The impact of learners’ disruptive behaviour on teachers’ well-being: a qualitative approach

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ABSTRACT

The study was carried out to investigate the impact of learners’ disruptive behaviour on teacher well-being. To achieve this aim, a phenomenological research design was used. The convenience sampling technique was adopted, as participants who were the most accessible to the researcher were contacted. The participants in this study were teachers from four different secondary schools in Bloemfontein. A total of ten teachers were selected to take part in this study. The data collection instrument for this study was a semi-structured interview schedule. The thematic analysis method was used, as this method makes it easier for the researchers to read and organise the data, as well as to make sense of the data by coding and grouping the themes. The findings from the study show that learners’ disruptive behaviours have a negative impact on teachers’ well-being. It is therefore concluded that learners’ disruptive behaviours have a severe negative impact on teachers’ overall well-being.

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INTRODUCTION

Learner’s disruptive behaviours have constituted a major challenge to the smooth running of academic institutions of learning the world over including South African schools. In the school settings, learners’ disruptive behavior is referred to as an inappropriate behavior that interferes with the teaching and learning in the classroom. It hinders or prevents teachers’ proper classroom management and instructional delivery (Ajibola & Ali, 2014). In the school systems, any behaviour by students or learners that are unethical and unacceptable that can cause harm to the academic activities of the school and/or jeopardize expected academic achievement is referred to as disruptive behaviour (Okorodudu, 2010). In other words, disruptive behaviour refers to a condition whereby a student’s mode of behaviour is in opposition to the rules and regulations of a school (Kwajo, 2011). It also refers to such behaviours as breaking the laws and orders of the school or engaging in unacceptable behaviours that could cause harm to self, others and hinder effective teaching and learning.

In the teaching profession, learners’ disruptive behaviour is one of the biggest challenges that teachers face (Schwab, Eckstein & Reussser, 2019). Aldrup et al., (2018) in their study found that students disruptive behaviours impact teachers’ well-being negatively. According to Anuradha and Pushkala (2020), disruptive behaviour occurs when learners are not cooperative and prevent themselves and others in the classroom from doing the given work by the teacher. Common examples of disruptive behaviours in the classroom include disrespect of rules and regulations, not following the laid down procedures by teachers or the school authority, walking around in class during lessons, fidgeting, fighting and talking to class peers during lessons, speaking out of turn; and moving furniture around (Briesch, Briesch & Chafouleas, 2015). Learners’ disruptive behaviour can also be more serious behaviour like conflict between learners and teachers or among learners, leading to physical violence and this is the most challenging behaviour to deal with in the school system (Sun & Shek, 2012).
Other forms of learners’ disruptive behaviour according to Sun & Shek (2012) includes bullying, threats, and the spreading of rumours. These behaviours not only occur among learners but also among teachers or between learners and teachers (Sun & Shek, 2012). Given the pressure teachers face in performing their professional duties, their well-being should be an issue of concern especially when students’ disruptive behaviour is on the increase (Schleicher, 2018). Studies show that the above-listed behaviours and others are causes of stress for teachers (Boyce & McGowan, 2019). Other studies such as (Anand, 2014; Sullivan et al., 2014; Nash & Schlösser, 2015) indicate that disruptive behaviour has a negative impact on teachers’ responses. Teachers tend to deal with learners’ disruptive behaviour in different ways and the main reason for teachers’ negative reaction is learners’ continuous disruptive behaviour (Lewis, Rouche & Romi, 2011). Impulsive reactions by teachers on learners’ disruptive behaviour include punishment, scolding, warnings, embarrassment, and moving learners from one seat to another (Polat, 2015). A negative classroom environment due to learners’ disruptive behaviour may affect teachers’ motivation, commitment, confidence, self-efficacy, and well-being (Schleicher, 2018:92). Based on the above, there is a need to investigate the impact of learners’ disruptive behaviour on teacher well-being.

Well-being, according to Longo, Coyne and Joseph (2017), is the experience of good health, happiness, optimism, awareness, self-worth and success, which includes good mental health, life and job satisfaction and the management of stress. For teachers to experience well-being, they must experience happiness and good levels of health (cognitive, physical, social and psychological) in the classroom environment (Herman, Hickmon-Rosa & Reinke, 2018; Schleicher, 2018). According to Schleicher (2018), teachers’ well-being is connected to the educational process and consists of four dimensions; cognitive, psychological, physical and social well-being.

