



Understanding the relational well-being of primary school teachers in rural South Africa



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Background: The workplace can be a source of stress if relationships are strained, as these interactions significantly impact individual well-being. Although numerous studies address the challenges and well-being of teachers, there is a scarcity of research on the relational experiences and relationships that are essential for teachers' well-being.

Objectives: The study aimed to understand the relational experiences and relationships that contribute to the well-being of teachers in rural primary schools.

Methods: Purposive sampling was employed to select 10 male and female teachers with five or more years of teaching experience from quintile 1–3 ordinary rural schools in South Africa. The data were obtained through semi-structured interviews and analysed thematically.

Results: The study's findings revealed that schools can provide conducive spaces for experiencing and forming positive interactional relationships with learners, peers and the community. In addition, teachers thrive because of important relationships that give meaning, such as nurturing interpersonal collaboration, finding purpose in life, fulfilment and valued relationships. Such relationships enable teachers to consistently strive for the best in their work performance.

Conclusion: Positive interactional relationships not only enhance the well-being of teachers but also contribute to the overall success of education.

Contribution: Our findings have implications for relational well-being interventions for teachers in the education sector.

Keywords: primary school; relationships; rural; teacher; well-being.

Introduction

Across the globe, education systems strive to provide high-quality education for their countries, requiring a supply of excellent teachers. However, attracting and retaining teachers, especially in remote schools, has become increasingly challenging (See et al., 2020). According to Hanushek (2011) and Sutcher et al. (2016), high-quality education and teachers are crucial for every country's development, yet recruiting and keeping qualified teachers has long been a global educational policy concern. Darling-Hammond (2010) adds that teaching quality is influenced not only by the teacher's abilities but also by the instructional context. This means that even highly skilled teachers may face difficulties if there is a mismatch between the demands of the situation and their expertise (Darling-Hammond, 2010). Consequently, teacher shortages in under-resourced rural schools are a critical issue in some developed countries (Miller et al., 2012) and even more prevalent in most developing countries (McEwan, 1999). Du Plessis and Mestry (2019) state that teachers in these rural schools face numerous serious challenges and often lack adequate support services. In South Africa, despite 25 years of democracy, there has been little progress in improving educational standards and student performance in rural schools (Du Plessis & Mestry, 2019).

Since 1994, efforts have been made to address the impact of apartheid on the education system in South Africa (Levinson, 2019). With a population of approximately 59.6 million people, South Africa has over 410 000 teachers and around 14.2 million learners in various types of schools (Statistics South Africa, 2019). The national schooling system in South Africa is divided into public and independent schools. Public schools are controlled by the state, and independent schools are privately governed. It is worth noting that most public schools are in rural areas (Gardiner, 2008). The term 'rural school' refers to any public school located on government land, communal land or private land (particularly on farms and church land), and is characterised by isolation, remoteness and dispersed settlements (Department of Education, 2005).

South African schools are classified based on the socio-economic conditions of the school using a categorisation system known as quintiles (Department of Basic Education, 2015), which helps allocate resources and provide support to schools based on their socio-economic context. Quintile 1 denotes poor schools, and quintile 5 represents wealthy or affluent schools. For this study, rural schools are defined as those located in areas characterised by social and economic deprivation, poverty and limited access to essential services, such as sanitation facilities, access to clean water, roads, transportation and electricity (Department of Basic Education, 2017; Wessels & Wood, 2019). Grenville-Cleave and Boniwell (2012) found that teachers in rural schools rate their well-being significantly lower compared to other professional occupations. Wessels and Wood (2019) argue that teachers working in under-resourced contexts typically face challenges that can negatively affect their well-being and hinder optimal performance and curriculum delivery. However, motivated and enthusiastic teachers are vital for providing quality education and improving their own well-being (Keller et al., 2016). Fredrickson (2013) also states that enhancing teachers' well-being is important as they play a crucial role in the quality of education.

