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Enabling Principal Leadership for Teacher Well-Being Through African Voices Dialogue Platform

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ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 epidemic had a huge influence on schools, requiring more interconnected, diverse, and digital leadership. Because of the pandemic's severe social distance and lockdowns, many school leaders felt alone. African Voices Dialogue (AVD), an online platform, provided a virtual space for school leaders to interact and exchange information and perspectives. The study concentrated on the use of AVD as a method for fostering discourse and action about teacher well-being. The study made use of a qualitative case study research design, which included two Limpopo primary school leaders and one teacher from each school. The results suggest that the pandemic had a significant effect on the well-being of teachers. However, the AVD platform has allowed school leaders to engage in dialogue around important teacher well-being issues and provided support in leading teacher well-being during these challenging times. This has cultivated a sense of being part of a community by exchanging valuable information and insights. Consequently, it has aided school leaders in creating customized coping strategies according to their specific requirements. The research demonstrated that online platforms are valuable tools for establishing arenas where African school leaders can interact, progressing from mere conversations to tangible initiatives within their respective local schools.

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INTRODUCTION

Globally, the Coronavirus pandemic has interrupted education, affecting nearly 1.6 billion children (Giannini, Jenkins, & Saavedra, 2020). To address the issues, global organisations such as UNICEF, UNESCO, and the World Bank began a mission to recover education, with the goal of returning children to school, recouping learning losses, and assisting teachers (UNICEF, 2021). Leaders' support and planning were critical throughout the crisis (Klein, 2009). Anecdotal evidence suggests that school leaders in South Africa struggled to receive sufficient direction and information (Foxton, 2020; Harris & Jones, 2020; McLeod & Dulsky, 2021). As a result, school leaders had to create new approaches to prepare for pandemic-related challenges.

Teachers needed training and assistance to integrate remedial education, socio-emotional learning and remote or hybrid instruction, as well as support for their personal well-being. Well-being has become crucial to effective school leadership, demanding a care-based pedagogy (Noddings, 2013). During a crisis, successful leaders provide containment and interpretation, as well as easing anguish, making sense of chaos, delivering comfort, and promoting cohesiveness (Petriglieri, 2020). Fears, health worries, trauma, and uncertainty were all brought on by the pandemic, prompting leaders to behave differently and seek new methods of learning how to

lead (Mphaphuli, 2021). A "Maslow before Bloom" strategy was required, prioritising fundamental necessities above educational engagement (Windsor, 2020).

As school resumed through varied teaching methods, the pandemic generated a "new normal" that forever altered education. Teacher well-being has arisen as an important concern, particularly in Africa (Douglas, 2005; Vyver et al., 2020). Face-to-face gatherings were no longer possible due to social distancing measures and lockdowns, spurring the formation of African Voices Dialogue (AVD), an online platform encouraging connection and support among education leaders (Whittaker, 2021). AVD provides a forum for African education leaders to participate in debate and seminars about educational concerns in Africa. Given the issues that education leaders encounter, the first focus was on teacher well-being.

The study investigates the use of AVD as an online debate and action platform, with the goal of preparing school leaders for uncertain times. It investigates the influence of AVD's teacher well-being series on the behaviour of two South African school leaders at their separate schools. Prior to the pandemic, educational leaders' roles were defined as complicated, ambiguous, and multi-faceted (Fullan, 2014; Gurr & Drysdale, 2012). The Coronavirus pandemic has shifted leadership priorities to be even more unpredictable, inventive, and experimental (McLeod & Dulsky, 2021). Meanwhile, before the pandemic, teacher well-being was an issue, with high rates of burnout, stress, and discontent (Jensen et al., 2012; Kyriacou, 2001; OECD, 2020, 2021; Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2015). Teacher happiness is essential for student happiness and academic performance (OECD, 2021).

