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Perceived psychosocial effects of COVID-19 on the teaching realities of Foundation Phase educators in selected rural quintiles 1 to 3 schools in South Africa

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The COVID-19 pandemic severely disrupted schooling, not only in South Africa, but globally. In the study reported on here we investigated the perceived psychosocial effects of the pandemic on the teaching realities of Foundation Phase (FP) educators in rural quintiles 1 to 3 schools in the North West province, South Africa. A qualitative, case study design was adopted with 10 educators purposively selected from 3 schools to participate through telephonic interviews. The findings reveal that as educators contended with the new rotational method of school attendance, challenges of limited teaching time, curriculum coverage, learner absenteeism and the lack of parental support that negatively affected their overall state of psychosocial well-being. This state of well-being was characterised by high stress levels, feelings of hopelessness, anxiety and a lack of accomplishment for educators. Despite these experiences, some educators demonstrated agency and resilience in ensuring that they carried out their core responsibility of teaching, but perceived themselves as requiring psychosocial support. The conclusion reached is that the available support structures provided by the Department of Basic Education appeared to be under-utilised and there was a critical need to introduce and advocate for mental health interventions to support educators emotionally.

Keywords: COVID-19; educator; foundation phase; learner rotation; new normal; psychosocial support; resilience; South Africa

Introduction

The coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic and related school disruptions increased concerns for the psychosocial functioning of educators globally (Gadernann, Gagné Petteni, Molyneaux, Warren, Thomson, Schonert-Reichl, Guhn & Oberle, 2023). Research on educators' mental health during the pandemic confirmed heightened levels of stress, anxiety and depression among educators in Canada, China, Brazil, the United States of America (USA), India and Spain (Oducado, Rabacal, Moralista & Tamdang, 2021; Ozamiz-Extebarria, Berasategi Santxo, Idoiaga Mondragon & Dosil Santamaría, 2021; Pressley, Ha & Learn, 2021; Silva, Cobucci, Lima & De Andrade, 2021). Psychosocial stressors included health and safety issues related to daily exposure to unvaccinated children; uncertainty stemming from persistent changes in public health regulations; teaching conditions including online, hybrid and in-person; the increased workload and need to learn new technologies; and pressure to cover the curriculum, assist learners to make up for learning time lost and provide emotional support for learners and family members (Flores, Caqueo-Urizar, Escobar & Irarrázaval, 2022; Nabe-Nielson, Christensen, Fuglsang, Larsen & Nilsson, 2022).

In South Africa, educators were not only confronted with stressors related to lockdown conditions, but had to contend with an already existing education crisis, especially for poor and vulnerable learners (Reddy, 2022). As early as 2013 Spaull showed how learners in rural areas and townships performed worse than their urban counterparts and emphasised that the low throughput rates and weak performance in high school were rooted in weak foundations from primary school. These findings highlight the importance of the Foundation Phase (FP) educators who are responsible for equipping young learners in Grades 1, 2 and 3 with the necessary content and skills in the foundation of reading, writing and numeracy to enable them to progress through the schooling system, take advantage of post-schooling education and ultimately enter the job market to contribute to the country's economy. Subsequently, during the pandemic "twice as many individuals were given the option of remote learning in urban areas compared to rural areas" (Maluleke, 2020:slide 15). Better resourced homes and schools were able to pivot to digital forms of learning and coverage of the curriculum. COVID-19 exacerbated the pre-existing inequalities with learning loss for learners in less resourced schools estimated at 4.2% higher than for learners in more affluent schools at 3.4% (Reddy, 2022).

