

TEACHER MENTAL HEALTH PROMOTION IN CREATING QUALITY TEACHING ENVIRONMENTS IN DYSFUNCTIONAL SECONDARY SCHOOLS

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this study was to find out challenges in the promotion of the teachers' mental health for them to create an environment that promotes quality teaching and learning in dysfunctional secondary schools in Mutale area in the Vhembe District of Limpopo Province. Quantitative research design was used, collecting data through questionnaires. Purposive sampling procedure was used to select 160 teachers from rural dysfunctional schools. Data were analysed using International Business Machines Corporation Statistical package for Social Sciences (IBM SPSS statistics). Results showed that conditions in the schools were not conducive to promotion of teachers' mental health. Teachers were demotivated resulting in poor performance in school activities including teaching in class. Some teachers even left the profession. Poor performance of teachers rendered the schools dysfunctional. A model was developed in order to enhance the quality of teaching and learning in dysfunctional secondary schools in the Mutale area through promotion of teachers' mental health.

Keywords: sustainability, teaching environments, dysfunctional school, secondary schools, teachers' mental health.

INTRODUCTION

According to Chapter 2 of the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, No. 108 of (1996), education in South Africa is a constitutional right for every citizen. Hence, South Africa spends more money on education than many other countries (World Bank report, 2014). The Census (2011) specifies that in the South African population, 35% of Blacks/Africans, 32.6% Coloureds, 61.6% of Indians/Asians and 76% White citizens have completed high school education whereas 8.6% of the population aged 20 years and older has not completed any schooling.

The South African education system is characterised by a number of challenges that affect school performance (Monyooe, Tjatji & Mosese, 2014). There is no indication that this downward trend in the schools has been arrested (Westaway, 2015). Some schools have been affected to the point of dysfunctionality (Pretorius, 2014) resulting from issues which include commitment of teachers, the well-being of teachers, teacher's knowledge of subject content, learner and teacher-interaction, use of different teaching approaches and assessments, unstable management conditions, inappropriate or lack of leadership, lack of vision, an unhealthy school climate and culture, and low staff and learner morale (Kutame, Maluleke, Netshandama & Ramakuella, 2014; Pretorius, 2014); high pregnancy rate among learners (Mbulaheni, Kutame, Frances & Maluleke, 2014) and violence amongst learners (Rossouw, 2003). A school may become dysfunctional due to abnormal or impaired functioning, thus, it fails to accomplish the true purpose of teaching and learning for which it was instituted (Pretorius, 2014).

There are reports that Limpopo has the highest number of dysfunctional schools in the country (Mohlala, 2009). Schools are under-staffed, poorly resourced, ineffectively managed and disciplined, and consistently low in academic performance. In Limpopo Province some schools performed much lower in 2012 in Grade 12 than the Provincial 2009 to 2013 target. Similarly, there is a considerable number of schools in Vhembe District which performed lower than the set national standard and categorized as dysfunctional (Kutame et al. 2014).

Teachers and learners in schools that are dysfunctional have to contend with a range of issues which exacerbate the situation in these schools. A lack of learner discipline may seriously hamper the teaching and learning

process, and, if disruptive behaviour prevails, education cannot be successful (Rossouw, 2003; Henry, Knight & Thornberry (2012).

Bloch (2011) states that the situation of dysfunctional secondary schools has been existing for many years and is serious and further indicates that the challenges in dysfunctional schools continued years after the introduction of the post-apartheid system of education. The characteristics of the apartheid policies contributed to the breakdown of the culture of teaching and learning in schools. Lethoko, Heystek and Maree (2001); Pretorius, (2014) also state that, the issue of the absence of culture of learning, teaching and services (COLTS) in South African schools, especially in secondary schools for the previously disadvantaged groups, is a major concern. Saunders (1996); Westaway (2015) aptly refers to this as “a crisis of gargantuan proportions”. Principals of underperforming schools still receive negative feedback as grades fall. The high number of dysfunctional schools in South Africa is an indication that school management and leadership need to be attended to seriously as today’s society has the widespread belief that educational leadership focuses on the contribution of quality leadership to the performance of schools and learners (Bush 2008; Zinate, Seyed, Elham & Hossein, 2016).

