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Fostering teachers' experiences of well-being: A participatory action learning and action research approach

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Teachers, specifically those who work in under-resourced contexts, face many challenges within their workplace that negatively affect their experiences of well-being. Although research indicates that if teacher well-being improves, a more enabling climate for teaching and learning is created, little support is available for teachers in this regard. The aim of this study was to work collaboratively with teachers to help them find ways to improve their experiences of well-being. Following a participatory action learning and action research (PALAR) design, 6 teachers in a rural primary school met as an action learning set over a period of 6 weeks to reflect on their learning about how to improve their experiences of well-being. The findings indicate that frequent, informal social contact with colleagues, coupled with explicit action to focus on positive emotions, could improve teachers' experiences of well-being. The PALAR design afforded the structure for this to happen. This study offers insight into how a collaborative action learning process could help to enhance teachers' ability to improve and sustain their experiences of well-being.

Keywords: action learning; flourishing; positive psychology; teacher well-being; wellness

Introduction

Internationally, emerging economies place a high premium on primary education. As early as 2007, the World Bank stated: "We have come to conclude that educational quality – particularly in assessing policies related to developing countries – is THE key issue" (Hanushek & Wößmann, 2007:1 original emphasis). This is based on the premise that education is the foundation for the attainment of further knowledge and skills (Dreyer, 2017). Motivated and enthusiastic teachers are vital for the provision of quality education (Keller, Hoy, Goetz & Frenzel, 2016) and this requires that they have a sense of well-being. Seligman (2011) identified five pillars of well-being, namely positive emotions, engagement, relationships, meaning and achievement. Well-being enables humans to flourish, or reach their optimal potential, and is characterised by positive affective states, psychological health and happiness (Seligman, 2011). Enhancing the positive attributes and strengths of teachers has twofold benefits. Firstly, it leads to a positive impact on teacher performance, commitment and satisfaction (Luthans, Norman, Avolio & Avey, 2008; Rothmann & Rothmann, 2010). Secondly, it influences the learners' satisfaction, which tends to improve academic results (Hansen, Buitendach & Kanengoni, 2015).

Yet, teachers in socio-economically challenging contexts work in difficult circumstances that negatively affect their well-being (Dehaloo, 2011; Nel, Mohangi, Krog & Stephens, 2016). The majority of classrooms are overcrowded, and under-resourced. Although policy suggests a teacher to learner ratio of 1:40, in reality, teachers, specifically in rural areas, deal with ratios of more than 1:50 (Department of Education, 1998; Venkates, 2011). Classrooms also lack basic resources, such as enough tables and chairs for learners to sit at (Muthusamy, 2015). Furthermore, in such classrooms, teachers have to accommodate a range of learners with diverse psychosocial needs, stemming from multiple adversities attributable to their socio-economic circumstances (Morgan, 2009). Rather than receiving extra support to cope with these difficult circumstances, teachers are often blamed in the media when learners perform poorly in the national assessment tests (Heard, 2016). Policy (Department of Higher Education and Training [DHET], 2015) stipulates that teachers should perform a supportive role for learners, yet this is a difficult role to carry out when their own sense of well-being is compromised (Hammett & Staeheli, 2009). If teachers could enhance their well-being, they would be better prepared to fulfil their role as supportive, caring teachers as well as to address the challenges that arise from the circumstances in which they teach (Fredrickson, 2013). Despite teacher well-being comprising a vital component of quality education (Department of Basic Education [DBE], Republic of South Africa, 2010), in reality, they tend to be demotivated, stressed and unable to perform the various roles expected of them to ensure quality education (Simbula, Panari, Guglielmi & Fraccaroli, 2012).

Although the DBE has introduced initiatives to better support teachers, the approach tends to comprise once-off events, such as Teacher Appreciation Week or short workshops, when what is needed is a more self-directed, and therefore sustainable, approach to support (Setlhare, Wood & Meyer, 2016). As Fullan warned more than 25 years ago:

Nothing has promised so much and has been so frustratingly wasteful as the thousands of workshops and conferences that led to no significant change in practice when the teachers returned to their classrooms (1991:315).