Teacher well-being is associated with positive emotional states, quality of instruction, and stress resistance (Collie et al., 2016; Turner & Thielking, 2019; Hung et al., 2016). Despite pre-pandemic studies recommending that school leaders enhance teacher well-being, little effort was made to educate and assist leaders in this area (Bu et al., 2020; Niedzwiedz et al., 2020; Pierce et al., 2020). In the midst of disease, death, stress, and uncertainty, the pandemic emphasised the need for leaders to humanise their approach and prioritise teacher well-being (World Health Organisation, 2020). The pandemic's influence has spurred the realisation of humanising leadership, with a global poll revealing inadequate humanitarian cultures in business and probable educational contexts (Gallup, 2021).

Teachers and leaders have reported feeling alone and overwhelmed as a result of their incapacity to physically assemble (Davids, 2021; Filho et al., 2021). This has necessitated the need for educational leaders to develop new means to communicate and cooperate, which has been made possible by advances in internet technology (Hojeghan & Esfangareh, 2011; Minghetti & Buhalis, 2010). Online platforms such as AVD provide chances for cooperation and solution-based leadership that transcend physical boundaries. AVD, an online platform, aspires to include real African voices in order to reinvent post-pandemic teacher well-being and affect policy and practise on the continent. The platform's goal is to foster long-term transformation and effect among school communities. This research investigates how two South African school leaders used the AVD platform to improve teacher well-being in their schools in the face of enormous challenges.

The study is guided by the following research questions:

- In response to school leaders attending the AVD Wellness series, what well-being strategies have been developed?
- What do school leaders recommend to further enhance AVD with regards to teachers' wellbeing?

Theoretical Framework

This study is underpinned by the theory of humanising leadership theory. According to Pitsoe and Letseka (2020, p. 146), applying Freire and Ubuntu to humanising education leadership stated that, “dominant education leadership strategies, procedures and behaviors in the South African context seem to be trapped in the functionalist framework that perpetuates a dehumanising pedagogy”. Like other leaders, school leaders also became acutely aware

through the pandemic of the importance of leading through principles of Ubuntu and a humanising pedagogy. This occurred as their role in ensuring teacher well-being became increasingly important. Pitsoe and Letseka (2021, p. 149) further suggested that "fourth industrial revolution technologies and AI call for a dramatic shift away from the dominant conventional education leadership". Supporting this claim is Kars-Unluoglu et al. (2022) in their analysis of 246 articles which revealed certain spontaneous initiatives ("leaderly" actions) that were brought to light during the pandemic. They extracted four practice-based dimensions that could result in redrawing leadership conceptualisations – which they refer to as "unleading".

The four dimensions are: (1) *unconditionality and social intention*; (2) purposeful action in the absence of achievement motivation; (3) sensing and attending to local conditions; and (4) *confident connecting and collaborating* (the italics used for emphasis in relation to Ubuntu and a humanising pedagogy).

Literature Review

Role of principals in promoting teachers' well-being

In times of adversity, principals are essential in guiding the well-being of teachers (Boin, Overdijk, & Kuipers, 2013; McLeod & Dulsky, 2021). Making sense of the situation, fostering organisational resilience, and addressing emotional and social anxieties are all essential components of effective crisis leadership (Boin et al., 2013; Meisler, Vigoda-Gadot, & Drory, 2013; Dückers, Yzermans, Jong, & Boin, 2017). The welfare of teachers has been a subject of controversy in South Africa (Diko, 2009; Phurutse & Arends, 2009). According to Mwangi (2013), principal leadership has a major impact on teachers' well-being.

According to Gilbreath & Benson (2004), Price & Weiss (2000), Tourigny et al. (2005), and Elfering et al. (2002), supportive leaders encourage greater well-being, lessen stress and burnout, and ease teachers' psychosomatic symptoms. On the other hand, ineffective leadership makes teachers more stressed (Philipp & Kunter, 2013).

