

## Teacher Mental Health Promotion in Creating Quality Teaching Environments in Dysfunctional Secondary Schools\*

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**ABSTRACT** Poor academic performance of learners is a major problem in South African public schools today. A considerable number of schools in the Vhembe District are dysfunctional. The main aim of this study was to find challenges in the promotion of the teachers' mental health for them to create an environment that promotes quality teaching and learning in dysfunctional secondary schools in Mutale area in the Vhembe District. Quantitative research design was used, collecting data through questionnaires. Purposive sampling procedure was used to select 160 teachers from rural dysfunctional schools. Data was analyzed using IBM Statistical Package for Social Sciences (IBM SPSS statistics). Results showed that conditions in the schools were not conducive to the promotion of teachers' mental health. A model was developed in order to enhance the quality of teaching and learning in dysfunctional secondary schools in the Mutale area through promotion of teachers' mental health.

### INTRODUCTION

Education in South Africa is a constitutional right (South Africa, 1996). South Africa spends more money on education than many other countries. The Census (2011), Devon (2016) specifies that in the South African population, thirty-five percent of Blacks/Africans, 32.6 percent Coloreds, 61.6 percent of Indians/Asians and seventy-six percent White citizens have completed high school education, whereas 8.6 percent of the population aged 20 years and older has not completed any schooling.

The South African education system is characterized by a number of challenges that affect school performance (Monyooe et al. 2014). There is no indication that this downward trend in the schools has been arrested (Westaway 2015). Some schools have been affected to the point of becoming dysfunctional (Pretorius 2014) resulting from issues that include commitment of teachers, the wellbeing of teachers, teacher's knowledge of subject content, learner-teacher interaction, use of different teaching approaches and assessments, unstable management conditions, inappropriate or lack of leadership, lack of vision, an unhealthy school climate and culture, and low staff and learner morale (Kutame et

al. 2014; Pretorius 2014; Dicke et al. 2015), high pregnancy rate among learners (Mbulaheni et al. 2014) and violence amongst learners (Rossouw 2003). A school becomes dysfunctional when, due to abnormal or impaired functioning, it fails to accomplish the true purpose of teaching and learning for which it was instituted (Pretorius 2014).

There are reports that Limpopo has the highest number of dysfunctional schools in the country (Mohlala 2009; Garcia-Moya et al. 2013). Schools are under-staffed, poorly resourced, ineffectively managed and disciplined, and consistently low in academic performance. In Limpopo Province some schools performed much lower in 2012 in Grade 12 than the Provincial 2009 to 2013 target. Similarly, there are a considerable number of schools in Vhembe District, which performed lower than the set national standard and are categorized as dysfunctional (Kutame et al. 2014).

Teachers and learners in schools that are dysfunctional have to contend with a range of issues that exacerbate the situation in these schools. A lack of learner discipline may seriously hamper the teaching and learning process, and if disruptive behavior prevails, education cannot be successful (Rossouw 2003). Bloch

(2009) agrees that the situation of dysfunctional secondary schools has existed for many years and is serious. Bloch (2009) and Hellström (2015) further indicate that the challenges in dysfunctional schools continued years after the introduction of the post-apartheid system of education. According to Bloch (2009:26), the characteristic of the apartheid policies contributed to the breakdown of the culture of teaching and learning in schools. Lethoko et al. (2001), Hewlett and Moran (2014) also state that, the issue of the absence of culture of learning, teaching and services (COLTS) in South African schools, especially in secondary schools for the previously disadvantaged groups, is a major concern. Saunders (1996) aptly refers to this as “a crisis of gargantuan proportions”. Principals of underperforming schools still receive negative feedback as grades fall. Today, the widespread belief in educational leadership focuses on the contribution of quality leadership to the performance of schools and learners (Bush 2008). Bush (2008) further indicates that the high number of dysfunctional schools in South Africa is an indication that school management and leadership also need to be attended to seriously. Bush suggests that the school management team is also responsible for the situation as one observes in schools.

The discovery that some schools continue without textbooks that are crucial for any successful learning process (Veriava 2013; Nkosi 2014; Lindholm 2015; Jackson et al. 2015) provided researchers with a sense that there are major problems in schools that may negatively affect the teachers’ mental health, which is critical in their quest for quality of teaching and learning. These reports suggest that teachers in schools that are dysfunctional do not perform optimally while at school.

