

How Can a Focus on Teacher Well-Being in Pre-Service Training Promote the Resilience of Primary School Student Teachers?

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Abstract

Norwegian teachers are facing increasing challenges with multi-lingualism and multi-culturalism in schools. In addition, Norway faces the challenge of addressing the need to retain novice teachers. In teacher education programs, there is little focus on teacher well-being to assist teachers in understanding and coping with the challenges of a range of schools and teaching contexts. The focus of this paper is on how an induction course on Teacher Well-Being, TWB, infused as part of an exchange program between one higher education institution, Oslo and Akershus University of Applied Sciences (HIOA) in Norway and three primary schools in South Africa, influence the professional development and resilience of the participating primary school student teachers. A qualitative research approach was used to capture student perceptions and meaning of their learning and development from the TWB training. The research design was informed by the qualitative reflective research approach as understood by, among others, Alvesson and Skjoldberg.

Key words: Teacher well-being, resilience, diversity, pre-service training

Introduction

First, the introduction to this study describes the rationale for the paper and how it was developed. Secondly, the research question as well as concepts and terminologies used are presented. Finally, the introduction describes a model for student teachers' school practice in a foreign context in which the concept of teacher well-being plays a central role.

Background and rationale of the study

The rationale of this study is the global concern that both language and socio-economic diversity in the classrooms are factors that affect the well-being of teachers. South Africa, Australia as well as many countries in Europe report a lowering of teacher morale, rises in stress and burnout resulting in high levels of teacher attrition (Hay, Smith & Paulsen, 2001; Xaba, 2003; Theron, 2009 in Collett and Olsen, 2012; Roffey 2012). This everyday reality calls for research based interventions in schools to enhance teacher well-being by strengthening teachers' capacity to manage language and social diversity in schools. The study draws on the concept of well-being inspired by Seligman (2002) in Huppert and Baylis (2004, p.1448) that includes both (1) "a sense of gratification" and (2) "a sense of meaning that derives from doing one's job in the service of something of wider significance than oneself" (Collett and Olsen 2012).

Language diversity among learners, combined as it often is with a disadvantaged socio-economic home environment, can lead to unequal opportunities of access to knowledge or learning due to the mismatch between the language of instruction and the learners and teachers home languages. Linguistic and social diversity is historically a common feature in South Africa and teachers have had to develop competencies to address both challenges and opportunities linked to diversity. European countries are now experiencing a greater need to address language and social diversity and the well-being of teachers due to rising immigration and the recent increase in asylum seekers from the Middle East and Africa.

International literature as well as educational programmes often focus on learners and not on the well-being of teachers. As pointed out by the Australian researcher Sue Roffey (2012) international literature on teacher well-being is often described in deficit terms – how stress is impacting on teacher burn-out and problems with retention. Teacher well-being is not only critically relevant for teachers' professional lives but also to the well-being of the learners through maintaining a stable, safe and supportive learning environment.

The findings of this study are presented in the light of research on interventions to enhance teacher's well-being and resilience; amongst others Roffey 2012 and Collett and Olsen, 2012. Resilience can be regarded as the extent to which a teacher is able to maintain a set of positive attributes, professional commitment and growth while dealing with the broad range of challenges, pressures and demands that are inherent in the everyday work of a teacher (Hristofski 2016). Resilience can also be regarded as: A phenomenon, which is influenced by multiple factors such as individual circumstances, situations and environments and it, encompasses much more than a reliance on specific personal or internal traits or assets alone. Current research points to the dynamic nature of resilience (Day et al. 2006, 2007 in Hristofski 2016) and suggests that resilience itself results from the interaction between the psychological, behavioural and cognitive aspects of functioning as well as emotional regulation.

Research suggests that teachers who possess characteristics of resilience are more likely to persevere in adverse situations, find it easier to adapt to change and ultimately may be less inclined to consider leaving the profession. Other findings suggest that learners of highly committed teachers are more likely to perform better academically than their peers whose teachers are not able to sustain their commitment (Roffey 2012).

The research questions emerging from the above are:

- How do the student teachers benefit from the focus on teacher well-being in their pre-service training?
- What are the key and critical factors determining an appropriate pre-service training in order to enhance the resilience of student and novice teachers and what are the implications for pre-service teacher education?

Building skills for resilience – a case of cooperation between South Africa and Norway
Adding to the stress in South African education is the legacy of apartheid that has left many schools under-resourced and unprepared to cope with transformation-related policies regarding, amongst others, new school curriculums, restructuring and reculturing of the whole education system (Olsen 2011; Olsen 2013). The impact of HIV and AIDS, as well as the effects of unemployment and poverty, place an immense responsibility on

schools and teachers to support the educational and care needs of many learners in the schools. This requires a unique focus on the need to engage with the well-being needs of teachers through building their coping strategies that could be very useful in the work towards better inclusion in the increasingly diverse and multilingual schools.

