Teaching and Teacher Education 52 (2015) 24–36

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Teaching and Teacher Education

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/tate

Preliminary impacts of the "Learning to Read in a Healing Classroom" intervention on teacher well-being in the Democratic Republic of the Congo

Sharon Wolf [a, *], Catalina Torrente [b], Paul Frisoli [c], Nina Weisenhorn [c], Anjuli Shivshanker [c], Jeannie Annan [c], J. Lawrence Aber [d]

[a] Global TIES for Children, Institute for Human Development and Social Change, New York University, 246 Greene Street, New York, NY, 10003, USA
[b] Yale Center for Emotional Intelligence, Yale University, 340 Edwards Street, P.O. Box 208376, New Haven, CT, 06520, USA
[c] The International Rescue Committee, 122 East 42nd Street, New York, NY, 10168, USA
[d] Department of Applied Psychology, New York University, 246 Greene Street, Room 416E, New York, NY, 10003, USA

HIGHLIGHTS

- The LRHC initiative aimed to improve teacher well-being and effectiveness.
- LRHC was implemented in primary schools in post-conflict Katanga province of the DRC.
- LRHC led to statistically significant increases in female teachers' job dissatisfaction.
- LRHC led to statistically significant increases in motivation for the least experienced teachers.

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:
Received 10 December 2014
Received in revised form
28 July 2015
Accepted 4 August 2015
Available online 31 August 2015

Keywords:
Teacher professional development
Motivation
International education
Democratic Republic of the Congo

ABSTRACT

This article examines the impacts of a partial year of implementation of Learning to Read in a Healing Classroom (LRHC), a curricular and social-emotional teacher professional development intervention in southeastern Democratic Republic of the Congo, on teacher professional well-being. Using a cluster-randomized control trial, this study assesses LRHC impacts on a sample of 346 teachers from 64 primary schools. We find statistically significant increases in job dissatisfaction for female teachers and increases in motivation for the least experienced teachers. Implications are discussed for the role of teacher professional development and well-being in improving education in low resource and conflict-affected contexts.

1. Introduction

There is growing understanding globally that teacher quality is central to student achievement, and that the nature of teachers' interactions with students is a critical component of quality instruction (Mashburn et al., 2008; Murnane & Ganimian, 2014). Teachers' motivation and professional well-being are linked to their interactions with students and their effectiveness in the classroom (Hargreaves, 1994). While rigorous quantitative data is lacking in low-income and conflict-affected countries, qualitative findings demonstrate that teachers in these contexts also contribute to children's learning and resilience (INEE, 2010; IRC, 2011; Kirk, 2004). A synthesis of 115 rigorous impact evaluations of educational programs and policies in low- and middle-income countries concluded that additional resources only improve student achievement if they change teachers' instructional practices (Murnane & Ganimian, 2014). Yet in low-income and conflict-affected countries, support for teacher professional development often falls behind other educational priorities such as building schools, buying materials and textbooks, and training new teachers.

A wealth of rigorous research has accumulated in recent years, primarily in high-income countries but increasingly in low-income countries as well, showing that professional development

* Corresponding author.
E-mail addresses: sharon.wolf@nyu.edu (S. Wolf), catalina.torrente@gmail.com (C. Torrente), paul.frisoli@rescue.org (P. Frisoli), nina.weishorn@rescue.org (N. Weisenhorn), anjuli.shivshanker@rescue.org (A. Shivshanker), jeannie.annan@rescue.org (J. Annan), lawrence.aber@nyu.edu (J.L. Aber).

http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.tate.2015.08.002
0742-051X/

interventions can improve teacher job satisfaction, self-efficacy, well-being, and performance (e.g., Brown, Jones, LaRusso, & Aber, 2010; EDC, 2014; Jennings, Frank, Snowberg, Coccia, & Greenberg, 2013; Pianta, Mashburn, Downer, Hamre, & Justice, 2008; Piper & Zuilkowski, 2015). However, efforts to improve educational quality in low-income and conflict-affected countries need to consider that teachers' realities can differ greatly across contexts. Compared to teachers in middle- and high-income countries, teachers in low-income countries (LICs) face many challenges: increasing workloads due to education reform, low and infrequent teacher remuneration, lack of professional recognition, challenging working conditions (i.e., large class sizes), lack of accountability, minimal professional development opportunities, and lack of voice (Bennell & Akyeampong, 2007; Guajardo, 2011; VSO, 2002; Wolf, Torrente, McCoy, Rasheed & Aber, 2015). These realities have led to a growing concern that teachers in LICs are facing a "motivation crisis" (Moon, 2006, 2007).

Teachers in conflict-affected contexts face additional challenges. Schools can be vulnerable targets for insecurity, and conflict jeopardizes teachers' social, emotional, and physical well-being (Buckland, 2005; Frisoli, 2013; INEE, 2010; Mosselson, Wheaton, & Frisoli, 2009). Studies in these contexts highlight that teachers may need varied support such as improving their social support, working conditions, content and pedagogical knowledge, and well-being in order to be effective teachers (Kirk & Winthrop, 2008; Shriberg, 2007). If improving educational quality in LICs and conflict-affected countries is to be realized, more context-specific research is needed to understand how the conditions of teachers' work and personal lives affect their well-being and motivation (Frisoli, 2013; Wolf et al., 2015). There is still a lot to learn, especially in LICs and conflict-affected settings, about what teachers gain from professional development and how their well-being and motivation influences and is influenced by these programs.