Roos and Du Toit (2014) believe that good relationships are key to fulfilling official roles and promoting mental health and well-being among teachers. When workplace relationships are characterised by cooperation, trust and fairness, they activate the brain's reward centre (Geue, 2017). This activation fosters future interactions that cultivate employee trust, respect and confidence, creating an environment where employees inspire each other's performance. Organisations with better employee engagement experience a range of advantages, including lower business costs, enhanced performance outcomes, decreased staff turnover rates, reduced absenteeism and fewer safety incidents (Gallup, 2015). McCallum et al. (2017) suggest that positive relationships with students, parents, colleagues and leadership can have a significant positive influence on teachers' sense of well-being, making this an area worthy of further research. The increased awareness of the importance of investigating relationships that influence the well-being of teachers (Geue, 2017; Grenville-Cleave & Boniwell, 2012; Keller et al., 2016; McCallum et al., 2017; Wessels & Wood, 2019) has prompted this research. As much as previous studies emphasise the importance of relationships on teachers' well-being, there is a gap in research on understanding the relational experiences and significant relationships that contribute to the overall well-being of teachers in rural primary schools.

Literature review

Relationships of teachers, students, peers and communities in rural schools

The relationships among teachers, peers, students and the community in rural area schools play a crucial role in shaping the educational experience and outcomes. In a study conducted by Nambiito and Ngumenawe (2024) in Uganda,

on teacher-student relationships and their impact on educational quality, the findings revealed that strong, positive relationships between teachers and students are crucial for student engagement and retention. The reason being when teachers are approachable and supportive, it creates a better atmosphere and promotes positive interaction which can significantly influence students' attitudes towards learning (Michael et al., 2023). In addition, in rural settings, the close-knit nature fosters a supportive environment where students feel more connected and valued, thereby enhancing their learning experiences (Elder & Conger, 2014). The relationships among teachers, students and communities are often characterised by collaboration and mutual support, essential for overcoming the resource constraints and isolation commonly faced in rural settings (Azano & Stewart, 2015).

Moreover, according to Epstein (2011), the relationship between the school and the broader community is vital for resource sharing and fostering a conducive learning environment. Community involvement in school activities and decision-making processes can enhance the educational experience by ensuring that the school's practices and policies align with local needs and values. Sa'ad and Sadiq (2014) also believe that schools with active community engagement and support experience higher student motivation and performance levels. Therefore, understanding and nurturing these relationships is essential for improving educational outcomes in rural schools as well as teacher well-being (Hascher & Waber, 2021).

Challenges of teacher well-being and importance of relationships

Aelterman et al. (2018) define teacher well-being as a positive emotional state resulting from the harmony between environmental factors and the personal needs and expectations of teachers. Acton and Glasgow (2015) describe teacher well-being as an individual sense of personal and professional fulfilment, satisfaction, purposefulness and happiness constructed through collaborative processes with colleagues and students. According to McCallum et al. (2017), teacher well-being is also influenced by contextual characteristics such as gender, schooling level, career stage and subject specialisation.

Teacher well-being significantly impacts teaching styles, behaviour and the transmission of positive emotions, enthusiasm and motivation in the classroom (Burić & Frenzel, 2020). Furthermore, the well-being of teachers directly influences the functioning and performance of schools, which in turn affects student performance (Fouché, 2015). According to Mwangi (2013), principals' leadership behaviour significantly influences teachers' professional well-being. However, despite extensive research on general well-being and principals' leadership styles, there is a notable lack of focus on teachers' professional well-being (Yildirim, 2014). Existing research primarily addresses teacher burnout rather than highlighting teachers' strengths and well-being (Hoy & Tarter, 2011).

In South Africa, teachers' well-being encompasses psychological, physical and emotional health (Yildirim, 2014). The physical and social isolation inherent in rural settings can contribute to a sense of disconnection from broader educational communities, leaving teachers feeling unsupported and undervalued (Graham et al., 2011). In addition, rural teachers frequently encounter socio-economic challenges within the communities they serve, including high levels of poverty and limited access to healthcare and social services. These conditions can create additional emotional and psychological burdens, as teachers strive to address their students' diverse needs while managing their own well-being (Beltman et al., 2018). According to Pitsoe (2013), approximately 55% of South African teachers would leave the profession if given the opportunity, citing stress as one of the reasons caused by the aforementioned challenges. The importance of teachers' professional well-being in educational organisations is increasingly recognised because of its direct impact on teacher retention rates (Acton & Glasgow, 2015).

According to McCallum and Price (2016), teachers need a well-being strategy to ensure their effectiveness in the classroom. However, implementing such strategies is challenging because of various factors affecting teachers' well-being, including the impacts of the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic between 2020 and 2022. Many teachers experienced heightened stress and anxiety because of the sudden shift to remote teaching, lack of access to technology and insufficient training on digital platforms, particularly in South Africa (Mphahlele & Mashau, 2020). The closure of schools disrupted not only the educational process but also the support systems that teachers relied on, exacerbating feelings of isolation and burnout (Motala & Menon, 2020). Additionally, the pandemic highlighted existing inequalities, as rural schools often lacked the necessary resources to effectively transition to online learning, putting additional pressure on teachers to bridge these gaps (Chigona, 2021).