Yet, most professional development workshops in South Africa are focused on curriculum, school governance or human resource issues, rather than the supportive role teachers have to fulfil (Douglas, 2005). These 'teacher

training' workshops are mostly theoretical and general in nature, positioning the teacher as a passive recipient of knowledge, rather than an expert, active contributor (Wood, L & Goba, 2011). Such an approach negates the valuable role of teachers' prior learning and experience and their insights concerning the realities of their contexts (McNiff, 2016).

Since it is unlikely that the external challenges experienced by teachers working in contexts of social and economic adversity will dissipate in the near future, learning how to balance resources against these challenges becomes an important aspect of teacher well-being (McCallum, Price, Graham & Morrison, 2017). Teachers have to learn how to create a climate that would enable them to feel positive, be more engaged with their work and colleagues, and to develop a sense of purpose in their teaching, all of which would improve well-being (Seligman, Ernst, Gillham, Reivich & Linkins, 2009). The present study intended to generate knowledge about how to engage teachers in a collaborative process that would enable them to learn how to improve and sustain their experiences of well-being. The guiding question was: How can teachers working in socio-economically challenging contexts learn to foster their experiences of well-being?

We now explain the concept of well-being as the theoretical framework that informed the study, followed by an explanation of the participatory methodology, before presenting a discussion of the findings.

Conceptualising Teacher Well-Being

We conceive of well-being from a Positive Psychology standpoint, which emphasises the improvement of quality of life by focusing on strengths and already existing resources (Keyes, 2014; Seligman, 2011; Wissing, Potgieter, Guse, Khumalo & Nel, 2014), rather than from a deficit perspective of trying to improve "weaknesses." Martin Seligman is considered to be one of the founders of positive psychology (Hefferon & Boniwell, 2011) and the originator of the term "flourishing" (Seligman, 2011), which explains well-being as comprising happiness, psychological health, and positive affective states.

In this study, our assumptions of teacher well-being were influenced by our understanding of Seligman's (2011) five pillars of well-being, namely: **positive emotions** (teachers would feel good about coming to work and about their daily work, including emotions of pleasure, joy, warmth and comfort); **engagement** (teachers would be absorbed in their work, interested in improving their teaching and actively pursuing ways to do this); **relationships** (teachers would benefit from developing meaningful relationships with colleagues and learners); **meaning** (teachers would

find purpose in their work); and **achievement** (teachers would experience a sense of accomplishment and success in their work). These five elements, abbreviated into the multidimensional PERMA model, were used to provide a conceptual and analytic framework for understanding teachers' experiences of the way positive psychology activities foster their well-being, and for guiding our choice of activities to promote teacher well-being in a developmental and participatory manner.

According to Wissing et al. (2014) well-being is an integrated concept, with both hedonic (functioning well) and eudaimonic (feeling good) dimensions that complement one another. Thus, well-being is not just a matter of being able to do things effectively or efficiently, but also to feel positive about what you do and why and how you do it. Dodge, Daly, Huyton and Sanders (2012:223) conceptualise well-being as including the ability to respond effectively to challenges by maintaining a balance "between changing intra- or interpersonal and external demands." This is something that teachers in under-resourced settings generally struggle to do (Naidoo & Muthukrishna, 2014) and provides a further justification for the need to improve their sense of well-being.

Although positive psychology interventions have been used before with relative success in schools (Kern, Waters, Adler & White, 2015; Knoop, 2013; Norrish, Williams, O'Connor & Robinson, 2013), the focus has tended to remain on activities delivered by an 'expert' facilitator, rather than on enabling teachers to create sustainable processes within the school to enhance well-being on a long-term basis. There has been much critique of this type of teacher 'training,' calling into question its efficacy to produce lasting change (Mertler, 2017; Stewart, 2014; Wood, L & Goba, 2011). We agree with McNiff (2017) that teachers have to learn to become active learners, and that they are capable of generating their own knowledge on how to improve their circumstances. The principle that individuals can be self-initiating agents for positive change in their own lives and the lives of others (Lopez & Snyder, 2009), resonates with the tenets of lifelong, self-directed learning on which participatory action learning and action research (PALAR) is based (Zuber-Skerritt, 2015).

Participatory Action Learning and Action Research as Methodology

This study was epistemologically embedded in a participatory, non-positivist paradigm (Zuber-Skerritt, Wood & Louw, 2015), following a PALAR design and working in qualitative and inductive ways to generate and collect data. PALAR is underpinned by democratic values and principles, clustered as the 'seven Cs'

(communication, critical reflection, commitment, coaching, collaboration, competence and character building), developed through an action learning process grounded in the 'three Rs' (relationship, reflection and recognition) (Kearney, Wood & Zuber-Skerritt, 2013).