The discovery that, some schools continue without textbooks that are crucial for any successful learning process (Veriava, 2013; Nkosi, 2014) provided researchers with a sense that there are major problems in schools that may negatively affect the teachers’ mental health which is critical in their quest for quality of teaching and learning. These reports suggest that teachers in schools that are dysfunctional do not perform optimally while at school.

The Department of Education is intervening in these schools with the aim of improving the situation (Kutame et al., 2014) without focusing on the promotion of the teachers’ mental health. In areas where the department is committed to improving the situation, the promotion of teachers’ mental health is still an area of neglect. The interventions seem to be unsuitable and unsuccessful and, as result these schools continue to be categorized as dysfunctional. The main aim of the study was to develop a teacher mental health promotion model that would improve the quality of the teaching and learning environment in dysfunctional rural based schools.

Statement of the problem

The Department of Basic Education is continuing with turnaround strategies in improving the academic situation in schools from dysfunctionality. However, the effect of such interventions does not seem to have been successful. The intervention strategies do not include promotion of teachers’ mental health thus, leaving teachers poorly motivated. Such interventions have been short lived and unsustainable. Teacher commitment is low, affecting the quality of teaching and learning and overall school performance negatively. Based on the background given above, one assumes that there are challenges in dysfunctional secondary schools which negatively impact on the promotion of the teachers’ mental health. Presently, no scientific evidence has so far been found relating to promoting the teachers’ mental health for them to develop a sustainable teaching and learning environment in these dysfunctional schools.

Research Questions

The study was guided by the following research questions:

- What are the challenges facing teachers in dysfunctional secondary schools which negatively impact on the promotion of their mental health?
- What strategies can be followed to improve academic situation in schools in rural areas from dysfunctionality which include promotion of teachers’ mental health?

METHODOLOGY

Design

The study was conducted using quantitative research design to find out challenges in the promotion of the teachers’ mental health for them to create an environment that promotes quality teaching and learning in dysfunctional secondary schools in Mutale area in the Vhembe District.

Population

The target population for this study was 350 teachers in 8 secondary schools in Mutale area of Vhembe District of Limpopo Province. These are teachers who teach at least one of the following subjects regarded as difficult: English, Mathematics, Physical Science and Life Sciences.

Sampling

Sampling is a process of selecting observation (Babbie & Mouton, 2012). A sample is defined as the representative of the population from which it is selected if the aggregate characteristics of the sample closely

approximate those same aggregate characteristics in the population (Babbie & Mouton, 2012) as used in this study. A purposive sampling procedure was used to select 160 respondents for this study from 8 secondary schools whose matric academic performance is consistently poor resulting in the school categorised as dysfunctional. The sample of 143 teachers completed the questionnaire from the 160 identified in the schools who teach subjects regarded as difficult, and which are contributing to the low pass rate in matriculation.

Instrument

Teachers were requested to rate issues related to the promotion of teachers' mental health on a self-constructed, closed-ended five-point Likert-type scale questionnaire, consisting of 'strongly agree', 'agree', 'not sure', 'disagree' and 'strongly disagree'. The questionnaire measured several aspects regarding promotion of teachers' mental health for them to improve the quality of teaching and learning, which is the focus of this paper. The questionnaire consisted of two sections: Section A, requesting for demographic information and Section B requesting for information regarding the association of the teachers' mental health for them to improve the quality of teaching and learning. Questions provided greater uniformity of responses and are more easily processed to extract results from data. Five point Likert Scale type questions required respondents to indicate the extent to which they agreed with each of the statements given. To increase reliability of this questionnaire, it was pretested with five respondents from the identified schools in order to identify flaws and ambiguities in the questionnaire while ensuring that the items were clear and easy to answer. Observation of conditions in the schools which focused on the teachers and the physical structure was also done during distribution and collection of questionnaires. What was considered relevant to the promotion of mental health guided by literature reviewed was captured for analysis.

