The Impact of School Leadership on Teachers' Wellbeing

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This article discusses the lack of research on teacher wellbeing. It demonstrates how certain factors predict teachers' personal wellbeing, with the Mental Health Continuum Short Form (MHC-SF) scale applied to measure wellbeing in a recent study. The results indicated that only two factors predicted teacher wellbeing: putting support strategies in place, and school leaders caring about teachers.

Introduction

While there are considerable policies and research that promote the wellbeing of students, it seems reasonable to assume that teacher wellbeing should also be addressed (Roffey, 2012). Yet research on teacher wellbeing remains scarce (Parker et al., 2012). Today, the crisis imputable to the Covid-19 pandemic has made teacher wellbeing more urgent than ever. Teachers in nearly 200 countries worldwide were affected by the pandemic (UN, 2020). They became frontline education providers in the midst of chaos, which resulted in many of them experiencing emotional exhaustion and lower job satisfaction (Chan et al., 2021).

Teaching young people through collective trauma took a toll on educators' wellbeing (Crosby et al., 2020), and the consequences may continue for years. In Ireland, an assessment of teacher wellbeing showed that they experienced more stress and lower levels of wellbeing nine months into the pandemic compared with a year before (Dempsey & Burke, 2021). While more research is required to confirm this, teachers' wellbeing may be at its lowest during this period.

Defining wellbeing in a school setting

Evident in the literature is the lack of consensus on what wellbeing is and how it should be defined (Burke, 2021). Definitions of it are blurred and too broad to understand (Forgeard et al., 2011). Though wellbeing is not a new concept, it has become more important in recent times in the educational context, evident in its inclusion on agendas of international organisations such as the WHO (2020), UN (2020), and UNICEF (Reuge et al., 2021). Nonetheless, teachers and managements continue to struggle to grasp its meaning (Doran, 2021), which makes the implementation of a wellbeing policy and framework more difficult (Camfield et al., 2009).

A recent study by Doran, Burke, and Healy (forthcoming) examined how well teachers' personal wellbeing can be predicted from factors

such as having a wellbeing policy, completing wellbeing CPD (continuing professional development), management caring about staff, having wellbeing on staff meeting agendas, and having support strategies in place, after controlling for age. Most of the 293 participating teachers were female (69.5%), from a range of second-level schools in both rural and urban areas across all four provinces in Ireland. Wellbeing was measured using the Mental Health Continuum Short Form scale (MHC-SF).

Discussion

The results of the study indicated that only two factors predicted teacher wellbeing in the model: management having support strategies in place for teachers, and teachers knowing that their management cared about them. Both factors related to leadership effectiveness in creating an environment that helped employees to flourish.

This is consistent with previous, robust research that linked leadership behaviour with employees' wellbeing, emphasising the fundamental role that leaders play in ensuring that their team is well (e.g., Cherkowski, 2018; van der Vyver et al., 2020; Zhong et al., 2020; Briker et al., 2021). Nonetheless, it is the first study that identified leadership factors being more impactful on teachers' personal wellbeing than having a wellbeing policy, doing regular wellbeing CPDs, and keeping wellbeing on the meeting agenda, which is usually the advice given to educators who wish to enhance their wellbeing (Falecki & Mann, 2020; Lester et al., 2020).

Establishing a wellbeing policy is often one of the first recommendations given to schools to ensure that their community's wellbeing is prioritised and improved (Hoffman et al., 2016; Brown et al., 2020; Frijters & Krekel, 2021). This means that schools' management and teachers must be familiar with a wide range of guidelines developed by others, and capable of enacting these new guidelines while being accountable to other educational managerial groups. Our study, however, showed that this did not predict teacher wellbeing. This finding is consistent with other studies showing that some policies do not change behaviours (e.g. Lucarelli et al., 2015).

> **Involving teachers in policy creation, and the change associated with it, will yield better results than setting up the policy for them and expecting them to adhere to it.**

This may be due to how wellbeing policy was implemented and enacted, and whether it was imposed on teachers or introduced collaboratively. But the implementation of educational policies does not always lead to achieving the policymaker's intended outcomes, and sometimes these outcomes do not match the needs of the school (Hess, 2013). Individual policy and policymakers rarely consider the complex environments of policy enactment or the need for schools to respond to several policy demands and expectations concurrently (Ball, 1997). Involving teachers in policy creation and change associated with it yields better results than setting it up for them and expecting them to adhere to it (Beryl et al., 2009). Collaboration is therefore very important when developing a wellbeing policy for schools, as teacher wellbeing is a shared responsibility which creates an opportunity

for schools and sectors to work in partnership with managerial agencies and professional associations (McCallum & Price, 2012).

The study implied that two important factors need to be considered when designing a wellbeing strategy for a school: putting support strategies in place, and management showing they care for their team. These findings can therefore (i) inform policymakers of the components that need to be incorporated in developing an effective wellbeing policy and interventions; (ii) inform stakeholders and school leaders that if you put support strategies in place and show staff that you care, you could enhance teacher wellbeing; and (iii) encourage leadership educational programmes to ensure that school leaders are aware of the impact of their behaviour on teachers' wellbeing. Further research is needed to evaluate these potential support strategies for management and to measure their effectiveness.

> **When teachers feel appreciated and empowered, they are much more likely to show patience and empathy to their students.**

Developing the wellbeing of teachers can make a substantial difference to the whole school community. When teachers feel appreciated and empowered, they are much more likely to show patience and empathy to their students. They are also more likely to share and work with others to support their students and promote wellbeing (Roffey, 2012). This can only be a positive thing for all involved.

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The **Irish Science Teachers' Association,** *Eol Oidí na hÉireann*, is the professional association for teachers of science in the Republic of Ireland. As such it is represented on the relevant subject development groups of the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment. Since its foundation in 1961 it has been providing continuous professional development and support for its members at both national and branch levels.

The Association has close affiliations with the Association for Science Education in the UK and is a founding member of ICASE, the International Council of Associations for Science Education. It is also represented on SCIENTIX which promotes and supports a Europe-wide collaboration among STEM (science, technology, engineering and maths) teachers, education researchers, policymakers and other STEM education professionals.

Members are also supported and informed of developments through the Association's website (www.ista.ie) and through its Journal, SCIENCE, which is posted to members three times a year.

The major national ISTA events are the Senior Science Quiz – normally held during Science Week since 1990 and the Annual Conference which provides members with the opportunity to hear and meet national and international experts in areas relevant to science education. The next conference will be held in the **TUS Limerick on 31st March & 1st April 2023.** The them: *Science Education for a Sustainable Future*.

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