Education policy-making in South Africa during COVID-19

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Abstract

Scholarship on the impact the COVID-19 pandemic has had on education has focused primarily on learners (Vaughn, Sayed and Cooper, 2021; Spaull *et al*., 2020) and the widening of existing educational inequalities (Schleicher, 2020). Few studies have considered the effects COVID-19 has had on teachers, which makes this study's contribution relevant and essential (Sayed *et al*., 2021). The literature on teaching during times of crisis has demonstrated that teachers can act as a buffer and mitigate many of the adverse effects that result from conflict and crises-ridden contexts (INEE, 2020). However, teachers need to feel more valued, as this will contribute to their positive sense of well-being and their ability to persist. This paper illuminates the experiences of teachers who work in challenging contexts in the Western Cape province of South Africa[3]. It contributes to the knowledge on teachers' experiences of crisis and instability in the Global South. The paper suggests that teachers, as front-line workers in crisis situations, should be granted autonomy and agency in their education choices and delivery methods.

Key Words

teachers, well-being, voices, autonomy

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3 Challenging contexts', for the purposes of this article, refer to impoverished areas that suffer from social and structural problems as a result of inequality, including gangsterism.

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a significant impact on education systems globe-wide. Traditional school calendars were disrupted by hard lockdowns or intermittent and rotational learner attendance (OECD, 2020). Whilst 'academic learning loss' from disruption to the school calendar has received a fair degree of scholarly and policy attention, less attention has been paid to teachers, their working conditions, and their well-being. This paper addresses this gap by considering how teachers in Manenberg, a neighbourhood in the Western Cape of South Africa, coped with the education policy response to the pandemic and the impact it had on their existing anxiety and vulnerability, and therefore on their well-being, between March 2020 and February 2022. It specifically examines teachers' experiences in the context of ongoing violence, and the effects of the pandemic relative to teacher voice, teacher support, and teacher autonomy.

The paper begins with a brief overview of the management and mitigation of the effects of the pandemic in South Africa, with a particular focus on teachers' working conditions and well-being. This is followed by a review of the literature to define teacher well-being, explore the effects of conflict and violence on teachers in South Africa, and present the theoretical focus. The paper then goes on to map the methodology and findings, as discussed in relation to three themes: (1) teachers' experiences of voicelessness during the pandemic; (2) teachers' lack of professional support and resourcing; and (3) the curtailing of teacher autonomy. These themes highlight the effects of the education policy response to COVID-19 in contexts of conflict and violence, that adversely impacted schools and communities in marginalised and impoverished settings.

Initial COVID-19 policies and the effect on teachers in South Africa

In South Africa, a national state of disaster was declared on 15 March 2020, as per the Disaster Management Act (57 of 2002). This allowed the government to institute protocols such as closing schools and forbidding travel that would spread the virus. The education policy response to the pandemic ranged from the complete closure of schools to rotational and staggered school days

(Government Gazette 43578). Teachers were expected to implement COVID-19 protocols whilst managing their teaching load. These arrangements continued throughout 2021, until the Government Gazette 45877 announced on 6 February 2022 that schools would return to normal full-day schooling. Two striking effects of the regulations on teachers' work are noteworthy.

First, teachers were expected to disseminate information about the virus and preventative measures to the school community (DBE, 2020a) whilst managing teaching and learning. They were responsible for ensuring social distancing in class and during breaks, monitoring bathroom usage, and disinfecting classrooms (Maree, 2022). Teachers also were expected to allay community fears about the pandemic, despite concern for their own and their families' safety, which increased their personal anxiety and deflated their sense of well-being (DBE, 2020b).

Second, teachers were expected to compensate for the loss of learning and curriculum coverage, ensure that missed content was covered and assessments conducted, and that learners were assigned homework when not in school (Schreuder, 2020). Research by Sayed *et al*. (2021) into the role of teachers in the development of the education policy response to COVID-19 suggests that policies were enacted with minimal to no consultation with teachers, effectively silencing those who would inevitably be responsible for implementing the policies.

As is often the case during crises and times of social disruption, the policy regulations for COVID-19 put multiple unrealistic and conflicting demands on teachers. They were expected to be front-line, street-level bureaucrats who oversaw state emergency functions whilst fulfilling the professional role for which they had prepared—teaching and learning.