Data collection

Data were collected from eight secondary schools which have been dysfunctional from 2009 to 2013 in Mutale area in the Vhembe district. The circuit managers also allowed the research team to collect data from their schools where we asked teachers willing to participate to consent. The researchers administered the questionnaires to the participating schools and collected them after a week. The return rate for the questionnaires was 90%.

Ethical consideration

The Department of Education gave us permission to conduct the research in the schools. Hamilton and Corbett-Whittler (2013) indicate that ethics in research needs attention from the beginning of the study to the end. Gallagher, (2009); O'Connor, Dearing & Collins, (2011) also stress that the ethics in research project continues through the research process. Participants consented by signing letters to take part in the study. They were further informed about the purpose of the research and that the results would only be used for the purpose of this study. They were also made aware that their participation was voluntary and that they were free to withdraw without any penalty.

Data analysis

A computer loaded with the IBM Statistical Package for Social Science (IBM SPSS statistics Version 22) programme was used to analyse quantitative data from questionnaires as it is more powerful and accessible on the personal computer. Through the frequencies procedure, value labels of each variable as well as all possible summary statistics were listed. Where there were some differences, probably due to sampling error percentages based on row totals, column totals, or total sample size were computed through cross tabulations.

Results and discussion

Demographic information

The demographic characteristics to determine which demographic characteristics of the respondents who completed questionnaires correlate best with their responses to the issues affecting teachers in dysfunctional secondary schools which have effect on the quality of teaching and learning are addressed in this section. Only one variable, gender, was included in the study for analysis.

Gender

Table 1 presents gender distribution of questionnaire respondents which include both male and female respondents. Slightly more than half (50.3%) of respondents in the study were males.

Table 1 Gender

Gender	Frequency	Percentage
Female	71	49.7%
Male	72	50.3%
Total	143	100%

Challenges in the promotion of the teachers’ mental health for them to create an environment that promotes quality teaching

Commitment of teachers

Teachers’ general perception of work environment has a great influence on the level of satisfaction and productivity. Teachers’ commitment bring about job performance which contributes towards a positive environment in the school for learning and teaching to succeed. Table 2 shows results indicating how teachers are committed to teaching learners in their schools.

Table 2: Commitment of teachers

Commitment of teachers	Frequency	Percentage
Not at all	9	6.3%
Lesser extent	21	14.7%
Not applicable	2	1.4%
Not sure	3	2.1%
To a greater extent	108	75.5%
Total	143	100%

The results in Table 2 show that 75.5% of respondents think that to a great extent, commitment of teachers affect the quality of teaching and learning in a dysfunctional secondary school while 6.3% think that it does not. There are significant differences in the rating of this item by level (Chi-Square = 36.974, $p < 0.05$, Cramer's $V = .254$). Circuit managers significantly (75%) confirmed that commitment of teachers is an issue that affect the quality of teaching and learning. We observed that though the teachers were committed, their morale was low. The infrastructure was weak; classrooms had cracks and potholes and graffiti. These conditions negatively affect the promotion of the teachers’ mental health resulting in poor performance by teachers and learners. While working with the poorest performing schools, it is important to get things such as time management and teacher attendance and commitment right before interventions at the curriculum level. Teachers cannot teach well if they are poorly motivated. Motivation is an energizing force that produces, directs and sustain an individual’s efforts (Basil, 2013).

Teacher’s knowledge of subject content

Subject content knowledge is critical for teachers to promote the quality of teaching and learning. Table 3 below presents teachers’ knowledge of subject content.