Given the rural-urban divide in access to the internet (particularly quintiles 1–3) during the pandemic (Maluleke, 2020), and the significant role played by FP educators, the aim of the study was to examine the perceived psychosocial effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on the teaching realities of FP educators in rural quintiles 1 to 3 schools in North West. The focus was on educators in rural quintiles 1 to 3 schools because these schools cater for learners from families with the lowest income levels and the least access to resources. Based on income, literacy and unemployment levels in a community, the Department of Basic Education (DBE) divides all public schools into five quintile rankings. Quintiles 1 to 3 schools are "no-fee paying" schools while quintiles 4 to 5 are "fee paying" schools. The majority of "no-fee paying" schools are situated in rural areas or previously marginalised communities (Parliamentary Monitoring Group, 2020). A previously marginalised population is "a population that has historically and systematically been denied access to services, resources and power relationships, which has resulted in poor outcomes across the spectrum" (North Carolina Department of Health

and Human Services, 2021:para. 5). The research objectives were (1) to elicit FP educators' perceptions of the psychosocial effects of COVID-19 on their functioning as educators; (2) to ascertain how FP educators were adapting to the conditions under COVID-19; and (3) to explore the views of FP educators on what sources of support were available; and what additional support was needed.

Literature Review

Within the South African context, a report by Statistics South Africa (Maluleke, 2020) highlights persistent inequality and barriers to participation in education during COVID-19. After the declaration of a national state of disaster on 15 March 2020, schools were closed on 18 March 2020. Over 1.1 million children aged 5 to 18 years were out of school during 2020 – many of those due to COVID-19. Eight of every 10 learners aged 5 to 24 years attended schools that were part of a nutrition programme. Nationally, most schools offered rotational learning with only 11.7% providing remote learning. Whites were four times more likely to have had the option of remote learning than black Africans. More households from the highest income quintile had internet connectivity in their homes than those from the lowest income quintile. Urban households had approximately five times more internet connectivity at home in comparison with rural households. Urban areas had higher numbers of individuals who owned mobile phones than those in rural areas. Only 32.2% of South Africans aged 5 to 24 years had a computer to assist with distance learning, with most computers owned by persons in the highest quintile income group (Maluleke, 2020). Given these findings, it seems reasonable to assume that all learners were affected by the pandemic with some groups likely to have experienced greater learning losses than others.

There was thus a clear need for concrete curriculum recovery plans to mediate learning losses incurred during the pandemic. Hoadley (2020) recommended contextual accelerated learning programmes as a remedial approach to school recovery. Hoadley (2020) also noted that the government had largely devolved plans for accelerated learning to schools and individual educators, in congruence with a notion put forth by Gustafsson and Nuga (2020) that efforts to help learners to catch up on missed learning largely lay with individual schools and educators. Mohohlwane, Taylor and Shepherd (2020) identified the trimmed curriculum as one method through which learning losses could be recovered, a useful tool that designates core areas to be taught and how they can be taught. A critical factor, especially at FP level, which Hoadley (2020) viewed as having seen major regression is reading

and writing. Major challenges in completing the curriculum still existed; more apparent and pronounced in under-resourced and disadvantaged rural schools characterised by poor infrastructure, low attainment and high drop-out rates, dilapidated structures, inadequate teaching and learning materials, overall poor sanitation, and ill-equipped educators (Du Plessis, Mestry & Wiehahn, 2022).

Educator roles were also re-defined by the COVID-19 pandemic. Where schools were in the past solely a place for learning, the pandemic necessitated a need for adherence to health warnings, regular sanitising of hands and classrooms, and social distancing between learners (friends) and educators putting all involved under "severe pressure and strain" (Du Plessis et al., 2022:15). In addition, educators were expected to manage the rotation timetable and learner attendance schedules. The combination of these factors highlights the need to understand the psychosocial functioning and coping mechanisms adopted by educators during the new normal.

