How Could Virtuous School Leadership Improve the Flourishing of Teachers?

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This paper considers an under-researched area: how could virtuous school leaders improve the flourishing of their teaching staff. Since evidence suggests that the flourishing and of teachers positively influences pupil outcomes across a range of measures, and philosophers argue that both are intrinsically good, this is a potentially beneficial topic to research. The project looked at both the philosophical and positive psychology literature on 'flourishing' as well as considering the concept 'wellbeing' as there is overlap between the two terms in the literature. The project also drew upon the business leadership, school leadership and positive organisational scholarship literature.

The project's research questions are:

1. What do teaching staff (defined as including school leaders) understand by the term flourishing?

2. What do teaching staff believe leaders could do to improve their flourishing?

3. What kinds of strategies could school leaders adopt with the intention of improving the flourishing of teaching staff?

These questions were answered using mixed methods research, combining quantitative and qualitative methods, as well as participatory and collaborative interventions. The collection of data began with focus groups to design an online exploratory questionnaire; this was followed by the collection of both quantitative and qualitative data from teaching staff in all roles in 78 UK schools (56 secondary and 22 primary schools). Finally, teaching staff from four schools in a representative range of roles reviewed the online questionnaire data and designed and trialled interventions, which they perceived would improve the flourishing and wellbeing of teaching staff in their schools. The teaching staff who had designed and implemented the interventions reviewed the impact of these in a focus group mid-way through the year and at the end of the year.

It was found that virtuous behaviour and actions of leaders is positively influential in teacher flourishing, but that leadership which positively impacted teacher flourishing was not restricted to those with defined leadership roles: it could come from anyone. It was also shown that through working collaboratively with staff, school leaders can improve teacher flourishing. The research is innovative in that it modified an established model of wellbeing to focus on the impact of leadership on flourishing and wellbeing in a school setting and included a participatory and collaborative research element within mixed methods design. It is hoped that this research will be used to change policy on the training and selection of school leaders and on educational

policy concerning the leadership of schools, to improve not only the flourishing of teachers, but also pupils.

Contents

1. Introduction

This study aimed to discover how school leaders could improve the flourishing both of teachers and leaders. I hoped that this knowledge will, through improving teaching staff flourishing, also improve the extent to which school-children are flourishing. This is an intrinsically valuable goal because flourishing is a good in itself (Aristotle, Ross & Brown (Trans), 2008); furthermore there also seems to be a need to carry out more research into teacher wellbeing as it has been argued that school teaching is, globally, one of the most stressful jobs (Lhospital & Gregory 2009; Kyriacou 2000). Teachers in the UK are also arguably not all flourishing. In a survey of 3,500 UK teachers, 84% of respondents said their job impacted negatively on their health; 76% were 'seriously considering' leaving the profession (NASUWT, 2015): both of which could be considered relevant indicators of a lack of flourishing. Flourishing and wellbeing have also been shown to have many extrinsic benefits, and this project explored these to determine what the impact of leaders focusing on flourishing and wellbeing could have for schools.

2. Review of the literature

The review of the literature began with a general exploration of flourishing and started to explore this concepts significance to schools. This enabled a consideration of whether this would be a worthwhile area to investigate. To examine effectively how school leaders could improve the flourishing of teachers, it was necessary to find a working definition and conceptualisation of flourishing; this formed the focus for the second phase of the literature review. The key finding from this phase was that flourishing is considered by nearly all authors to be a multidimensional

concept and the conceptualisation that seemed to be most relevant to this project was Su, Tay and Diener's (2014) '*Core Dimensions of Psychological Wellbeing*'.

Su et al.'s (2014) core dimensions include both eudemonic and hedonic conceptualisations of flourishing and are:

(1) subjective wellbeing (SWB) covering high life satisfaction and positive feelings;

(2) positive, supportive and enriching relationships;

(3) engagement and interest in daily activities;

(4) meaning and purpose in life;

(5) a sense of mastery and accomplishment;

(6) feelings of autonomy and control;

(7) optimism.

A working definition was later also suggested by participants in the project: '*being at your best'*, and the definition that was found to be most relevant to the project from the literature was from Fredrickson and Losada's (2005) definition: living '*within an optimal range of human functioning, one that connotes goodness, generativity, growth, and resilience.*'

The conceptualisation of flourishing chosen for this project (Su et al.'s 2014 Model of Psychological Wellbeing) was then used as a start point for exploring how school leaders may be

able to influence the flourishing of academic staff in each domain. The literature, which examines the extent to which teachers are currently flourishing was also reviewed: this helped to define where this project might be able to make an impact on the teaching profession.

