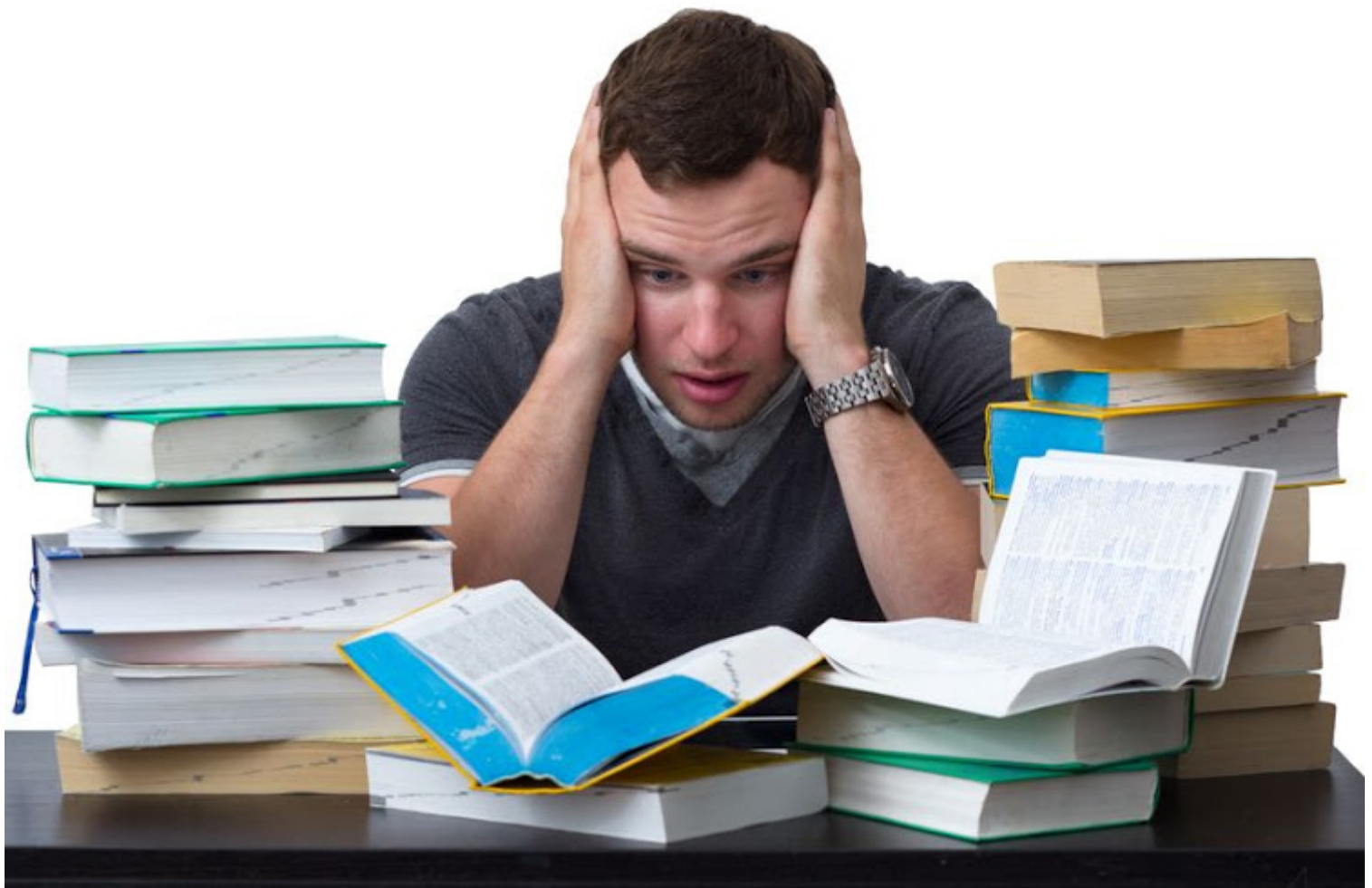


NEWS

Things were bad for teachers even before Covid-19. Now they're terrible

A UKZN webinar on the emotional health of teachers lays bare truths about teaching in the age of Covid-19



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BOOK ME IN Teachers are trying to cope with a range of emotions as they navigate their way through their new classroom environments.

Image: 123rf/dandamanwasch

Distress, confusion, anxiety, stress and helplessness.

These are the emotions plaguing many SA teachers, particularly at under-resourced schools, as the country wages war against Covid-19.

Teachers' wellbeing and the challenges of the transition from remote to contact learning came under the spotlight at a webinar hosted by the University of KZN on Tuesday.

Prof Lesley Wood, from North West University's education faculty, unpacked some of the hurdles worrying teachers in rural schools.

