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**The Mental Health Situation Among Teachers in Learning
Institutions in Kenya: A Concern for Attainment of Quality
Education (SDG. NO. 4)**

By: Dr. Winnie Waiyaki & Dr. Gowon Cherui***

Abstract

The whole area of mental health has gained prominence in recent years. Its impact on emotional, psychological, and social well-being of an individual has become a matter of great concern including in education. Impacts of mental illness to students and pupils have been studied, including how their education and social performance is affected, with several interventions suggested for coping. The education of a nation resonates with the extent to which development occurs and is sustained. However, not much has been studied on the impact of mental health on the instructors in the technical and vocational training institutions. It is assumed that the teachers are well prepared to help learners with mental health problems but, modalities to help instructors cope with their own mental health issues given the prevailing conditions in our society have been overlooked. This paper assesses instructors' awareness of their mental health and coping strategies in technical and vocational training institutions. The paper relies on available secondary data and reviewed existing literature on mental health issues and interventions among instructors. The paper established that many instructors suffer from mental health disorders without being aware. Several etiological factors were identified that contribute to this among them, the working conditions and family issues. The effects of poor mental health

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identified in education include stress, burnout, and demotivation, which, if unattended may give rise to mental disorders such as depression. The paper concludes that individuals, institutions, and policy makers need to work together to address the mental health of instructors and therefore recommended that mental health units be set up in vocational training centers, be equipped with qualified mental health workers who can continually assess for mental disorders and apply requisite interventions promptly. Teachers are also encouraged to take it upon themselves to seek attention for their mental health issues to arrest problems before they get out of hand.

KEY WORDS: Mental Health, instructors, interventions

Introduction

Mental health has become a serious consideration in all sectors. It is a cardinal aspect of life thus its inclusion in the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) (WHO, 2023). In its World Health Mental Report (2022), the WHO noted that concerns for mental health are undoubtedly now universal, but the response has been below par the world over. Accordingly, treatment for most mental disorders is cheap and possible Pearson, Nash, & Ireland (2014), yet the uptake has been slow and inadequate (WHO, 2022). Simultaneously is the vision for quality education articulated by the fourth SDG. There is a necessary intertwining between these two SDGs, in that, for quality education to be realized, the mental health of both teachers and learners needs to be addressed in equal measure.

Existence of mental disorders among professionals, has been well documented. For instance, studies on the legal profession have shown high levels of depression, anxiety and subsequently, substance dependence among lawyers Krill, Johnson & Albert (2016)

while doctors, particularly during and post the Covid pandemic have displayed heightened depression and anxiety (Harvey et. al., 2021). In the UK a study on the engineering profession revealed that engineers are at a high risk of mental disorders arising from a high stress environment (Danowitz & Beddoes, 2022).

The work of teachers has been similarly regarded, due to the responsibility they shoulder as conveyors of knowledge and shapers of future generations (Carlto & Camara, 2015). Furthermore, the workload and poor pay are some of the factors cited as leading to low motivation and burnout (Kotowoski, Davis & Barrat, 2022). According to this study, teachers have therefore been seen to have a high prevalence of stress and mental disorders. Indeed, would be innocuous factors have been seen to lead to mental disorders as one study interestingly noted that their job is so stressful, yet accompanied by less opportunities for vigorous activity, thus leading to depression and anxiety.

It is therefore crucial to address the status of teachers' mental health for better education outcomes, individual well-being, the good of society and for the reduction of the burden of disease.

Concept of mental health

The issue of mental health received prominence during the Covid 19 pandemic. Studies done in North and South America, Poland and England (Hossain et al, 2022) showed the increase in mental health issues during the Covid 19 pandemic period. The mental issues manifested themselves from growing uncertainty, increased workload, health vulnerabilities, exposure to non-stop negative news in media and concern over the wellbeing of students and colleagues.

All these affected the mental health and well-being of primary and secondary teachers.

