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The Role of Educational Coaching in Enhancing Teachers' Well-being During Pandemic

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Abstract

The coronavirus pandemic has turned out to be the biggest challenge the modern educational systems across the world have ever faced. Many teachers observed as their well-being plummeted as they started to overwhelmingly worry about the health of their families, as they were facing confusing instructions, unclear expectations or technical difficulties. The purpose of this qualitative study is to diagnose the role of educational coaching in stimulating the well-being of teachers during the pandemic of COVID-19. The results indicate that educational coaching can help teachers improve their well-being during the pandemic when teachers need to change their role – from classroom to remote – and succeed under a new set of circumstances.

Key words: *coaching, COVID-19, educational coaching, pandemic, well-being*

Introduction

The coronavirus pandemic has turned out to be the biggest challenge the modern educational systems across the world have ever faced (Bakhshaei, 2020). From one day to the next, all teachers had to change their physical classroom environment to online, remote and home-based instruction. Many teachers observed as their well-being plummeted as they started to overwhelmingly worry about the health of their families, as they were facing confusing instructions, unclear expectations or never ending technical difficulties. As the United Nations admit-

ted: (2020, p. 2): *'Many people are distressed due to the immediate health impacts of the virus and the consequences of physical isolation'*. Under such circumstances, there has already been some scientific evidence that educational coaching can play a positive role when transitioning to a remote teaching model (Bakhshaei, 2020).

In the last few decades there has been a growing body of scientific research providing supportive evidence that coaching is an efficient approach supporting learning and professional development across the entire education sector: students, teachers, educators, and school leaders (Cornett & Knight, 2009; Green et al., 2007; Kraft et al., 2018; van Nieuwerburgh & Barr, 2016). Coaching has been described as a very powerful approach facilitating personal and professional change and learning through deep level listening, questioning, setting the right challenges and providing support along the process (Griffiths, 2005).

According to Griffiths (2005) the role of the teacher in modern educational setup has shifted from being an instructor to being a facilitator. More often than not, teachers are aiming at helping their pupils *'to learn rather than teaching them'* (Whitmore, 2002). As Ellis & Smith (2020) state, more and more teachers integrate coaching into their teaching routine: *'...the most effective teachers create opportunities for learning by allowing students to discover knowledge in a mutually supportive environment.'* Professional development within the education sector, especially that of teachers, is of paramount importance to students' scholarly and academic achievements, as teachers' classroom practices have been established as a predictor of students' results in the classroom (Bush, 2009; Chetty et al., 2011; Knight, 2009).

The purpose of this qualitative study is to diagnose the role of educational coaching in stimulating the well-being of teachers during the pandemic of COVID-19. The study also focuses on analyzing the effects of the pandemic on teachers under a very unique scenario in which all of a sudden all teachers needed to change their classroom setting to fully online and face unprecedented stress.

Literature Review

Educational Coaching

Educational coaching has been defined as *'a one-to-one conversation that focuses on the enhancement of learning and development through increasing self-awareness and a sense of personal responsibility, where the coach facilitates the self-directed learning of the coachee through questioning, active listening, and appropriate challenge in a supportive and encouraging climate'* (van Nieuwerburgh, 2012).

In particular, when teachers assume the role of coachees, they are coached '*with a focus on improving their (...) teaching practice and outcomes for learners*' (van Nieuwerburgh, Barr 2016).

According to Wood *et al.* (2016), educational coaching is a reliable, valid, and established approach that helps educators enhance their professional skill set. When applied in practice, educational coaching seeks to facilitate the coachees' growth and development and in order to do that, the educational coach will gather information, test its usefulness, applicability in a classroom setting, and help teachers co-create meaningful solutions (Sezer, 2016). In that sense, an educational coach aims at *facilitating* rather than *directing* the teachers, and supports them at finding the best and most resourceful ideas to improve student learning process and classroom experience.