Although principals may both directly and indirectly improve teachers' well-being, they must be deliberate in creating a positive school climate (Vyver et al., 2020). Principals may enhance teacher well-being through purposeful interventions by having an understanding of characteristics including leadership style and adopting frameworks like the JR-D Model and the PERMA framework (Yildirim, 2014). It is crucial to remember that school leaders must help teachers while also caring for their personal well-being, especially during the pandemic (Yildirim, 2014). South African principals were forced to rely on one another and pursue self-directed professional development during COVID-19 due to the unforeseen and ambiguous circumstances brought about by the pandemic. The foregoing is indicative that school leaders were able to have discussions and make well-informed decisions thanks to online tools and platforms.

Internet-based tools for collaboration and interaction

Increased computer power and internet connectivity have a transforming effect on human life, work, contact, and relationships, according to the literature (Doucet et al., 2018). Fostering larger, shared understandings that transcend school and national boundaries is necessary to promote teacher well-being in the context of technological innovation and globalisation (Liu et al., 2018). To do this, it is vital to establish forums and platforms for international conversations on teacher well-being as an issue that affects both individuals and whole professions. Online communities and communities of practice (CoP) have become important venues for connecting, exchanging information, and engaging beyond the confines of actual time and location for educational leaders (Wang & Lu, 2012).

These online forums support group discussions, resource sharing, and career advancement (Liu et al., 2018; Glazer et al., 2005; Wang & Lu, 2012). According to Wenger et al. (2002), online communities, or CoP, are made up of people who are passionate about the same subject and

who want to learn more about it. These people can increase their knowledge via regular interactions.

Domain, community, and practice are the three key components of online communities of practice (Wenger et al., 2002). The domain is the shared space where users may exchange thoughts and information, and it should be simple to access on a variety of gadgets, including computers, iPads, and mobile phones. With meeting invite URLs and passwords, Zoom is a free online platform that is utilised for the African Virtual Dialogue (AVD). The community feature depicts a group of people who build connections based on shared commitment and a sense of belonging, frequently developed around common interests or goals. The purpose of AVD is to bring together a community of people, educators, students, and school leaders for talks on the difficulties facing education in Africa. The community's particular knowledge, resources, and conversations are focused on dialogue to encourage action for meaningful impact. The AVD concentrated on guiding teacher well-being through online sessions and seminars during this project.

RESEARCH METHOD

The constructivist paradigm, which emphasises the active and social development of knowledge via engagement with people and the environment, guided the research technique used in this study (Creswell, 2012). Using an online community platform called AVD, a qualitative case study research approach was chosen to investigate the factors influencing teacher well-being during a pandemic. Using a purposeful selection technique, two school leaders and one teacher per leader were chosen who had attended the AVD Wellness course and employed the insights in their educational setting. Semi-structured individual interviews, a focus group discussion, and AVD session observations were used to gather the data.

Data Collection Method

The research instruments used for collecting data in this study were semi-structured individual interviews, a focus group and observation. A semi-structured interview process allows the researcher to engage from a pre-determined question list while at the same time having the autonomy to ask follow-up questions based on participant responses (Brenner, 2006). This allows for a fluid manner of engagement for rich data collection (Alvesson, 2011). Each participant was invited to a one-hour Microsoft Teams meeting. Consent for participation and recording of the interview was obtained beforehand via email. Each meeting was transcribed, and participants were provided with the opportunity to review the transcript for changes before the data analysis process began. The interviews were followed by a focus group discussion including all participants on WhatsApp. Observation was used as another data source over and above the interviews and focus group. This included observation of the AVD Wellness dialogue online Zoom session and the AVD Wellness workshop online Zoom session.