Literature review

Crises, disruptions, and conflicts negatively impact teaching and learning. Whilst research on the impact of schools in conflict zones and areas plagued by violence is typically oriented toward learners' experiences, school violence also has an adverse effect on teachers (Yang *et al*., 2021). Several

studies have noted that violent school contexts aggravate teachers' anxiety, fear, and sense of inadequacy about their ability to provide quality teaching and learning. Teachers often suffer effects similar to prolonged post-traumatic stress disorder (Davids and Waghid, 2016). When teachers in these contexts are not adequately supported, valued, or respected, these effects can expedite burnout (Sayed and Singh, 2020). Therefore, teachers and their well-being in conflict contexts are the subjects of this paper.

Defining well-being

The concepts of teacher well-being in conflict settings are multiple and varied (Falk *et al*., 2019; OECD, 2020). The World Health Organization defines health, which includes well-being, as 'the full physical, mental and social well-being not merely the absence of disease or infirmity' (WHO, 2022, p. 1). Benevene, de Stasio, and Fiorilli (2020, p. 1) similarly contend that well-being is a complex notion with intellectual, physical, and emotional aspects which incorporate dispositional, personal, organisational, and environmental factors. In the context of teachers, well-being refers to a 'positive emotional state that combines personal needs and expectations of both learners and their teachers' (Entrée, 2017, p. 1). According to Schleicher (2018), well-being refers to how teachers feel and function in their jobs. In conflict-ridden and other challenging contexts, teachers are essential to creating safe teaching and learning environments for others, which amplifies their stress and anxiety. This highlights the need to be attentive to teacher well-being (Mendenhall, Gomez and Varni, 2018). Teacher well-being in general, but particularly in challenging contexts, affects student learning and the building of equitable, inclusive, resilient, and quality education systems (INEE, 2021).

Framing teachers' well-being

The definition of well-being, as captured in McCallum *et al*.'s (2017, p. 6) comprehensive framework, includes external and structural aspects such as 'economic resources, political circumstances, and health and literacy', as well as individual 'happiness, emotion, engagement, purpose, life satisfaction, social relationships, competence and accomplishment'.

This paper explores teacher well-being in relation to the external and individual aspects of violence and conflict contexts, and how they are affected by education policy responses to COVID-19. Particular attention is paid to teacher autonomy, involvement, and collaboration in education policy-making.

Teacher voice and empowerment

The pandemic exacerbated the inefficiencies and misalignment of resources within South Africa's education system (Maree, 2022). Teachers were expected to work remotely from home with minimal support and direction, despite not having done so before and regardless of whether they or the learners had the facilities to do so (Schleicher, 2020; Neufeld and Malin, 2020). The empirical literature suggests that teachers were struggling to adapt to these expectations, with little guidance on how to best manage the effects the pandemic was having on education (OECD, 2020; Sayed *et al*., 2021). In this respect, many scholars note that teachers' voices have been marginalised in the literature and in policy-making, despite their being uniquely placed to offer input into policies, reforms, and school contexts, particularly during times of crisis, including the COVID-19 pandemic (Gozali *et al*., 2017; McCallum *et al*., 2017; Maree, 2022). The literature suggests that, where teachers are given a voice in forming policies and procedures, they have an 'increased sense of ownership and responsibility of the outcomes' (Gozali *et al*., 2017, p. 34). The increased sense of ownership of and responsibility for the outcomes will reduce teacher stress and increase their motivation to teach (Neufeld and Malin, 2020).

Teacher stress, anxiety, and motivation

Teachers' mental health during times of crises is critical to the provision of quality education (Collie, 2021; McCallum *et al*., 2017). The COVID-19 restrictions and limited available resources, compounded by anxiety about contracting the illness, left teachers feeling worse psychologically than before the pandemic (Landa, Zhou and Marongwe, 2021). As teachers' anxiety and vulnerability increased, their well-being declined. In areas like Manenberg, where most adults are unable to assist children academically (Maree, 2022), teacher stress levels escalated and further reduced their sense of well-being (Collie, 2021). Teachers' stress was likely exacerbated by the power

dynamics of the education authorities and their top-down micro-management practices (Eiroa-Orosa, 2020). In sum, teachers' lack of involvement in crisis policy-making adversely impacted their professional work, morale, and motivation (Neufeld and Malin, 2020).

Methodology

This paper focuses on the experiences of teachers in Manenberg, a location created during the spatial planning of apartheid, during the COVID-19 pandemic. The teachers participating in this study worked at one of three primary schools: Jupiter Primary School (JPS), Saturn Primary School (SPS), and Neptune Primary School (NPS)[4].