The teacher and coach work together in an environment of continuous feedback and support that as a result helps teachers increase self-awareness, reflect, and grow. Educational coaches may provide feedback based on observations in the classroom setting. Such feedback would typically be followed by a coaching session in which the coach and the teacher discuss their observations, reflections on what happened, and improvement suggestions (Wesley & Buisse, 2006). Such coaching sessions aim at creating a permanent, constructive shift in teachers' behavior patterns and help teachers establish a healthy professional growth and learning path for themselves.

Moreover, coaching has been described as one of the most efficient approaches for teachers' development. Outcomes obtained by Wood *et al.* (2016) show that the results observed in teachers' practice following coaching far exceed the results observed after application of other professional development approaches. The application of coaching in an educational setting has gathered enough positive evidence to become a common development strategy for teachers who want to grow professionally (van Nieuwerburgh, Barr 2016; Wood *et al.*, 2016).

Positive results experienced by teachers in their teaching practice include the following: positive attitude, better teacher-student skill transfer, enhanced teacher efficacy, being open to implementing new learning and teaching strategies, improved students' outcomes (Knight, 2009). As a result of their study, Vogt and Rogalla (2009) additionally noticed enhanced adaptive teaching competency amongst teachers following individual coaching sessions.

A study by Brown *et al.* (2008) adds to the above cited body of evidence. The outcomes suggest that coaching can support professional development of teachers, their efficacy in the classroom setting as well as learning relationships with fellow educators. In addition, Kraft *et al.* (2018) suggest that educational coaching may

improve classroom environment and help promote good studying habits amongst students. Guskey & Yoon (2009) point out that such substantial impact has mostly been seen as a result of coaching teachers and has not been achieved to such extent by any other professional development method or approach.

Methodology

Participants

The participants of the study were 30 teachers. A non probability convenience sampling technique was used to assemble the study group. One of the authors asked for volunteers within her professional network. According to Christensen (1994), convenience sampling is considered a verified and reliable method, which allows the researcher to assemble a research participants group in a convenient way, based on their availability within the researcher's networks. There were 2 inclusion criteria for the participants: (1) they could not currently be in therapy, (2) they could not be taking medications for anxiety or depression.

Procedure

The participants were presented with the coaching program Information Sheet (including details about the Educational Coaching Program) and they were asked to fill out a Consent Form. The Information Sheet additionally included information about what *not* to expect in a coaching session, some common examples being therapy, counseling or training. Common understanding of *well-being* was established and the assumed definition was '*optimal psychological functioning and experience*' (Ryan & Deci, 2001, p. 141). The authors also made sure that all 30 participants were clear that data collected would remain fully anonymous and only data summaries were to be made public.

The study aimed at diagnosing the role of educational coaching in stimulating the well-being of teachers during the pandemic of COVID-19. The study also focused on highlighting the effects the pandemic had on teachers under a very unique scenario in which all of a sudden all teachers needed to change their classroom setting to fully online and face unprecedented stress.

The coaching sessions were conducted over a period of three months. Both group and individual coaching sessions were offered to all participants. Out of which, all 30 teachers participated in 5 group coaching sessions and further 10 of those attended individual coaching sessions. Each of those who opted in for the individual coaching sessions attended 10 sessions.

Although the authors assumed multiple roles: the role of a researcher, the role of the coach and the role of the data collector, the participants of the study were clear on what roles there are as part of the procedure, which ones are assumed and when. One of the authors holds an ICI coaching credential and the other author holds an ICF coaching credential.

All coaching sessions were conducted via zoom, recorded and transcribed. The authors have no reason to suspect that the thoughts, feelings, beliefs and answers shared by the participants of the study were biased in any way.

