to overcome stressors in the workplace due to being middle-aged and in the mid-career bracket, where stress levels and burnout are at their highest. As a result, this cohort of experienced teachers may start to externalize their discomfort, which is presumed to be the case during the COVID-19 lockdowns of 2020–2021.

During the COVID-19 lockdown, well-being levels were reported as reduced, and higher staff absenteeism and turnover were apparent (Han et al., 2020). Teachers identified that they could only control their well-being up to a certain level and that the school culture and the leadership within the external environment also need to support staff well-being (Rasheed-Karim, 2020).

Methodology

Arksey & O'Malley (2005) identified a scoping study as an evidence-based investigation and recognized it as a legitimate form of research since the research needs to be completed systematically and rigorously to ensure the reliability and replication of the outcomes. We based our scoping study on a broad range of international literature, published over an extended period (2002–2020), to reflect a number of subtopics as part of a complex area. As part of this research, we focused on the connection between teacher well-being and the external environment of the teacher's LOC. Since the topic is highly multi-faceted, the LOC framework was applied to each subtopic of teacher well-being.

Arksey & O'Malley (2005) have emphasized the importance and validity of a scoping study in comparison to a systematic review. They suggest that a scoping study is an evidence-based investigation and, therefore, a legitimate form of research. Levac et al. (2010) and Pham et al. (2014) support this claim, arguing that scoping studies focus on a different objective than that of a systematic review. A broader perspective provides a comprehensive overview of the topic rather than in-depth research. The main aim of the scoping study is to align key aspects of the literature in relation to the research question while applying a relevant framework that can be replicated (Arksey & O'Malley, 2005; Levac et al., 2010; Pham et al., 2014). As part of their research, Arksey & **O'Malley (2005) identified a framework that** was tested and verified by Levac et al. (2010) and Pham et al. (2014). Due to the multi-faceted topic surrounding teacher well-being, this structure was identified as useful.

Stage 1: The Research Question

The primary focus of this research paper is teacher well-being. As part of this research, we found the topic of teacher well-being to be multi-faceted. The article reflects the topic and the extended identification of issues that teachers face, while the LOC framework was applied to the subtopics of teacher well-being. Thus, this **paper's research question is: How does the external** LOC framework relate to teacher well-being?

Stage 2: Identification of Relevant Studies

As part of this research, only electronic journal articles were selected, and we applied a timespan from 2002–2020. As part of the 2002–2016 timespan, only 17 articles met the inclusion criteria. However, the 2017–2022 timespan became the focus of this paper because of the more recent research and subsequent acknowledgment of declining teacher well-being at schools.

Original texts from Rotter (1966) and Spector (1988) were included in this paper to apply their LOC framework. The electronic articles were published mainly in English; however, German language articles were included, as well. Every effort was made to include only peer-reviewed articles by cross-referencing these as part of the LaTrobe University Library search function, which is used to ensure the validity of the papers.

Key terms that were used, initially, as part of the research, and then were further refined and extended once the research question was adjusted are: *teacher well-being*, *teacher health*, *teacher efficacy*, *teacher resilience*, *Lehrergesundheit* (teacher well-being), *Lehrerbelastung* (burden on teacher) and *Locus of Control*. We did not use a reference list of identified papers so we could develop a broad sample of articles while identifying the history of teacher well-being over the stated period.

Stage 3: Study Selection

The focus of this paper was to continue the breadth of research across the stated timespan rather than to perform in-depth research on one specific aspect. Firstly, the key terms were entered into the search engines. Secondly, abstracts were read to consider their inclusion or exclusion from the review. Decisions were based on relevance according to the research question. To gain a deeper insight into an article, the full paper was read, and a final decision was then made about whether to include the article in this review. Once a selection was made, the article was uploaded into the EndNote reference management tool to collate all papers and identify the themes arising from the literature.