Moreover, the COVID-19 pandemic significantly impacted the relational well-being of teachers in rural areas. The enforced isolation measures and social distancing protocols hindered the ability of teachers to engage with colleagues, students and the broader community, leading to a sense of professional and personal disconnection. This relational strain not only affected their emotional well-being but also their motivation and job satisfaction. Teachers in rural areas often rely on close-knit community relationships for support and collaboration and the disruption of these relationships because of the pandemic further intensified the challenges they faced (Spaull & Van der Berg, 2020). The compounded challenges of adapting to new teaching methods, managing personal health concerns and supporting students in under-resourced environments have underscored the critical need for enhanced support and resources for rural teachers to maintain their well-being and effectiveness during such crises (Spaull & Van der Berg, 2020).

To enhance teachers' well-being, Reis and Gable (2015) suggest relationships may be the most critical source of life satisfaction and well-being. Donnell et al. (2014) emphasise that relationships are a cornerstone of well-being and have been linked to greater happiness, life satisfaction and physical health outcomes. Roos and Du Toit (2014) also highlight that fostering good relationships promotes well-being and thriving. Hargie (2011) in agreement states that relationships which involve ongoing, reciprocal verbal and non-verbal interactions between individuals enhance well-being. Additionally, Brownie and Hortsmanshof (2012) suggest that individuals can achieve relative comfort, security and freedom from anxiety through reciprocal relationships characterised by caring, warmth, satisfaction and trust. According to Donnell et al. (2014), relationships connect human beings, and the sentiment linked to relationships is fundamentally about connections.

Relationships are a consistent and compelling source of meaning, transcending cultural, gender or age differences, and people overwhelmingly regard relationships as crucial to their construction of meaning (Delle Fave et al., 2013). Teachers internalise their experiences in representational models of relationships, which guide their emotional responses during daily interactions with students and co-workers, ultimately affecting their long-term well-being (Spilt et al., 2011). Well-being is enhanced in work environments where employees feel valued and respected and where interactions are trusting, collaborative and positive (Mastroianni & Storberg-Walker, 2014).

Theoretical framework

This study was embedded in relational work theory because it specifically sought to understand relational experiences and relationships of importance that give meaning and contribute to the well-being of primary school teachers in rural areas. Relational working highlights the interplay between the working environment and the interactional relational dynamics within it (Blustein, 2011). Relationships at work play a crucial role in providing satisfaction and a sense of significance. The following are the seven relational propositions within a working environment (Blustein, 2011). Proposition 1 suggests that individuals' thoughts and feelings about work influence their perceptions of and attitudes towards relationships. Proposition 2 posits that individuals' past and present relationships shape their approach to work-related issues and planning. Proposition 3 highlights the intersection of work and relationships in both the workplace and caregiving settings. Proposition 4 indicates that prior relationships can facilitate or impede individuals' decision-making and their ability to engage in work and training. Proposition 5 states that individuals' decisions at work impact their relationships with others. Proposition 6 asserts that individuals derive meaning from their work through their relationships with others, taking cultural influences into account. Lastly, Proposition 7 emphasises that cultural context provides a sense of security and belonging in relationships, helping individuals navigate work transitions and concerns.

To the best of the researchers' knowledge, there is a limited understanding of the relational experiences and relationships that contribute to the well-being of primary school teachers in rural South African communities. This study aimed to explore the relational experiences of teachers at a rural primary school and identify the significant relationships that enhance their well-being. In this context, understanding the relational experiences of teachers in rural schools can help the Department of Basic Education develop interventions that enhance teachers' relational well-being and contribute to the quality of education in South African rural schools. In addition, the research aimed to contribute to the literature on the relational well-being of rural primary school teachers, and to inform policies that promote effective communication strategies among teachers, students and the broader community in rural schools.

