Mental Health and Wellbeing Promotion and Support: Education Leaders' perceptions and experiences.

Maria Pace[a][1] and Claudette Portelli[b]

aMinistry for Education, Youth, Sports, Research and Innovation, Malta
bDirector of the OCD Clinic, Malta

Educator leaders play a vital role in fostering educators' and students' mental health and wellbeing. Through qualitative research, this paper provides insights from eight education leaders working in State Schools in Malta on their perceptions of, and experiences in, the promotion and support of mental health and wellbeing among educators and students. The objective of the study is to examine how mental health and wellbeing are being promoted, addressed, and supported in schools. Eight semi-structured interviews were conducted with education leaders followed by a reflexive thematic analysis. Four themes emerged from the data, namely school philosophy, ethos, and leadership; mental health and wellbeing in schools; loss and grief; and Covid-19 and its impact on mental health and wellbeing in schools The findings suggest the need for more proactive and supportive considerations of mental health and wellbeing in schools in Malta, along with the implementation and evaluation of mental health and wellbeing whole-school projects in schools.

Keywords: Mental Health and Wellbeing, Schools Leaders, Malta, Reflexive Thematic Analysis

Introduction

Schools are increasingly being considered as important sites to embed mental health and wellbeing prevention programmes and school-based mental health support (Moore et al., 2022). Currently, we are living in a 'crisis' status, both in terms of the number of educators and young people experiencing mental health problems and

---

1

   Corresponding author. Email address: maria.c.pace@gov.mt

with respect to the capability of health services and schools to respond to the current need (Brown & Shay, 2021). In this study we construe mental health and wellbeing as 'a state of wellbeing in which the individual realises his or her own abilities, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and is able to make a contribution to his or her community' (WHO, 2004). Mental health and wellbeing are thus conceptualized as a state of positive in which a person is aware of one's own strengths and abilities, can address life stresses is a positive manner, can feel that she can contribute to her community and feels that her work is productive (Shute & Slee, 2016).

It is crucial to understand how educators view and experience mental health and wellbeing at school as such views and experiences determine their practice and the effort they expend in promoting and supporting mental health and wellbeing at school. School leaders are pivotal in the school's priority to and effort in promoting and supporting mental health and wellbeing (Graetz, 2016). In this study, we wanted to learn more on the promotion and support of mental health and wellbeing in school in Malta through education leaders' perceptions and experiences.

Methodology

This study adopted a social constructionist approach that focuses on how the participants in a research make sense of the world and how they relate to lived experiences (Willig, 2013). The participants included eight education leaders in State Schools in Malta. The participants' work experience in a senior leadership role ranged from 2 to 15 years. Four participants were males and four females. Five participants were from primary schools, two from middle schools and one from a secondary school. Face to face individual, semi-structured interviews were held with the eight participants. The research took place during the COVID-19 pandemic at the time vaccines started to be administered to the public and when positive COVID-19 cases were rising in alarming numbers. Ethical clearance was sought from the Ministry for Education Ethics Board. Reflexive thematic analysis (RTA) (Braun & Clarke, 2019) was conducted to analyse the data.

Findings

Four themes emerged from the reflexive thematic analysis of the data. which were; [3] Loss and Grief; and [4] COVID-19 and its impact of Mental Health and Wellbeing.

The first theme *School Philosophy, Ethos and Leadership* described how mental health and wellbeing need to be embedded within the school culture and shared by the school community. The participants spoke about the need for "a positive ethos" (Mr Abela) in schools, where children "need to feel loved and secure" (Ms Ebejer) and where "distributed leadership" is practiced (Ms Debono). These findings are in line with international research such as Beinecke (2016); Owen (2016); Shava & Tiou, (2018) & Shute & Slee (2016) which shows that types of leadership such as distributed and transformational leadership support mental health and wellbeing.

Theme 2 describes how mental health and wellbeing in school are implemented through the "school development plan" (Mr Farrugia) and through the "promotion of a culture of trust where staff feel valued" (Ms

Debono). Participants mentioned challenges that lead towards a comprised culture of mental health and wellbeing in schools such as how the role of a head of school "can be a lonely role" (Ms Ebejer); how compromised wellbeing in educators and members of staff impact practice, as "an unhappy member of staff will have challenges in class" (Mr Farrugia); and how behaviours of concern experienced by students such as "ODD and aggression" (Ms Debono) and "withdrawn behaviour" and "low self-esteem" (Ms Borg) compromise students' wellbeing.

Two contextual challenges that this study identified were the issue of loss and grief and the impact of losing someone within the school community or beyond has on the staff and students' mental health and wellbeing and COVID-19 pandemic. Similar to the study by Ferrow (2019), this study presents the challenges of loss, grief and separation can leave on the school. Two participants mentioned how two children from their respective schools passed away and the loss "created a lot of sadness" (Mr Camilleri) at their school. One participant spoke about the loss of loved ones within the families of the students and noted that "some children pass through very difficult situations" (Ms Ebejer).

COVID-19 was another theme identified by the participants as impact mental health and wellbeing in school, which is not surprising as data collection was conducted in the midst of the pandemic. Based on the four dominant sensations by Nardone (2009) as cited in Papantuono et al., (2014) the participants in this study explained how these four emotions were common in schools during the pandemic: fear -"everyone was afraid" (Mr Camilleri) -, anger - "they have a right to question" (Mr Farrugia)-, pain -"she was overhelmed" (Ms Borg)-, and pleasure -"some students took it as *mangia passiga"* (Ms Herrera).