Qualitative measures

The following qualitative research tools have been used: (1) observation and (2) analysis of teachers' responses collected through both group and individual coaching sessions. Data collected were very complex and have been analyzed with qualitative data analysis approaches listed in scientific literature as valid and reliable (Creswell & Creswell, 2017; Saunders & Rojon, 2014). Example procedures include: (1) inductive/deductive data analysis, (2) noting patterns and clustering, (3) analyzing participants' meaning, (4) common themes; finding dependence/co-dependence between themes.

Findings

The participants of the study noticed that although their initial well-being level was low at the beginning of the study, their overall self-reported well-being and the ability to cope as well as bounce back from adverse events (resilience in the time of stress) improved towards the end of the study. As one of the participants stated:

'(...) not only do I feel better, I mean physically, you know. I can also see that my overall functioning greatly improved towards the end. I don't drag my feet out of bed in the morning anymore, but I have this good, warm feeling that I'm able to face many things that come my way during the day. Maybe not all of them yet, but many.'

There were a few common themes around teachers' well-being and everyday functioning that emerged from the group and individual coaching sessions over the period of 3 months as a result of remote work: (1) lost sense of control, (2) loss of track of time, (3) loss of job satisfaction, and (4) technological overload.

Lost sense of control

At the beginning of the study, nearly all of the participants struggled with uncertainty regarding the new situation, challenges of working from home, not being able to cope with all the demands and also not having any clarity whatsoever about what the demands were. Many participants had other family members living with them in the same household which made teaching an additional struggle. Nearly everyone agreed that their sense of control is simply gone. One of the participants shared her feelings:

'It is an utterly and infinitely gloomy time for me. I feel like I'm trapped in a complete chaos, more like a tornado that keeps spinning me around and I have no idea if it's going to spit me out at any point and if so – where exactly am I going to land. Can anyone, ANYONE, tell me what it is specifically that I'm supposed to do?'

Losing track of time

As the weeks progressed, the participants noticed another prevailing phenomenon. Nearly all of them have lost track of time. Class schedules are laid out very well throughout the week, however, what they were struggling with was to know which week of the semester/year they were currently in, which week of the lockdown, which week of remote work. Nearly all of them also experienced loss of work-life balance that only made things worse. As one of the teachers said:

'If someone told me tomorrow that I'm supposed to share my final evaluations with my pupils this Thursday, I'd totally believe them. And on top of that I'd panic that I don't have anything ready yet.'

Loss of job satisfaction

Most of the teachers with sadness admitted that they have significantly lost satisfaction related to teaching their pupils and being a teacher. Mostly they were pointing at: loss of belief that work has meaning and decreased sense of professional competence and self-efficacy as a cause. Example experiences that teachers shared during the group coaching session around job satisfaction were the following:

'Nothing I'm doing makes sense anymore. I'm tired. I'm tired of trying to teach, I'm tired of seeing my students just trying to cheat through the tests all the time, I'm tired of pretending I don't see that they're cheating. I mean... what is the point of trying to teach in the first place?'

Another teacher shared:

I'm no longer perceived as knowledgeable by my students. They laugh at me when I'm trying to unmute my mic, they laugh at me when I'm trying to figure out how to share my screen. Nightmare! All of a sudden my competence in history is being evaluated based on my computer literacy!

Technological overload

Zoom fatigue has been experienced by everyone. All of a sudden both teachers and students had to completely forget about the vibrant classroom environment and turn on their laptops to dial into a virtual classroom. Most of the teachers complained that technology combined with lack of instructions and IT support have caused them to fail completely in the early stages of remote work. One of them admitted:

My eyes were itchy, red and aching at the end of the day, my brain was tired from trying to figure out how "Teams" work, what is "Zoom", where do I click, where do I submit, why do some of the messages go to Spam... that's just the tip of the iceberg! Every single day brought 10 tech problems upon me, all of which were nearly impossible for me to solve. I have never, never, and I repeat, never, worked under so much stress.'