The cognitive well-being dimension refers to the skills and abilities to take on the workplace. Along with skills and abilities, teacher efficiency (instruction and classroom management) also forms part of this dimension (Schleicher, 2018). Being a teacher requires specific skills and abilities such as maintaining learner discipline, but this is not always as easy as it seems. Studies show that teachers feel disempowered by the ineffective discipline strategies as well as their low levels of efficiency, caused by disruptive behaviour, both have a significant impact on teacher cognitive well-being (Segalo & Rambuda, 2018; Collie et al., 2012). In line with this, a study in USA schools shows that teachers feel overwhelmed by the learners’ disruptive behaviour, resulting in low efficiency (Works, 2015). When teachers experience low levels of efficiency, cognitive well-being is impacted, because of a reduction in confidence (Works, 2015). Boulton et al. (2014) agree that teachers’ confidence regarding the ability to manage learner behaviour is impacted by learners’ disruptive behaviour.

The second dimension is the psychological well-being, which involves emotions (stress, motivation, endurance, frustration) and attitudes towards learners as well as peers, job satisfaction and commitment (Schleicher, 2018). Emotions form a major part of teaching (Frenzel, 2014) and teachers who deal with disruptive classroom behaviour report an increase in emotional exhaustion, frustration, and a reduction in work enthusiasm, endurance, motivation and optimism (Segalo & Rambuda, 2018). Psychological well-being or lack thereof can enhance or reduce durability, endurance and optimism (Salsman et al., 2014). Studies have found that disruptive behaviour is linked to teachers’ stress (Aloe et al., 2014; Tsouloupas et al., 2010:) and it is the most influential stressor among teachers (Hagenaier et al., 2015). Environments that are stressful for teachers have a negative effect on their motivation, commitment and well-being.

The third dimension is physical well-being, which includes the levels of health of which physical exhaustion or burn-out forms part (Schleicher, 2018), where teacher responses or reactions are also included (Van Dat, 2016). Aloe et al. (2014) state that disruptive behaviour has an impact on the physical well-being of teachers, and burnout causes personal and mental health problems. Furthermore, teachers who experience higher levels of burnout are reported to be less effective in teaching, classroom management, and job satisfaction. Studies (Anand, 2014; Sullivan et al., 2014; Nash & Schlösser, 2015) show that disruptive behaviour has a negative impact on teachers’ responses.

The final dimension is social well-being, which includes support from colleagues and interaction with the learners (Schleicher, 2018). Disruptive behaviour is associated with a negative teacher-learner relationship, impacting the social well-being negatively According to Aldrup et al. (2018), teachers feel they are not supported by colleagues when they experience disruptive learner behaviour. The professional relationship with learners and colleagues have both favourable and unfavourable consequences, as they are the most important sources of negative job outcomes.

This study was generated by cases that escalated in the classroom environment due to learners’ disruptive behaviour, which raised concerns about teacher well-being. According to Aldrup et al. (2018), the well-being of teachers rapidly reduces when they face high levels of disruptive behaviour in the classroom. A study shows that it is very challenging for teachers to deal with disruptive behaviour in schools (Sun & Shek, 2012), as learners’ behaviour is intolerable and stress-provoking, leading to a decrease in teachers’ psychological and cognitive well-being (Pillen, Beijaard & Brok, 2013). According to Tsouloupas et al. (2010), along with Aloe, Amo and Shanahan (2014), learners’ disruptive behaviour has an impact on the physical well-being of teachers, which shows a risk of increased levels of burnout over time. The teacher-learner relationship seems to have an impact on teacher stress and learners’ disruptive behaviour causes a reduction in teacher well-being (Admiraal, 2020:8; Ding et al., 2010). According to Schleicher (2018), teachers’ well-being has a direct connection with education and therefore can affect learners’ achievement, motivation, self-efficacy and well-being, the quality of teaching and learning, and the classroom environment in the education system. Since the well-being
of teachers plays such an important role in the education system, it should be of great importance to investigate the impact of learners’ disruptive behaviour on teachers’ well-being.