Table 3: Teachers’ knowledge of subject content

Teachers’ knowledge of subject content	Frequency	Percentage
Not at all	11	7.7%
Lesser extent	15	10.5%
Not applicable	2	1.4%
Not sure	8	5.6%
To a greater extent	107	74.8%
Total	143	100%

The subject content knowledge is a core component of teacher competence. A teacher who has sufficient subject knowledge is motivated to go to class and teaches with confidence. Sufficient knowledge on the subject boosts the morale of the teachers. Results show that the majority of the respondents (74.8%) think that teacher’s knowledge of subject content is to a great extent critical for promotion of teachers’ mental health for them to contribute effectively to the quality teaching and learning. There are significant differences in the rating of this item (Chi-Square = 38.935, $p < 0.05$, Cramer's $V = .261$). Circuit managers significantly (75%) feel teachers’ knowledge of subject content affect learner performance. The results of this study suggest that the poor performance of learners is brought about by teachers who are not knowledgeable in their subject content and therefore poorly motivated. Teachers must have an in-depth knowledge of subject content that they teach, and

the ability to understand it from the learners' perspective (Ball & Forzani, 2011; Mosely, 2000; Mitchell, Robinson, Plake & Knowles, 2001).

Knowledge of the subject matter is as equally important as the requirements of education and the philosophy of life to the society. When teachers know and understand what philosophy of life entails and underlie their practice of education, they have the certainly in their minds and a sense of responsibility. Effective teachers communicate subject knowledge actively, clearly and in a structured way and use a variety of teaching strategies to ensure the best possible mastery of different aspect of subject content.

Teacher – learner interaction

Teacher- Learner interaction has a reflective effect on the promotion of the teachers' mental health. Miller (2000); Basil (2013) found that the teacher-learner interaction play an important role in helping promoting quality teaching and learning. Results showing teacher-learner interaction are given in Table 4 below.

Table 4: Teacher - learner interaction

Teachers - learner interaction	Frequency	Percentage
Not at all	5	3.5%
Lesser extent	22	15.4%
Not applicable	3	2.1%
Not sure	15	10.5%
To a greater extent	98	68.5%
Total	143	100%

The results in Table 4 show that teachers-learner interaction is a critical issue which affects the promotion of the teachers' mental health so that they are able to provide quality of teaching and learning. The majority (68.5%) of respondents indicate that learner-teacher interaction affect the quality of teaching and learning to a great extent. Lee (2007); Westaway (2015) established that the trust developed between the learner and teacher can contribute to learner's academic performance. Koplou (2002); Helen and Michael (2013) recommend that effective teacher-learner interaction encourage greater confidence and classroom engagement. In addition Silins and Murray-Harvey (1995); Barber and Mourshed (2011) specified that learners who indicate high feelings of ability in their interaction with their teachers academically do well. There are significant differences in the rating of this item (Chi-Square = 29.513, $p < 0.05$, Cramer's $V = .227$). Circuit managers significantly confirm that teacher-learner interaction in some schools are to a greater extent an issue which affects the provision of quality teaching and learning. Teachers-learner interaction depends on different settings, in some school settings they are negative and in others, they are positive. In order to achieve good performance there must be positive teacher-learner interaction which would boost the morale and the teacher thereby improving their well-being. Teachers whose well-being is healthy are in a position inter-act with learners in promoting teaching and learning environments in schools that are dysfunctional.

DISCUSSION

The results showed that issues related to the teacher's well-being have the greatest impact on the promotion of quality teaching and learning. Crosswell and Elliot (2004) in their studies, point out that one of the most critical factors for the future success of education and schools is the commitment of teachers. Commitment requires individuals who are ready to accept challenges they may have to deal with as it usually evokes a strong sense of intention and focus. Fisher, Frey and Hattie (2016) claim that instructive commitment can be improved by promoting a culture that is welcoming; in which the environments for learning are ever-present; which look at how school community analyses how their behaviors affect them. It is accompanied by a statement of purpose or a plan of action. Teachers work for the Department of Education, and commitment to this institution should be expected. Basil (2013) stresses that teachers' commitment leads them to be accountable to their responsibilities and supervision of different tasks provided to the learners as the result it conveys a change to academic performance of learners and good work. Abiding by its rules and regulations and embracing its philosophical and pedagogical principles are reasonable requirements.