Data Analysis

An examination of the transcribed data from the interview, focus group and observations was carried out using thematic data analysis. Thematic data analysis consists of "distilling how things work and naming the essential features in themes," (Creswell, 2012). This involved a process of compressing the raw data into categories/themes based on well-grounded data interpretation (Zhang & Wildemuth, 2009). The themes that emerged formed the foundation for the consideration of the phenomenon (Henning et al., 2004).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

The study used a qualitative technique to evaluate how involvement in AVD during the pandemic affected teachers' well-being. It did this through observation, semi-structured

interviews, and a focus group. An overview of the major themes and sub-themes gleaned from the gathered data are shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Main themes and sub-themes

Main Themes	Sub-Themes
Participating in an online platform during the pandemic: teachers' experience and its effects	• Increased knowledge and exposure; • A stronger sense of community; • A shift in attitudes and behaviours;
Coping mechanisms that developed/grew after attending ADV	• Heart communication and healing • Acceptance and optimism • Transformational leadership and teamwork • Prioritisation of employee well-being through official support and practises
Improvements to the online platform	• Involvement • Topics

Developing/strengthening post-adv well-being strategies

This section will be presented under the following subthemes (1) humanising collaboration and leadership (2) Prioritising employee well-being through established procedures and assistance (3) Interaction between minds and healing (4) Trust and resilience (5) Refinement to online platforms.

Humanising collaboration and leadership

According to contemporary literature, collaborative decision-making and shared sensemaking are made possible by humanising leadership (Pitsoe & Letseka, 2020; Kars-Unluoglu et al., 2022). A participant in the ADV Wellness dialogue expressed the following opinion*: "And the necessity to, for educators to feel comfortable at schools again, it will probably rely on you know, various methods of leadership, and then the significance of that, and leaders should always be accessible, compassionate, and continually check in with educators*" (ADVL: 769–771).

The capacity to employ open communication, compassion, and empathy (individual concern) to foster a supportive environment inside the school is a component of humanising leadership. Participant 3 stated, "*So we work hand in hand, there was a collaboration between teachers and was a collaboration between the SMT at the school, even the SGB, and the community at large*" (I2L: 136-138), which made this collaboration abundantly obvious. Participant 2 supplied the following information on this:

Together, Participant 1 and I were working hand in glove together… She was welcoming everyone, she needed to hear from everyone. How did they spend the weekend?... So, we embrace all the educators.(I1L: 538–544).

As Participant 1 stated: *I've recognised COVID has taught us to be extremely clean, it was obvious that the participants intended to carry the lessons and insights learned from the epidemic into the future and maintain a sustained focus on teacher well-being. Yeah. Because it has transformed us from who we once were into individuals that always consider the health of others around them. So that was quite helpful to us. And after that, a lot has been accomplished. And we accomplished a lot with the SMT – me, Participant 2, the educators, you know, we accomplished a lot and the majority of the things are extremely crucial right now, so we believe we will continue adhering to procedures and putting an emphasis on the well-being of educators* (I1L: 656–662).

A participant from ADV agreed that, in the wake of the epidemic, leaders must no longer ignore teacher well-being but rather recognise its importance and give it top priority:

'First and first, we understand that well-being, particularly mental well-being, is a topic that is frequently disregarded or taboo in our region of the world. And claiming that COVID provides us the chance to break this taboo since the difficulties and worries it brings to the surface in students' and teachers' lives help us appreciate the importance of well-being' (ADVL: 668–672).

In keeping with this, MacLeod (2019) lists three important leadership truths in his book Humanising Leadership: introspection fuels, people matter, and connections matter. According to participant responses, putting "people first" and cultivating "people relationships" are essential for effective leadership. This is supported by the claim made by MacLeod (2019) that motivated employees are more open to innovation and development, which leads to improved performance and productivity. A more caring atmosphere and positive advances in teachers' work were made possible by school leaders' attention on the well-being of their staff (MacLeod, 2019).

Prioritising employee well-being through established procedures and assistance

Leaders were inspired to take a more proactive approach to their well-being when teachers started to return to school after attending the ADV Wellness conversation. In order to better understand how the school leadership might help the teachers, one specific school handed out a questionnaire, according to Participant 1.

Additionally, participant 2 and I created a questionnaire as a group. We intended to evaluate how educators are feeling after returning from work or after experiencing tragedy at home, such as the death of family members (I2L: 190-195).

Participant 1 also discussed the importance of worker well-being and the idea of care: *We make every effort to make things simpler for everyone since we are on the SMG. As a result, engagement was crucial. We concentrated more on the well-being of the teacher and the student, such as communicating, exchanging ideas, working together, and caring* (I1L: 208-212).