Research methods and design

Sampling and participants

The study is a qualitative phenomenological research design. Maxwell (2013) explained that the qualitative approach focusses on understanding the meaning participants ascribe to events, situations and lived experiences. In this study, the participants described the unique relational experiences and important, meaningful relationships that contributed to their well-being as teachers teaching in rural primary schools. The researchers used purposive sampling to select 10 male and female participants who were foundation and intermediate phase teachers. The selected teachers had been teaching for at least 5 years, with ages ranging from 30 to 56 years. Their qualifications varied from teaching diplomas for the older teachers to master's degrees for the younger ones. The participants were chosen based on their fulfilment of the inclusion criteria and their willingness to share their relational experiences and relationships that contribute to their well-being in the rural school context. The motivation behind these criteria was to gather diverse insights from experienced educators across different age groups and qualification levels to understand their relational well-being.

Sample description

The study consisted of 10 South African teachers who work in rural schools in Mpumalanga province. As per the inclusion and exclusion criteria of this study, the participants were chosen based on: their willingness to participate; teaching experience of 5 years and more from quintile 1–3 ordinary rural schools; both male and female teachers; and teachers who use English as a medium of instruction were included.

Data collection

Data were collected through semi-structured online interviews. The data collection was carried out during the COVID-19 pandemic, and therefore, it was performed on a virtual platform (Microsoft Teams). All interviews were conducted in English. Each interview took 45 min to an hour. All the

interviews were audio recorded with the consent of the participants using Microsoft Teams' digital audio recorder. Subsequently, all data were transcribed and presented as findings of this study.

Data analysis

Data from the semi-structured interviews were analysed using Braun and Clarke's (2013) six-step thematic analysis process. This process entails familiarising oneself with the data by reading interview transcripts multiple times before doing any coding or analysis. Because the researchers transcribed the interview transcripts, repeatedly listening to the interview recordings during the transcription process ensured familiarity with the data. Subsequently, the researchers generated codes from the data, which were used to formulate themes and subthemes. The themes and subthemes derived from the codes were assigned names and were constantly reviewed until their finalisation. In this study, teachers are described using numbers, age and gender, for example, Participant 1, age 65, female (P1, 65, female)

To ensure credibility and trustworthiness, there was a prolonged engagement in the field and the researchers continuously checked with participants to ensure that their views had been accurately captured. Two experienced coders independently analysed the data. The researchers kept reflexive notes throughout the study to reduce the possibility of biased findings (Braun & Clarke, 2022)

Ethical considerations

This research study received approval from the Faculty of Humanities Research Ethics Committee at the University of Pretoria (Reference no.: 28000367 (HUM032/0521)) before the commencement of data collection. Permission was also granted by the Provincial Department of Education in Mpumalanga to conduct the research in schools. Informed consent forms and information sheets were provided to the participants to offer detailed information about the study and outline the nature of their involvement. Participants expressed their consent in writing by completing the provided forms upon recruitment. Confidentiality was assured to protect the participants, and pseudonyms were used in reporting research results so as to maintain participants' anonymity.

Results

The findings were classified under two main themes, namely relational experiences and important relationships, to provide a detailed account of the rural school teachers' experiences. The first theme on relational experiences has the following subthemes: Teacher and learner relationships, teacher and parent relationships, collegial relationships and community relationships. The second theme on important relationships has the subthemes: collaborative interpersonal relationships, purposeful relationships, supportive relationships, sense of fulfilment and valued relationships.

Theme 1: Relational experiences

According to Reis and Gable (2010), relational experiences are integral to our identity as human beings because relationships significantly contribute to our well-being. Similarly, the teaching-learning process must involve teachers and learners to be successful and effective. In this study, relational experiences were described through how teachers relate with learners, parents, colleagues and the community.

Subtheme 1: Teacher and learner relationships

The participants expressed their sentiments regarding how they relate to their pupils as shown in the following excerpts:

'My relationship with the learners is nurturing, and it gives me the joy to see them happy.' (P1, 47, female)

'The relationship is very good. We have a close and open relationship.' (P2, 30, male)

'I do enjoy it a lot with the learners because sometimes they make jokes, and they talk innocently. I enjoy teaching.' (P4, 53, female).

'These relationships are connected. As a teacher, it feels good.' (P6, 50, male)

This subtheme highlights the importance of the learner and teacher relationship in teachers enjoying their work and positively impacting their well-being. The findings showed that most teachers appear to experience positive, good and open relationships with their learners. The excerpts above align with da Luz's (2015) emphasis on the positive impact of good learner and teacher relations on learner performance and teacher satisfaction. Additionally, Coristine et al. (2022) affirm that positive relationships between teachers and students make the teachers become more successful in the classroom and make the classroom a safe and welcoming environment. Sheldon and Epstein (2013) echoed these sentiments, suggesting that positive relationships with learners benefit teachers by reducing their career changes and providing a greater sense of fulfilment in their careers.