The aim of this study was to investigate the impact of learners’ disruptive behaviour on teachers’ well-being. The specific objectives were to:

i. Explore how teachers see disruptive behaviour in the classroom.
ii. Determine the causes of disruptive behaviour in the classroom.
iii. Examine the impact of learners’ disruptive behaviour on teachers’ well-being.

The following research questions are posed to guide the study:

i. How do teachers see disruptive behaviour in the classroom?
ii. What are the causes of disruptive behaviour in the classroom?
iii. What is the impact of learners’ disruptive behaviour on teachers’ well-being?

Theoretical framework

The theoretical framework for this study is based on the Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) Model developed by Demerouti et al. (2001). The JD-R Model is one of the theoretical frameworks for understanding the well-being of employees and assumes that each job has its factors which is associated with job-related stress (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007; Demerouti et al., 2001). According to Bakker and Demerouti (2007), there are several working conditions or job characteristics that have an impact on well-being, divided into job demands and job resources. This is an effective model to use, as it can apply to a variety of jobs and allows flexibility in the selection of job demands and resources. This study focused on understanding the impact of learners’ disruptive behaviour on the well-being of teachers.

Job demands are the physical, psychological, social, or organizational aspects that require an abundance of physical and psychological (cognitive and emotional) effort and usually harm individuals’ well-being (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007). Job demands, also called ‘stressors’ can be identified as pressure (time or work), workload, learner disruptive behaviour, student diversity, irregular working hours, lack of support, negative working environments, and work pressure. In this study, the job demand was learners’ disruptive behaviours.

Job resources are the physical, psychological, social, or organizational aspects that are useful for achievement in the workplace, reduce the physical and psychological effort, stimulate personal development and growth, and are likely to have beneficial effects. Examples of job resources from previous studies involve positive and supportive relationships with colleagues, parents and learners, fairness, teacher opportunities to learn and develop, and teacher autonomy (Collie & Martin, 2017, Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2018). The potential job resource for this study is supportive relations with colleagues, as this can increase teacher well-being.

The JD-R Model further suggests two processes that play a role in employee well-being. The first process is the health impairment process, and the second process is a motivational process. The health impairment process argues that job demands drain individuals’ physical, cognitive, and psychological resources with the result that individuals are affected negatively and may end up exhausted, which leads to negative health and organisational outcomes (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007). This reduction of energy may eventually result in health problems and deprive well-being. The second process is the motivational process, which proposes that job resources are rewarding, play a motivational role, and might have a beneficial effect on well-being. The JD-R Model further states that there is an interaction between job demand and job resources. For example, social support, which is a job resource, may lessen the negative effect of job demand, such as learner behaviour, on teacher well-being. The JD-R Model also digs into the broader concept of an individual’s occupation and relates the demands and resources to outcomes such as burnout and emotional exhaustion.

Thus, based on the model, the result of this study expects that job resources may increase teacher well-being and job demand may decrease teacher well-being. Based on the above, the JD-R Model is the most appropriate framework for this study, because it helps to understand the impact of learners’ disruptive behaviours on the well-being of teachers.

Research and Methodology

This study adopted the qualitative research approach to understand the social phenomenon Qualitative research is a scientific investigation that seeks to build description to inform researchers’ understanding of a social phenomenon (Astalin, 2013). According to Hennink, Butter and Bailey (2020), qualitative research is an approach used by researchers to study people in their natural environment to identify how their experiences are formed by the context of their lives and therefore seeks to understand the contextual influences on the research issues. The study adopted an interpretivism research paradigm. The interpretive paradigm is concerned with the individual and helps to understand the subjective world of human experiences (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2018). To achieve this, a phenomenological research design was used, as this describes a real-world problem within an educational setting (Astalin, 2013). A phenomenological research design is also used when there is a lack of understanding of a phenomenon, because the understanding of the impact this phenomenon might be unclear. We know that learners’ disruptive behaviour is a phenomenon in classrooms, but the impact it has on the well-being of teachers is still unclear.
The participants in this study were teachers from four different secondary schools in Bloemfontein. A total of ten teachers were selected to take part in this study.