Global studies have revealed that educators showed psychological symptoms of stress, depression and anxiety since the start of the pandemic (Oducado et al., 2021; Ozamiz-Extebarria et al., 2021; Pressley et al., 2021; Silva et al., 2021). For example, research carried out with educators in Spain (Ozamiz-Extebarria et al., 2021) indicated that the stress of having to adapt to online learning and an increased workload led to some educators experiencing loss of sleep, and exhaustion. In the USA, Kush, Badillo-Goicoechea, Musci and Stuart (2022) conducted a national online survey of mental health outcomes during the pandemic. They found that educators reported a greater prevalence of anxiety symptoms than did those in other professions and educators using remote methods of teaching reported higher levels of distress than those teaching in person (Kush et al., 2022). In Chile, Lizana and Lera (2022) found high levels of depression, stress and anxiety among educators, with higher levels in those below the age of 35 years, in women, and those employed in public schools.

Psychological care is imperative to support high quality teaching, improve job satisfaction, prevent burnout and ultimately enhance student learning outcomes as students are directly and indirectly affected by educators' well-being (Ozamiz-Extebarria et al., 2021). In terms of psychosocial support (PSS) during the pandemic, positive relationships with colleagues and being supported by the school community were identified as particularly important for educators in the United Kingdom (Gadermann et al., 2023; Kim & Asbury, 2020). In South Africa, the DBE took cognisance of the adverse psychosocial challenges presented by COVID-19 and the need to ensure psychosocial well-being of educators, learners and

school support staff as it enhances the cognitive, emotional and spiritual well-being of a person and strengthens their social and cultural connectedness (DBE, Republic of South Africa [RSA], 2020). Mohohlwane et al. (2020) found that as schools geared for reopening, they were the least ready to provide psychosocial support to learners. Namome, Winnaar and Arends (2021) have called for a strategy and guidelines for the implementation of psychosocial interventions for both learners and educators, in line with evidence suggesting the urgent need for such interventions in contexts disrupted by such national disasters as the COVID-19 pandemic. Within the provincial Departments of Basic Education, a Health and Wellness Unit exists to assist in such interventions.

Coping mechanisms and adaptation methods were found to be in line with available resources. For example, to deal with the anxiety of COVID-19, educators in the Philippines (Talidong & Toquero, 2020) tended to try out new hobbies, communicate more with colleagues and loved ones through social media and some sought spiritual guidance. This finding relates to the multitude of roles played by educators who are also parents, partners, friends and colleagues, among others. Collie (2021) found that autonomy-supportive leadership within the school had huge potential to lower stress and emotional exhaustion amongst educators. Autonomy-supportive leadership refers to practices that facilitate individuals' self-initiation and enhance a sense of empowerment (Collie, 2021). The implication is that support mechanisms that allow educator autonomy have a positive effect on educator functioning and act as a protective factor that lowers stress and encourages teaching and learning.

Against this backdrop, there was a paucity of literature on how educators were navigating the new normal, specifically in rural schools, that had not been able to pivot to online learning due to a lack of resources for both educators and learners. A lack of information existed on their teaching realities and its effects on their psychosocial well-being which was likely to be negatively exacerbated during the pandemic. It was envisaged that this research would add to the literature on psychological impacts of changes framed within the adversity of the COVID-19 pandemic on educators who are viewed as resourceful and resilient professionals in their field. It was further anticipated that the research would have implications for educational policy regarding psychosocial support for FP educators, particularly those employed in rural settings.

The theoretical framework guiding the study was Van Breda and Sekudu's (2019) social ecological approach to resilience theory. Specifically, the study was framed within the salutogenic approach to social ecological resilience

which focuses on the causes and enablers of well-being or psychosocial functioning of individuals that allow them to flourish despite adversity (Van Breda & Sekudu, 2019). The social ecological resilience theoretical framework was selected as the theoretical lens for this study as it allowed an understanding of the perceived psychosocial effects in relation to positive outcomes/coping strategies to identify what worked, and the protective or mediating factors (how they worked) that supported, in this context, a continuation of teaching and learning (Van Breda & Sekudu, 2019). Adversity in this context was framed within the COVID-19 pandemic. The social ecological resilience theory takes on a person-in-environment approach and views an individual's resilience against a multi-layered system with which they interact, and which provides the factors that support and enable resilience. Social ecological resilience is defined within varying individual, family, peer, social and structural levels (Van Breda & Sekudu, 2019) which are subsumed under the micro systems (individual, family), the meso systems (school level including peer networks), and the macro systems (community organisations, society and culture).