We sought to foster teachers' experiences of well-being by involving the teachers themselves in the research process as co-constructors of knowledge (Wood, L & Zuber-Skerritt, 2013). PALAR aims to improve practical situations as well as generate knowledge from participants' critical and collaborative reflection on their personal and communal experiences (Helyer, 2015). As teachers work together towards a shared goal, they develop a shared wisdom that helps to bring about sustainable change, in this case the development of teachers' experiences of well-being. PALAR endeavours to equalise the power relations between the academic researcher and participants to create a relationship based on respect and trust, through which they learn how to transform their lived reality (Zuber-Skerritt, 2015). Such emancipatory learning is concerned with understanding the nature and root causes of unsatisfactory circumstances in order to develop real strategies to change them (Thompson, 2000).

The PALAR cycles of action and reflection are summarised in Table 1. The aims of Cycle 1 were to develop a strategic plan for the project; and to facilitate the construction of visual representations (collages) of the teachers' experiences of well-being. They then analysed the collages to: (i) identify their needs and expectations; and (ii) formulate achievable plans to address the identified challenges. From this exercise, the teachers identified the following areas of improvement on which they wished to focus: dealing with emotions; improving relationships with each other; adopting healthier dietary and exercise habits; and learning how to handle their finances.

Cycle 2 entailed the introduction of activities to address these needs. As facilitator, the lead author engaged the teachers in deciding collaboratively on data generation and analysis methods to answer their own research question, which they formulated as: *How have we improved our well-being?*

During the third cycle, the teachers reflected on their learning to answer their research question and presented their learning at a celebration function, to which they invited staff members from their school as well as guests from the local university campus.

Table 1 Summary of data generation process and documentation

Venue of study:	Primary school where teachers were teaching at the time of the research.	
Participants:	Six female, Setswana speaking teachers aged 25–63.	
Cycle 1: Develop a strategic plan for the project and establish an understanding of own well-being	Time frame	Data generation techniques and documentation
Session 1: Negotiation of roles, goals and norms within project. Explanation of PALAR; discussing well-being using the PERMA framework. Construction and analysis of collages to determine teachers' needs with regard to their well-being.	2 hours	Field notes about what teachers perceive as well-being. Collages as visual data.
Cycle 2: Positive psychology activities (PPA) and other strategies to address identified needs		
Session 2: Savouring. Session 3: Acts of kindness. Session 4: Input on living a healthier life style. Session 5: Consultant on financial well-being.	8 hours	Teachers' conversations and reflections on activities and process in relation to well-being were recorded in each session.
Cycle 3: Reflection and evaluation		
Session 6: Reflection and evaluation of PALAR process and PP activities as a means to initiate and sustain experiences of well-being Session 7: Public presentation of learning	3 hours	The final evaluation session where teachers identified themes was recorded and analysed. Video recordings of the participants' presentations were analysed by participants and researchers to identify how they experienced the development of their well-being.

The research took place in a rural primary school in the North West Province of South Africa, as a response to Foundation Phase teachers' request for help in improving their well-being. Six teachers indicated that they wished to work with the lead author and decided to meet weekly for an initial period of six weeks in an action learning set. The teachers all had teaching experience that ranged

from four to 18 years. Qualitative, inductive methods were used to generate and analyse data, namely recordings of reflections in the action learning set meetings and presentations, and visual data, such as the collages. Themes were derived from the data interactively with the participants (Creswell, 2013). The two authors then conducted

an independent theoretical analysis of the themes, before comparing their findings to reach consensus.

Trustworthiness was further enhanced by triangulation of data sources, validation of themes by the participants, and a detailed audit trail (Creswell, 2013). Ethical clearance was granted by the institutional ethics board, which attested that the study adhered to the requirements for informed, voluntary consent and confidentiality, and that no harm was caused to participants (Bretag, 2016).

Findings

Our research question in this study was: *How can teachers working in socio-economically challenging contexts learn to foster their experiences of well-being?*

In response to this question, we present the findings of the three cycles, supported by direct quotations from the teachers (unedited), and control these findings against relevant literature about well-being.