The school leadership recognised the need to enlist the aid of outside experts to support and allay teachers' concerns about COVID and their own well-being. These experts included psychologists, medical personnel, counsellors, and clergy. To help teachers feel secure, school leaders also put in place stringent health and safety procedures. Respondent 2 stated: *We decided that it would be best to contact an expert so that he could speak to all the educators. We had a lengthy session where individuals interacted with him, asked questions, and had their questions answered. Following that, you offer guidance on how to survive in this* (I1L: 489–497).

Participant 1 echoed this sentiment and said, "*So we try to employ various means, you know, going in the toilets, one by one, sanitising, putting sanitizer stations around, for everyone to have access to. The masks are another addition* (I1L: 195–197).

The following was said by participant 3: "*We invite the priest to come in our school to pray for the learners, we invite the priests, as well as for the teachers, and we invite the Department of Health, which includes nurses from the healthcare facility and also the medical facility. We invite them to come and counsel our educators and even the learners*" (I2L: 151–153). Participant 4 added: *With the teachers, we ask certain psychologists and health professionals to visit and speak with the teachers. They do so in order to provide teachers with counselling. Since some people they couldn't handle. They learn that this COVID caused the death of one of our professors. They then developed a phobia of going to school* (I2L: 203-208).

Participant 1 *(a principal) stated that they found the counselling to be helpful for themselves because they occasionally felt overburdened with the responsibility of running a school system in which everyone looked to them for support and guidance. They also desired to upskill themselves sufficiently so that they could assist others in seeking guidance and take informed action based on sound knowledge. I also sought counselling. As a result, I was able to interact with a therapist and social service providers, and expert* (I1L: 270–276).

The previous interventions had a wide-ranging impact since they not only enabled them to help teachers in need, but they also helped to create a culture of caring that bonded them as a school community.

Interaction between minds and healing

The interaction with school leaders made it clear that they supported teachers' well-being in ways beyond merely hiring psychologists and health care staff. Opportunities for teachers to

communicate openly in a loving and caring environment were expressly developed through methods like healing circles with priests, giving time to grieve, encouraging prayer, and open-door policy.

To let teachers know she was available for them, participant 1 explained her open-door policy: *Yeah, you know, during that time, you know, some people are difficult to disclose their problems. So those teachers that will always stay alone, you know, unable to reach an individual, you ask a person how are you feeling today? and they say No I am fine – but you can see that this educator is traumatised, is fearful*(I1L: 235–241).

In the event that a teacher is deemed to be in need, we also get engaged in their social well-being. We visit the family and support the teacher during the burial. Additionally, everyone is concerned when a teacher doesn't seem to be feeling well (ADVL: 533-543).

These statements provide compelling evidence that the factors contributing to adult well-being discussed in the literature review have been embodied and experienced, particularly the factors of affect (the capacity to overcome negative emotions to achieve a positive state) and relationships (the development of deep relationships with others) (Holland, 2021).

Trust and resilience

The capacity to display resiliency, optimism, and hope for the future is a crucial characteristic of transformative leaders (Arnold, Turner, Barling, Kelloway, & McKee, 2007; Franke & Felfe, 2011; Nyberg, Bernin, & Theorell, 2005). The interviews revealed a certain acceptance of the pandemic's components that are beyond the control of school leaders as well as optimism for the future.

Participant 1 expressed a similar opinion: *To be quite honest, COVID has boosted our spirits and helped us to become more compassionate, kind, and wise than we were previously. But just after a COVID, we started to resemble ourselves more and more.* (I1L: 525–530).

Participant 2 discussed the realisations and lessons she gained from the epidemic that inspired her to carry on the cooperation and camaraderie that had been created throughout COVID: *Therefore, I discovered that during the COVID, individuals were just dying off. In order to be happy and to share what I have with others, I've learned that I must make the most of every moment. And, you know, to be kind to people with whom we may not have gotten along.* (I1L: 444–450).