A teacher whose well-being is healthy would be able to manage all these things and make a meaningful contribution to teaching and learning. Health promotion is about realising people's potential to make them more resilient and involves building strengths, competencies and resources. Poor mental health of teachers negatively affect the commitment of teachers to provide quality teaching in dysfunctional secondary schools. Teachers' with lower level of commitment develop fewer plans to improve the academic quality of their instruction (Danetta, 2002; Helen, & Michael, 2013). There are significant differences in the rating of this item (Chi-Square

= 36.974, $p < 0.05$, Cramer's $V = .254$). Circuit managers significantly feel that commitment of teachers is an issue that affects the quality of teaching and learning.

Secondary teachers need motivation in order to promote productivity and educational quality. Motivation promotes an individual's well-being. A mentally healthy teacher can be motivated to improve and sustain the quality of teaching and learning at schools (Kutame et al., 2014). A good work environment is, therefore, that kind of environment where staff is highly motivated to work hard to bring about improved job performance. Motivation to secondary school teachers, is critical as it may encourage teachers to be positive and accountable to their responsibilities and supervision of different tasks provided to the learners; as the result, the academic performance of learners would improve (Basil, 2013).

The kind of relationship that exists between teachers and colleagues can affect their level of commitment as well as their attitude towards the work. The good condition of the infrastructure also have positive influence on the promotion of the teacher's mental health.

Teachers' level of education and depth in the subject content they teach, have positive correlation with high level of learner achievement. Teachers' working conditions negatively affect their mental health and their ability to provide quality education: If the working conditions are conducive, they enhance the well-being of teachers. Learner-teacher interaction affects the promotion of the teachers' mental health and the environment for quality of teaching and learning to take place. Murray and Almgren (2005); Orth, Robins and Widaman (2012). indicate that learners who have negative relationships with their teachers are associated with negative outcomes including high rates of school dropout, lower rates of college applications, low self-efficacy and low self-confidence. Teachers whose well-being is sound and are using different teaching approaches find it easier to inter-act with learners for them to understand what is being taught. Various studies (Cornelius-White, 2007; Roorda, Koomen, Split, & Oort, 2011; McCormick, O'Connor, Cappella & McClowry, (2013) have shown that students with better teacher-learner relationships tend to achieve more highly in school.

Teacher mental health promotion model

Based on the results of this study, The Teacher Mental Health Promotion Model (Figure 1) was developed for promotion of teachers' mental health for them to create an environment that promotes the quality of teaching and learning. Teacher-mental health promotion model incorporated self-actualization, academic support programs in schools, participation by stakeholders in promoting teaching and learning, self-evaluation by schools and assessment by schools and stakeholders in all school activities.

The model consists of a closed circle having five stages. Stage 1 shows "Teacher-mental health promotion through self-discovery". Teachers are made aware of their personal well-being and school situation so that they discover themselves what affects their school system negatively to the point of being dysfunctional. Teachers should also discover and acknowledge their talents and abilities for them to contribute positively towards creating a suitable sustainable learning and teaching environments. Some teachers had not been developing themselves professionally and academically. This self-discovery would enable teachers to accept themselves and to be in a position to change and develop.