Theme One: Improvement in Relational Well-Being

The most striking difference experienced by the participants was in regard to relational well-being, one of the dimensions highlighted in Seligman's (2011) PERMA model. The teachers had not had an opportunity previously to interact on more than a superficial level with their colleagues, nor had they ever thought of collaborating towards a mutual goal that was not directly related to the curriculum or learner performance. The improvement in relationships was ascribed to the creation of a regular relational space, specifically dedicated to working on their own well-being and the activities completed within that space.

The importance of a relational space to improve well-being

Teachers at this rural primary school had no physical place where they could come together during breaks, because the room intended as a staff room was too small for this purpose and had been turned into a store room. This led to the formation of cliques, where discontent was fostered for some, or feelings of isolation for others:

When we sit down at break [...] in my class, we just complain, about not having a comfortable space, no support (P2:7).

During break, we have nowhere to go. So we will form small groups or sit alone in our classrooms (P1:7).

The creation of a relational space at work was identified as crucially important to improve well-being. Participants decided that they would meet once a week as a group and negotiated use of the mathematics laboratory for this purpose. They also created a virtual space via WhatsApp to communicate between scheduled meetings. By setting outcomes around the *improvement* of well-being, they ensured that the focus of such groups

would be on sharing their reflections on their learning, so that it would not degenerate into a space for complaints. This helped to overcome feelings of disconnect and foster a sense of belonging:

Once we had our 'sit-downs' and we realised that we all shared the same personal problems ... it made me feel ... that I belong in this group. It was nice coming to our place each week and share. (P5:23)

With this group, you know – if you get something that we share, a joke, laughter ... we start joking about, until I ask: Can we sleep now? At least, the stress is a bit better – once we share a joke on WhatsApp it creates ... I think ... a common space. Yes, we can say that connections improved, relationships improved, because we shared our worries and our positive emotions. (P1:23)

As we sat together, discussing some other topic, we were passionate, we learned active listening, interaction with our colleagues. We really learned in this small group. We mended weak links ... now ... we are a team, we came together. (P4:34)

According to Walsh (2011), relationships are of the utmost importance to individual and collective well-being. In addition, good relationships are central to both physical and mental well-being to enhance happiness, quality of life, resilience, cognitive capacity and even reducing physical and mental health risks (Fowler & Christakis, 2010). Although it was a relatively simple task to organise a weekly action learning set meeting and set up the WhatsApp group, the teachers had not previously been able to mobilise themselves to do this until the PALAR process was created. Relationships are at the heart of PALAR since all learning and development take place in small reflective groups underpinned by values such as trust, care and respect (Zuber-Skerritt, 2015).

Positive psychology activities foster emotional awareness which improves relationships

Initially, the teachers were completely out of touch with their emotions as they struggled to name positive emotions.

I know what it is not [...] it is not stress, not anger, not frustration (P3:6).

The only thing that they were sure of was that they were stressed and overworked. The idea of flourishing seemed something outside of their grasp:

I have too much stress, do you really think I will be stress-free? I want to flourish (P4:6).

Even the prospect of taking action to improve their well-being seemed too difficult to accomplish:

We are so busy, it is the principal, it is the department and then even the trade unions come with the all kinds of things they want from us and [...] the children. We can't even eat or drink tea, some of the learners are so naughty, they don't do their work, and they are so naughty [...] we have many challenges. I feel so tired as I sit here. (P1:8)

To counter this, the lead author introduced two Positive Psychology activities (PPAs): Savouring (focusing on positive moments/experiences as they occur) and Acts of Kindness (doing deliberate kind acts for others).

To implement Savouring, the teachers decided to record funny incidents in their classrooms by taking photographs with their cell phones to share with each other via WhatsApp. The humour involved in this action helped the teachers to see their experiences in a classroom – usually linked to feelings of stress – in a more optimistic way (Achor, 2010). Sharing humour helped the participating teachers become aware of their emotions and had a positive influence on their relationships with each other:

That day in class when I took that video [...] we watched it over and over and we laughed every time (P2:15).

I think it creates positive emotions, because now we did not focus on the hard work, but on the humour and how it brought us, as teachers, closer to one another (P5:15).

Our [...] connections improved, relationships improved, because we shared the positive emotions [...] it improved a lot (P1:23).