Subtheme 2: Teacher and parent relationships

Teacher and parent relationships were mainly described as challenging because parents are expected to contribute as active agents to foster the relationships between the school and learners to help shape learners' education but the parents do not connect with the schools. The participants expressed their experiences as follows:

'I feel that there is a lack of support for us as educators. The parents don't show support even when you write a letter to them. It always leads to me, as a teacher, feeling like I failed the learners, like I'm helpless because I can see they have potential but alone I cannot do it.' (P5, 33, female)

'The parents are not concerned about their children's education. It makes me feel bad because with these children, if their parents can be on board, we're going to produce a lot of great kids, and that would help us in our community.' (P4, 53, female)

These comments show there is not really a relationship between parents and teachers. The lack of parental

involvement presents numerous challenges for teachers to create good, reciprocal relationships with parents for the benefit of the children. Zedan (2012) supports the notion that contact between parents and the school and parents' participation in parent-teacher meetings play a crucial role in fostering teacher-parent relationships that can improve learners' performance in school. Similarly, Stright and Yeo (2014) believe that school-focussed parenting practices are significant predictors of children's achievements. Islam (2019) reinforces the idea that positive interactions between teachers and parents spill over to help improve student engagement and learning outcomes.

Subtheme 3: Collegial relationships

This subtheme addresses the experiences of teachers and their colleagues (other teachers, the principal, heads of departments, circuit managers and other staff in schools). Their relationships were described in relation to the support and assistance they rendered each other. The following excerpts illustrate the teacher-colleague relational experiences:

'It's a healthy relationship because we have fun, and we help each other.' (P2, 30, male)

'I can walk to the principal's office and ask a question about something I don't understand and get support.' (P5, 33, female)

'With my colleagues, it is different to the extent that you sometimes come to work with baggage from home, and you speak to our colleagues and assist you with the problem. This shows how honest and trustworthy they are.' (P10, 48, female)

'I take them as my sisters because 90% of my life I spend here with them. Our relationship means a lot because I've learned something from each one.' (P5, 33, female)

'It makes me feel good because I will become open and transparent about the child's needs and learn from each other about the child.' (P4, 53, female)

These excerpts reveal the dedication of the teachers and the value they place on their relationships with each other. The findings also highlighted the supportive role of co-workers in strengthening relationships between teachers and higher management. Spilt et al. (2011) point out that the well-being of teachers who experience representational models of relationships that guide emotional responses in daily interactions with learners and co-workers enables students to improve in the long run. The findings align with McCallum and Price's (2016) finding that teacher quality, retention, satisfaction and well-being are key elements for a sustained profession to maintain motivation and prepare teachers to fulfil aspirational outcomes as leaders.

The findings also revealed that teachers have not only developed work relationships but have also connected and emotionally supported each other and become like a family. The following are some of the participants' excerpts:

'The most important one is the one with my peers because having a good relationship with peers makes the working environment and conditions much more enjoyable, and you'll be able to perform very well. They can help and assist you where

you have difficulties. So, it's simple to talk to anyone and engage them for assistance.' (P2, 30, male)

'We are a community now ourselves, we are family. We are there for one another all the time. It makes me feel good because I know whenever I'm not feeling good, some people pick up the phones and check on me. When someone has lost a loved one, we are there for this person. They know my children. Talk to them about my children even make, even if they have not met them, but they know them by name.' (P9, 56, female)

The preceding excerpts show that there is a sense of community and belonging among the participants that is expressed through their mutual assistance in both work obligations and personal problems. According to Geue (2017), when relationships in the workplace are characterised by cooperation, trust and fairness, it encourages future interactions that promote respect and confidence and inspire each other in their performance. Participants also indicated that they live in harmony and are always there for one another in times of need. In support of this, Greenaway et al. (2018) describe social and professional relationships as vital in offering support, interpersonal emotional regulation, companionship, motivation and mentorship, ultimately enhancing social and emotional well-being.