"I asked graduate students working in rural areas to take three questions and find out very informally from their colleagues what they are feeling during this time and how the virus is affecting on them.

"We know our teaching body is ageing. There are a lot of teachers suffering from obesity, high blood pressure, diabetes, HIV (comorbid diseases)."

Wood said many teachers couldn't return to these schools because of such health conditions and the burden fell on younger and healthier teachers.

Schools on the whole were not well before Covid-19.

Prof Lesley Wood

"The PPEs are not optimal. They say the face masks cause breathing problems for some teachers.

"The shields cause headaches at times. They also report exhaustion. All these aspects of holistic wellness are interrelated.

"Wood said the issue of financial burden often fell on teachers supporting their extended families.

"It is only, of course, made worse now as family members are losing income due to the pandemic.

"This of course affects their emotional wellness.

“They worry about infection, they worry about learners not keeping their masks on.

“One teacher said it caused panic and nerves, working through such a stressful period.

“A lot of work needs to be caught up that has been missed. This puts more pressure on teachers and causes feelings of frustration and demoralisation.

“Other feelings include, distress, confusion, anxiety and helplessness.”

She believes many teachers working in tough conditions felt like this before Covid-19.

“Wellness is so low among some teachers that they take it out on the learners. Teachers become desensitised and harsh sometimes.

“Covid-19 has really made a bad situation worse and is affecting the organisational wellness of the school.

“Schools on the whole were not well before Covid-19 – bad management, teachers not in class, absenteeism.

“Even now during this vulnerable time, the focus is on physical and not mental health of teachers.

“There are positives. The department has come to the party with flushing toilets, which schools did not have before, and cleaner schools, smaller classes and mobile classes,” Wood said.

STACK OF CHALLENGES Covid-19 has brought added stress for the teaching fraternity, already battling to cope.

Image: 123RF/Wavebreak Media Ltd

Ndabenhle Mdluli, a principal at a KZN high school, shared his experience of being at the coalface of school reopening within the Covid-19 context.

He said the outbreak was not only a public health crisis but also a grave psychosocial issue for teachers.



“Basic education has faced the wrath of the novel coronavirus.

“Teachers must safeguard their wellbeing and regulate their coping mechanisms in the right way to avoid possible adverse effects on their wellbeing.”

“When our school reopened for Grade 12s, the atmosphere was quite different from when we closed for term one.

We knew fears, anxieties and frustrations were not compatible with proper teaching and learning.

Ndabenhle Mdluli, KZN school principal

“Most looked overwhelmed, confused in masks, not knowing who is who. There was no energy and passion which usually characterises our times of reopening school.”

Mdluli said he was emotionally drained.

“As a school principal I knew I had to create an emotionally stimulating environment for teachers and learners.

“But I was so emotionally drained that I did not have power left in me most of the time.

“I remember reciting words I know, trying to cheer up teachers and learners. They knew me well enough not to believe me.

“Faking emotions is very exhausting, and literature says it may lead to burnout.

“However, one positive thing was that as teachers we were happy to be back at school to do what we love doing.

“We knew fears, anxieties and frustrations were not compatible with proper teaching and learning.

“The situation is not about to change and has not changed since then.

“The difficulty of teacher workload and timetabling has increased as more cohorts of learners have returned to school as per the department’s staggered approach.

Mdluli said pupils were also feeling an emotional weight on their shoulders.

“For instance, I was talking to a group of them. They seemed worried and asked about the health status of a teacher who was no longer coming to school due to comorbidity.

“They also asked about extracurricular activities and their matric dance.

“I had to break the sad news to them that those activities are officially cancelled.

“The response from one of them was that their matric year was cursed.

A Durban primary schoolteacher Nompumelelo Nzimande spoke about her anxiety and taking control of her emotions so she would not impact her pupils.

It helps to have personal strategies. Bringing in positive energy into the classroom is so important. If you are going to come with that negative energy, it won't help.

Nompumelelo Nzimande, primary schoolteacher

“A challenge with contact teaching is splitting pupils because of regulations and teaching the same lesson up to four times.

“This increases the workload of teachers and adds to our stress.”

Nzimande said she had to put plans in place to ensure effective teaching.

“The children can't just come to school and sit there just because I am overwhelmed and tired.

“I am at school, so I have to do my duty as a teacher, no matter what.

“Health was my main concern when moving back to contact teaching. However, it helps to gradually adjust and think of possible solutions.

“It helps to have personal strategies. My first strategy was to ensure that I keep healthy, switch off from the working environment and exercising.

“Bringing in positive energy into the classroom is so important. If you are going to come with that negative energy, it won't help.

“It makes them attract that positive energy, and they want to work.

“I saw that working in my classroom. I don't go in distressed.”