Teachers' mental issues are important because they not only have a detrimental influence on the teachers themselves but also directly affect classroom outcomes. Recent research by Unicef (Unicef, 2022) observed that there were almost no evidence-based programs globally that focus specifically on supporting the mental health of teacher educators. While safe care to manage stress is important for everyone, policymakers and school leaders must also take responsibility for ensuring teachers are safe, well and organized. More investment is needed in support structure and practices that ensure the wellbeing and job satisfaction of teachers is enabled particularly during time of crisis (Dabrowski, 2022).

Matete (2022) quoted Mrs Benta Opande the secretary general of Kenya Women Teachers Association (KEWOTA) as having said that between 2020-2022 over 22 teachers died of suicide. Their deaths were attributed to mental health issues. She projected that this number would increase if the situation was not checked and that there was need for mental wellness awareness to be enhanced among the teachers to address the menace. On the same breath, the National chairman of Kenya Primary Schools Heads Association (KEPSHA) Mr. Johnson Nzioka advocated for concerted efforts in addressing mental health ailments among teachers that attributed to increased report of suicide cases among teaching staff. He further said that pressure from parents, the employed and high targets set up by the ministry of education to achieve, contributed tremendously to teachers going into depression and anxiety. Mental wellness should

be addressed to counter this before it goes out of hand (Said and Hinga, 2022).

Teachers tend to ignore their stress and anxiety levels in lieu of their unconditional love for education and teaching children. But the gratification from teaching can sometimes come with the pressure and performance management that's always looming in the teacher's mind (Aggarwal 2022). A study in Brazil by Carlotto & Camarra (2015) showed that teachers suffering from common mental disorders was associated with having role ambiguity, overload, low level of social support, and low perceived self-efficacy were associated with common mental disorders.

Common mental disorders are a group of distress states manifesting with anxiety, depressive and unexplained bodily symptoms which are usually seen in community and primary care settings (Ajay, 2012). They are conditions that are diagnosable through identifying changes in thinking, feeling, behaviour (and possibly a combination of all these). Their effect is that they commonly impair a person's functioning and cause distress (Murphy, et al., 2013).

Studies indicate that mental ill-health is not a stranger in the school/learning environment. In the UK, a survey of over 11,000 teachers was conducted by NASUWT, the teachers' union in 2022. It showed that 90% of the teachers were stressed, and 91% had their mental health adversely affected by work demands, with workload being the leading worrier. The Brazilian study above, found a prevalence of 29.4% of common mental disorders among teachers.

Factors associated with teachers' poor mental health

According to Gray, Wilcox, and Nordstokke (2017), high stress levels are a risk factor for teachers, which may lead to burnout and leaving the profession. Several factors can affect the mental health of teachers such as a significant workload with long hours, a large class. There is also often a lack of support from colleagues or the administration which can lead to feelings of isolation and frustration. All the constant stress on the job can take a toll on teacher's physical and mental health. If not addressed, these can lead to burnout or even depression. In Philippines, the mental health of the Filipino teachers has come under the spotlight in recent years. Thankfully, to support learners, teachers, and the public during times of mental and psychological distress, a mental health helpline system was launched consisting of contact information from different organizations (Inlife Inullar Life, 2022). According to recent study, more than half of the Britain's' teachers have a diagnosed mental health problem, with 76% of education professionals experiencing behavioural, psychological, or physical symptoms due to their work (Baljinder, 2019).

A web-based study done in Bangladesh Tanvir et al, (2022) on the mental health status of teachers during the second wave of the Covid 19 pandemic observed that the overall prevalence of depression, anxiety and stress among teachers were 35.4%, 43.7% and 6.6% respectively. The prevalence was higher among male and older teachers than among female and younger colleagues. The findings further showed that place of residence, institution, self-reported health, usage of social and electronic media and the fear of Covid 19 significantly influenced the mental health status of teachers.

In Spain, the study in mental health reported heightened depression anxiety and stress particularly among female and older teachers and among teachers suffering from chronic diseases or living with chronically ill or Covid 19 infected family (Santamaria, et al 2021).