Method

The research took the form of case study research located within a qualitative approach. According to Creswell and Creswell (2018), a case study design is a form of inquiry that allows the researcher to develop an in-depth analysis of a case, in this instance, FP educators in quintiles 1, 2 and 3 schools in the North West province. The research took place within a bounded system, and data collected were specific to the period of time within which the research was conducted, that is during the COVID-19 pandemic. The qualitative approach was chosen because it has a high degree of flexibility and provides rich holistic data (Rahman, 2017). Ten FP educators teaching grades 1, 2 and 3 were selected from a purposive sample of three quintile 1, 2 and 3 schools. Selection criteria for the research sites were that the schools had to be primary, quintile 1 to 3 schools situated in rural areas. Selection criteria for the educators were that they had to be FP educators of either gender, with a minimum of 1 year of teaching experience. The rationale for focusing on the psychosocial realities of these educators during COVID-19 was that it was anticipated that it would be difficult for them to pivot to online learning with such young learners. Demographic analysis revealed that all participants were female, while years of teaching experience ranged from 4 to 27. The number of years teaching FP ranged from 2 to 27 years with a mean of 16.2 years, attesting to the depth of experience that the participants contributed to the study.

Data were collected through semi-structured telephonic interviews. The decision to collect data telephonically was due to limitations for entry into schools presented by the COVID-19 pandemic, plus the need to adhere to COVID-19 health and safety protocols such as social distancing. Interviews were recorded with consent from participants. The questions posed were generally open-ended to prompt participant views and opinions (Creswell & Creswell, 2018) and were designed to explore the objectives of the study. The interview schedule was self-constructed and based on a literature review of the topic. As the interviews were conducted during school breaks, the duration of each interview was restricted to a maximum of 20 minutes. Interviews were recorded and transcribed.

Thematic analysis was used to analyse the findings. Braun and Clarke's (2006) six step method of thematic analysis was employed and involved familiarisation with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and writing the report. Inconsistencies within and across data items were noted for later use (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Themes and sub-themes were defined by categorising data as they focused on the broader objectives; formally organised and coded, after which codes were collapsed as they related to each other. Identified themes were reviewed and refined to ensure coherence among the set groupings of codes, and those that did not fit within the overall dataset were removed. Themes were refined against the theoretical framework guiding the research.

Trustworthiness and rigour of the study was enhanced by adhering to Schwandt, Lincoln and Guba's (2007) criteria for ensuring credibility or truth value through member checking; confirmability or neutrality/objectivity through keeping a reflexive journal; dependability or consistency through keeping an audit trail of all recordings and transcripts; transferability or applicability through the provision of thick descriptions of context; and authenticity or fairness through ensuring informed consent and transparency of all procedures.

Ethical clearance was received from the relevant University Human Research Ethics Committee and the North West Provincial Education Department (NWPED). Informed consent and permission to audio record interviews were sought from participants. The latter were informed of their right to voluntary participation, right to withdraw, privacy and confidentiality, and anonymity (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). A copy of the completed report was made available to participants who requested feedback, as well as the NWPED in accordance with the terms under which permission was granted to conduct the study.

In terms of limitations, the findings from this qualitative study cannot be generalised and extended beyond the sample to the broader population (Atieno, 2009) due to the small sample size and non-probability nature of the sample. A small sample was chosen because we thought that this sample would yield rich, qualitative insights. However, one can argue that partial generalisability may be possible for similar populations in the context of the new teaching realities under COVID-19. Secondly, only female respondents participated in the study, thus, the male view is absent. This gender bias is in keeping with the norm in South Africa where female educators have historically been associated with teaching at the FP level (Bhana & Moosa, 2016).