Humour is an effective coping mechanism (Fredrickson, 2013) that enables people to become creative, knowledgeable, resilient, socially integrated, and healthy individuals (Fredrickson, 2013), who can relate better to others.

Another activity, Acts of Kindness (Otake, Shimai, Tanaka-Matsumi, Otsui & Fredrickson, 2006), was used to enhance the participating teachers' positive emotions and improve interaction with others. Teachers were instructed to count and reflect on the acts of kindness they perform each day. Focusing on doing and recording Acts of Kindness helped the teachers to become aware of their capacity to care:

We are dedicated and caring teachers, I realised it [...] after this week [...] I realised, we are kind to our learners (P1:16).

As the project progressed, there was a gradual improvement in their experience of positive emotions (Seligman, 2011) and empathy towards each other within the sessions. Initially, they would come to the sessions, one by one, downhearted and complaining, but after the first few sessions, they came in a group, laughing and talking. The rest of the staff also saw this change and became curious to know what had caused it. The principal contacted us to ask when the project could be expanded to include the rest of the school, as they could see a positive change in the attitude of the participating teachers. At the celebration function, when the participants presented their learning to the rest of the school, the principal remarked:

I have witnessed miracles tonight. I was not aware that my staff could do this.

Every teacher could confidently identify her emotions, but they also noted that, although their

circumstances did not change, the way in which they perceived their lives had changed:

Well-being is all about: Who am I? Worthy, strong, motivated. I may not have everything, but I am enough and I do enough. I strive very hard to make a positive change (P2:12).

Kindness to oneself and to others is associated with satisfaction (Buchanan & Bardi, 2010) and feelings of well-being (Pasch & Bradbury, 1998). Acts of kindness enhance gratitude and positive social relationships, which contribute in turn to improved physical health by reducing perceptions of stress (Wood, AM, Froh, & Geraghty, 2010). These two simple activities made a visible difference in the well-being of the participants. It is, however, unlikely that the exercise would have had the same effect if the teachers had done it on an individual basis; it was the collective sharing and reflecting on the experiences through the PALAR process, which enhanced the learning, and gave them a sense of belonging to the group by improving positive affect and interpersonal relations (Seligman, 2011).

Theme Two: Improvements in Individual Well-Being
The importance of the teachers being involved in determining their needs with regard to well-being within their specific context cannot be over-emphasised. They identified factors we would not have thought of if we had just been guided by the Positive Psychology literature. The PALAR process actively involved the teachers in determining their needs with regard to well-being, guided by the five pillars of the PERMA model (see Seligman, 2011).

The PALAR process allowed for gradual shifts in experiences of stress

The teachers experienced their administrative workload as too heavy, and blamed it for their high levels of stress and related illnesses. Although they enjoyed the actual teaching, they could not cope with the amount of assessment and administrative tasks.

Who do not enjoy working with our children? (P1:6) [Everyone agreed that they enjoyed working with young learners].

It is just the paperwork that are killing me, you know [...] I have 38 Grade 2 learners and each one has four books, which they should work in and I should mark [...] (P5:6).

All of them complained on a regular basis that they were tired and that they could not face another demand.

I am sorry that I always complain, but the amount of work that I have to do [...] it gets to me [...] I need to remind myself constantly that the learners in front of me are my first priority (P3:18).

Rather than using a specific Positive Psychological intervention to change the participants' thinking, the lead author decided to try and influence their perspective by sharing her own experiences of a stressful job and how she coped. Gradually, they

appeared to realise that every position has challenges and joys and that they could choose to focus either on the challenges or on the joys.

You know, Foundation Phase [...] we are facing the challenges of the learners [...] we spend time at school and few hours are home [...] but as we are sitting here, our mind-set come so settled and we relate with each other. (P4:28)

I am thankful, we know about unemployed people. They don't have a job [...] they don't have a job [silence] they have nothing. We have something to eat every day, somewhere to go. All of us [...] has the opportunity to work for God, right here at our school. (P4:11)

I have learned that we must be grateful for what we have. (P2:23)

The participatory action learning process based on relationship, reflection and recognition of everyone's feelings and perceptions created the space for this to happen. PALAR views learning as holistic, and draws on emotions and spiritual understandings, as well as cognitive theories (Zuber-Skerritt, 2015). It is unlikely that this gradual change in attitude would have occurred if the lead author had merely delivered a series of Positive Psychology interventions to the teachers, rather than accompanying them on a journey of learning and development. This accompaniment also enhanced their feelings of being authentically connected to others (Seligman, 2011), who share the same experiences.