The data collection instrument for this study was a semi-structured interview. An interview is an open-ended conversation used to gather information from the participants (Hennink et al., 2020). A semi-structured interview is an appropriate method to use when a researcher wishes to gather in-depth information about the participants’ experiences in a systematic manner. The teachers were visited in their respective schools and the interview took place during long break period; therefore, the normal school time-table was not disrupted by the research activities. Thematic analysis method was used, as this method makes it easier for the researchers to read and organise the data, as well as to make sense of the data by coding and grouping the themes together (Hennink et al., 2020).

Credibility and dependability were followed to ensure trustworthiness. Credibility refers to the confidence in the truth of a study, which means that the findings are important criteria of the study (Connelly, 2016) and the researchers will therefore make sure to record the phenomena accurately and then give a detailed description of the investigated surroundings. Dependability refers to the reliability and consistency of the findings and if the study were to be repeated with the same methods, in the same context, and with the same participants, the same results would occur. The researchers addressed this value by describing the methods for data collection, data analysis and the design so that future researchers would get the same results.

Ethical clearance were obtained from the University of the Free State as well as the Department of Education. The principals of the four schools gave a permission letter before the researchers asked the teachers to take part in the study. After the teachers had been asked to participate in the study, the selected teachers gave their consent by signing a consent form. The participants were made aware of the purpose of this study, and they were also informed before the interview that participation was voluntary and confidential.

Ethical consideration

Approvals to collect data from the schools were obtained from the school management of the various schools used for the study. The interviews with the selected teachers were conducted during break period, this was done inorder not to disrupt the normal lesson periods.

Analysis and Findings

Below are direct quotes from participants’ interviews based on the research questions that guided the study.

Research Question 1: How do teachers see disruptive behaviour in the classroom?

This category represents research questions one that explores how teachers perceive learners’ disruptive behaviour in their classrooms. The various definitions and types of learner disruptive behaviour provided by the participants were addressed to highlight the fact that various teachers have different perspectives and views about the concept of learners’ disruptive behaviour. The participants were asked to define learner disruptive behaviour in their own words. According to the participant, learner disruptive behaviour is,

P1: “As the whole goal of teaching is to facilitate learning to reach a specific outcome, learner disruptive behaviour is the actions that keep me from achieving this in my classroom.”

P2: “learner’s disruptive behaviour from my own perspective is when a learner did the opposite of everything one asked them to do, such as not following the class or school rules”.

P3: “learner’s disruptive behaviour happens when learners consistently interfere with my teaching and hinder other learners from learning. I also see it as any action from a learner that is unacceptable or unethical and can disrupt the learning process”.

P4: This participant claimed that his understanding of the concept of learner disruptive behaviour is when a learner is uncooperative in the classroom and prevent him from working in the class.

P5: This participant said that learner disruptive behaviour is when learners do not take on their responsibilities in the classroom. The respondent further stated that, learner’s disruptive behaviour occurs when learners act inappropriately in the classroom.

Learner disruptive behaviour, as stated by one of the participants, is when learners act egocentrically and are selfish in the classroom, while others claimed that they see learner disruptive behaviour as a combination of poor characteristics of the learner, which creates a deficiency in the teachers’ teaching skills.

The participants seem to all have the same perspective regarding the description of disruptive behaviours they encounter in the classroom. The most common disruptive behaviour the participants mentioned was that of disrespect towards teachers and class peers’ constant talking and walking around during teaching lessons, incomplete assignments and homework, using cell phones, sleeping in the classroom, and making jokes. However, two major themes were discovered from the participants’ transcribed interviews, namely: Learners refusing to take instructions, to follow rules and command, and disruption of the process of teaching and learning.
Research Question Two:

What are the causes of disruptive behaviour in the classroom?

According to the participants there are several causes which lead to learner disruptive behaviour in the classroom. The participants stated the following as causes of disruptive behaviour in the classroom:

P6: “the cause of disruptive behaviour in the classrooms to the best of my knowledge is linked to lack of interest in classroom activities, if a student is interested in learning activities, he or she will not disturb the class and will be very attentive during lessons. So, lack of interest is one of the causes of disruptive behaviour”.

This response shows that students’ interest towards learning has a significant role to play in the life of the learners. When students are interested in learning, it controls their behaviour both inside and outside of the classroom. Another respondents stated that:

P7: “parents don’t discipline their children and teach them the basic respect towards others, and this has been the major cause of classroom disruptive behaviour by students, if their parents train them very well, they will learn to behave well even in the classroom”.