Findings

Findings are discussed in accordance with the objectives of the study.

FP Educators' Perceptions of the Psychosocial Effects of COVID-19 on their Functioning as Educators

Educators who were interviewed largely demonstrated a negative psychosocial state of well-being when asked about teaching in the new normal. Speaking on their state of well-being during this time, some educators reflected: *"The stress level is too high; stress level is too high hey?"* (Educator 6). *"... mmm physically I'm fine, mentally I'm not fine. Overthinking!"* (Educator 8). Educator 4 was distraught about the high number of Grade 3 learners who could not construct a sentence and highlighted her feelings of a lack of accomplishment. *"Hai, I become hopeless. I become hopeless, hopeless. Just imagine a Grade 3 learner who can't even construct a sentence. And there are so many. Mm. [silence] They are so many. [silence] Hai, no I become so hopeless. It seems as if I'm not doing nothing ... And it's not even in my class it's the whole class, the whole Grade 3's. [silence] And seems as if it's something that is coming yearly nowadays. Even the ones we were having last year they were just the same but these ones, seems as if they are worse."* Despite this feeling of futility, one educator mentioned that she tried to manage learners' mental well-being and anxiety owing to the disruptions in social cohesion brought about by the pandemic.

However, some of the educators who were interviewed were able to see some positive aspects of teaching during the new normal – especially less overcrowding in classrooms. For example, Educator 3 commented as follows: *"It's not overcrowded in the classroom. Our learners are using the social distancing, no problem ... I enjoy teaching much small numbers, yes, because today was 16 tomorrow will be 17. At least."* A further benefit was the ability to manage learners'

classwork and give feedback: *“Except the challenges I have in my classroom – during COVID-19 I think I can be able to do anything because I can teach. After teaching I can mark all the books at the same time then go to another subject and teach, write classwork and mark also. Because there are few in the classroom. But if there is no COVID-19 they are crowded aah, I can’t manage.”* The new normal also increased focus – particularly on learners with barriers to learning:

It is because I’ll be able to teach, give them activities and control their work and where it’s necessary we do corrections. But when the number is high it’s a bit challenging because I won’t be able to attend them individually to control all of their work if they are 40, I’ll have to control it after work ... Somewhere, somehow, we have advantages. Somewhere, somehow, we have advantages especially where we find learners with barriers to learning. (Educator 9)

How FP Educators were Adapting to the Conditions under COVID-19

Considering the significant reduction in teaching time and dealing with learners with varied abilities, educators resorted to giving learners more homework and implementing extra classes as a strategy to enable learners to catch up with their work. One educator mentioned that she focused mainly on teaching for assessment, *“... I don’t know sometimes we do assess learners and re-assess and re-assess and re-assess; yes, because the learners are not supposed to fail.”* Another educator stated that she tried different strategies and continually adapted where she found these are not working.

When educators were asked how they coped, three aspects emerged, namely the professional dimension, the emotional dimension, and the motivational dimension. An example of the professional dimension included: *“Like when you come to class prepared, when you come knowing what you’re going to do, you won’t stress you will cope because you come to class ready”* (Educator 7). The emotional dimension was captured in this response: *“It’s just that as a person, neh, I like my FP learners”* (Educator 2), while the motivational dimension was encapsulated in the following: *“From my side, just that I’ve got passion for teaching ... I’ve always wanted to be a teacher so what I’m doing is what I enjoy”* (Educator 5).