A Teacher Well-Being (TWB) project was established in 2007 as a partnership between the South African Democratic Teachers Union (SADTU), Transforming Institutional Practices (TIP) at the University of the Western Cape, and the Centre for Education Policy Development (CEPD). Staff from each of these organisations supported the need to urgently address the support needs of teachers in public schools in order to assist with teacher retention, job satisfaction and the achievement of quality education for all. The TWB project was initiated with the overall aim of promoting resilience and well-being of teachers in four primary schools in and around Cape Town. This had an overarching aim of enhancing the quality of education for all. The project goal was to learn from the experiences in these four schools with the aim of informing debates and planning to support the improvement of the quality of education in public schools in South Africa. The lessons learnt from these experiences were to feed into engagement with current educational policy and practice in order to enhance the capacity of schools, teachers, unions and district offices in supporting teacher well-being (Chisulo, Collett and Buchler 2012).

Oslo and Akershus University of Applied Sciences (HiOA) provides the opportunity for student teachers to complete a practice and BA study period of three months in primary schools in the province of Western Cape, South Africa. The student teachers are accommodated with host families to provide an arena outside school for reflection with their peers and host teacher on their daily experiences in order to strengthen their learning experience of a foreign culture. In collaboration with the TIP based at the University of the Western Cape, three of the TWB piloted schools described above were selected as practice schools for the Norwegian students since 2010.

As mentioned above the practice placement schools have since 2007 aimed at changing the school culture using the methodology of Teacher Well-Being (TWB). The following can serve as an example on the kind of interventions and activities implemented in order to promote a supportive school culture influencing on the well-being of staff. A school management team, SMT, consisting of the school principal, deputy principal, two teachers and two representatives of parents has initiated a number of interventions in order to promote the well-being of not only teachers, but all members of staff. The SMT acknowledged that a number of factors such as staff conflict, multiple roles of teachers, limited parental support, lack of affirmation, school context of poverty and health related problems are influencing the well-being of teachers and learning environment. To address these challenges, the SMT introduced activities inspired by the TWB project and regarded as characteristics of a healthy organisation (Kyriacou 2001). The activities are implemented on a regular basis and could consist of for example laughter therapy sessions, counseling sessions for staff, celebration of small successes, work against isolation, cliques and fear, staff development plans and perhaps the most important intervention: space and time for professional and organisational reflection and learning. After two years the school principal documented changes such as reduced absenteeism increased responsibility, improved work performance, calming effect on whole school community and improved systemic results. And finally, according to the principal of one of the practice placement schools the activities must be on-going in order

to achieve a continuous improvement to the quality of learning and teaching taking place. In addition to individual coping actions that a teacher can take, Kyriacou (2001) refers to a number of studies that have highlighted the importance of working in a school where a positive atmosphere of social support exists (Shefeld *et al.* 1994; Punch & Tuetteman 1996 in Kyriacou 2001). This enables teachers to share concerns with each other, which can lead to helpful suggestions from a colleague that the teacher can implement or action by colleagues that resolve the sources of stress (2001).

To empower student teachers to take action to address challenges that affect their and others well-being, the students are given a brief introduction to the TWB methodology and thinking before departure from Norway to South Africa. This is followed by a TWB course at the University of the Western Cape upon arrival in South Africa. To enhance the students' level of reflection the course is followed up by two workshops mid-term and towards the end of their three months stay. In the first TWB seminar the students are given an assignment where they are asked to discuss with the teachers in the practice placement schools and with peer students what factors hinder and what factors promote their well-being in the practice school. The students must reflect upon contextual issues such as poverty that impact the school, the classroom, the teacher (stress levels and teaching style) and learner. The students are encouraged to observe and learn from how the teachers in the practice placement schools take care of their own and their colleagues well-being.

Methodology

The issue of the impact of Teacher Well-Being awareness on student teachers is analysed in this paper within the framework of a qualitative study targeting students who have completed a three months' practice and study period in schools located in and around Cape Town, South Africa. The methodological rationale for the qualitative research approach forms part of a search for meaning (Miles & Hubermann 1994; Morgan 1997) within the practice schools situated in poverty-stricken semi-urban and urban communities in South Africa.

