

The Role of Emotional Health in Learning and Teaching

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ABSTRACT Emotional health is vital in learning and teaching. Learning and teaching should take place within a healthy atmosphere. This paper sought to describe and explore the role of emotional health in learning and teaching. A qualitative approach was used. The population for this paper comprised all the Life Skills teachers in primary schools in a circuit. A purposive sample of nine teachers was used. An open-ended questionnaire was used for data collection. Data was analysed and coded thematically. The findings showed that a conducive atmosphere allowed effective and efficient learning and teaching. The findings further indicated that emotionally healthy teachers were able to enjoy teaching and that made learners to enjoy learning, whereas unhappy teachers were difficult to colleagues and also learners. In that regard, it is recommended that the Department of Education organises continuous professional development and in-service workshops for teachers. The Department of Education should collaborate with the Department of Health for support with regard to health-related trainings.

INTRODUCTION

The aim of this paper was to describe and explore the role of emotional health in learning and teaching. The personal and social well-being of learners and teachers is very important in the teaching and learning process. Emotion is defined as the part of a person's character that consists of feelings such as love, fear or anger (Hornby 2010). This means that emotional health is connected with people's feelings, how well and good people feel about themselves. Learners need to be supported and motivated by teachers who have a genuine interest in their development. All the things teachers do with the learners should contribute to the learners' holistic development (Joshua 2001). According to Joshua, holistic development (the whole child approach) aims to ensure that learners develop physically, emotionally, socially, intellectually and spiritually. In support of the above statement, Hugo and Lenyai (2013) pointed out that developmentally appropriate practice promotes an awareness of children's predictable stages of growth in all developmental areas: cognitive, emotional, linguistic and social. The essential recurrence of emotional development gives this study its base.

The Department of Basic Education (DBE) also takes holistic development of learners very seriously, hence the provision of Life Orienta-

tion as a subject for Intermediate and Senior Phase and Life Skills as a subject for Foundation Phase to address teaching and learning. These subjects are central to the learners' holistic development. The Life Skills subject addresses knowledge, skills and values for the emotional, intellectual, personal, social and physical growth of learners. It is also concerned with the way in which these facets are interrelated (DBE 2011a, b). The Life Orientation subject on the other hand guides and prepares learners for life and its possibilities and equips them for meaningful and successful living in a rapidly changing and transforming society (DBE 2011a). Through life skills learners are exposed to a range of knowledge, skills and values that strengthen their cognitive, emotional, personal, physical and social development (DBE 2011b). These empower them to be able to take good care of themselves.

According to Verdisco (2013), every emotion from being angry, annoyed to ridiculed, all these emotions affect learning by affecting communication, attention and memory and therefore, they all need to be managed. For example, an angry person acts angry, and acting angry has a number of consequences which are mostly bad for learning. Furthermore, if a learner is wound up or in the foul mood, it is hard for him or her to calm down or snap out of it and focuses on learning if he or she does not know how to calm down or redirect his or her feelings.

Amongst other things, people's emotional state has the potential to stimulate their thinking. For example, learners learn and perform more successfully when they feel secure, happy and excited about the subject matter. Although emotions have potential to uplift learners' thinking, emotional states also have the potential to interfere with learning (Darling-Hammond et al. 2003). This suggests that if learning gets hampered, it does not take place. They further indicate that emotions such as anger, anxiety and sadness have the potential to distract learners' learning efforts by interfering with their ability to attend to tasks at hand. Some learners may have difficulty learning because their minds are tangled with distracting thoughts and memories. Strife or fear in the learning process can generate a negative disturbing strain that interferes with learners' abilities to process new information and to perform (Roeser et al. 2000). This means that fear affects learning negatively.

It is very difficult to understand one's feelings and to appropriately deal with them. Learners and teachers may not constantly know and classify what they feel or understand why they feel in that way and may not know what to do about how they feel. The ability of learners to understand their emotions is associated with self-confidence; this understanding helps them to be in control of their inner life. This is not an easy task to learners, therefore, teachers should be mindful of and considerate towards the different ways learners react and display emotion (Darling-Hammond et al. 2003). Not all learners are mature to the level of being in control of their emotions. It is important therefore to recognise the important link between emotions, thought and action. It is also vital to teach learners that emotions can be managed, regulated and controlled to some degree (George 2000), to help them bring their emotions under control.

Learners should be taught tolerance with themselves and others and to develop determination and skills to work through conflict and frustration. This teaches learners tolerance and 'Ubuntu'. Learners who demonstrate skills in empathy are good listeners, they are sensitive to others' needs and feelings and treat others with respect (Darling-Hammond et al. 2003). Learners should have knowledge of self-awareness and self-knowledge which are important components of emotional intelligence.

