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27 October 2021

Support for overburdened and mentally fatigued teachers and learners in the face of the pandemic

The psychosocial impact of the COVID-19 pandemic is compounded by the structural and physical violence endemic to society. More than ever before, psychosocial support is critical, for both teachers and learners – especially in communities that face multiple and constant crises, said the University of Cape Town's (UCT) Dr Patti Silbert.

In response to this crisis, UCT's Schools Development Unit (SDU) developed the Psychological First Aid (PFA) for Educators in Times of Crisis short course. The university-approved South African Council of Educators (SACE)-accredited short course equips teachers with the tools they need to support learners who experience anxiety and stress in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Dr Silbert and Ferial Parker, who are both senior education specialists in the SDU – together with Tembeka Mzozoyana, a social worker in UCT's Schools Improvement Initiative (SII) based in the SDU – co-developed the programme. The trio also lecture on the course.

"The psychosocial aspects of the pandemic, and the emotional and psychological impact on our school-going youth, are enormous. It is especially challenging in those contexts where children are not encouraged to express their fears and vulnerabilities," Silbert said.

More than 300 teachers countrywide have already registered to participate in the PFA short course, and approximately 186 teachers have received their certificates. As more educators look for ways to cope with the psychological fall-out of the pandemic, numbers are set to increase. But what about those who don't have access to the short course?

'Teachers are overwhelmed'

The new rotational school structure adopted by most public schools at the onset of the pandemic continues to have adverse effects on teachers' mental health. "Teachers are overwhelmed. The lack of momentum as a result of the rotational structure has been extremely challenging for teachers and learners. It has resulted in disruptive teaching

and learning patterns; and sadly, this reduction also means that teachers are struggling to complete the syllabus," Mzozoyana said.

Added to the academic demands, teachers have reported high levels of disengagement and disassociation among learners, as well as a lack of in-class concentration and an inability to complete certain tasks. "This level of disconnection among learners is as a result of the emotional and psychological effect the pandemic has had on our children," she said.

Providing learners with the psychosocial support they need is no longer as easy as it was before. As a result of social distancing measures, teachers have very little physical contact with their learners. This, Silbert explained, makes it challenging for them to interact with learners on a personal level, and to support those who may be experiencing emotional distress. "This has been especially difficult for teachers. The expectation that they just needed to adapt to these changes in a short space of time has also led to anxiety, sleep disturbances and mental exhaustion on their part."

Care, compassion and courage

Silbert and Mzozoyana said they are on a mission to support teachers and to equip them with the tools and skills they need to adequately support their learners.

Step one, Mzozoyana said, is to "normalise vulnerability". Teachers can achieve this by helping learners to find their voices and truly express their feelings. Creating safe classroom environments where learners feel comfortable sharing their fears and anxieties should be the ultimate goal. "We need to create school cultures of care, compassion and courage. Our learners need to be able to express themselves without fear of humiliation and shame. We need to help teachers create these environments," she said.

And while the PFA short course aims to upskill teachers in this area, Silbert said there are other practical techniques that teachers can adopt in their classes to create a community of care where trust, love and open communication can thrive.

Silbert recommended that they adopt the following:

- Provide a listening ear – children need to be heard, acknowledged and validated.
- Normalise feelings of withdrawal, anxiety, fear and frustration.
- Refer the learner to a social worker or psychologist for psychosocial support if necessary.
- While taking care of others, teachers shouldn't sacrifice their own health and well-being.
- Have conversations with parents to stress the importance of open communication at home.

"These are some of the ways in which teachers can attend to learners who are experiencing emotional distress. The act of noticing and listening in itself is what our teachers need to do, as they continue their essential work at the coalface of this pandemic," Silbert said.

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