Simple changes led to significant improvements in experiences of well-being

All the teachers were keen to improve their physical health and financial well-being, but they were uncertain of how to do this. Physical activity has the capacity to prevent mental illness, to foster positive emotions, and to buffer individuals against the stresses of life (Hefferon & Mutrie, 2012). Although the lead author could not source a PPA that related directly to physical health, the link between well-being and health is documented (Austin, Saklofske & Egan, 2005).

For this reason, she introduced the teachers to some simple stretching exercises. The teachers rated this simple change as the most helpful in making them feel better. Given the fact that lifestyle changes (Walsh, 2011) can be effective in both physical and mental health, the development of a Positive Psychology activity to enhance physical activity should be considered. Basic stretches to relieve muscle tension were demonstrated, and the teachers reported that the daily stretching reduced headaches and backaches.

It really helped me, I was having a problem with my back, but the one [...] where you just hang forward and swing your arms, helped me a lot (P2:22).

With the exercises, we were full of energy (P3:26).

Similarly, although financial well-being does not feature strongly in theoretical models in Positive

Psychology, the teachers insisted that they wanted to address the matter, as it is something that they worry about. The teachers were adamant that a lack of financial security contributed to their lack of flourishing. The lead author then suggested inviting a financial planner to one of the sessions. When the participants reflected on what they had learned from the financial advisor and how they would implement the new knowledge, one participant made the remark:

You know ma'am, we have a problem with black tax (P3:20).

The teachers explained that 'black tax' refers to a tradition where an employed family member is expected to support other relatives. Such support does not only entail basic needs, but also extends to so-called 'luxury items.' This suggests that, no matter how much may earn, the expectations for family support can exceed their capacity to provide. A teacher earning a moderate salary can therefore never really enjoy financial freedom (Mhlungu, 2015). Prolonged financial stress is thus a reality in the lives of many teachers. The findings from this study support the suggestion by McCoy, Ross and Goetz (2013) that interdisciplinary approaches are more effective to help clients, because attending to finances, emotions and relationships collectively has positive outcomes.

Theme Three: PALAR Process Enabled Teachers to Take Action to Sustain Their Experiences of Well-Being

The PALAR process contributed to the success of this project in two main ways. Firstly, the teachers were actively involved in the determination of their needs; thus they identified their desire to lead a healthier lifestyle and improve their financial well-being. These are two areas that an outside 'expert' might not have thought of including, since neither correspond directly with the PERMA framework (Seligman, 2011). Secondly, the PALAR process provided a reflective, relational space where colleagues could share personal challenges. This regular, informal social *engagement* with colleagues improved *relationships*, and increased *positive emotions*.

Our [...] connections improved, relationships improved, because we shared the positive emotions [...] it improved a lot (P1:23).

We tried by all means coming together, doing some activities which involves each educator or teacher to participate and our relationship it become strong, and we worked together as a team (P4:30).

Once the teachers realised that they all shared the same challenges, their perceptions about their workload and stress gradually changed.

I realised that am not the only one with a workload, we are in this together and we are not going to change it. The only thing that could change it is to laugh about it, okay? (P4:32).

They also indicated that they intended to take action to sustain their feelings of well-being:

It is not just that we discuss but we don't do [...] at the end we will get there (P1:24).

Seek advice from financial advisors or professionals, so that you can become a free person later (P5:30).

The teachers reported that their sense of belonging, the improved relationships, the shared positive emotions and shared personal problems, contributed to their improved experiences of well-being. They also indicated that being aware of their kindness added meaning to their lives and gave them a sense of achievement:

When you do something good for other people, it will make you feel very good and fulfilled, for example, when some of the learners [...] it is easy for us to identify some of the learners who maybe [...] they don't have food, but you know if this thing that are going to help others [...] that thing will make you to be fulfilled. (P1:31)

The teachers reported that they felt confident enough to support colleagues from neighbouring schools and that they realised that they were a strong team. These realisations included that they could not change their circumstances or workload, but that they perceived themselves as capable of facing the associated challenges. The PALAR process always involves an event where participants can share their learning with others, both to recognise their learning and to educate and encourage the wider community (Zuber-Skerritt, 2015). The value of the participatory learning process was evident in the presentations of participants at this event:

I have been discussing this issue with colleagues outside, especially Foundation Phase educators. I told them that we start with ourselves, to attend to our well-being, not to teaching. They asked, 'How can we also get together'. You know, Foundation Phase [teachers] [...] we are facing the challenges of the learners [...] we spent time at school and few hours are home [...] but as we are sitting here, our mind-set come so settled and we relate with each other. That particular teacher said, 'The doctor diagnosed me with fatigue' [...] but she is still young [...] 'the whole of my body is so painful.' I said we sit together and discuss our common problems, maybe financial [...] the other one says, 'I also have a problem with finances. How can we be assisted?' This thing can be very big, we must keep on, keep on, as this lady said. Let us invite people from the area office [...] ja. (P4:28)

This implies that the teachers have seen the potential for continuing action learning set meetings to enhance positive relations and 'settle' their minds. They do not just want to keep this learning for themselves, but have seen the value of the process for other teachers, indicated by their desire to share their learning with the Department of Education in the district.

Having a collaborative process like PALAR together with PPAs, helped the teachers to become self-directed in terms of improving their experiences of well-being. Since they were actively

involved in the whole process, from determining their needs, to the choice and execution of activities, they took ownership and they said that they would continue to use the activities they learnt. The teachers were confident that they were able to sustain their own well-being and they indicated that they would like to extend the project to other schools. The meeting place they created was still in use at the time of writing, and teachers continue to share jokes and other experiences on the WhatsApp group:

So now we do have a team, we will work as a team, irrespective the condition or the background we are from, but you have shown that teamwork works importantly (P4:31).

Although the teachers were very positive at the onset of the project, the biggest challenge was to keep them interested, because of their workload and time constraints. Their motivation was re-instated once we looked back during the reflection and public representation of the research results. Since this is an on-going project, we will still be meeting at least once a month and additional activities, according to the teachers' needs, will be introduced to ensure sustainability.

Conclusion

Teachers in socio-economically challenging contexts work in difficult circumstances, and are in need of support. The use of PALAR, together with PPAs in this project, created a context where positive experiences of well-being could be developed on an on-going basis. The 'seven Cs' (Wood, L & Zuber-Skerritt, 2013) and the 'three Rs' of PALAR (Kearney et al., 2013) underpinned the process, because frequent *communication* played a significant role in the formation of authentic, trusting *relationships*. Although the teachers had a heavy workload and several responsibilities, their *commitment* to the project was an outstanding feature. Although not all of them could attend all sessions, they always made arrangements and provided valid reasons for not attending. *Coaching*, guided by questioning and dialogue, characterised the learning throughout the project and enhanced our understanding of the unique circumstances of the teachers' conditions at school. During their weekly *critical, collaborative* reflections, they challenged existing assumptions and tried to gain insight into existing problems as well as finding possible solutions for those problems, thereby increasing their competence to improve their own well-being. The learning they presented at the celebratory event is evidence that they found answers to their research question of how they improved their sense of well-being. Our analysis of this learning also allowed us to answer our question of how teachers working in socio-economically challenging contexts can learn to foster their experiences of well-being.

The combination of PPAs, embedded in the PERMA model coupled with a PALAR approach, yielded positive outcomes in term of enhanced experience of well-being and learning about how to sustain the improvement. The findings of this study show that teachers are perfectly capable of improving their experiences of well-being, even in contexts of adversity. Although their circumstances did not change, their experiences of well-being improved when they were facilitated in learning simple, inexpensive PPAs, within a structured process that developed them as action learners. This study is one example of how teachers can begin to take action to improve their own perceptions of well-being within challenging contexts to better enable them to provide the quality education needed at primary level to help children, and ultimately society, to prosper. Of course, the problem remains that such approaches are not normally adopted by the Department of Basic Education in their training initiatives. More research to provide evidence of the value of participatory, self-directed ways of professional and personal development needs to be conducted as a means of influencing future policy and practice regarding the provision of support to teachers at both governmental and school level.

Authors' Contributions

Elsabe Wessels generated the data, analysed it and wrote the first draft. Lesley Wood conceptualised the project, assisted with data analysis, and contributed to the writing of the article.

Notes

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