Because high quality pre-service teacher professional development (TPD) programs have been slow to develop in LICs, school-based in-service TPD programs are considered promising alternatives (MacNeil, 2004). In-service training and support on established curricula, as well as Teacher Learning Circles (TLCs), are two examples of such models. TLCs are school-based groups where teachers regularly meet to support one another, discuss issues they face in their classrooms, and learn collaboratively from one another, thus requiring minimal resources. In challenging contexts, TLCs are intended to foster a supportive collegial work environment (Frisoli, 2013). In this intervention, TLCs were combined with training on new reading and math curricula. The TLCs were intended to be vehicles through which teachers could discuss and master the curricular changes introduced. Little impact evidence exists on TLCs, though evidence from high-income contexts suggests improved teacher practices and possibly improved student outcomes (Vescio, Ross, & Adams, 2008).

The present study applies a rigorous methodology to consider the question of whether and how a TPD intervention can improve teacher motivation, burnout, and job dissatisfaction in the DRC. To our knowledge, this is the first study that uses a cluster-randomized controlled trial design to test the causal impact of a school-based TPD program consisting of an integrated early grade reading and social-emotional learning curriculum—Learning to Read in a Healing Classroom (LRHC)—combined with Teacher Learning Circles. LRHC was developed by the International Rescue Committee and adapted and implemented in collaboration with the DRC Ministry of Primary, Secondary, and Professional Education (MEPSP) with funding from the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). It is comprised of two main parts: (1) teacher instructional guides with integrated social-emotional and literacy practices, and (2) a teacher professional development support system of teacher trainings and TLCs. This study is intended to be a test case, exploratory in nature, and hypothesis generating for future research. Two companion papers assess preliminary program impacts on children's reading and math skills (Aber et al., 2015, under review) and social-emotional outcomes (Torrente et al., 2015, in press).

1.1. Teacher motivation and well-being

Teaching is a stressful profession. Compared with other professions, teachers exhibit high levels of exhaustion and cynicism (Maslach, Jackson, & Leiter, 1996; Schaufeli & Enzmann, 1998; Travers & Cooper, 1996). Over one-third of teachers surveyed in twelve low-income countries reported "poor" or "very poor" motivation levels (Bennell & Akyeampong, 2007). Teachers who report high levels of burnout are at increased risk of physical and mental illness, resulting in higher levels of absenteeism (Schonfeld, 2001) and reduced quality of performance and classroom instruction (Blase, 1986; Pianta, Belsky, Houts, & Morrison, 2007; Travers, 2001). Teachers in sub-Saharan African in particular have seen a decline in self-esteem and motivation and increased attrition rates (Bennell & Akyeampong, 2007; UNESCO, 2012; VSO, 2002). High levels of stress are related to teacher burnout and deteriorating teacher performance (Osher et al., 2007; Tsouloupas, Carson, Matthews, Grawitch, & Barber, 2010). Furthermore, studies have linked teacher stress to poorer classroom climate (La Paro et al., 2009; NICHD ECCRN, 2003) as well as poorer student behavior and achievement (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009; Malmberg, Hagger, Burn, Mutton, & Colls, 2010; Mashburn et al., 2008). Reducing stress should maximize a teacher's capacity to be effective and create a positive learning environment for students.

In conflict-affected settings, further difficulties arise. For example, teacher remuneration can be even lower and more inconsistent, making it more difficult for teachers to support themselves and their families and jeopardizing their socio-emotional and physical well-being (INEE, 2010; Penson, 2012; Shriberg, 2007). Many teachers in these contexts are also expected to play a nurturer role for children and address sensitive conflict-related issues, such as responding to situations involving trauma and emotional problems, for which they have received minimal, if any, training (Sommers, 2004; Tomlinson & Benefield, 2005). Furthermore, teachers have their own psychosocial needs which are impacted by crisis (Asimeng-Boahene, 2003; INEE, 2010; IRC, 2011). Teachers do not necessarily have the necessary support to cope and bounce back from traumatic events themselves while simultaneously helping children to do the same.

Nonetheless, in countries recovering from years of conflict, high participation and engagement rates recorded during TPD offerings show that teachers are eager to gain support and improve their skills (EDC, 2014; Frisoli, 2013), indicating that professional development interventions have the potential to improve teacher well-being.

1.2. Well-being, learning, and teacher professional development programs

High-quality TPD programs can have a significant and positive impact on teachers' instruction and well-being in LICs. In a review of research on undertrained and untrained teachers, Orr et al. (2013) identified that several in-service TPD interventions improved teachers' confidence and motivation, both in their schools and communities, and in some cases led to more positive attitudes towards their students (e.g., Binns & Wrightson, 2006; Bof, 2004; Guzman et al., 2000; Kruijer, 2010). In a review of 43 "high quality" studies on the specific school and teacher