The learning environment is a very important factor to learning. Learners' cognitive learning, growth and creative expression develop well

in an emotionally safe classroom environment (Roeser et al. 2000). The emotional and academic functioning of learners improve when their teachers support their competence in a caring and respectful, non-comparative and non-competitive way. This means that learners should be treated as individuals and therefore learners' individual development should be encouraged. On the other hand, teachers should use various forms of support including learning resources to help meet learners' academic, social and emotional well-being. When learners sense and feel that teachers care about them and their responses are validated and affirmed by the educators needs they get motivated (Bojuwoye et al. 2014). This suggests that feedback is important in learning and teaching.

Another important aspect in teaching and learning is respect. Mutual respect and the environment that put value on learners' contributions and participation promote and encourage greater engagement and academic success (Dallimore et al. 2004). When learners feel valuable in the learning process they also feel free to contribute and actively participate. Peterson and Hittie (2003) indicate that in areas of poverty there is usually a high incidence of physical, emotional or sexual abuse and this can lead to absenteeism from school and eventually dropping out. This happens because learners feel unwanted and valueless. All of these environmental conditions have harmful effects on the physical and socio-emotional well-being as well as development of children and can disrupt learning (Heward 2010); and emotional stress may affect learners so severely that they fail to fully participate in the process of learning (Dunbar-Krige and Van der Merwe 2010). Learners start to isolate themselves and withdraw from learning.

DBE (2011b) states that personal and social well-being includes emotional health, social health and relationships with other people and the environment, including values and attitudes. This assists learners in making accountable, informed and morally responsible judgements about their health and the environment. All of those require emotional maturity and tolerance, without which in times of anger one may lose control and act contrarily. This may affect negatively relationship with other people and the environment.

This paper sought to describe and explore the role of emotional health in learning and teaching.

METHODOLOGY

Study Design

This paper adopts a qualitative research design. Qualitative research is a form of investigation in which researchers make an interpretation of what they hear, see and understand. The researcher's interpretations cannot be separated from their own background, history, context, and prior understanding (Creswell 2007).

The population for this paper comprised all the Life Skills teachers in primary schools in a circuit. Population is the term for the collectivity that the researcher plans to study and about which he/she wants to make statements (Rossouw 2003).

Sample

A sample can be described as a small-scale representation – a kind of miniature model – of the population from which it is selected (Seale 2007; Shipman 1997). It is a subset of people from the population who will participate in the current study (de Vos et al. 2002). The population of this paper consists of all the teachers in the three primary schools, whereas its purposive sample comprises only the nine teachers who teach the Life Skills subject in the Foundation Phase. Purposeful samples are comprised of people based on a particular attribute, and are often designed to arbitrarily include equal representation of groups that may not be equally represented in society (Vanderstoep and Johnston 2009).

Research Instrument

An open-ended questionnaire was used to collect data. A questionnaire is a list of questions or statements to which people are asked to respond in writing. Questionnaire refers to both documents that are completed by an interviewer in a direct person-to-person situation, and those documents that are mailed or handed to people for completion without the assistance of the researcher (Rossouw 2003).

Data Collection and Analysis

For collection of data an open-ended questionnaire was used. Data were then analysed and coded according to the emergent themes.

Ethical Considerations

Permission to conduct the research was sought and granted from the schools. The participants were informed that they were free to participate. They were also informed about the confidentiality and the anonymity of the procedure and they subsequently filled the consent forms. To ensure trustworthiness of the study findings the following criteria were applied: credibility, dependability, transferability and conformability. This research dealt with real people in a real and practical environment and therefore the information gathered is credible. The findings are dependable, they have been gathered from real people and could be put into practice in the actual situation under investigation. The accuracy of the data matches the reality of the situation.

RESULTS

The following section presents the findings of this paper, out of which four themes emerged: understanding of emotional health, the role of emotions in teaching and learning, strategies used to build and encourage learners' emotional health and assumption whether emotional health matters.

Theme 1: Understanding of emotional health

In answering the question whether participants understood what emotional health was?, the research found out that teachers have different understanding of emotional health, some understood it as a state of emotional and psychological wellbeing in which an individual is able to control and express all emotions appropriately. To some teachers emotional health meant that "a person is well concerning his mind". One teachers also indicated:

If a person was being disturbed or irritated by someone or something, that also disturbs and troubles the emotions on the inside. That person starts not to feel well in his/ her mind and then becomes emotionally unhealthy.

Theme 2: The role of emotions in teaching and learning

The research found out that teachers agree that emotions play an important role in learning

and teaching; it was indicated that happy people are positive about life and are healthy. Teachers indicated that emotional health makes learning easier and interesting:

When the teacher is happy he enjoys teaching and learners also enjoy his teaching. That makes learners to learn with ease. On the other hand, when the same teacher comes to school angry, as colleagues we also see it, he becomes unfriendly and difficult to us, which means even learners experience difficulties with him.