This responses by participant seven shows that lack of parental responsibility or parental involvement in the education of the child pose serious danger to the overall growth of the learners. If parents play their role very well, learners disruptive behaviour can be curbed.

P8: “some learners have problems at home which they bring to school to seek attention from others and another, in the cause of doing this, sometimes the behaviour becomes disruptive. So, the students should settle their problems at home before coming to school with it”.

P9: “Another cause of disruptive behaviour in the classroom is due to peer pressure”.

From the responses of respondents on the causes of disruptive behaviour in the classroom as seen above, it is evidence therefore that so many factors are responsible for students’ disruptive behaviour ranging from lack of parental responsibility in training the child, peer pressure, lack of interest in classroom activities and students’ constant exposure to domestic violence among others. This incidence of disruptive behaviour when not controlled may have negative impact on teachers’ overall well-being.

Research Question three

What is the impact of learners’ disruptive behaviour on teachers’ well-being?

Because of coping with disruptive behaviour every day in the classrooms, most participants felt overwhelmed, stressed, and anxious. The emotions and feelings they encountered because of coping with this phenomenon were conveyed by the participants. The participants had these to say:

P10: “I feel frustrated dealing with behavioural issues in the classroom especially disruptive behaviours. When students continue to behave in such a manner that classroom activities are disrupted, I become frustrated, and this affect my general wellbeing”.

Other participants found learners’ disruptive behaviour in their classrooms irritating and frustrating. One of the participants stated that;

P2: I feel angry and most times exhausted emotionally, psychologically, and physically when I noticed that students are not obeying rules and acting in disobedient manner in the classroom.

Some participants’ statements revealed that because of the presence of this phenomenon in their classes, these teachers experienced emotional problems. As professionals, two participants stated that they had to deal with the learners’ disruptive behaviour as well, which in turn has prevented them to fulfil their workplace duties.

Two other participants mentioned having health issues and that the learners’ constant disruptive behaviour had led to increasing their health issues, causing them to end up in hospital. There was a participant who was new to one of the schools and had had more than one mental breakdown due to her expectations not being met by her learners. One participant claimed that she was proof of what burnout is, as she had developed health issues caused by learners’ disruptive behaviour. Two of the male participants stated “they were very calm people and that it took a lot for them to become angry and frustrated, but there have been cases where learners’ disruptive behaviour has pushed them to a point where they physically grabbed the learners out of their chairs and screamed at them”.

From these scenarios, the participants described that physically they shook with anger and their heartbeat was extremely fast. They claimed that they did not have control over their reactions towards those learners. Seven participants notified the researchers that learners’ disruptive behaviour seemed to determine how their relationships were with their learners.

“When a disruptive learner enters my classroom, I’m immediately rude and short with them. I never want to listen to them or make jokes with them in the class.”
Four other participants had the same answer regarding the teacher-learner relationship. One participant stated that learners’ disruptive behaviour had no impact on their social well-being regarding relationships with colleagues. Another participant stated that learner disruptive behaviour did not cause any friction between him and his colleagues, with four other participants making the same statement. Four participants notified the researchers that when they felt angry or frustrated due to learners’ disruptive behaviour, their colleagues would support one another.

From the findings as presented above, it is evident that students’ disruptive behaviour posed a serious challenge to teachers’ overall well-being. This implies that disruptive behaviour has negative impact on teachers’ well-being.

Discussion of Findings.

It was clear that the participants all faced the phenomenon of learners’ disruptive behaviour in the classroom. From the findings, it was also clear that the ten participants each gave their perspective on how they saw the concept of disruptive behaviour and what types of disruptive behaviour they encounter in the classroom. Looking at the different perspectives of the concepts of learners’ disruptive behaviour, the researchers can state that learners’ disruptive behaviour is the behaviour of learners that prevents teachers from facilitating their classrooms and reaching the educational outcomes, and when learners violate rules. The main finding of this study was that the participants revealed that learners’ disruptive behaviour harms teachers’ well-being. This finding is consistent with Anand, (2014); Sullivan et al., & (2014); Nash and Schlösser, (2015) who in their separate studies found that students’ disruptive behaviour has a negative impact on teachers’ responses and overall well-being. The result is also in agreement with Aldrup et al. (2018), who also found that the well-being of teachers rapidly reduces when they face high levels of disruptive behaviour in the classroom. It is very challenging for teachers to deal with disruptive behaviour in schools as learners’ behaviour is intolerable and stress-provoking, leading to a decrease in teachers’ psychological and cognitive well-being.