The Department of Education is intervening in these schools with the aim of improving the situation (Kutame et al. 2014; Nabe-Nilsen et al. 2015) without focusing on the promotion of the teachers’ mental health. In areas where the department is committed to improving the situation, the promotion of teachers’ mental health is still an area of neglect. The interventions seem to be unsuitable and unsuccessful, and as a result these schools continue to be categorized as dysfunctional. The main aim of the study was to develop a teacher mental health promotion model that would improve the quality of the teaching

and learning environment in dysfunctional rural based schools.

### **Statement of the Problem**

The Department of Basic Education is continuing with turnaround strategies in improving the academic situation in schools from becoming dysfunctional. However, the effect of such interventions does not seem to have been successful. The intervention strategies do not include promotion of teachers’ mental health, leaving teachers poorly motivated. Such interventions have been short lived and unsustainable. Teacher commitment is low, affecting the quality of teaching and learning and overall school performance negatively. Based on the background given above, one assumes that there are challenges in dysfunctional secondary schools, which negatively impact the promotion of the teachers’ mental health. Presently, no scientific evidence has so far been found relating to promoting the teachers’ mental health for them to develop a sustainable teaching and learning environment in these dysfunctional schools.

## **METHODOLOGY**

### **Design**

The study was conducted using a quantitative research design to find the challenges in the promotion of the teachers’ mental health for them to create an environment that promotes quality teaching and learning in dysfunctional secondary schools in Mutale area in the Vhembe District.

### **Population**

The target population for this study was all teachers in public secondary schools in Mutale area (plus or minus 500). These are teachers teach at least one of the following subjects regarded as difficult and include English, Mathematics, Physical Science and Life Science.

### **Sampling**

Sampling is a process of selecting observation (Babbie and Mouton 2001). A sample is defined as the representative of the population from which it is selected if the aggregate characteris-

tics of the sample closely approximate those same aggregate characteristics in the population (Babbie and Mouton 2001) as used in this study. A purposive sampling procedure was used to select the respondents for this study from secondary schools whose matric academic performance is consistently poor resulting in the school categorized as dysfunctional. The sample of 143 teachers completed the questionnaire from the 160 identified in the schools that teach subjects regarded as difficult, and which are contributing to the low pass rate in matriculation.

### **Instrument**

A self-constructed, closed-ended questionnaire with multiple-choice questions on issues related to the promotion of teachers' mental health for them to improve the quality of teaching and learning was used to collect data. The questionnaire consisted of two sections of Section A, requesting for demographic information, and Section B requesting for information regarding the association of the teachers' mental health for them to improve the quality of teaching and learning. Questions provided greater uniformity of responses and are more easily processed to extract results from data. Five-point Likert Scale type questions required respondents to indicate the extent to which they agreed with each of the statements given. To increase validity of this questionnaire, it was pretested with five respondents from the identified schools in order to identify flaws and ambiguities in the questionnaire while ensuring that the items were clear and easy to answer. Observation of conditions in the schools, which focused on the teachers and the physical structure, was also done during distribution and collection of questionnaires. What was considered relevant to the promotion of mental health guided by literature reviewed was captured for analysis.

### **Data Collection**

Data was collected from eight secondary schools, which have been dysfunctional from 2009 to 2013 in Mutale area in the Vhembe district. The circuit managers also allowed the research team to collect data from their schools where the researchers asked teachers willing to

participate to provide consent. The researchers administered the questionnaires to the participating schools and collected them after a week. The return rate for the questionnaires was ninety percent.

### **Ethical Consideration**

The Department of Education gave the researchers permission to conduct the research in the schools. Hamilton and Corbett-Whittler (2013) indicate that ethics in research needs attention from the beginning of the study to the end. Gallagher (2009) also stresses that the ethics in a research project continues through the research process. Participants consented by signing letters to take part in the study. They were further informed about the purpose of the research and that the results would only be used for the purpose of this study. They were also made aware that their participation was voluntary and that they were free to withdraw without any penalty.

### **Data Analysis**

A computer loaded with the IBM Statistical Package for Social Science (IBM SPSS statistics) program was used to analyze quantitative data from questionnaires, as it is more powerful and accessible on the personal computer. Through the frequencies procedure, value labels of each variable as well as all possible summary statistics were listed. Where there were some differences, probably due to sampling error percentages based on row totals, column totals, or total sample size were computed through cross tabulations.