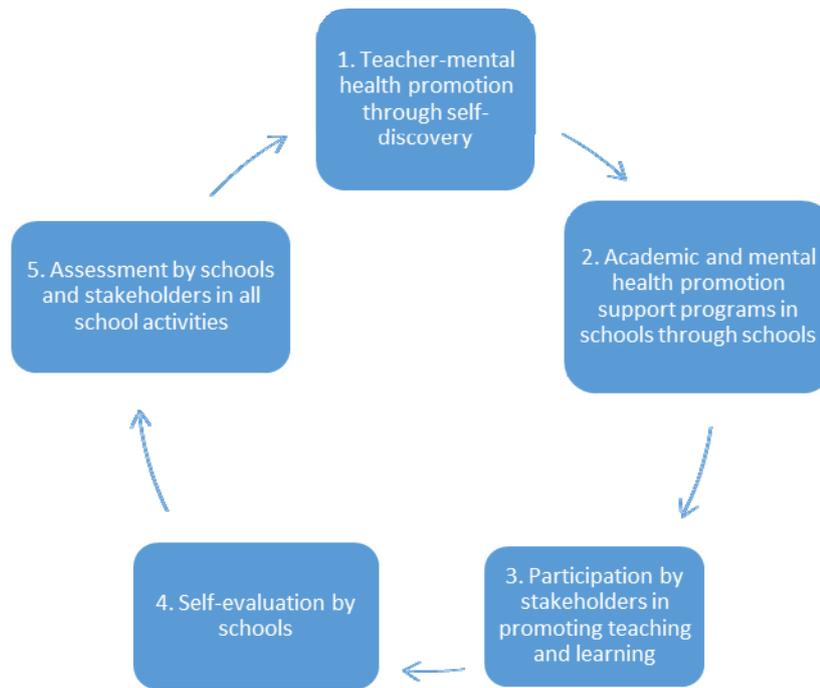


Figure 1: Teacher Mental Health Promotion Model

The Model continues with (2) development of academic and mental health promotion support programs in schools. Each school should develop its own programmes guided by their findings during self-discovery exercises. The programmes will be suited to their situation and needs; it will be easy for teachers to own the programmes than those imposed upon them. Self-developed programmes are easy to understand and therefore relevant to the situation.

The third stage (3) is that of participation by stakeholders in promoting teaching and learning. Stakeholders must be involved in the improvement of the school situation; they should feel that they are part of the school in the area of their jurisdiction. By being part of the school improvement plan, they will be able to establish why it is necessary that they should lend a hand when need arises. We have observed that most of the schools in the project had poor facilities (physical resources). By being part of the problem, it is envisaged that they might feel obliged to improve the situation.

Stage four (4) is about self-evaluation by schools. Each school is expected to evaluate the progress made since the start of the programme after two years to allow processes that take place as the school develops. Teachers and all involved in the programme know where and how and even why they started with the programme. They also know how the programme has developed and should therefore be in a position to evaluate progress made.

The last stage (5) allows assessment by schools and stakeholders in all school activities. This exercise deals with the bias during self-evaluation by teachers at each school. The stakeholders will be able to reflect on the biases established for the school to plan for future. The Model continues to stage one to establish if indeed the teachers had been open minded to point to the issues that affect their commitment to the development of the school to move out of the dysfunctional zone.

CONCLUSION

This study confirms the conditions in the rural schools are generally not conducive for quality teaching and learning and have thus rendered the school dysfunctional. This study suggests that the dysfunctionality of the schools impacts negatively on the mental health of teachers resulting in poor performance by learners and on overall performance of the school in matters relating to learner academic performance. These results further indicate that teachers in rural dysfunctional schools need the involvement of other stakeholders in promoting their mental health through improvement of physical resources. The results suggest that the schools, working in partnership with their communities, can positively contribute to the well-being of teachers who would turn around the situation in dysfunctional schools.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The Department of Basic Education needs to take into consideration the promotion of mental health of teachers in their quest to improve the quality of teaching and learning. Physical resources should be improved so that conditions in the schools are conducive for promotion of the teachers' mental health. They need to employ school principals and teachers who can handle situations in schools, teach and motivate learners to work hard and produce excellent results. Frequent workshop, training and seminars should be provided for teachers to improve their teaching skills and employ those suited to their school situations. The study was conducted in Vhembe district in Mutale area targeting eight selected dysfunctional secondary schools. We recommend that the same study be conducted to other dysfunctional schools in all the districts. A study on the promotion of mental health of learners in schools that are performing poorly needs to be conducted in comparison with those learners in well performing schools.

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