The adoption of Ubuntu proved instrumental in enabling both schools to navigate the challenges posed by the pandemic successfully, as indicated by the study's findings. School leaders effectively addressed these obstacles by embracing a humanizing leadership approach, guiding with their intellect, actions, and empathy.

Improving the online platforms

Contemporary literature indicates that individual school's boundaries are no longer sufficient to ensure a teacher's well-being. To promote real 21st-century well-being, holistic well-being necessitates fostering larger, shared understandings across communities and nations (Liu et al., 2018). Physical distance is no longer an impediment because technology supports and enables this type of engagement. Online platforms are useful for exchanging experiences, resources, and information to facilitate better teacher development, according to several research findings (Glazer et al., 2005; Liu et al., 2018; Wang & Lu, 2012).

According to the participants' comments on how to improve ADV online interactions, there is a desire for it to become a global platform that includes more than just African nations so that knowledge from all over the world may be assimilated. "*I would recommend that as leaders we should engage more in global communications so we can be able to find solutions to matters that we are facing as leaders, for example, educators with the same challenges should learn from one another through sharing of ideas,*" said participant 3 (FGL: 10–13). Participant 2 also expressed a wish to communicate with people from other countries: "*There should be individuals from other nations, not only people from the same country, in every separate room so that we can relate to and compare our nations* (FGL: 36–37).

In order to investigate improved interaction and engagement, it was suggested that sessions take place more frequently (every month) and that the chat box function should always be enabled so that everyone can express their opinions. Even if they do not get a chance to speak in the larger room, they can comment in the chat room for everyone to see. It was suggested that breakout rooms be utilised going forward and that there should be more variety inside the breakout rooms to enable interaction between nations and an understanding of how other cultures see teacher well-being.

CONCLUSION

Using a constructivist qualitative research approach, this study investigated how participation in an online platform (AVD) impacted principal leadership and contributed to teacher well-being during the pandemic. The research underscores the crucial role of school leaders in supporting teachers' well-being by fostering a culture of care through the use of AVD and a humanizing leadership style. School leaders acquired effective methods and facilitation tools on the AVD platform, collaborating to co-design support strategies. The engagement on AVD equipped leaders with skills to address teacher well-being challenges during the pandemic.

The data revealed various health issues among teachers during COVID-19, including pressure, stress, fear, sadness, and isolation. School leaders positively acknowledged the AVD Wellness series, highlighting its supportive online network during this challenging period. Following AVD engagements, participants developed strategies such as prioritizing staff well-being, embracing humanizing leadership, fostering heart communication and healing, promoting acceptance, and cultivating optimism. School officials suggested expanding the AVD platform globally, covering additional topics like student well-being and other relevant academic fields.However, it is essential to note that the study's conclusions are specific to the selected institutions in Limpopo and may not be universally applicable to all primary schools in the region.

Recommendations

- School leaders should formalize policies prioritizing ongoing well-being, including counseling, training, and organized conversations, to establish a sustainable culture of teacher well-being.
- Teachers and support personnel should be provided access to online community platforms like AVD for collaborative purposes.
- Develop post-attendance discourse sessions for leaders and teachers to reflect on shared experiences, and AVD should showcase success stories to promote implementation behavior and stimulate learning.
- Improve AVD online platform and interaction tools as technology becomes more widely available and affordable.
- Enhance in-between-session engagement and connection using tools like Zoom, Mentimeter, WhatsApp groups, and email. Consider incorporating virtual reality systems for more human-like interaction.

Limitations of the Study

The study's scope is limited to two public primary schools in the Limpopo area, and generalization to all primary schools or secondary schools in South Africa is not assured.Gender representation was not guaranteed due to privacy regulations (POPI act) and limited contact information.

The shift from Microsoft Teams to WhatsApp for the focus group affected interaction and discourse. The full impact of COVID-19 on teachers' well-being is yet to be fully assessed, and new challenges may arise.

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