Emotionally healthy people enjoy learning new things whereas emotionally unhealthy learners do not enjoy learning. On the other hand, another teacher said:

“Emotional health in learning contradicts the mind and the body of the learners. The learner cannot concentrate or focus during the lesson because his mind will be thinking about the problem.”

Another response further indicated:

“During lessons if learners are emotionally unhealthy they are unable to learn because they will be thinking about something that caused the problem, that is why learning will not take place.” For example, hungry learners cannot enjoy learning, there is a song that says ‘a hungry man is an angry man’.

It was indicated that when the teacher’s emotions were healthy, his teaching became effective. Healthy emotions make the teacher’s mind to be focussed on the intended aims and objectives. The participants indicated that if the teacher has emotional health problems she/ he shouts and uses language/ words in a reckless way which makes learners feel scared and humiliated and they become afraid of him/her. It was also indicated that if the teacher has emotional health problem he/she will be shouting and harassing learners so learners will feel ashamed and humiliated in front of others; such an environment will not be conducive.

One of the participants indicated *“My emotional health can affect learning and teaching either positively or negatively depending on the state of my mental health. If I am emotionally unhealthy, that can affect learners negatively, they can be afraid of me and they cannot learn well.”*

Another participant indicated: *“It drags down the performance of learners. I cannot perform as a teacher if my emotions and health are not balanced, as a result emotional health*

plays an important role during learning and teaching.”

Another participant said: *“The tone of my voice will be very high. I can also exercise anger and aggression which is very bad to learners. In effective learning and teaching the teacher and learners must be friends.”*

Theme 3: The strategies used to build and encourage learners’ emotional health

The following are responses which indicate the strategies teachers use to encourage learners’ emotional health. Some participants indicated that they teach learners to respect one another as a way to build and encourage learners’ emotional health:

“When a person is disrespected he or she gets angry. So in order to prevent learners from making each other angry I teach them to respect each other.”

It was also indicated that teachers give learners group work so that they (learners) can learn to work together, listen to one another and learn to communicate their views. They also indicated that they give learners leadership roles to boost their self-worth and confidence.

One participant said: *“In teamwork learners also learn to tolerate one another; teamwork is very good.”*

Participants also indicated that they encourage learners to voice out their feelings if they are hurt or disturbed and that they find someone to share their problem with or seek counselling.

Another participant indicated that he told learners to talk about things that troubled them. By so doing he indicated that he availed himself/herself to listen to them and to give them advice on how to seek solutions.

One of the participants indicated that he/she implemented what was expected by the policy: *Ubuntu*, respect and working together.

Another participant indicated: *“The Department of Education should employ professionals for the benefit of the learners who should be placed in schools, because teachers are not trained as psychologists.”*

Another participant said:

“I am able to see learners every day, so if a learner kept quiet and the performance dropped, as a teacher I know that the learner

has emotional problems and needs help. When emotions are hurt it can be seen."

The participants indicated that they help learners deal with emotional health by building good relationship with them by showing love and respect to them. Another participant indicated:

"I give complements for both positive action and attempts made by learners. I also encourage them to speak if they are hurt."

Another participant indicated: *"I am transparent to the learners so that they can feel free to share any problem they encountered and if it is beyond my control I will refer the matter to the social workers."*

The other participant responded: *"I will encourage them to be open to me as a teacher. I will promise them that if they tell me I will not tell anyone, it will be confidential with me. It will be our secret forever."*

Theme 4: Assumption about emotional health matters

The participants indicated that their mental and emotional health determine how they will adapt, manage and deal with different physical, mental and social challenges they encounter.

One of the participants indicated:

"A healthy mind is a healthy body, it works hand in hand. My health and my emotions should be in good condition for the sake of my learners."

The other participants said: *"My emotional health is important, because if I am emotionally unhealthy I will over react to learners unnecessarily. My approach to learners, the way of talking to them will not suit the teaching environment."*

DISCUSSION

Although emotional growth or development forms part of the curriculum, it has been rarely taught in the classrooms. The research findings show that participants have different views and understanding of emotional health. This indicates that participants do not fully understand their emotions and that of the learners. In support of the above-mentioned findings, Darling-Hammond et al. (2003) show that learners and teachers may not always detect what they are feeling or understand why they feel in a particular way, they may also be not sure of what to do

about how they feel. They further indicated that learners' ability to understand their emotions was connected to greater self-confidence; that understanding help them to feel greater control over their inner life. It means that teachers should always be careful of and sensitive to the different ways learners react and show emotions, in order to respond appropriately to learners' emotions without hurting them emotionally. Sylwester (1994) also concurs indicating that teachers do not know exactly how to control emotions in school, beyond defining too much or too little emotion as misbehaviour. This means that the moment emotions are classified 'misbehaviour', negativity encroaches. On the other hand, Hargreaves (2001) advocates that the act of teaching needs individuals to possess a sincere emotional understanding and compassion towards others, which teachers still lack towards the learners.