Job demands are the physical, psychological, social, or organizational aspects that require an abundance of physical and psychological (cognitive and emotional) effort and usually harm individuals’ well-being. In this study, learners’ disruptive behaviour was the job demand that has an impact on teachers’ well-being. The participants reported that they were frustrated, which shows that learners’ disruptive behaviour keeps teachers from teaching, which has an impact on their cognitive well-being. Teachers who feel that they cannot teach due to learner disruptive behaviour feel unsuccessful in their job. Teachers need to feel that they are doing a good job teaching so that they can become confident in their skills and abilities in the workplace. Learners’ disruptive behaviour issues in the classroom wear down the teachers’ feeling of effectiveness. It is difficult for the participants to feel their worth in the profession when the negative emotions about learners become too overwhelming.

The two male participants who reported that they had no control over their reactions towards the disruptive learners, stated that the disruptive behaviour had an impact on them physically as they reacted completely out of response. Since teachers are so dominated by high stress, it can be the source of many physical and emotional issues. Too much tension in one’s life will create a staggering number of diseases. Exhaustion, headaches, indigestion, sleep disorders, high blood pressure, chronic pain, depression, and many more can be among these diseases. The sensation of being exhausted is the most dominant symptom of stress noticed by interviewing the participants. The participants’ productivity decreased and can cause burnout when the burden of learners’ disruptive behaviour becomes too much. Participants who have had burnout during their careers reported high levels of work de-personalisation, low morale, and emotional fatigue. In the finding, one of the participants made a statement about never wanting to listen or have fun with the disruptive class. Thus, it can be seen that learners’ disruptive behaviour has a negative impact on the social well-being of a teacher in respect of the teacher-learner relationship. Teachers’ well-being is impacted by the quality of relationships between their learners, and a poor teacher-learner relationship seems to have a negative impact on the social well-being of a teacher. Looking at the findings of this study and the four dimensions of teachers’ well-being (cognitive, psychological, physical, and social), it was clear that after the conducted interviews, learners’ disruptive behaviour had the most impact on the teachers’ physical, cognitive, and psychological well-being.

One of the participants said it was a general challenge to handle her classroom, and the most difficult part of classroom management was that a technique that worked for one class did not seem to work for another class. This can increase disruptive behaviour and decrease their well-being if teachers do not have efficient techniques for classroom management. Although the older participants, with more experience in managing disruptive behaviour, also reported that they sometimes still experienced learners’ disruptive behaviour to have a negative impact on their well-being. Even though the participants are teaching different phases in the secondary education system, it seems that no matter the grade or phase of the learners, some form of disruptive behaviour occurs in the classroom, which has an impact on teachers’ well-being.

The results of the study agreed with earlier findings by Schwab, Eckstein & Reusser, (2019) that in the teaching profession, learners’ disruptive behaviour is one of the biggest challenges that teachers face. Aldrup et al., (2018) also found in their study that students disruptive behaviours impact teachers’ well-being negatively. The results are also consistent with Briesch, Briesch & Chafouleas, (2015) who found that common examples of disruptive behaviours in the classroom include disrespect of rules and regulations, not following the laid down procedures by teachers or the school authority, walking around in class during lessons, fidgeting, fighting and talking to class peers during lessons, speaking out of turn; and moving furniture around. It is evident from the findings of the study and the discussion of the results therefore that learners’ disruptive behaviour has negative impact on teachers’ well-being.
Conclusion

From the findings of this study along with the literature review, there are strong indications that learners’ disruptive behaviours have negative impact on the teachers’ cognitive, psychological, physical, and social well-being. One conclusion that can be taken from this study is that the experiences of teachers in their classroom of disruptive behaviour are closely connected to their well-being.

Based on the findings of the study, the researchers recommend that:

i. Stakeholders should respond to this phenomenon of students’ disruptive behaviour, since teachers’ well-being plays an important role in the education system.

ii. The Department of Education should encourage teachers to enforce behavioural policies regularly and ensure that the overall school atmosphere helps to increase teacher well-being.

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