In all human relational interactions, there are bound to be disagreements (Valente et al., 2020). The findings showed that although there are cordial relationships among colleagues, there are also at times disagreements. The participants described disagreements as follows:

'We quarrel as human beings, but it is not that bad in such a way that we will fight not talking to each other. We disagree, but that does not mean we are fighting. The truth is that 90% of our relationships are good. It is a working relationship.' (P3, 46, male)

'Like any human, I feel angry sometimes when other colleagues refuse to be team players.' (P7, 53, male)

These excerpts show that the conflicts seem to strengthen relationships and help the participants achieve goals for the benefit of their learners. Kazimoto (2013) also believes that disagreements occur when the goals, interests or values of different individuals or groups are compatible. Additionally, Wong (2011, 2016) is also of the view that conflict management plays a role in thriving in any work situation.

Subtheme 4: Community leaders' relationships

In this study, teachers expressed strong relationships with community leaders. These include political leaders, church leaders and municipality counsellors. The relational experiences were expressed as follows:

'The political leaders of this place are so supportive of our school. Even the church leaders from the Presbyterian Church have given to the school. We find that we would have problems, maybe the school has got no water and that there's so much support ... Yes, so they are very good for us.' (P10, 48, female)

'One day we had a challenge with electricity, and we went to the house just nearby the school, and they managed to assist us for the sake of the learners without expecting payment.' (P3, 46, male)

'I feel that this is a type of community that you want as a teacher, and they respect the work of a teacher, and they embrace education.' (P3, 46, male)

The teachers appreciate the relationship, support and involvement of the community leaders in school activities, and the support makes them feel respected as teachers and appreciated for their work. Henderson and Mapp (2002) state that the relationship with the community is important as it plays a significant supporting role in the school's communal motivation. Crocker et al. (2017) also state that relationships are inherently interdependent, and communal motivation to care for others is essential to ensure the well-being of both parties, which is the teachers and community in this case. The IIEP-UNESCO Report (2018) states that the involvement of communities and families is a key pillar of education.

Theme 2: Important relationships

This theme describes important relationships that contribute to the teachers' well-being. These relationships are described through the subthemes collaborative interpersonal relationships, purposeful relationships, supportive relationships, a sense of fulfilment and valued relationships.

Subtheme 1: Collaborative interpersonal relationships

This subtheme describes the experiences of the participants with collaborative relationships within the school context that are important to them. To illustrate the collaborative interpersonal experiences, the following excerpts are presented:

'The importance of collaboration effort from learners, colleagues, and the community and that these relations need to be nurtured.' (P4, 53, female)

'So that's why I'm saying that I make sure that I nurture the relations. I believe in everyone playing their part.' (P1, 47, female)

'The collaborative relationship has assisted me in developing more strategies to deal with young people and minds and in basically dealing with people.' (P2, 30, male)

The connectedness created by these relationships motivates the participants to explore better ways of interacting with others, which promotes positive emotions. This type of relationship is deemed important and gives meaning to the participants as they value relationships and see it as a channel to help improve the quality of teaching and learning in the classroom. Khan et al. (2020) found that employees report higher levels of motivation when interpersonal relationships with co-workers are good and when interactions are trusting, collaborative and positive. Additionally, Martin (2013) purports that positive interpersonal relationships have been proposed as a buffer against stress and risk and serve as a basis for social and emotional development.

Subtheme 2: Purposeful relationships

This subtheme focusses on purposeful relationships as experienced by teachers in a rural school context. The following excerpts are presented to illustrate purposeful relationship experiences:

'They build my character, and they bring about change, even in my personal life.' (P3, 46, male)

'I'm not here for the money, but I'm here for my interest. I'm here for the kids. It makes me proud that I've done something in the community.' (P5, 33, female)

'I feel I should be a role model. I should be someone with whom I should be trusted, and they are indeed being entrusted as well.' (P7, 53, male)

'Being a teacher is my calling.' (P10, 48, female)

'It made me feel proud, and it makes me want to do more good.' (P8, 47, female)

These excerpts show that purposeful relationships are important to the participants because they feel it allows them to embrace their work and make a difference in their learners' performance. They also mentioned that good trusting relationships motivate them to want to do more for the learners and that investing in their learners' performance contributes to them valuing their professions and motivates them to continue doing good for the community. This supports Dzokoto et al.'s (2019) statement that work-related meaning is associated with doing significant work that contributes to the greater good. Mason (2015) also found that work-related meaning contributes to a sense of connectedness, direction, relational dependency and the need to give back. Ryff (2014) also asserts that humans experience meaningfulness through purposeful relationships that contribute to their well-being.