Recent research by Unicef (2022) observed that there were almost no evidence-based programs globally that focus specifically on supporting the mental health of teacher educators. While safe care to manage stress is important for everyone, policymakers and school leaders must also take responsibility for ensuring teachers are safe, well organized. More investments are needed in support structure and practices that ensure the wellbeing and job satisfaction of teachers is enabled particularly during time of crisis (Dabrowski, 2022).

The determinants of mental health problems in Poland identified included the number of children, partners' employment status, changes in quality and satisfactory of relationships. Depression among teachers was reported to be 54.99%, anxiety 50.73% and stress 55% according to Jakubowski and Dominik (2021).

In Brazil, a study found the prevalence of mental disorders among teachers to be 20.9%. Some of the associated risks with this were expressed as "repetitive movements, chalk dust, stressing work, long working hours, work in more of one school and low wage".

Effect of mental health on classroom practices

Miller and Wiltse, 1979 observed that mental health of a teacher is important for it affects his whole being. Teachers interact with learners who have unique personalities and face various challenges.

In addition to the daily pressures of their job, it can lead to stress and anxiety. With time, these feelings can negatively impact mental health. A teacher struggling with health issues finds it difficult to concentrate on his work, can't multitask and has poor relations with his peers and other workmates. Mentally healthy teacher easily relates with the delivery of the lesson with more clarity. A teacher's poor mental health is not only an individual concern, but it also affects their learners greatly. It has the potential of affecting their learning outcomes, examination performance and also the cost of provision of education. Emotional atmosphere in a classroom setting is important to the experiences of all students (Miller and Wiltse, 1979). A teacher who is emotionally unstable can cause a lot of damage to his students. Several causes and contributing factors to mental health problems have been identified.

A teacher with poor mental health not only tends to be incapacitated for the performance of multifarious duties in the school but also creates difficulties and problems to students (Kumar, 1992). It is known that when mentally healthy, teachers experience professional growth and healthy personality development positive outcomes result for their learners (Gorsy, Panwar & Kumar, 2015). In contrast, when teachers are experiencing ill mental health, children are able to pick up on it even when the teacher hides it well, leading to adverse effects on the learner (Glazzard & Rose, 2019).

Navigation of Mental Health Issues

From the foregoing, it is clear that it is imperative to carry out well-being surveys, training staff as mental first aiders and provision of personal mental health guidance. There need to be a robust debate on issue mental health at all forums. The debates and discussions will be

able to remove stigma that surrounds mental health and promote wellness. These wellness activities involve getting enough sleep, adopting a growth mindset towards learning and teaching, focusing on gratitude, and having clear boundaries between the school and rest. This will help improve mental health in our schools for students and teachers alike (Two Sigmas, 2019).

To tackle the crisis head on, school leaders need to build open and supportive well-being cultures. With a recent study showing that in United Kingdom employers claim they don't feel comfortable talking to their managers about mental health problems for fear of being judged, this is clearly a pressing issue. By adopting open door policies and encouraging staff to share their issues, school leaders can ensure that problems can be appropriately addressed (Baljinder, 2019).

In terms of policy and application of wider scale interventions, there needs to be an integration of mental health into primary and community health care as is recommended by the WHO (2022). If every time members of the public, teachers included, go to hospital and their mental health is assessed, this would be a formidable steppingstone into the way forward in effective treatment of mental disorders. Not only would this create the awareness above envisaged but would also ensure that psychological problems are nipped in the bud before they escalate, thus helping teachers do what they know how to do best.

Conclusion

It is undeniable that instructor's mental health has far reaching consequences given that not only are teachers affected, but the learners who are their academic wards, are adversely impacted.

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Mental ill-health does result from teachers' working conditions and personal life challenges. Their performance is grossly affected with their health is not up to par. This calls for a concerted effort by all stakeholders to ensure systems are put in place to continuously assess and treat mental health problems as they arise.

Recommendation

Since the issue of workload has been variously highlighted as a major stressor for teachers, it is suggested that policymakers devise ways of managing workloads among teachers. For instance, job sharing may ease the burden of overwork and make it easy to retain staff. In addition, mental health units are required in vocational training centers, quipped with mental health workers well trained in assessment and treatment of mental disorders as well as other stressors that lead to mental ill-health of instructors as expeditiously as possible.

