Original Paper

Social and Emotional Wellbeing of Teachers and Its Impact on the Teaching Practice

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Abstract

Teacher socioemotional health has always been an important area of study, but the global COVID-19 pandemic made it a priority. The emotional well-being of teachers is so important because it directly impacts on their teaching abilities and as a result on students' well-being and learning. This article documents how a university-based professional development center addressed these SEL needs of teachers during the year of the pandemic, how teachers felt about this support and its implications on their teaching practices. We show how immediately after schools closed and teachers had to teach online, their priority was to learn about the technology and how to teach online. We also show as the year progressed, how the basics of technology had been covered, how teachers sought professional development to care about their own mental health, and detailed how the intersection of SEL made the teaching practice more meaningful. The lessons learned this year and data gathered from other organizations that offered free of charge professional development suggest a possible shift in how schools may perceive the need to offer professional development to teachers, and therefore embrace a teacher training program that incorporates holistic self-care strategies and mental health related training.

Keywords

social-emotional health, teachers, administrators, COVID-19, professional development, technology

1. Introduction

The socioemotional health of teachers has been an increasingly researched area in the past decade. The emotional well-being of teachers is so important because it directly impacts and relates to their teaching abilities and the classroom environment. More specifically, teachers who experienced more stressors reported worse mental health and found it harder to cope and teach (Baker et al., 2020). Furthermore, mental health should be treated as an occupational health issue in teachers because work stress is a major risk factor for mental health issues like anxiety and depression (Borelli et al., 2014). Work related stress may start off as just being mental fatigue or burnout, but the long term implications of this stress has

negative impacts for not only teachers but their students too.

Although this has always been an important area of study, it is increasingly important to consider now during the current times of the COVID-19 pandemic. It was reported that teachers experienced considerable stress as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, which was related to declining mental health outcomes, coping ability, and teaching (Baker et al., 2020). This same article details that both lack of connection and lack of support from administrators/coworkers were highly reported as contributors to stress (2020). In addition, there is high risk for job strain due to COVID-19. More specifically, this risk develops in work environments where the psychological demands of a job are high, while there is also low support that increases the risk (Borelli et al., 2014). It is now of utmost importance that teachers are supported emotionally, as it is essential for the effectiveness of teaching and student learning.

2. Methods: Responding to Teachers' Social -Emotional Needs

Keeping these research points in mind, our center offered professional development opportunities tailored to these needs of teachers. We offered several webinars and professional development opportunities promoting skills and practices related to emotional well-being for teachers. In these webinars, we collected data on participant satisfaction and overall response to our presentations. Some of the topics offered through our webinars that pertained to the socioemotional health of teachers were as follows: *Self-Care Practices for Teachers, Making Meaning in Chaotic Times,* and *Leading Today's Schools: Observing and Supporting Teachers in a New Classroom Landscape.* In addition, our center launched a monthly Chat and Network event to further support teachers and educators, where members in both school and district positions exchange ideas to innovate and problem solve collaboratively.

Figure 1. PDRC Webinars Statistics April 2020-June 2021

3. Results

3.1 Teacher Feedback to Selected Professional Development

Regarding more specific participant feedback on these webinars, we received a lot of positive feedback. Regarding *Making Meaning in Chaotic Times,* the average satisfaction rating was 4.5 points on a 5 point scale. Regarding *Self-Care Practices for Teachers,* the average satisfaction rating of all participants was 4.7 on a 5 point scale. Regarding *Self Care Practices for Teachers II,* the overall satisfaction rating was 4.5 on a 5 point scale. Open ended questions were also used to further assess attendee satisfaction. Overall, participants felt that this webinar encouraged them to be in touch with their emotions and prioritize their self-care practices moving forward. Here are some more specific reflections from *Self Care Practices for Teachers*:

- "I am not the only teacher feeling this way and that the reason why I may be feeling like this is because I never had a break from last year."
- "I'm learning to balance self and commitments."
- "Self-care is important. Even with the many things happening around us, time should be set aside to reset."
- "I learned that I am not the only one alone in this situation and that it sometimes it is okay to say
- "'*No, I am not okay*'"

Fordham University PDRC Social-Emotional Learning Webinars January 2021 - June 2021	
Outcomes	**Survey Responses Average**
I would attend future webinars of this subject that focus on building related skills.	95%
The knowledge that I gained makes me feel more confident and prepared to incorporate what I have learned into my practice	92%
The knowledge I gained will enhance my practice.	92%
My participation in this webinar added value to my practice and knowledge.	91%
I plan to share information I learned today with my colleagues.	89%
I feel that this webinar provided me with new knowledge that will enhance my students' learning.	89%
Average	**91%**