Of particular interest for this paper was the literature on virtues and flourishing. Arthur, Kristjánsson, Cooke, Brown, & Carr (2015) argue that virtues are particularly important for teachers because of their role in the moral and character development of those they teach. Many scholars have presented evidence to support the idea that there is no necessary trade-off between virtue and performance. Virtuous organizational performance is strength-building, life-giving and virtuous attributes such as compassion, forgiveness, courage, hope, humility, and integrity are evident (Cameron and Caza, 2003). These phenomena represent 'positive deviance' from typical organizational behaviour (Peterson & Seligman, 2004; Sandage & Hill, 2001). The presence and manifestation of organizational virtuousness has been shown to create physical and mental healing effects for individuals (Gilbert, 2010), stronger communities and relationships (Avolio, Gardner (2005); Bezzina (2012)., organizational resilience (Dirks, Ferrin, 2002), positive affect (Fredrickson, 2001), and enhanced engagement (Bass, and Steidlmeier, 1999, Dutton et al. 2006).

These outcomes come, argue Cameron and Caza (2003) from two particularly important attributes of virtues. First, the *amplifying* effect virtues appear to have in organizations. Several researchers have described the dynamics of groups and organizations that experience exceptional

performance, flow, or virtuous actions (e.g., Sethi, R. & Nicholson, C.Y. (2001); Lee et al (2003); Fredrickson & Joiner (2002); Quinn (2002); Frost et al (2000). Under these virtuous conditions, the organisation's members experience a compelling drive to build upon the contributions of others and to continue the virtuous spiral Fredrickson (2002)

Second, say Cameron and Caza (2003) virtues have a *buffering* effect in organizations. Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi (2000) provide evidence to suggest that the development of human virtues, such as courage, hope and optimism, faith, honesty and integrity, forgiveness, and compassion, serve as a buffer against mental and physical ill-health and dysfunction both in individuals and in groups. Learned optimism, for example, prevents depression and anxiety in children and adults, roughly halving their incidence over the subsequent two years. (Seligman, et al., 1999). At the group level, evidence has been found to suggest virtuousness enhances resilience and solidarity, which leads to high levels of performance, particularly when the organisation faces threats or challenges (Weick, 2003; Gittell & Cameron, 2002). Virtues, therefore, appear to be a significant factor in enabling flourishing and there appears to be evidence that virtuous behaviour within schools has a positive impact on well-being.

The review of the literature then considered definitions of leadership, school leadership, educational leadership and teacher leadership before exploring theories of leadership and the predicted and researched impact of each of these leadership theories on flourishing and wellbeing. The theories in the literature that focused most on flourishing were servant leadership, responsible leadership and positive leadership.

Finally, the review considered where there is a research gap. It is proposed that while there is literature that considers the impacts of leaders on wellbeing, there is comparatively little educational research on this topic. This research is also the first to use Su et al.'s (2014) Dimensions of Psychological Wellbeing to consider the impact of leaders on the flourishing of academic staff in schools.

3. Methods

The research was influenced by pragmatism, specifically Tashakkori & Teddlie's (2003) interpretation of pragmatism which *'focuses on 'what works' as the truth regarding the research questions under investigation'* (Tashakkori & Teddlie 2003, p. 713), as well as Dewey's (1938) *'problem-centred pedagogy'* and his idea that democracy was about more than just votes; rather it's the idea that all societal institutions should aim to maximise flourishing: something this project is trying to grapple with for schools.

The project's research questions were answered using mixed methods research in six phases. Phase one was a series of two pilot focus groups that were used to design an online questionnaire. Most questionnaire items (42) used a Likert-type rating scale and five other items were open questions. The questions using a Likert-type rating scale were adapted from Su et al.'s (2014) Comprehensive of Thriving to be applicable to the impact of school leaders on teachers.

The open questions sought to discover more information about participants; understandings of different aspects of flourishing and wellbeing; the impact they perceived leaders could have on their wellbeing and flourishing in a work context; and what school leaders could do to improve their wellbeing and flourishing.

Phase two was the delivery of the questionnaire. In the questionnaire, quantitative and qualitative data were collected from academic staff in all roles in 48 state funded secondary schools; 17 state funded primary schools; 8 fee-paying secondary schools; and 5 fee-paying primary schools in the UK. Data were also collected from 6 schools outside the UK, but these were discounted because the sample size was too small.

Phase three shifted to participatory and collaborative research. Phase three consisted of two pilot focus groups with teachers from 12 schools which were used to design the schedule and delivery of the focus groups in phases four to six in four schools which became the case studies.