The findings showed that participants expressed that their purpose is embedded in building community through the learners they teach with no expectations of any form of financial gain. This supports Person et al.'s (2016) statement that meaning in life is linked to work-derived identity, experiences of self-worth, and people's impact on others through service and social connections afforded by work to promote purposeful living (Ryff, 2014; Ryff & Singer, 2013).

Subtheme 3: Supportive relationships

This subtheme revealed that good supportive relationships with colleagues and community members positively contribute to the performance of teachers in rural schools. The following excerpts are examples of this:

'I need my peers, school management team (SMT), and the community. We need each other, and I cannot do it on my own.' (P1, 47, female)

'Working together is the most important key in an institution. So as teachers, we need to support each other.' (P1, 47, female)

'The political leaders of this place are so supportive of our school.' (P10, 48, female)

'We are so united, and the support that I get from them whenever I come across a challenge.' (P5, 33, female)

Forming good, supportive relationships appears to have improved support structures among teachers. This supports Chakraborty and Ganguly's (2019) statement that

a positive work environment includes transparent and open communication, recognition, team spirit and appreciation. This social connectedness can be understood as the heart of care and support for African people (Stavrova & Luhmann, 2016). According to Wang et al. (2018), the strong ties developed through social interactions assist innovators in the search for inspiration, sponsorship and support within the workplace.

Subtheme 4: Sense of fulfilment

In this study, the teachers expressed that they get a sense of fulfilment from good relationships, their hard work and the learners' success in their education. The following are some of the participants' sentiments:

'In these relationships, I'm gaining a lot. It's rewarding when graduates return to the school to thank you, and it reminds me to focus on why I am here. It makes me realise that I love being a teacher.' (P1, 47, female)

'When I see them doing something which they were not able to do before through my guidance. For me, it's pure fulfilment.' (P5, 33, female)

'One day when the learners are grown and working, I will be happy that I helped my kids. I feel excellent and that I've made it.' (P4, 53, male)

'In my capacity, it brings a sense of fulfillment, especially when somebody would appreciate what I may have contributed.' (P7, 53, male)

The preceding excerpts reveal that teachers find it gratifying to see their learners perform well and become successful. These experiences contributed to teachers' sense of fulfilment. Keller et al. (2016) confirm that motivated and enthusiastic teachers are vital for the provision of quality education and the promotion of their own well-being. Martin (2013) agrees that passionate teachers are distinguished by their commitment to the achievement of their learners.

Subtheme 5: Valued relationships

In this study, the participants expressed that being valued is important to them. The gratitude and encouraging comments they receive from learners and the community give meaning to their lives and enhance their work performance and relationships. The following are some of the participants' sentiments:

'It brings a sense of encouragement when somebody would appreciate what I may have contributed. I'm proud of this.' (P7, 53, male)

'It impacts your well-being psychologically, emotionally, and spiritually. There's a gift that we must fill in that gap.' (P4, 53, female)

'It gives you courage and even makes you feel well and good about it.' (P10, 48, female)

If someone values my profession, it tells me that I can do better and improve and makes me go the extra mile.' (P3, 46, male)

These excerpts illustrate how encouragement and affirmations make teachers feel valued, motivate them to be more

effective at teaching, and directly have a positive impact on their holistic well-being. According to Mastroianni and Storberg-Walker (2014), when employees feel valued and respected in their work, it enhances their well-being. The excerpts also appear to confirm that being valued promotes teachers' psychological and emotional well-being, and encourages them to go the extra mile in their jobs. The comments they receive from learners and the community give them meaning and enhance their relationships and work performance. Therefore, rewarding employees in the correct way makes them feel valued and engaged in their work (Victor & Hoole, 2017).