## **RESULTS**

### **Demographic Information**

The demographic characteristics to determine which demographic characteristics of the respondents who completed questionnaires correlate best with their responses to the issues affecting teachers in dysfunctional secondary schools, and have effects on the quality of teaching and learning are addressed in this section. Only one variable, gender, was included in the study for analysis.

## Gender

Table 1 presents the gender distribution of questionnaire respondents, which include both male and female respondents. Slightly more than half (50.3%) the respondents in the study were males.

**Table 1: Gender**

<i>Gender</i>	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
Female	71	49.7
Male	72	50.3
Total	143	100

## Challenges in the Promotion of the Teachers' Mental Health for them to Create an Environment that Promotes Quality Teaching

### *Commitment of Teachers*

Teachers' general perception of the work environment has a great influence on the level of satisfaction and productivity. Teachers' commitment brings about job performance, which contributes towards a positive environment in the school for learning and teaching to succeed. Table 2 shows results indicating how teachers are committed to teaching learners in their schools.

**Table 2: Commitment of teachers**

<i>Commitment of teachers</i>	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
Not at all	9	6.3
Lesser extent	21	14.7
Not applicable	2	1.4
Not sure	3	2.1
To a greater extent	108	75.5
Total	143	100

The results in Table 2 show that 75.5 percent of respondents think that to a great extent, commitment of teachers affect the quality of teaching and learning in a dysfunctional secondary school while 6.3 percent think that it does not. There are significant differences in the rating of this item by level (Chi-square = 36.974,  $p < 0.05$ , Cramer's  $V = .254$ ). Circuit managers significantly (75%) confirmed that commitment of teachers is an issue that affects the quality of teaching and learning. The researchers observed that though the teachers were committed, their mo-

rale was low. The infrastructure was weak, and classrooms had cracks and potholes and graffiti. These conditions negatively affect the promotion of the teachers' mental health resulting in poor performance by teachers and learners. Teachers cannot teach well if they are poorly motivated. Motivation is an energizing force that produces, directs and sustains an individual's efforts (Basil 2013).

### *Teacher's Knowledge of Subject Content*

Subject content knowledge is critical for teachers to promote the quality of teaching and learning. Teacher's knowledge of subject content is presented below in Table 3.

**Table 3: Teachers knowledge of subject content**

<i>Teachers knowledge of subject content</i>	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
Not at all	11	7.7
Lesser extent	15	10.5
Not applicable	2	1.4
Not sure	8	5.6
To a greater extent	107	74.8
Total	143	100

The subject content knowledge is a core component of teacher competence. A teacher who has sufficient subject knowledge is motivated to go to class and teaches with confidence. Sufficient knowledge on the subject boosts the morale of the teachers. Results show that the majority of the respondents (74.8%) think that teacher's knowledge of subject content is to a great extent critical for promotion of teachers' mental health for them to contribute effectively to the quality teaching and learning. There are significant differences in the rating of this item (Chi-square = 38.935,  $p < 0.05$ , Cramer's  $V = .261$ ). Circuit managers significantly (75%) feel teachers' knowledge of subject content affect learner performance. The results of this study suggest that the poor performance of learners is brought about by teachers who are not knowledgeable in their subject content and therefore poorly motivated. Teachers must have an in-depth knowledge of subject content that they teach, and the ability to understand it from the perspective of the learner and the way learners receive it (Ball 2000; Moseley 2000; Mitchell et al. 2001; Nutbeam 2015; Persson and Svensson 2015; Haraldsson and Hagquist 2016).

### Teacher-Learner Interaction

Teacher-learner interaction has a reflective effect on the promotion of the teachers' mental health. Miller (2000) found that the teacher-learner interaction plays an important role in helping promote quality teaching and learning. Results showing teacher-learner interaction is given in Table 4.