In phase four, the research continued to use participatory and collaborative methods. Teaching staff from four schools and in a representative range of roles discussed their understandings of flourishing in focus group 1. Between focus group 1 and 2 they reviewed a summary of the online questionnaire data and the data from the first three phases and then, in focus group 2, designed and trialled interventions, which they perceived would improve the flourishing and wellbeing of teaching staff in their schools.

Phases 5 and 6 used focus groups to enable academic staff to reflect upon the impact of the interventions they had trialled, halfway through the intervention (phase 5) and at the end of the intervention (phase 6).

4 Findings

4.1 Findings RQ1: What do teaching staff understand by the terms flourishing and wellbeing (in their work context)?

This question sought to explore what the participating teaching staff (including school leaders) understood by the term flourishing and was addressed with qualitative and quantitative data from the online questionnaire. The data from the focus groups and online questionnaire gave an interesting insight into the ways teaching staff may understand wellbeing and flourishing in their work contexts. It was possible to categorise all of the answers into one, but more commonly a few of Su et al.'s (2014) CIT factors (relationships, mastery, SWB, autonomy, engagement, optimism, meaning + purpose); whilst the CIT statements were a useful start point for deciding which categories each response fitted into. Overall, it was found that Su et al.'s (2014) dimensions of psychological wellbeing were useful as a means of organising a complex, multifaceted phenomenon and there was enough fit to warrant their continued use. It was found that many of the categories were inter-related.

Relationships were the most frequently referred to factor in teaching staff's answers to what flourishing meant to them. The second highest number of responses were coded into the category mastery for flourishing. Again, there seemed to be many links between data coded into various

11

categories. The responses coded into these three sub-categories (self-efficacy, accomplishment and continued learning), also seemed to fit with the idea growth, with all those involved in coding considering that growth was a more accurate way of describing most of the answers coded for continued learning and many of those coded for self-efficacy and accomplishment. This was also seen later when the responses to the open questionnaire were coded and growth was a more relevant term than mastery for these data.

In the online questionnaire, the highest percentage of respondents 'strongly agreed' (gave the question a rating of '5') that satisfaction with life and positive feelings (SWB) were important influences on the extent to which they were flourishing (36%); interestingly, the fourth highest number of responses were coded SWB when participants were asked flourishing meant to them (after mastery, relationships and optimism). 'Positive relationships with my leader' had the second highest number of respondents rating it as '5' (34%), closely followed by optimism (33%). It would be interesting to find out whether 'positive relationships', rather than 'positive relationships with my leader' would have scored higher. This was also a contrasting result to the findings from the focus group asking what participants understood by flourishing. Relationships were the highest for flourishing. Optimism was the third highest for flourishing.

Overall, these data suggested that relationships were the factor that the highest number of Su et al.'s (2014) dimensions of psychological wellbeing connected to, as well as having the highest number of responses that were coded into this category for wellbeing. It seems possible to conclude from these data that relationships are particularly important to flourishing. The other

conclusion it is possible to make is that the dimensions of Su et al.'s (2014) Model of

Psychological Wellbeing are difficult to isolate in terms of teaching staff's understanding of

them; they also frequently are described as overlapping and affecting one another in the

literature.

This section aimed to explore the question: 'What do teaching staff believe leaders could do to

improve their flourishing?' What had been shown in the project up to this point is relationships

in the literature and in the perception of participants are very important to the extent to which

people perceive they are flourishing. Relationships were also shown to be connected to all the

other factors involved in flourishing that have been explored to this point.

I shall now explore the factors involved in building and maintaining positive relationships that

were frequently reported by participants. Participants said that receiving support and compassion

from leaders was very important to the extent to which they were flourishing; other virtuous

behaviours, particularly by leaders were also frequently reported as being influential in teacher

flourishing, particularly the virtue integrity in preventing a leader from negatively affecting

flourishing. The responses about virtues linked to being trusted themselves, and working with

others, particularly leaders, who are trustworthy. Trust linked to autonomy, but teachers wanted

different levels of autonomy and autonomy over different areas of their role. Teaching staff who

thought autonomy was important also said that support would positively influence their

13

flourishing. A leader, therefore, needs to get to know and understand their people and find out what level, as well as type, of support and autonomy would work best in support of their flourishing.

'Time and balance' was another of the four categories most frequently referenced affecting teaching staff's flourishing. Where leaders could reduce work that was not purposeful or necessary for helping student outcomes, it was strongly recommended by many teachers that they should to improve teacher wellbeing. Unnecessary pressure was also linked to this. Teachers reported that they wanted pupils to do well and that excessive pressure undermined their flourishing and, therefore also their ability to teach effectively and achieve great outcomes for the pupils.