Conclusion

This study suggests that schools tend to focus more on reactive approaches towards mental health and wellbeing rather than proactive approaches to actively promote mental health. Education leaders sought support from services such as educators and professionals working in schools to support staff and students who might be experiencing mental health challenges, such as loss and grief. As the research took place during the COVID-19 pandemic, the theme of mental health and wellbeing in schools came out as one of the major themes of this study. Challenges faced by students and staff were noted, however, the pandemic also made education leaders think outside the box and look for alternative approaches to teaching and learning, support services and meetings. The findings also suggest that school philosophy, ethos and leadership and the school physical and social environment were important drivers for mental health and wellbeing promotion in school. This study underlines two crucial issues in the promotion of mental health and wellbeing in schools, namely a critical need for nurturing and supporting educators in schools (Middleton et al., 2020) and a dire need for whole-school approaches to mental health and wellbeing in contrast to 'fragmented' approaches (European Commission, 2023). Training, outreach, and support for educators is key to ensuring that proactive approaches are put in place (Berger et al., 2022; Middleton & Kay, 2019.

This was a small-scale study with eight education leaders which provided insights on how school leaders understand and look at mental health and wellbeing promotion and support in school. Given the small

number of participants, however, one needs to be cautious about making generalisations about educational leaders and mental health and wellbeing in schools in Malta. Further research may include larger mixed methods studies on school leaders and mental health and wellbeing promotion and support in schools and studies focused on the perceptions of other stakeholders in schools on such as educators, children and young people and parents. Another area for further research would be the implementation and evaluation of whole-school approach to mental health and wellbeing in Maltese schools.

References

Beinecke, R. H. (2016). Leadership for 'Wicked' School Mental Health Problems. In R. H. Shute, & P. Slee (Eds.), *Mental Health and Wellbeing through schools: The way forward* (pp. 15-26). Routledge

Berger, E., Reupert, A., Campbell, T., Morris, Z., Hammer, M., Diamond, Z., Hine, R., Patrick, P., & Fathers, C. (2022). A Systematic Review of Evidence-Based Wellbeing Initiatives for Schoolteachers and Early Childhood Educators. *Educational Psychology Review, 34*, 2919-2969. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10648-022-09690-5

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2019). Reflecting on reflexive thematic analysis. *Qualitative Research in Sport, Exercise and Health, 11*(4), 589-597. https://doi.org/10.1080/2159676X.2019.1628806

Brown, C., & Shay, M. (2021). From resilience to wellbeing: Identity-building as an alternative framework for schools' role in promoting children's mental health. *Review of Education, 9*(2), 599-634. https://doi.org/10.1002/rev3.3264

Conte, E., Cavioni, V., Ornaghi, V., Agliatix, A., Gandellini, S., Santos, M. F., Santos, A., Simoes, C., & Grazzani, I. (2023). Supporting Preschoolers' Mental Health and Academic Learning through the PROMEHS Program: A Training Study. *Children, 10*, 1070. https://doi.org/10.3390/children10061070

European Commission, Directorate-General for Education, Youth, Sport and Culture. (2023). *Social and emotional learning and academic achievement in schools*, Publications Office of the European Union. https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2766/46681

Ferrow, A. (2019). Childhood Grief and Loss. *European Journal of Educational Sciences*. http://dx.doi.org/10.19044/ejes.s.v6a1

Graetz, B. (2016). Student mental health programs: current challenges and future opportunities. In R. H. Shute, & P. T. Slee, (2016). *Mental Health and Wellbeing through schools: The way forward* (pp. 3-11). Routledge

Hart, L. M., Morgan, A. J., Rossetto, A., Kelly, C. M., Mackinnon, A., & Jorm, A. F. (2018). Helping adolescents to better support their peers with a mental health problem: A cluster-randomised crossover trial of teen Mental Health First Aid. *Australian & New Zealand Journal of Psychiatry, 52*(7), 638-651. https://doi.org/10.1177/0004867417753552

Middleton, T., & Kay, L. (2019). *Using an Inclusive Approach to Reduce School Exclusion: A Practitioner's Handbook.* Routledge

Middleton, T., Rae, T., & Walshe, J. (2020). *Nurturing Peer Supervision: Supporting the Wellbeing of those who Nurture. nurtureUK*

Moore, A., Stapley, E., Hayes, D., Town, R., & Deighton. J. (2022). Barriers and Facilitators to Sustaining School-Based Mental Health and Wellbeing Interventions: A Systematic Review. *International Journal of Environmental and Public Health, 19,* 3587. https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph19063587

Owen, S. (2016). Professional learning communities: building skills, reinvigorating the passion, and nurturing teacher wellbeing and "flourishing" within significantly innovative schooling contexts. *Educational Review, 68* (4), 403-419. https://doi.org/10.1080/00131911.2015.1119101

Papantuono, M., Portelli, C., & Gibson, P. (2014). *Winning Without Fighting: A Teacher's Handbook of Effective Solutions for Social, Emotional and Behavioural Difficulties in Schools*. Malta University Publishing

Shava, G. N., & Tiou, F. N. (2018). Distributed leadership in education, contemporary issues in educational leadership. *African Educational Research Journal, 6*(4), 279-287. https://doi.org/10.30918/AERJ.64.18.097

Shute, R. H., & Slee, P. T. (2016). *Mental Health and Wellbeing through schools: The way forward*. Routledge.

Willig, C. (2013). *Introducing Qualitative Research in Psychology.* McGraw Hill

World Health Organisation. (2004). *Promoting mental health: concepts, emerging evidence, practice.* World Health Organisation