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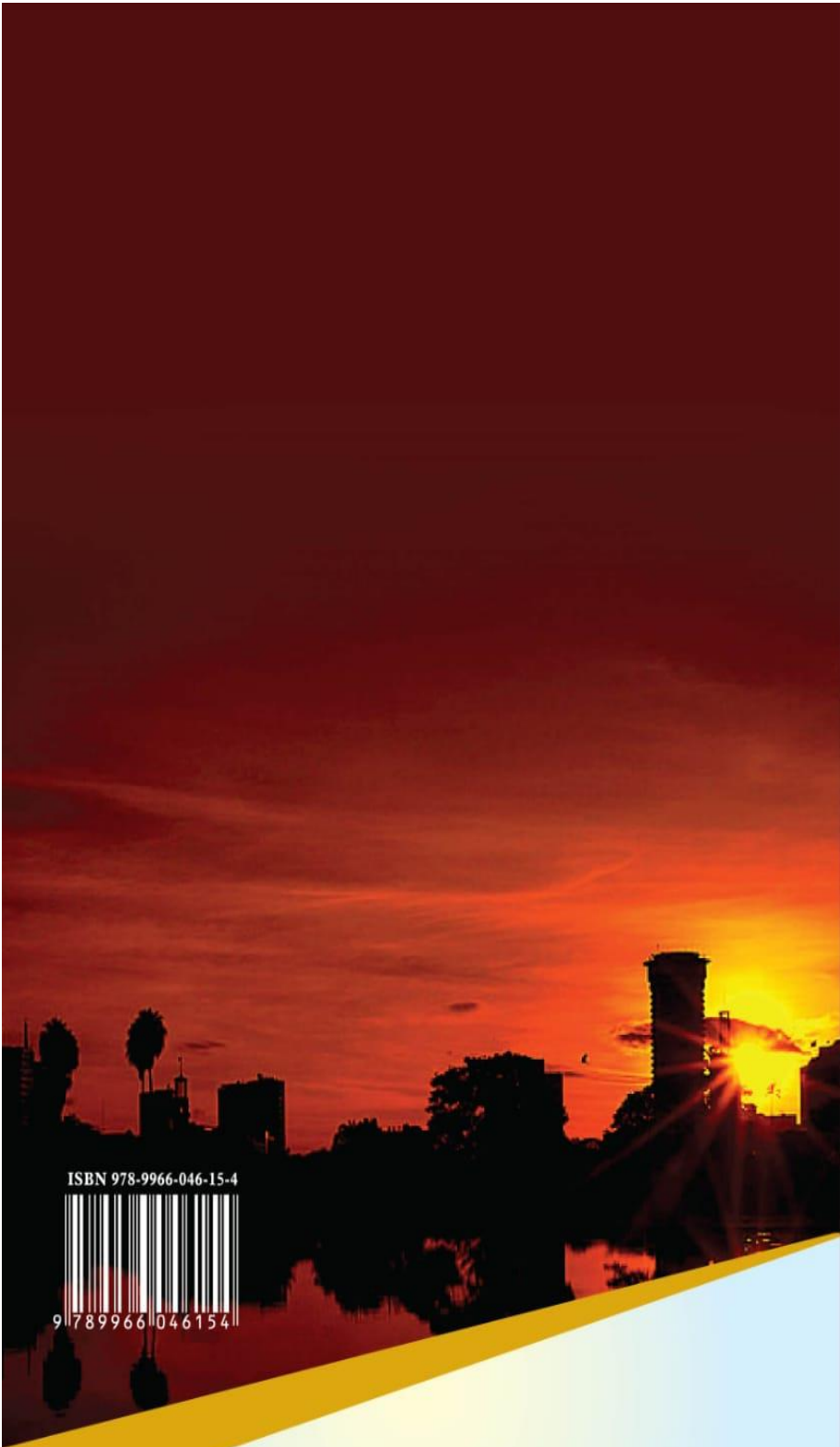
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