The investigation, conducted annually over a period of four years from 2013 to 2016, included 48 primary school student teachers. The students' three practice placement schools are partner schools to the Department of primary and secondary teacher education at Oslo and Akershus University College (HiOA). The schools have provided student practice placements since 2009. Access to the schools was obtained through a long-term research partnership between researchers based in the respective faculties of education at the University of the Western Cape (UWC) and HiOA.

Since examining a cultural phenomenon is a dynamic process, a reflexive qualitative research approach, including a continuous process of reflection and self-reflection as understood by Alvesson and Skjoldberg (2000), was chosen for this study. The aim is to describe and better understand the processes of learning experiences and communication among the participants in the study. A drawback with this kind of qualitative case study research is that it provides a poor basis for scientific generalisation. Yin (1993) introduced the concept of *analytical generalisation*, different from *statistical generalisation*, which is based on empirical data collected from a sample of a population considered representative of the whole population. He argues that *cases*, are not sampling

units as such. As the study presented in this paper, the cases are context-related units of study (schools) used to compare with previously developed theory (1993).

The data collection instruments applied are focus group interviews and written questionnaires. Three of the four focus group interviews took place about three months after the students' return to Norway in order to give the participants 'ample time to digest and reflect on their experiences. The assumption was that the time provided would give the students an opportunity to develop a more thoroughly elaborated interpretation of their own experiences and a better understanding of how those experiences had affected them. Only one of the four group interviews took place immediate after their return to Norway to capture valuable 'fresh-in-mind' information. All interviews covered questions related to many aspects of their practicum and for this paper, I have focused on the data directly or indirectly related to the notion of teacher well-being. Generally, the students seemed to speak openly and freely around the questions asked in the group interviews. As described by Morgan (2007), the advantage of group discussions became clear when the discussions progressed. The students' opinions and experiences reflected mostly similarities but also some differences across the group. Even though the focus group discussions seemed homogenous, I could for example pick up contradictions or vague statements and immediately feed it back to the group to be explained or elaborated upon.

The focus group interviews and the written questionnaire took place in the same meeting. The questionnaire - filled in by the respondents individually and with secured anonymity - represented an opportunity for the respondents to answer more freely without any peer pressure. This way data captured nuances and differences among the respondents' reflections. I therefore argue that the data provided a valuable source of insights into the students' processes of learning during their stay in South Africa.

The use of coding mechanism may have given a more accurate account of the respondents' answers and it would certainly have offered an opportunity to disseminate the answers and findings in illustrative ways. I still chose not to use a coding mechanism for the data, but rather thorough reading and re-reading of the information gathered - as well as through discussions with colleagues in the Faculty of Education - I gradually became more aware of my own and respondents' assumptions and possible misinterpretations. Through the data analysis it also became pivotal to examine and uncover how existing positions and relations within a student group as well as between a student group and the researcher could influence how the students reflected and revealed their social realities. As I gradually developed a deeper understanding of the material, I organised the data into meaningful analytical categories, within the framework of the study. Miller and Crabtree (1992:24) point to making meaning out of experience and write: "Phenomenology answers the question, 'What is it like to have a certain experience?'".

Findings

The investigation reveals that most students participating were benefiting to a significant degree from the training and support provided, both prior to and during their stay in South Africa. The findings indicate that the students' resilience - understood as their ability to be able to cope with an unfamiliar and challenging teaching and learning environment has been generally strengthened. The focus on teacher well-being seems to have equipped

the students with useful coping tools in order to manage and learn from the new and challenging context. The study finds that the comprehensive approach employed in order to prepare the students seems to have had an effective impact in terms of strengthened resilience. Knowledge of South African history and contemporary contexts of school and society - as well as an introduction to self-supportive well-being techniques – have clearly helped reduce the student’s anxiety linked to teaching in diverse classrooms. The course assisted the students in acquiring a deeper understanding on how impoverished home environment can affect learners’ school achievement. Meerkotter (2001) refers to South Africa, and argues that the socio-economic environment of the school must be conducive to what happens in school in order to make learning meaningful and relevant. He emphasises how the quality of education for the student cannot be improved unless the situation for the student outside the school is also fully understood (2001). The students echo the meaning of Meerkotter’s arguments when explaining how they developed a greater empathy with their learners that helped reduce their own frustrations and enhance their ability to provide both emotional and educational support to learners struggling. The students also learned ways to give social and emotional support to each other as highlighted by Hristofski (2016) when dealing with strong emotional reactions to situations they experienced as disturbing or even traumatic. As described by Olsen, Hagen & Bratland (2015) most students talk about how teachers commonly use derogatory descriptions of learners and their parents. TWB training has proven in particular beneficial to help students deal with their emotional responses to teachers’ derogatory language or when witnessing corporal punishment of children exercised by a small minority of teachers. Most students emphasize how both positive and negative experiences in and outside school have contributed to a strong personal and professional growth because of the reflective and supportive structures provided through the TWB course and their homestay with teacher families. This finding is supported by research highlighting that collegial support opportunities enables teachers to share concerns with each other (Olsen and Collett 2012).