Educator 10 showed reflexivity in her work and future thinking, alluding to what has been dubbed “the lost generation”:

There is no other way. I’m ready to cope, but my concern is the future of these COVID-19 learners.... [silence] Actually, they are not learning. They just come to school for a day or 2 they go back, after 3 days they come back they know nothing again. You can see that their foundation is going to be very weak in Grade 12. (Educator 10)

While some educators revealed a passion for teaching, others demonstrated a lack of options. *“It’s only that I’m coming to work because I’m being paid to come to work ...”* (Educator 2). Others had to function under the prevailing circumstances:

And as you know, we don’t have to just use corporal punishment, so we have to just look at them and if they don’t do nothing or do homework, we just have to look at them just like they are. (Educator 8)

Educator 4 raised the issue of conflict around pacing in the lesson plans and ensuring that the learners understood the concepts taught: *“The subject advisors, when they see you, they want you being on this part being on this week ... In the lesson plans. So, what about the kids? It’s a problem serious.”*

Educators’ Views on what Sources of Support were Available, and what Additional Support was Needed Theme 1: Sources of support

Educators who were interviewed revealed that they received support from the school management team (SMT) and colleagues at the school, as well as engaging educators from other schools within the community. Other sources of support included subject advisors who held regular workshops and teaching assistants who provide administrative support and help with classroom management.

Theme 2: Adequacy of support

Educators were asked to assess the adequacy of the support received and educators tended to gauge the adequacy of support against their needs. Some of the support received from within school structures proved to be inadequate despite repeated engagements with staff at senior levels. This inadequacy is shown in the following responses from educators who felt isolated and unsupported: *“Yes, we did like monthly we are having a meeting at the Foundation Phase. We have discussed this with the school during our meetings ... The feedback I cannot say it was positive because there’s no resolution”* (Educator 5). Educator 4 expressed a similar sentiment: *“I once talked to the principal, but most of the time I engage the DH [head of department]. They said even herself she’s having a serious problem in the class. She’s in Grade 2”* (Educator 4). While support was available, it was not always optimal. *“Even at school there is that support but it’s not so, it’s not enough because at school, the thing is I can’t say they are not doing justice to us because everyone at school has his or her own duty to do and then to take care of others of maybe of other educators is a problem. We are taking care of ourselves”* (Educator 2). Everybody seemed to be experiencing the same challenges and stresses. *“No, they’re not even giving us a chance, hey, they are not. Because they are all experiencing that. I don’t*

see any point (colleagues and school management team). It's not even simple because each and every person is experiencing the same thing the SMT can't even help because they're also facing the challenge so you can't even complain about it. You can't" (Educator 6). Heavy workloads and time constraints also limited the support that was available: "Its average ... because everyone is busy with her class and with her own learners so we don't have much time" (Educator 8).

Theme 3: The type of support that educators felt they needed

Educators were asked about the type of support they needed to enable them to continue teaching during the pandemic. In response, they referred to the continuation of the Education Assistant programme; additional space in terms of extra classrooms; and a trimmed curriculum considering rotational attendance.

Theme 4: Psychosocial support for mental well-being

Some educators did not know about the health and wellness (H & W) unit, but were interested in making contact with the unit. "No, not even aware of that ... Yes please, maybe they will help. Yho, we will end up being admitted at the mental institutions I'm telling you" (Educator 6). Others had heard about the H and W unit and wanted contacts details as, for example, Educator 4 demonstrated a negative state of well-being and admitted to being depressed: "Yes, I sometimes hear about that. But I've never been there ... Yes please, maybe they will help ... I need somebody. Because I sometimes become so depressed." Educator 7 had heard about the H and W unit but did not require assistance: "I am aware [of the H & W unit] ... No, I don't think I need to [contact them] [laughs]."