Growth and the opportunity to develop, whether that was through training opportunities, career progression or the chance to grow through being challenged at an appropriate level was also very often spoken about by teaching staff as being something leaders could influence that would affect the extent to which they were flourishing.

SWB was perceived to be affected by the other factors mentioned above by teaching staff but could also be influenced positively by leaders generating optimism; focusing on teachers' strengths; and being grateful for, and appreciating, what teachers were doing.

In summary, it was found that, again, there were many factors that overlapped and that participants had different perceptions on what would most affect the extent to which they were flourishing. The most frequently reported factors, though, that participants felt leaders could influence to improve their wellbeing were

1. positive relationships, which were predominantly built through virtuous behaviours and giving time;

2. Time/balance – not asking teachers to do unnecessary work, particularly tasks that did not contribute to improved outcomes for pupils

3. Growth – opportunities to learn and develop were important to teachers

4. SWB – enhanced through leaders displaying the virtue optimism; valuing teachers; focusing on their strengths and the virtue gratitude.

4.3 Findings: RQ3: What kinds of strategies could school leaders adopt with the intention of improving the flourishing and wellbeing of teaching staff?

For this question, a series of focus groups were used to find out what teaching staff in three schools thought would be most helpful to enable them to flourish. Participants were then asked to try out their ideas and report back through focus groups and surveys on the impact of those ideas on their wellbeing and the extent to which they were flourishing at work. It wasn't specified that these interventions should be led by people with a formal school leadership role and in many

cases, they weren't, thus supporting one of this project's proposal that leadership is not dependent upon having a named role; instead, it is having a positive impact on others.

Several interventions were suggested during the second focus group, but the schools chose to deliver the following:

School 1: Yoga, coaching and failure stories

The impacts of yoga were reported as being on the participants' subjective wellbeing and enabled staff from a range of departments to form positive relationships with each other, which wouldn't have happened without the intervention. The yoga was taught be a school dance teacher and her approach to the sessions were extremely positive. Yoga was suggested at another school, but the uptake was low due to time pressure. These findings supported the idea that positive relationships, SWB and time/balance were important to these participants for their wellbeing. The coaching was experienced as peer coaching; leaders coaching those they line manage; and teachers coaching pupils. The main impacts of the reinvigoration of coaching were a positive impact on relationships, growth and SWB. Again, the main limitation to the impact of this intervention was time. Failure stories had some impact, but again, participants reported that not enough time was dedicated to them to maximize their effect.

School 2: Positive boards in departments.

Many ideas were put forward in this school, but the only one that ended up being taken forward was positive boards where anything positive that had happened could be posted onto the board to

boost everyone's SWB. The group raised concerns about behaviour but didn't agree on any specific initiatives to take forward. The group also talked about email timings and putting a system into place that stopped all but urgent emails being sent after defined working hours and yoga; both were looked into, but it was decided not to change the email policy and that there wasn't enough interest in, or time for, yoga. This again highlighted the importance of having time to spend on interventions that boost wellbeing and also showed the relevance of autonomy, in this case through choosing when to communicate through email. The positive boards required very little time and boosted the SWB of those who were involved with them or saw them.

School 3: Wellbeing Whatsapp group and pay it forward acts of kindness. This group set up a Whasapp communication group and sent each other supportive messages, as well as using it to plan and carry out random acts of kindness. This was led collaboratively by all those in the group, rather than by someone with a formal leadership position. They reported a positive impact on their relationships with each other and an increase to SWB.

5 Discussion

The thesis aimed to answer the overarching question: 'How could school leaders improve the flourishing of teaching staff?

The research questions were:

1. What do teaching staff understand by the term flourishing?

2. What do teaching staff believe leaders could do to improve their flourishing?

3. What kinds of strategies could school leaders adopt with the intention of improving the flourishing of teaching staff?

The key findings were that Su et al.'s (2014) model of psychological wellbeing was relevant to teachers' understandings of flourishing and wellbeing and that nearly all participants agreed that the seven factors included by Su et al. (2014) in their model (positive relationships; SWB; mastery; autonomy; engagement; optimism and meaning+purpose) were important to their wellbeing. The instrument that was designed by adapting Su et al.s (2014) CIT for leaders to assess the extent to which they were affecting the flourishing of those they lead and more generally to gain information about people's perceptions on wellbeing was found to have internal consistency and was perceived to be useful by participants.