Stage 4: Charting Data

This stage of charting the data included sorting the data according to the research question and the identification of key terms. Since the topic of "teacher well-being" is multi-faceted, this step was vital in uncovering key aspects of the topic. To simplify this process, further steps were taken, including:

- Step One: A table, as part of a Word document, was created. In it, the author, publishing date, and title were listed with a short summary of the text, including the key points.
- Step Two: An Excel spreadsheet was used, where each key point along with additional details was entered. These key points were again separated into two key aspects. These two key aspects then formed the two focus areas: the teacher focus and the school leadership focus. Further sub-topics were identified to combine the main ideas for each focus area.

As part of this sorting process, we recognized that the Locus of Control (LOC) framework, which was identified by Rotter (1966) and extended by Spector (1988), is suitable for this research paper, because the LOC framework differentiates between the internal and the e**xternal control over one's own life and,**

specifically, in the workplace. Here the connection was made: The teacher focus represents the ILOC, and the school leadership focus represents the **teacher's** ELOC.

Stage 5: Collating, Summarizing, and Reporting Results

Once the two common groupings of "teacher focus" and "school leadership focus" were identified, the LOC framework for exploring the literature was overlayed. As the study compares the internal and external LOC, each sub-topic—formed into sub-headings representing the main keywords—was then applied. As part of this summarizing process, decisions were made to allocate sub-topics to their respective key aspects of the teacher focus and school leadership focus. Advocates of a scoping review warn that a bias can be apparent, depending on the interpretation of the literature and the sorting and combining of key aspects of the overall themes.

As part of this paper, we made decisions to combine features of teacher well-being in relation to their internal and external LOC. Further gaps and constraints are apparent as part of time constraints—particularly due to the COVID-19 pandemic—and a break, as part of the research, had to be accepted. Furthermore, the exclusion of articles published in languages other than English and German limited the breadth of this research.

This research does not generalize the findings; however, a broad reflection of the multi-faceted issues is presented. There will always be exceptions possible in a broad topic, such as teacher well-being, but overall, the scoping study f**ramework by Arksey & O'Malley (2005)** was applied step by step. Researching the topic of teacher well-being, while upholding the structure and implementing the key aspects of the LOC framework, has conveyed a broad scope of the overall theme.

Findings

According to the LOC f**ramework, the teacher's** external LOC consists of the school leadership, school culture, available resources, job demands placed on educators, and professional development. These areas are considered outside of teacher control; therefore, they can potentially be part of environmental stressors that may affect teacher well-being (Kristiansen et al., 2012).

Researchers have claimed that individual preventative measures to overcome health issues in the workplace are not powerful enough: Organizational strategies are needed to ensure healthy personnel (Dabrowski, 2020). To ascertain teacher well-being levels, surveys administered by the school leadership team are highly recommended to identify areas of improvement, while minimizing daily stressors in the workplace (Zurlo et al., 2007). Since teachers are predominantly internals (Rasheed-Karim, 2020) who like to be proactive and included in decision-making processes, including them in the implementation of well-being efforts based on in-school survey results offers them a sense of control (Benoliel & Barth, 2017).

School Environment

The overall school environment (other terms used, interchangeably, are *school climate* and *school culture*) was identified as part of the ELOC. As Gray et al. (2017) suggest, norms and values, as well as the overall character of the setting, reflect vital aspects of the school climate. Teachers are not able to control these factors, and, therefore, these unknowns can present challenges for teachers to navigate, while also staying positive about the workplace.

Teachers with higher internal characteristics, who tend to be more outgoing and focused on problem-solving strategies, could be faced with challenges due to their inability to identify overarching solutions for themselves and their colleagues (Ng et al., 2006). The personal alignment of each teacher with the wider school focus has an impact on the individual well-being level for both ILOCs and ELOCs (Gray et al., 2017; Ng et al., 2006). To build a positive culture, strong relationships between all stakeholders, inclusive of the leadership team, staff, students,

as well as parents, need encouragement. Positive staff well-being has an impact on all other parties, resulting in the identification of all **teachers'** social and emotional demands that need to be met to further enhance all **stakeholders' bonds** (Cherkowski, 2018). As Cherkowski (2018) states, a positive school culture supports higher levels of teacher resilience and job satisfaction, reflected in more positive mental health levels among staff.