Discussion

FP Educators' Perceptions of the Psychosocial Effects of COVID-19 on their Functioning as Educators

It became evident that most of the interviewed educators were experiencing a negative state of well-being which could be viewed as emanating from the learning difficulties experienced by learners, learning gaps, and the insurmountable amount of work that needed to be covered in the context of the rotational attendance. Some of the educators were experiencing high stress levels, feelings of depression and a lack of accomplishment as they taught learners who were behind in terms of grade-level content, struggled to catch up to material being taught and were in general absent more frequently during this time. Challenges of inadequate curriculum coverage and an overall lack of support from senior staff were also reported by educators. The rotational

attendance was often criticised due to the ineffective amount of teaching and learning that occurred due to the reduced number of days and hours available. Studies conducted in contexts where disasters have disrupted schooling show concerning lifelong negative impacts leading to lower educational outcomes and lower lifetime earnings (Mohohlwane et al., 2020). For example, learners who progressed to Grade 4 without being able to read for comprehension were likely to struggle with independent reading and may lose interest in schooling altogether, which may contribute to the already high drop-out rate of 94% – down from 98% (Spaull, Daniels, Ardington, Branson, Breet, Bridgman, Brophy, Burger, Burger, Casale, English, Espi, Hill, Hunt, Ingle, Kerr, Kika-Mistry, Kohler, Kollamparambil, Leiiibrandt, Maughan, Mohohlwane, Nwosu, Oyenubi, Patel, Ranchhod, Shepherd, Stein, Tameris, Tomlison, Turok, Van der Berg, Visagie, Wills & Wittenberg, 2021).

With these challenges, it seemed that some educators were better able to manage their classrooms and learners' work since there was no overcrowding as the class sizes had been reduced to ensure adherence to physical distancing guidelines. In a way, one can view the positive outcomes during the pandemic mentioned by some participants as mediating factors supporting educators' work. In other words, regardless of the adversity resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic, educators were still able to identify positive aspects in what could generally be viewed as a negative situation.

How FP educators were adapting to conditions under COVID-19

Considering the significant reduction in teaching time and dealing with learners with varied abilities, educators resorted to giving learners more homework and implemented extra classes as a strategy to enable learners to catch up with their work. These strategies were in line with Mohohlwane et al.'s (2020) observation that educators generally implement after-school classes and give learners extra homework, especially those with learning difficulties. The findings were also consistent with the salutogenic approach within the social ecological resilience theory, where the ability to adjust and increase one's competence in the face of adversity is one of the features used to define educator resilience (Mansfield, Beltman, Price & McConney, 2012).

It was interesting to note that three specific types of mediating factors supporting resilience emerged from the interviews with the educators. These were mainly related to their professional, emotional, and motivational aspects as educators. They largely understood the need to continue with teaching and learning despite their personal

feelings. This finding was contrary to those by Talidong and Toquero (2020) who found that educators mainly leaned on personal activities such as trying out new hobbies and communicating more with colleagues and loved ones to cope with the new normal. This contradiction could be related to a limitation of the current study in that educators were not specifically asked to detail strategies outside of the school that they adopted to deal with this new situation. Still, motivation to succeed and problem-solving skills demonstrated by the educators who were interviewed, made up individual constructs of resilience as educators took responsibility for meeting the challenges that they faced with their learners to ensure a progression of teaching and learning.

Where educators were able to exercise autonomy, they demonstrated the ability to develop strategies that could assist them to deal with the workload. Where educators were able to teach for assessment, and give learners more homework, they were able to take steps to minimise the negative effects of the pandemic. This finding is important, especially considering the DBE's devolution of catch-up strategies to schools and educators (Hoadley, 2020), which could be a useful tool for engagement of educators to formalise context-specific strategies and to share lessons learned among themselves in the school as well as in other schools in their communities.

Educators' views on what sources of support were available; and what additional support was needed

Some of the educators interviewed mentioned that they had received support from within the school (SMTs), from other school subject advisors, teaching assistants, and family members. These listed structures are located within the social ecological environment of educators and can provide protective factors to support educators' resilience. Van Breda and Sekudu (2019) state that resilience requires an interaction between various systems, which was apparent in the findings from the interviews. However, some of the interviewed educators mentioned limitations regarding such support. They struggled in accessing support because the SMTs and colleagues were essentially experiencing similar adversity, and therefore could not find time to assist others. These limitations in support highlight the issue of relationships within the social environment as a critical enabler. Van Breda and Sekudu (2019) caution that the availability of individuals within a social environment may be insufficient, pointing to the critical need for interaction as individuals engage and develop an understanding of the challenges they face.