The students did observe and to some degree benefit from the existing culture of collegial support in the schools; although to a varying degree among the three placement schools. This kind of support was mostly depending on the students’ own initiative in seeking advice from the teachers. Roffey (2012) cites the work of Spratt et al. (2006) who found that schools attempt to address a range of issues related to well-being by bolting ‘fragmented initiatives’ onto existing systems. They argued that schools need to undertake a more fundamental review of values, policies and practices (p.15). Their argument is supported by an Australian study presented by Roffey (2015) in which the outcomes for the educational stakeholders were evident when change processes were taking the social and emotional aspects of school into account and thereby strengthening general relationship skills. Several participants, however, acknowledged that teacher well-being needed a higher focus in this endeavour (p. 15).

The majority of the students express that this kind of training should be included in the teacher education program to reach all students. Recent research indicates that the impact of social and emotional well-being raises the question of how teacher pre-service education courses prepare early career teachers to contribute to and support social and emotional well-being on their learners (Hristofski 2016). Hristofski refer to Zin et al. (2004) who emphasise social and emotional well-being is a cross-curricular issue that underpin students’ capacity to learn and succeed academically. Drawing on Bernard et.al 2007, Hristofski argue that social and emotional well-being should become an integral

part of initial teacher education programmes. Subsequently this is seen as a way of helping early career teachers to feel more confident in creating supportive environments, participating in whole school development programmes and responding adequately to children and young people (2016: 38).

Not surprisingly, nearly all students across the four years of this study report that their practicum and BA study in South Africa has been a profound life-enriching experience from which that they think will influence their everyday life, personally and professionally always. I would argue that based on the students self-claimed insight of positive growth from their school practice, their resilience is enhanced in line with the definition used by Hristofski (2010) in which teachers' professional commitment and growth are maintained while dealing with the broad range of challenges, pressures and demands in everyday life. The study of this paper is supported by strong arguments - based on Australian research - for exploring what well - being in school means in practice and the ways in which this can be developed at all levels of the institution (Roffey 2012, p.9). As claimed by the principal of one of the TWB schools in South Africa, developing and maintaining a culture of 'well-being' in the school would demand a continuous TWB commitment by school leadership and staff to ensure the dynamic nature of resilience as pointed out by, amongst others, Hristofski (2016).

The following quote by a teacher in one of the TWB schools in South Africa, represents a shared experience among the students and teachers:

TWB allowed us to identify areas which had to be addressed, as they affected the well-being of teachers. As staff we also worked closer in solving these areas. We could reflect, make changes and monitor. I am stronger, more confident in taking this further at my school.

Conclusion

The findings of this study indicate that the key and critical factors in achieving the beneficial impact of the teacher well-being training can be summed up as follows:

- Students are introduced to the concept and methodology of TWB both prior to their school placements and during their practicum.
- The students' opportunities for reflection are varied and frequent throughout the stay: home-stay, reflection assignment and reflective workshops.
- Combination of practice and BA – thesis fieldwork that mutually strengthen the impact of the other. An indication of this is that a significant number of students choose a thesis topic linked to teacher well-being, class management, learner differentiated teaching and learning, whole school development parent-school relations or multilingualism.
- Students are given the opportunity to observe and learn from how the practice school principal and teachers take action in order to promote TWB (as illustrated in the example presented in this paper).
- Practice follow-up/supervision by a local lecturer at UWC.

Focusing on the well-being needs of student teachers using the methodology of TWB provides an innovative approach to prepare and strengthen the resilience of student novice teachers in coping with an increasingly demanding teaching and learning environment in

schools. I argue that by preparing student teachers to enter their profession with an awareness of how to mobilize their own agency to enhance their well-being benefits the students to such an extent that this may impact positively on their efficacy as novice teachers. The strengthened ability to resolve stress and maintain their own well-being may enable the teachers to encourage the same in their learners through building a respectful, supportive and inclusive learning environment in their diverse classrooms. Research findings from Australia support the argument by indicating that including social and emotional concepts in pre-service teacher education may assist novice teachers to be better prepared for the complexity of their roles in today's school (Hazel and Vincent 2005 in Hristofski 2016).

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