In contrast, negative teacher well-being will have an undesirable impact on the school environment. A downward trend can result in high staff absenteeism, staff turnover, and possible early retirement. This decline can be prevented by the school leadership team, which is able to introduce strategies to counteract these factors (Gray et al., 2017).

As Gray et al. (2017) have stated, individual interventions do not reach far enough to change an overall negative school environment. Therefore, schools need complex interventions. Appropriate policies and procedures need to be introduced, which can be challenging for the school leadership team to maintain in the long term. Approaches that need to be included are positive two-way communication, effective information flow with a focus on the acknowledgment of the individual situation, as well as trusting and respectful relationships with staff (Gray et al., 2017).

Leadership–Teacher Relationship

The school leadership team is responsible for creating the school environment, as Gray et al. (2017) identified. This climate can be either a supportive climate, where teacher well-being is prioritized, or a stressful culture with declining well-being levels (Gray et al., 2017). Since the LOC of the leadership team has an impact on teacher–work life, the principal and leadership team need to be aware of their own LOC characteristics and subsequently their communication styles (Shivers-Blackwell, 2006).

Principals are often not aware that they are able to regulate staff emotions through their interactions. Communication styles, such as a positive tone in comparison to a negative one, will influence staff emotions. As a result, principal communication styles will have a positive or negative impact on staff well-being, which will be reflected in the overall school culture (Cherkowski, 2018). Depending on the connectedness between these two stakeholders, staff are more likely to voice their honest emotions and opinions if they feel safe doing so. Therefore, a better overall understanding of the employees by the leadership team is necessary to implement positive strategies and develop an improved school climate leading to higher staff retention rates (Cherkowski, 2018).

Researchers have found that strong connections—across all stakeholders—not only counteract "ill health" but also—when implemented as a joint goal—help to overcome unwellness (Shernoff et al., 2011). To further strengthen the leadership–teacher relationship, principals need to mentor individual staff members by displaying compassion, trust, and respect, thereby supporting teachers and enabling a stronger sense of efficacy by supporting confidence in their own skills (Cherkowski, 2018).

Job Resources

While the staff is considered the most important resource for each school (Zurlo et al., 2007), a low return on investment in the school was identified: When staff retention rates are low, staff hiring and training costs are high. First, the cost of the hiring process by following the application process, where staff are taken out of their classes to view applications and conduct interviews, is significant. Furthermore, inducting new staff into a school culture takes time. Subsequently, team dynamics must continuously adjust due to high staff turnover, loss of pedagogical expertise, and curriculum needs, creating a higher work demand (Torres, 2016). These impacts are felt by the school leadership team, as well as staff members, who must constantly readjust to changing team characteristics. Therefore, the school leadership team needs to support teachers by offering

empowerment, social networks, and personal growth to counteract increased staff absenteeism and increased resignations (Benoliel & Barth, 2017).

Researchers have also identified that teacher efficacy is highly advantageous for staff with high levels of ILOC; however, a balanced environment for internals and externals offers the most contentment among staff (April et al., 2012). To maintain high teacher retention rates, staff well-being needs to be kept at a high level, where a supportive environment is created. "Effective feedback and supportive relationship(s)" (p. 489), which are valued by all staff—internals as well as externals—need to be demonstrated and fostered by the school leadership (Manasia et al., 2020). Effective feedback and supportive relationships encourage the development of teachers who enjoy teaching and, therefore, can display their passion in the classroom (Huang et al., 2019).

Job Demand

The Australian Government Productivity Commission (2002) identified increased job demands as one of the main contributors to **teachers'** negative well-being levels. These demands are connected to the physiological cost (for example, the lack of sleep), which includes the reduced ability of teachers to feel confident in their own abilities to perform a job (Dicke et al., 2018). Internals are known for controlling job demands better than externals by being more proactive and focusing on problem-solving while adjusting to their environment. However, staff with ILOC are also affected by increased workloads and therefore show stress signs similar to externals (Karimi & Alipour, 2011).