Figure 2. Teacher Participant SEL Feedback

4. Discussion

4.1 Holistic In Nature

The foundations of social emotional awareness are connected to holistic spiritual development research. According to the stages of spiritual development by James Fowler (1995), when an individual decides to assert one's belief, values, and commitment it is at that moment self-awareness and emotional intelligence becomes established. This human expression represents the Individuative-Reflective stage in spirituality. This stage identifies people who are capable of expressing their internal feelings as a result of their surroundings, diversity, and world view happenings (Fowler, 1995; Love, 2001; Paloutzian & Park, 2014). Today, educators are more in tune with their inward feelings as a result of the global social effects of COVID-19.

As educators continue to assess their values, beliefs, and commitments, the teaching profession will now require infrastructures that provide social emotional support for teachers. According to organizational research, a holistic work environment produces meaningful and effective service (Oliveria, 2004). This observation confirms that holistic constructs are important to the work environment. Moreover, in order to provide holistic and meaningful support, these same values must be incorporated into the work environment. It is an education tradition for students to receive social and emotional services, however the current climate of the teaching practice is in need of social emotional contexts for teachers.

4.2 Making The Teacher Practice More Meaningful

One of the suggested ways to incorporate holistic frameworks into the work environment is to acknowledge the needs of the professional. Social emotional support is indicative of meeting the unique needs of the individual, which will make the work meaningful. Social emotional support is connected to meaningful development. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, educators are looking to make their practice a more meaningful experience. As a result, self-care themes have emerged for educators to incorporate into their practice. The self-care focus translates into developing a more meaningful work experience for educators.

According to education research of Rober Kegan, humans are "meaning-making organisms" as they evolve through self- authorship (Erikson, 2006.p.291). In this case, the recent rise in educators to explore more self-care innovations into their practice is a reflection of self-authorship. In the case of teachers of the classroom, the best way to affirm self-care, self-authorship, and a meaningful work environment, is to build community. Community building is a direct strategy that can be used to ensure teachers are feeling supported and cared for while at work. During the pandemic, many people were isolated from the people, places, and things that added meaning to their life. Community engagement is a strong conduit for building connections and meaningful interactions.

According to the holistic spiritual research of Cady (2004), individuals can build their meaning-making domain through relationships and community. Relationships and community are also referred to as internal and existential domains (Paloutzian & Park, 2014). As educators and school leaders come together to discuss what brings meaning to the classroom and overall school environment, then the

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holistic practice of self-care can take shape within the profession. Community building efforts that support self-care within the school environment can include professional development centered around holistic themes, provide classrooms with wellness instruments that lend to self-care and support, promote peer engagement that reflect the diversity of current staff for meaningful connections, and incorporate a mood meter to assess the feelings of the teaching community for the day. Each of these community building techniques can serve as holistic efforts to improve self-care support for teachers within the school community.

5. Conclusion & Recommendations

Considering both the research on the socioemotional health of teachers and the feedback about our webinars collected by our center, these are my recommendations:

- Listen to teachers and incorporate their feedback when planning about future virtual or in-person professional opportunities.
- Use a simple but inviting tool such as sending a short online survey or Google form to learn about teachers' interests, particularly as they relate to their well-being and its impact on their instructional practice.
- Encourage teachers and school administrators to participate in professional development that focuses on communication particularly during times of stress.
- Offer a more freely planned, "discussion forum", open to teachers and administrators to discuss issues related to the socioemotional health of teachers and their impact in the classrooms Teachers can help other teachers based on shared experiences, and therefore can make suggestions or offer advice.
- Because of recent research on the positive effects of **mindfulness** and **meditation** during the COVID19 outbreak, we strongly suggest using a SEL framework when delivering professional development regardless of the topics. Here is an article for reference:
  ○ Matiz, A., Fabbro, F., Paschetto, A., Cantone, D., Paolone, A. R., & Crescentini, C. (2020). Positive impact of mindfulness meditation on mental health of female teachers during the COVID-19 outbreak in Italy. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, *17*(18), 6450.

Overall, the socioemotional health of teachers should remain an interest for centers that offer professional development, like the *Fordham Professional Development Resource Center.*

Webinars and related services should focus on this topic and promote the wellbeing of teachers as a priority to the education system.

Acknowledgement

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