Teaching staff believed that leaders could improve the flourishing of teaching staff in numerous ways and that the extent to which the behaviours and actions of leaders were virtuous were influential in the extent to which the people they lead flourish. This resonated with the positive leadership (for example, Cameron, 2012), positive organizational scholarship (Cameron, Dutton and Quinn, 2003) and 'new genre leadership' (Avolio, Walumbwa &Weber, 2009) literature, all of which explore the impact of leaders on those they lead and propose that flourishing should be a key focus for leaders because of its intrinsic worth and because of its performance benefits. All these leadership literatures also refer to the importance of virtue in flourishing. These concepts were much less commonly explored in the school leadership literature, which seems to focus

more on the impact of school leaders on pupil outcomes (attainment) and a focus on strategy and operations, rather than on teacher or, indeed, pupil flourishing (for example, Earley, Higham, Allen, Allen, Howson, Nelson, Rawar, Lynch, Morton, Mehta, & Sims, 2012).

It was also found, though, that leadership and having a positive impact on flourishing was not only possible for someone in a formal leadership role. In fact, it was also shown that teaching staff at any level of an organization could influence the wellbeing of others; this finding echoed some of the later literature on leadership, which views leadership as service and impact on others, rather than an allocated role or the achievement of change or results (for example, Laloux, 2014). For this projects, strategies to improve flourishing were co-created by a group of interested teaching staff from the same school. The strategies chosen focused on improving primarily positive relationships, SWB and growth. Time was the greatest barrier to interventions being effective and was also frequently reported as being a key factor in preventing teaching staff from experiencing wellbeing. This echoed findings in the literature where time was also referred to as limiting the potential of teachers to achieve flourishing.

6. Evaluation

The use of mixed methods, whilst it had its limitations, seemed to be an appropriate way of accessing three complex concepts: flourishing, wellbeing and leadership through quantitative, qualitative, participatory and collaborative methods. The online survey provided a broader and larger sample than could have been achieved through focus groups and interviews alone; the sample for the online questionnaire was not as representative as it could have been for UK schools and it would have been better to have collected more responses. The qualitative data collection methods were helpful for gaining richer data and enabling the creation of interventions by participants; they could, however, have been enhanced by using more individual interviews to gain a deeper understanding of what individual teachers and school leaders understood by wellbeing and flourishing and what leaders' impacts could be. The methods of analysis could have been enhanced by using a team of researchers to check the data and spending more time with participants exploring with them the extent to which the findings and conclusions reported were congruent with what they were intending to report. Participative and collaborative methods enhanced participants' engagement with the project; improved their understanding of how all members of a school's staff have the potential to improve the flourishing of both themselves and others; promoted feelings of collective-efficacy; and improved relationships between the group members.

7. Conclusion

The project sought to answer the question: 'How could school leaders improve the flourishing of teaching staff?' It is possible to conclude from the data collected that flourishing can be influenced by leaders' behaviours, practices and decisions. It was also shown that positive relationships were particularly important to flourishing and that this was an area that would be beneficial for leaders to focus on, specifically through the virtues: compassion, integrity, gratitude, trust, trustworthiness and optimism. Leaders providing opportunities for teaching staff to grow was also perceived to be important to teacher wellbeing, as was leaders considering the impact they were having on SWB and how they could alter this for the better. Time and balance were also considered to be particularly relevant for leaders to focus on in their efforts to improve teaching staff flourishing; specifically not asking teachers to do work that wasn't purposeful and wouldn't improve pupil outcomes.

It was found that asking teaching staff to design interventions to improve their flourishing could have a positive impact, whether that was led by someone in a formal leadership role, or by a group of teachers who were enthusiastic about that particular intervention. The key barrier to the success of the interventions that were implemented in the case studies was lack of time due to the pressures of the job; alleviating the pressures on teachers to complete work that they didn't perceive to be of maximum benefit to pupil outcomes was also raised at this stage as being important for the success of future interventions.

Contributions to knowledge included using an established model of wellbeing and modifying it to focus on the impact of leadership on flourishing in a school setting; Su et al.'s (2014) Model of Psychological Wellbeing and their associated scale the Comprehensive Inventory of Thriving had not been used in this way before. The research brought the school leadership, business leadership and flourishing and wellbeing literature together to contribute to an understanding of an under-researched area: how school leaders can improve teacher flourishing and wellbeing. This provided a new understanding of school leadership and its impacts. It was found that leadership is important in teacher wellbeing and that teacher flourishing is, in turn, important to student outcomes. The actions, behaviours and decisions of school leaders were shown to influence teacher flourishing, and that through working collaboratively with staff school leaders can improve teacher flourishing. It is hoped that this research will be used to change policy on the training and selection of school leaders and on educational policy concerning the leadership of schools, to improve not only the flourishing of teachers, but also pupils.

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