Discussion

Implications of the findings

The study presents a positive perspective on relational experiences and emphasises the importance of relationships that provide meaning and contribute to the well-being of teachers in rural primary schools. Positive interactional relationships are regarded as vital, particularly to teachers teaching in rural schools as they motivate and encourage them and bring meaning to their professional and personal lives, these findings corroborate with Hascher and Waber (2021)'s findings. In this study, participants see schools as conducive environments that enable them to form relationships that contribute to their well-being, regardless of the challenges of teaching in a rural primary school. The participants derive fulfilment from positive relational interactions, and it consistently motivates them to perform their best work. Further research of this nature is needed to address issues surrounding the dynamics of teacher relations in rural schools because these relationships help teachers cope with the challenges of working in rural schools. Wright et al. (2007) support the notion that a happy worker is more likely to be a productive worker. Additionally, Greenaway et al. (2018) state that both social and professional relationships are vital as they offer support, interpersonal emotional regulation, companionship, motivation and mentorship, which ultimately enhances social and emotional well-being. This was also revealed in this study as relational experiences with learners, parents, colleagues and the community appeared to sustain the well-being of teachers in rural primary schools. The findings showed that providing good resources is not enough to enable teachers to perform better or improve their well-being but that a conducive environment that fosters positive relationships is necessary to sustain teachers' careers. In agreement with the findings of this study, Nambiito and Ngumenawe (2024) also state that positive interactional relationships enhance teacher performance and contribute to learner success. Teachers thrive in environments where they experience important relationships that provide meaning, such as being valued, and where they can find purpose and a sense of fulfilment because it contributes to their personal growth and overall well-being. Thus, nurturing positive reciprocal interactional

relationships is important to retain and sustain the well-being of teachers in rural schools, and the success of education in South Africa.

Limitations and recommendations

The findings of this study may aid in better interpreting teachers' relational experiences in rural primary schools in South Africa. However, because of the qualitative nature of the study and the small sample size, the findings cannot be generalised as they are not fully representative of all teachers in rural South African primary schools. The method used leads to subjective results that may reflect the experiences and perspectives of the researcher. More studies need to be conducted with different methods, and teachers in other provinces of South Africa to explore diverse contexts.

This study contributes to increasing knowledge and closing the research gap related to the relational well-being of teachers in the South African context, particularly in rural areas. It is recommended that further research be conducted to cultivate positive interactional relationships among teachers, learners, parents and the community as a whole. Such research helps inform policymakers about the importance of encouraging interactional relationships in the education sector, especially in rural primary school settings. Additionally, policymakers should develop interventions that support the future development of schools. Furthermore, it is recommended that school management is encouraged to provide ongoing support to teachers who aim to build positive interactional relationships in schools. Engagement in ongoing professional development focussed on relational well-being and effective communication strategies in rural schools is also recommended. These efforts will help bridge the gap between management teams and teachers by creating open, transparent relationships.

Conclusion

This study highlights the significance of fostering positive reciprocal relationships for primary school teachers in rural areas. The findings suggest that, in addition to providing adequate resources, it is vital to create an environment conducive to positive relationships, which are essential for teachers' performance and well-being. These relationships improve job satisfaction, personal growth and overall well-being, ultimately enhancing learners' success. Despite forming positive interactions with students, colleagues and the broader community, teachers faced challenges in building relationships with parents.

To address this, it is recommended that teachers provide regular updates to parents regarding their children's progress, and actively encourage parental feedback and concerns. Schools should also create opportunities for parents to volunteer in school events or extracurricular activities, thereby fostering strong relationships and empowering parents to take ownership of their children's education. Additionally,

celebrating student achievements with both students and parents through awards at assemblies can strengthen these bonds. Policies that promote and facilitate greater community involvement, such as parent-teacher associations and community volunteer programmes, are also encouraged to fortify the connection between the school and the broader community. These strategies are essential for nurturing relationships, creating a sense of belonging among teachers, parents and the community, and contributing to the success of education in South Africa, particularly in rural schools.

Relationships, especially work relationships, are essential for individuals' well-being, as they spend a significant amount of time at work. Many interactions occur in workspaces, and these reciprocal interactions facilitate the formation of meaningful relationships. Therefore, it is crucial to provide workspaces that enable employees to interact with one another and form relationships that enhance their well-being and work performance.

This study found that teachers who experience positive relationships can more easily identify their purpose, resulting in favourable outcomes for both the school and its community. The participants emphasised the significance of feeling valued by their students and the community, as this serves as a source of encouragement and motivation. This recognition enhances their effectiveness in the classroom and promotes their overall well-being. Having a sense of purpose not only allows teachers to find meaning in their work but also positively impacts their job performance, thereby contributing to their overall well-being.

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Competing interests

The authors declare that they have no financial or personal relationship(s) that may have inappropriately influenced them in writing this article.

Authors' contributions

S.M. is the Master's student who conducted the study and wrote the article. S.C. is the supervisor of the study who supported and assisted with the conceptualisation of the study, study design, article write-up and submission for publication.

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Data availability

All data retrieved will remain in the researchers' possession at the University of Pretoria. The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author, S.C.

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