**Table 4: Teacher - learner interaction**

<i>Teachers-learner interaction</i>	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
Not at all	5	3.5
Lesser extent	22	15.4
Not applicable	3	2.1
Not sure	15	10.5
To a greater extent	98	68.5
Total	143	100

The results in Table 4 show that teacher-learner interaction is a critical issue, which affects the promotion of the teachers' mental health so that they are able to provide quality of teaching and learning. The majority (68.5%) of respondents indicate that learner-teacher interaction affects the quality of teaching and learning to a great extent. Lee (2007) and Schaps (2016) established that the trust developed between the learner and teacher can contribute to learner's academic performance. Koplow (2002) and Shen et al. (2016) recommended that effective teacher-learner interactions encourage greater confidence and classroom engagement. In addition, Silins and Murray-Harvey (1995) specified that learners who indicate high feelings of ability in their interaction with their teachers academically do well. There are significant differences in the rating of this item (Chi-square = 29.513,  $p < 0.05$ , Cramer's  $V = .227$ ). Circuit managers significantly confirm that teacher-learner interaction in some schools is to a greater extent an issue, which affects the provision of quality teaching and learning. Teachers-learner interaction depends on different settings, in some school settings they are negative and in others, they are positive. In order to achieve good performance there must be positive teacher-learner interaction, which would boost the morale and the teacher thereby improving their wellbeing. Teachers whose wellbeing is healthy are in a position to interact with learners in promoting teaching and learning environments in schools that are dysfunctional.

### DISCUSSION

The results showed that issues related to the teacher's wellbeing have the greatest impact on the promotion of quality teaching and learning. Nutbeam (2015) and Crosswell and Elliot (2004) in their studies, point out that one of the most critical factors for the future success of education and schools is the commitment of teachers. Commitment requires individuals who are ready to accept challenges they may have to deal with as it usually evokes a strong sense of intention and focus. It is accompanied by a statement of purpose or a plan of action. Teachers work for the Department of Education, and commitment to this institution should be expected. Basil (2013) stresses that teachers' commitment lead teachers to be accountable to their responsibilities and supervision of different tasks provided to the learners as the result it conveys a change to academic of learners and good work performance. Abiding by its rules and regulations and embracing its philosophical and pedagogical principles are reasonable requirements. A teacher whose wellbeing is healthy would be able to manage all these things and make a meaningful contribution to teaching and learning. Health promotion is about realizing people's potential to make them more resilient and involves building strengths, competencies and resources. Poor mental health of teachers negatively affects the commitment of teachers to provide quality teaching in dysfunctional secondary schools. Teachers' with lower level of commitment develop fewer plans to improve the academic quality of their instruction (Danetta 2002; Veerman 2015).

There are significant differences in the rating of this item (Chi-square = 36.974,  $p < 0.05$ , Cramer's  $V = .254$ ). Circuit managers significantly feel that commitment of teachers is an issue that affects the quality of teaching and learning.

Secondary teachers need motivation in order to promote productivity and educational quality. Motivation promotes an individual's wellbeing. A mentally healthy teacher can be motivated to improve and sustain the quality of teaching and learning at schools (Kutame et al. 2014; WHO 2016.). A good work environment is, therefore, that kind of environment where staff is highly motivated to work hard to bring about improved job performance. Motivation to secondary school teachers is critical as it may en-

courage teachers to be positive and accountable to their responsibilities and supervision of different tasks provided to the learners, and as the result, the academic performance of learners would improve (Basil 2013).

The kind of relationship that exists between teachers and colleagues can affect their level of commitment as well as their attitude towards the work. The good condition of the infrastructure also has a positive influence on the promotion of the teacher's mental health.

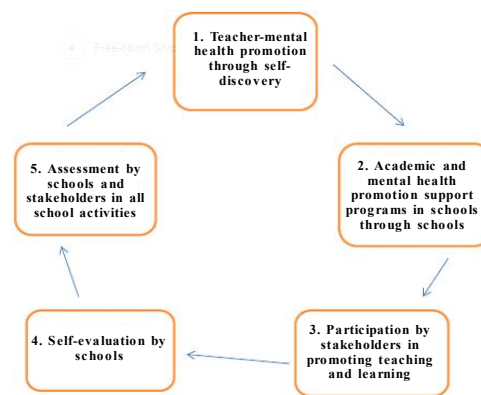
Teachers' level of education and depth in the subject content they teach, have a positive correlation with high level of learner achievement. Teachers' working conditions negatively affect their mental health and their ability to provide quality education. If the working conditions are conducive, they enhance the wellbeing of teachers. Learner-teacher interaction affects the promotion of the teachers' mental health and the environment for quality of teaching and learning to take place. Murray and Malmgren (2005) indicate that learners who have negative relationships with their teachers are associated with negative outcomes including high rates of school dropout, lower rates of college applications, low self-efficacy and low self-confidence. Teachers whose wellbeing is sound and are using different teaching approaches find it easier to interact with learners for them to understand what is being taught. Various studies (Cornelius-White 2007; Roorda et al. 2011; Devon 2016) show that students with better teacher-learner relationships tend to achieve more highly in school.