On the one hand, physical impacts on teachers, such as unhealthy eating habits and increased alcohol consumption, were well researched by scholars (Gray et al., 2017). Administrative tasks, changes in curriculum, meeting deadlines, the growing numbers of students, teaching increasingly diverse cohorts of students, student management, as well as a poor work—life balance, among other factors, have an increased impact on teacher well-being (Gray et al., 2017).

Emotional impacts, such as mental health issues and depression, which can happen concurrently, have an equal influence on teacher welfare. Dealing with psychologically challenging situations such as **a student's** anxiety and a challenging home life situation, to name two examples, while compensating for personal issues and supporting colleagues can be overwhelming, as Torres (2016) identified. It is demanding for a teacher to display positive emotions in a tense parent conversation, for example, when a teacher feels tired and exhausted, but still must be positive and empathetic in a parent—teacher interview where a parent criticizes the teacher**'s classroom management strategies.**

Researchers have found that experiencing one emotion while displaying another in a given situation is more strenuous than showing true feelings (Tuxford & Bradley, 2015). It is also important to point out that staff who need the most support tend not to speak up due to embarrassment and the fear of being judged by others (Gray et al., 2017). It is, therefore, critical for the school leadership team to support individual teachers, manage their job demands, and reduce their stress levels (Torres, 2016). By doing so, staff members feel more appreciated and more empowered to manage their own well-being (Karimi & Alipour, 2011).

Professional Development

Professional development for teachers can offer educators opportunities to learn how to improve their understanding of pedagogy and curriculum knowledge. Increasing numbers of courses are offered for teachers to learn about student well-being. However, Falecki and Mann (2020) question the effectiveness of these programs since teachers need guidance and support for themselves to improve their own health first. If teachers are not well, they are unable to display positive well-being traits while teaching their students effective strategies to overcome ill health (Falecki & Mann, 2020). For teachers to learn and improve their own well-being levels, no matter whether they display more internal or external characteristics, they need to

be afforded opportunities to be more in control of their own health (Rasheed-Karim, 2020). It is further suggested that the school leadership team participates in positive leadership training focused on mental health.

It is important that the professional development programs for mental well-being are practical courses, where the participants can experience the newly learned strategies. As Acton & Glasgow (2015) point out, this will support a more long-term implementation of changes in behavior in comparison to theory-based or online curricula. Furthermore, researchers have identified that **this "holistic education program" (p. 110), where the** theory component is underlined with practical exercises, needs to be offered as part of multiple sessions as a **whole staff approach to ensure successful incorporation into the school's values and norms** (Acton & Glasgow, 2015).

Conclusion

This paper outlines the importance for the school leadership team to learn from the business sector, where successful strategies are implemented to support staff in their work–life balance, leading to improved overall higher levels of well-being. By doing so, staff can feel more valued, motivated, and recognized, combating the current low teacher retention rates (Australian Government Productivity Commission, 2022; Clare, 2022a, 2022b).

To counteract the declining retention rates and improve teacher well-being levels, the LOC framework is one possible structure. By identifying whether a teacher displays higher levels of ELOC or ILOC, leadership can better meet staff needs and offer targeted support. Furthermore, individual feedback can be offered to enhance staff welfare and ensure higher work outputs. Additionally, practical professional development with a focus on the improvement of personal well-being for both the leadership team and teachers will augment long-term changes in behavior and an improved school climate. These courses can support internals and externals personally, so that both groups are able to educate students in the classroom to further improve student outcomes.

To successfully change processes, the school leadership team needs to have a detailed understanding of the well-being status quo among staff (Zurlo et al., 2007). By identifying its own leadership characteristics, as well as staff attributes, leadership can form a better understanding and, subsequently, a closer relationship between individual staff members and principals. Often, however, the school leadership team is not aware of individual staff issues, where staff do not feel comfortable speaking up about their well-being concerns. Nevertheless, the literature is clear that whatever the challenges might be, it is imperative for the school leadership team to look after the social and emotional needs of every teacher in their school (Cherkowski, 2018).

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