The type of support required by educators was largely informed by the resources at hand, the extent to which they viewed themselves as

resourceful (and lacking in resources), and their ability to identify areas of need. Some of the educators interviewed in our study stated that they needed assistance with schoolwork, managing classrooms and measures to ensure curriculum coverage. This need showed that the educators who were interviewed strongly identified with their roles as professionals, despite their own personal feelings and frustrations experienced in these roles. This finding could possibly be attributed to participants being interviewed at school, with the interviews largely based on determining how they were functioning during this time.

Psychosocial support for mental well-being

Based on the interviews, the educators could be categorised in three groups: those that were not aware of the existence of an H and W unit within the Department but were interested in receiving their contact details; those that were aware of the unit but did not deem themselves as needing their contact details, and those that were aware and wanted to get in touch with personnel from the Unit.

Mental health has been a major topic of interest because of the pandemic, and it is acknowledged that in order for effective teaching and learning to continue, the mental wellness of educators (and learners) must be prioritised. This focus was the rationale for this specific line of inquiry. Namome et al. (2021) argue that the curriculum recovery plans need to be accompanied by a strategy to assist both learners and educators to recover from social and emotional loss within the school setting, through psychosocial support. It is evident that the DBE is largely focused on curriculum recovery, the implication being that where the need for psychosocial support is ignored, this neglect could have a negative effect on the learning environment. In addition to psychosocial support, it is argued that educators need support in developing practical skills to promote a positive classroom environment, and one can add that for educators to carry out this role, their mental health also needs to be supported (Gadermann et al., 2023).

Educators presented different views on their need for psychosocial support, which did not always align with their personal feelings of hopelessness and frustration expressed earlier on. It is possible that they might not have viewed psychosocial support as a critical enabler to their overall well-being and focused only on the need to teach and ensure that learners were able to learn during this time. They also tended to rely on their own personal abilities and strengths, positive engagements with available community networks as well as support from the Department as they declined a freely available service that offers psychosocial support. It is also possible that some

participants might have perceived the seeking of psychosocial support as a form of weakness, or they may have harboured populist stereotypes associated with psychotherapy. It would, therefore, be interesting to conduct research to determine the exact factors that impede educators from seeking or even acknowledging the need for PSS despite personal feelings of depression, anxiety and frustration.

Conclusion

A key contribution of the study is that it focused on the psychosocial realities of an important but under-researched group of educators, namely FP educators working in rural quintiles 1 to 3 schools in the North West province, South Africa, during COVID-19. FP educators are central to laying the foundation for lifelong learning, ensuring that learners are equipped with the necessary content and knowledge to proceed through school, and nurture an interest in learning. The COVID-19 pandemic was a new reality for everyone and the need to adapt to rotational attendance and the deleterious effects on learners, was stressful for the educators who were interviewed. The research highlighted a glaring need to ensure the psychosocial well-being of educators, while also providing them with the skills and support they needed to adapt and continue teaching effectively during the COVID-19 pandemic and other possible future states of disaster. The study also allowed the voices of front-line educators to be heard during an unprecedented time and contributes to the body of knowledge on teaching and learning in the context of a global pandemic. In addition, the social ecological resilience theory proved valuable for the research as educators located mediating and protective factors that lay within themselves as individuals, based on their professional backgrounds, as well as in family, community and Departmental structures that enabled and supported their efforts at coping and developing resilience. However, while the available support structures appeared to be under-utilised and could be strengthened, the need to introduce and advocate for mental health interventions is critical to support educators emotionally.

Authors' Contributions

NM conducted the study for the degree Master of Philosophy in Social Policy and Development at the University of Johannesburg. ER was her supervisor. Both authors were involved in the writing of the article and both reviewed the final manuscript.

Notes

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