The findings also indicated that emotions play a vital role in teaching and learning. Hargreaves (1998) supports the findings indicating that teaching and learning are socially situated practices that are deeply rooted in emotional experiences. When emotions are healthy, the mind is healthy and the body is healthy and equally unhealthy emotions make an unhealthy mind and an unhealthy body. Verdisco (2013) in support of the findings also indicates that if a learner is wound up or in a foul mood, it is hard for him/her to calm down or get out of it and focuses on learning if he/she does not know how to calm down or redirect his/her feelings. Furthermore, Verdisco indicates that every emotion from being angry, annoyed to ridiculed, affect learning by affecting communication, attention and memory and they all need to be managed. In addition, an angry person acts angry, and acting angry has a number of consequences, which are mostly bad for learning.

It was also indicated that if the participant has emotional health problems he/she will be shouting and harassing learners so learners will feel ashamed and humiliated in front of others; such an environment will not be conducive. Villavicencio et al. (2013) reveal that negative emotions, for example, anger, anxiety and boredom lessen cognitive resources and self-regulation during learning whereas milder forms of negative emotions also influence negatively the motivational and cognitive aspects of students' learning. Emotionally unhealthy teachers may

scare or make learners angry and emotionally unhealthy learners' performance may drop. On the other hand, negative emotions weaken learners' motivation to learn and trigger the use of more rigid strategies. It was also indicated that as much as emotionally healthy teachers and learners affect positively teaching and learning so do emotionally unhealthy teachers and emotionally unhealthy learners, they affect negatively the process of teaching and learning.

It was indicated further that emotions which are healthy make teaching enjoyable, effective and efficient because the mind is able to focus on the intended objectives. This was emphasised by Pekrun et al. (2002), indicating that positive emotions such as enjoyment, hope and pride positively influence learners' motivation to learn and the use of flexible learning strategies and self-regulation. Darling-Hammond et al. (2003) also confirm the findings indicating that emotions have potential to energise learners' thinking. Frederickson (2001) and Rastegar et al. (2009) show that teachers whose emotional experiences are positive might generate more, improved and better teaching ideas; they might also develop open-minded coping strategies which can help them solve challenges and problems.

Research findings also indicated that teachers use several strategies to build and encourage learners' emotional health; as supported by Hawkey (2006), teacher training needs to address emotions in education. Darling-Hammond et al. (2003) and George (2000) also indicate that it is critical to recognise the important bond between emotions, thought and action. Moreover George indicates that it is important to teach learners that emotions can be controlled, how to control and managed them to a certain extent.

Teachers indicated that they teach learners respect of oneself and others. Learners are encouraged to work as a group so that they develop tolerance and skill to work with others as a team member. That way learners learn to voice out their feelings to others and learn to receive and to offer help. This is in line with Dallimore et al. (2004), who indicate that mutual respect and the environment that values learner's contributions and participation encourage and promote bigger engagement and academic success. Learners also learn to communicate well, building and boosting their confidence and self-worth, which Williams et al. (2000) state as teaching learners how to learn and include boasting their confi-

dence, motivating, enhancing self-esteem and organizing an appropriate learning environment. Literature also indicates that various forms of support including learning resources help meet learners' academic, social and emotional well-being. Learners get motivated when they feel and sense that educators care about them; and when their responses are acknowledged and confirmed by the educators needs (Bojuwoye et al. 2014).

CONCLUSION

The research indicated that emotional health is of uttermost importance in teaching and learning. It is therefore important that teachers and learners work hand-in-hand for the understanding and maintenance of emotional health.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings, the following recommendations would be beneficial in addressing the role emotions in teaching and learning: The Department of Basic Education need to employ relevant professionals like psychologists who will be able to help learners deal with their emotions well. Teachers should be equipped during teacher training programs to be careful of the concept of emotions so that they could help learners defeat their feelings of uselessness in class and create better educational conditions for their students (Rastegar et al. 2009). Seeing that teachers' role is not limited to teaching learners to read and write or the transmission of knowledge, it is also recommended that they receive on-going workshops organised to empower them with knowledge concerning social, emotional and mental health. Therefore, there is a need for psychologists to conduct workshops that would orientate teachers on strategies to maintain first their emotional health and that of the learners.

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