JPS is geographically situated where four rival gang territories coincide. The children associated with these gangs attend JPS, which gives rise to tensions within the school. SPS is a relatively small school situated on a main road, where the local youth gather to indulge in substance abuse activities. NPS is situated in a slightly more affluent area, but the learners commute from less affluent areas that are inundated by gang activities.

Participants were selected based on their willingness to participate after the onset of COVID-19. They indicated their consent through an interest questionnaire disseminated via email. The sample included two principals, three management team members, and nineteen teachers.

Data were collected using open-ended, semi-structured interviews in English, the language of teaching and learning, to enable participants to relay their experiences. The information was gathered in person and via Skype or email, including follow-up questions. It was transcribed and along with the field notes, then coded, analysed, and identified themes named. It then was reviewed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) steps for analysing qualitative data, which include familiarisation, coding, generating themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and writing up. Similarities, anomalies, or contradictions were carefully reviewed by the researcher (one of the co-authors), who is regarded as both an insider and outsider by virtue of their position as an education specialist working in the district in which these schools are situated.

Ethical clearance was obtained from the Cape Peninsula University of Technology, with which all three co-authors were affiliated at the time of the study. Written informed consent was gained from the participants, who had the right to withdraw at any time without repercussions.

We acknowledge the study's limitations. Considering the ongoing and evolving effects of COVID-19, we know that it represents a snapshot in time. Further limitations stem from the reluctance of the participating teachers to meet face-to-face and to have follow-up sessions due to their personal and professional demands, and from the potential bias that could emerge due to the researcher's association with the school beyond this study. However, the findings we present are substantiated by the existing body of literature, which allows for insightful conclusions.

Findings

The findings in relation to teacher well-being during the COVID-19 crisis identified the following three themes: teachers' experiences of voicelessness during the pandemic, a lack of professional support and resourcing, and curtailment of teacher autonomy.

Teachers' experiences of voicelessness during the pandemic

Teachers' sense of not being heard and of having their voices rendered invisible in policy discourse while they were expected to follow explicit directives emerged powerfully from the data, as indicated in this quote:

> Ideas get shared, but it doesn't always get brought into [being] and sometimes that also causes a kind of demotivation. (Samantha, grade 7 educator, JPS)

This suggests that teachers felt excluded, that their voices were ignored in a context in which they are experts and capable of providing workable solutions. The feeling of invisibility was evident to teachers in discussions regarding when to resume schooling, and in the ineffective communication with schools

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4 The school names are pseudonyms.

in the midst of the pandemic about the return of learners and the academic programme.

This feeling of invisibility creates a trust deficit between teachers and senior officials, as explained by this school official:

> I would love the authorities [Minister of Basic Education and Superintendent General of Education in the Western Cape] in this period [COVID-19] to actually...let teachers come to school and develop what the new normal will be [i.e., school opening times and which learners should attend school]. (Donovan, deputy principal, NPS)[5]

Teachers understand the context and academic deficits of the learners in their schools and the communities they serve. Thus, they are best placed to develop COVID-19 protocols and to deliver quality teaching. The lack of insightful policy-making that resulted from the scant input from education specialists, including teachers, aggravated the challenges officials faced when closing schools, such as providing meals and the increased food insecurity amongst the children in the country during that time.

Lack of support and resourcing

The effects of the COVID-19 pandemic in South Africa highlighted the inequalities that still exist in the country, despite the move to democracy in 1994 (Sayed and Singh, 2020). This was noted by a respondent:

> COVID has actually brought up a lot of the deficiencies in our society, in our schools. [The] marginalised communities [were left wanting as there was] no data. There was no home-schooling that could happen. (Donovan, deputy principal, NPS)

The Manenberg area is an impoverished community where most residents lack access to online resources. Many parents are unable to assist their children academically, as they have minimal schooling themselves:

> Because we have a backlog here in our curriculum, and especially with our learners, it was difficult to give them a take home pack because the parents can't help them. (Donovan, deputy principal, NPS)

Ensuring that everyone adhered to COVID-19 protocols proved an additional challenge for teachers, as learners needed frequent reminders of these protocols:

> The new set of rules, that is going to be challenging because...social distancing was impossible in this environment because they hadn't applied it at home. They are coming into a classroom setting, and you have to remind them not to hug their friend, but they are used to doing it at home. (Samantha, grade 7 educator, JPS)

Lack of access to the necessary technological resources due to a lack of funding and infrastructure proved particularly stressful for teachers:

> I know it's a difficult concept to provide every school what is required. It's extremely difficult because the finance is not there…Half of the teachers cannot do a Zoom; we don't have computers. (Donovan, deputy principal, NPS)

Some teachers used their personal resources to engage the learners who did have access to technology, but they were burdened by the extra preparation time, which was onerous and time-consuming:

> I was constantly in the mode of teaching because I've been actively on my WhatsApp with my learners and parents throughout the lockdown. I was busy. (Samantha, grade 7 educator, JPS)

Teachers noted that the education policy response to COVID-19 was difficult and almost impossible to implement without adequate support or resources. Engaging with teachers about suitable teaching and learning strategies that would be effective in the pandemic context would have minimised much of the stress, anxiety, and frustration experienced by the teachers at these schools.

Curtailing teacher autonomy

When teachers are given the autonomy to manage teaching and learning in their classes in the way they deem best, it promotes job satisfaction and improves teacher retention (Worth and van den Brande, 2020). During times of crisis and disruption, such as COVID-19, teachers are less inclined to leave the profession if they are given the space to manage how they teach and how best to realise

5 All participant names are pseudonyms to protect their anonymity.

education policies in their specific contexts. Limiting teacher autonomy and instructing them to just 'follow the rules' disregards their professional skills, which creates feelings of confusion and anxiety, as one teacher noted:

> I feel like the plan was never obvious to us. That made me very cross! Okay we're going to do it this way…Oh, no, here's another circular, we must do it this way…I felt overwhelmed. I felt disrespected by the education departments. (Samantha, grade 7 educator, JPS)

A lack of teacher autonomy reduces their role to one of automated state workers, when they are in fact trained professionals fulfilling one of society's most crucial functions.

The findings presented above on the three themes suggest that the education policy response to COVID-19 at these schools left teachers anxious, stressed, and frustrated, which negatively impacted their well-being. Teachers noted that the emergency policy mandates during the crisis heightened their anxieties to the point of needing medication and therapy and caused immense stress. One teacher explains:

> That's also the main reason why I returned to therapy. I was feeling anxious because my first inkling was to phone my doctor and ask for a prescription, and then I thought…No, no, no… why phone the GP when you can actually phone your therapist, and that's what led me to returning to my therapist because I wasn't blind to the fact that this was a traumatic experience. I was feeling anxious. (Faith, grade 5 educator, JPS)

Simply including teachers in the process of emergency policy-making, giving them a platform to advise, and allowing them to use their experience to implement policies in a manner they knew to be effective would have minimised the catastrophic effect the pandemic had on teachers' well-being.

Conclusion

This article examined teachers' reflections on their well-being, and their views about teacher participation in education policy-making during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Crises like the COVID-19 pandemic engender fear and vulnerability in teachers, particularly in violent and conflict-affected contexts. Despite uncertainty about their personal well-being, teachers were expected to attend to learners' needs (Neufeld and Malin, 2020). The difficulties teachers experienced during the pandemic were especially pronounced for teachers in Manenberg, a marginalised community, where they struggled to provide quality learning in an impoverished and vulnerable situation affected by social ills and inequality. The difficulties teachers in such contexts experienced were compounded by scant resources, the absence of meaningful professional development, and access to support for their own well-being (INEE, 2020; Sayed *et al*., 2021).

In the South African context, strategies to cope with learning during the COVID-19 pandemic were determined without teacher consultation (Sayed *et al*., 2021), which diminished teacher autonomy and agency. This contrasts with countries like Finland, Japan, and the Netherlands, where schools and teachers were given the autonomy to make alternative arrangements for education (Schleicher, 2020). South Africa's top-down education policy approach to the COVID-19 pandemic undermined the conditions under which teachers laboured and adversely impacted their well-being. Not being given a voice in policy-making or the agency to adjust their teaching, coupled with restricted access to learners and their collegial community, had a detrimental impact on teachers' professional and personal well-being and their efforts to mitigate the effects the crisis had on education (Wong and Moorhouse, 2020).

This paper underscores the importance of teachers' voices in the management of a crisis while also considering the fault lines of inequality in education. The value in policy-makers and school leaders listening to teacher voices when instituting regulations and assessing the particular context of a school is clear. Therefore, it is essential that policy-makers and education leaders give teachers autonomy over their work and allow them to operate in a collaborative environment in which their input is valued and respected. Teachers will then be able to adapt their teaching and the curriculum to the crisis context while taking into account the contextual needs of the community they serve.

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