Discussion

The results obtained in qualitative analysis indicate that educational coaching can help teachers improve their well-being during the pandemic. Scientific research supports coaching as an effective strategy that can be employed for ongoing teacher learning and development (Cornett & Knight, 2009; Joyce & Showers, 1987; Knight, 2009; Kraft *et al.*, 2018). Skiffington & Zeus (2003) describe coaching as 'a holistic multifaceted approach to learning and change'. As such, educational coaching can play an important role in education across many domains: teachers' professional development, students' academic achievement, helping educational leaders or creating a supportive learning culture.

According to Aguilar (2013), educators face many challenges when they begin their teaching career – they instantly need more knowledge, both theoretical as well as the real time classroom applications. Teachers need to be able to make

optimal decisions on the spot, control their reactions in the classroom, make sure their responses portray both knowledge about the subject as well as deep interest in it, and much more to make sure that their students can learn in an optimal environment (Aguilar, 2013).

However, these challenges do not even measure up with the plethora of obstacles and additional requirements that the pandemic has demanded from teachers. The outcomes seen in this study indicate that educational coaching is indeed an approach that can answer those needs and positively impact teachers. As Aguilar (2013) states, coaching '*can go where no other professional development has gone before: into the intellect, behaviors, practices, beliefs, values, and feelings of an educator*'.

Positive results experienced by teachers in their teaching practice include the following: positive attitude, better teacher-student skill transfer, enhanced teacher efficacy, being open to implementing new learning and teaching strategies, improved students' outcomes (Knight, 2009). A lot of these results have also been observed amongst the participants of the study and are discussed in the section below.

Benefits of the coaching sessions

One of the most frequently mentioned benefits of the educational coaching group sessions was being able to connect with other teachers who were facing the same set of unprecedented and stressful scenarios. All participants found it to be eye-opening to realize that they are not unique in their struggles and that the hardships of the pandemic have spread across the entire educational system. The coaching sessions were very rewarding for all participants as they were able to share their experiences, listen to the similar – or very different – experiences of others, learn what solutions others came up with and how to apply them specifically to their situation.

There were several aspects of educational coaching that the participants considered particularly efficient: (1) being provided with a safe space, where everyone could share their experiences, feelings and thoughts without fear of being judged or ridiculed, (2) increased self-awareness and awareness of one's own environment as well as resources, strengths and weaknesses, (3) learning how to create solutions, set smart goals and use available resources to attain them.

Nearly all the participants of the educational coaching program experienced some form of a positive shift in their thinking patterns, in their perception of their immediate environment and the evaluation of how well/bad things are turning out for them. Most of the participants stated that they are able to see more solutions

to problems at hand, then they were able to come up with prior to the coaching program. Most of the participants also admitted that their level of self-acceptance and the acceptance of current circumstances increased and the feeling of being lost or lacking sense of control decreased significantly. All participants evaluated the coaching session very highly and considered it a time well spent – they felt that they have learnt a lot and grown professionally more than ever before.

Limitations

This study has some limitations. The fact that a non-probability convenience sampling was used may have had an impact on the motivation of the participants. Teachers who participated in the study could have been more motivated to improve their well-being than if the sample had been chosen randomly. Also, it is possible that a larger sample would have led to different qualitative results.

Conclusions

The purpose of this study was to diagnose the role of educational coaching in stimulating the well-being of teachers during the pandemic of COVID-19. The study also focused on analyzing the effects of the pandemic on teachers under a very unique scenario in which all of a sudden all teachers needed to change their classroom setting to fully online and face unprecedented stress. Qualitative analysis showed that educational coaching can help teachers improve their well-being during the pandemic when teachers need to change their role – from classroom to remote – and succeed under a new set of circumstances.

The following aspects of educational coaching were particularly efficient: (1) having a safe space, (2) increased self-awareness (3) learning how to create solutions using available resources. This qualitative study helps establish an empirical evidence that educational coaching can help teachers enhance their well-being during the pandemic, and possibly – during other crisis scenarios as well.

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