### Teacher Mental Health Promotion Model

Based on the results of this study, the Teacher Mental Health Promotion Model (Fig. 1) was developed for promotion of teachers' mental health for them to create an environment that promotes the quality of teaching and learning. Teacher-mental health promotion model incorporated self-actualization, academic support programs in schools, participation by stakeholders in promoting teaching and learning, self-evaluation by schools and assessment by schools and stakeholders in all school activities.

The model consists of a closed circle having five stages. Stage 1 shows "teacher-mental health promotion through self-discovery". Teachers are made aware of their personal well-

being and school situation so that they discover themselves and what affects their school system negatively to the point of being dysfunctional. Teachers should also discover and acknowledge their talents and abilities to them to contribute positively towards creating a suitable sustainable learning and teaching environments. Some teachers had not been developing themselves professionally and academically. This self-discovery would enable teachers to accept themselves and to be in a position to change and develop.



**Fig. 1. Developed Teacher Mental Health Promotion Model (Mbulaheni 2016)**

The Model continues onto the second stage with development of academic and mental health promotion support programs in schools. Each school should develop its own programs guided by their findings during self-discovery exercises. The programs will be suited to their situation and needs, and it will be easy for teachers to own the programs than those imposed upon them. Self-developed programs are easy to understand and therefore relevant to the situation. The third stage is that of participation by stakeholders in promoting teaching and learning. Stakeholders must be involved in the improvement of the school situation, and they should feel that they are part of the school in the area of their jurisdiction. By being part of the school improvement plan, they will be able to establish why it is necessary that they should lend a hand when the need arises. The researchers have observed that most of the schools in the project had poor facilities physical resources. By being part of the problem, it is envisaged that they might feel obliged to improve the situation. Stage

4 is about self-evaluation by schools. Each school is expected to evaluate the progress made since the start of the program after two years to allow processes that take place as the school develops. Teachers and all involved in the program know where and how and even why they started with the program. They also know how the program has developed and should therefore be in a position to evaluate progress made. The last stage allows assessment by schools and stakeholders in all school activities. This exercise deals with the bias during self-evaluation by teachers at each school. The stakeholders will be able to reflect on the biases established for the school to plan for future. The Model continues to stage 1 to establish if indeed the teachers had been open-minded to point to the issues that affect their commitment to the development of the school to move out the dysfunctional zone.

### RECOMMENDATIONS

The study was conducted in the Vhembe district in the Mutale area targeting eight selected dysfunctional secondary schools. The researchers recommend that the same study be conducted with other dysfunctional schools in all the districts. The researchers also recommend that a study on the promotion of mental health of teachers and learners in schools that are performing poorly be conducted in comparison with those learners in well performing schools. Principals from the dysfunctional schools should visit high performing schools to find how excellent results are achieved. Teachers and learners must attend workshops about the concept of a healthy classroom culture. To achieve change in teaching and learning, teachers require more than new tools, a new curriculum or new educational theories they need to help adjust their thinking to take into account recent acquired knowledge.

The dysfunctional schools should develop the social capability of networks and relationships with the functioning schools to provide principals, teachers and learners with extra support on effective teaching and learning. Sustainable education improvement requires the involvement of key stakeholders, which include the state, parents, communities, teacher associations, NGOs, universities, and the private sectors. The study was conducted in Vhembe dis-

trict in Mutale area targeting some selected eight dysfunctional secondary schools.

### CONCLUSION

The Department of Basic Education needs to take into consideration the promotion of mental health of teachers in their quest to improve the quality of teaching and learning. Physical resources should be improved so that conditions in the schools are conducive for promotion of the teachers' mental health. They need to employ school principals and teachers who can handle situations in schools, teach and motivate learners to work hard and produce excellent results. Frequent workshop, training and seminars should be provided to teachers to improve their teaching skills suited to their school situations. Teacher development would increase subject knowledge, and this would have a positive effect on promoting teaching and learning.

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### NOTE

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