Opinion Piece

How Head Teachers can create a supportive workplace where teachers feel valued and respected

Introduction

A recent Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted) (2019) report highlights school leaders as negative influences on the occupational well-being of teachers in schools. The issue was some head teachers or principals failed in words and actions to recognize the importance of teachers and acknowledge their professional abilities and contributions.

This occurrence negatively impacts teachers' occupational well-being. Additionally, teachers not being valued and respected contributed to their attrition and breached an aspect of the UK's Head Teachers' Standards 2020. Coincidentally, the failure of head teachers to adequately value and respect teachers was not confined to the United Kingdom but was also of concern to countries such as Korea, New Zealand, Finland, Ireland, Wales, South Africa, Bangladesh, the USA, and Canada.

In this opinion piece, I propose a solution. The solution is for head teachers to support teachers and create a supportive workplace. This solution was a key theme or category from a recent study (Minott. M.A., Enow. L., & Urbina-Garcia, A., forthcoming). Given the practitioners' focus of this think piece, the aim is to discuss this solution and provide examples of what a supportive workplace (school) looks like in practice. Additionally, given this focus, the article is descriptive and minimally critical, which is helpful for busy head teachers interested in "what could be done."

Head Teachers being supportive of teachers.

The broad research question, how do head teachers in their daily tasks contribute to their teachers feeling valued and respected in school, guided the research of Minott. MA., Enow. L., & Urbina-Garcia, A. (forthcoming). Two answers emerged from the study.

1. **Supporting teachers must be intrinsic, a high priority, and a moral responsibility.**

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All study participants—head teachers—spoke of the importance of supporting their teachers. This phrase saturated all participants' responses. For example, when participants were asked to describe their engagement with teachers, responses included, "I think we umm... for the staff and the children, really, we focus on supporting people's emotional wellbeing and on supporting their development…" (HS). "I think it's very supportive, very positive..." (CB). "I've been head teacher for several years now and I view my work in England as doing my very best to protect staff, the first port of call is always support" (HD).

However, while this is so, the support offered should be based on an inherent desire to do so, seen as a moral responsibility and of a high priority. CB said, when talking about supporting teachers, "that is what I am" (CB). Used in this way, this phrase describes an inherent quality, indicating that the desire to support teachers is internal, satisfying, and enjoyable (Deci, et.al., 2017).

For HS— a study participant—, supporting teachers is a moral responsibility, i.e., a sense of duty or obligation based on her personal beliefs, values, and principles. Therefore, she embraces the idea that supporting them is her "moral role" which leads her to be deliberate in finding ways to support teachers' development. She said, "I'll take a breath and notice what's going on around and then look at how best to utilize a person— and not always for the benefit of the school— but to support that person's development" (HS). SB, another participant, sees the support of teachers as a high priority. This involves making sure they are okay, able to deliver their classes, listening to them and supporting them as needed.

To distill and develop the research findings outlined above, a close examination of the discussion reveals that a significant way a head teacher contributes to teachers feeling valued and respected is by offering support or help. However, supporting teachers involves emotional and attitudinal aspects that may be challenging for some head teachers, especially those having a strong managerial focus.

The discussion above also suggests that a desire to engage in support must first be inherent to the head teacher. If this is not innate, it needs to be cultivated, i.e., the head teacher must find ways to educate him or herself in this matter and make a conscious decision to do so.

Further, supporting teachers should be a moral responsibility and of high priority. In other words, head teachers should see supporting teachers as the correct thing to do and doing so may require an attitudinal adjustment or adjustment to a way of thinking. This adjustment is necessary because attitudes or ways of thinking impact behaviours and notably, unprofessional, or negative behaviour impact teachers' well-being (Ofsted, 2019).

2. Create Supportive Working Environments.

Head teachers interested in valuing and respecting teachers create supportive working environments. For example, when ask to describe his working environment CB stated, "I think it's very supportive, very positive, we call ourselves—it's not just me—, but we call ourselves our school family…" (CB). Implicit in this statement is the idea that a family is a source of support (Buchanan and McConnell, 2017). However, to achieve a supportive workplace, head teachers prioritize helping teachers by being mindful of their time, affective-ness, offering recognition and rewards, communicating effectively, motivating teachers, treating them as professionals, enabling voices, offering leadership opportunities, and promoting collaboration.

Here are several examples of ways head teachers could create a supportive workplace, thus displaying their value and respect for teachers. I invite readers to reflect on the extent to which the suggested activities may or may not apply to their context and what adaptation might be necessary.

Some examples of what support and a supportive workplace looks like in practice.

1. Being mindful of teachers' time.

There is a need to protect teachers' time, i.e., their planning, preparation, and assessment (PPA) time and non-contact times with students. Whenever possible, try to extend the PPA time offered to teachers. Avoid introducing new initiatives or school-wide improvement projects during busy periods, such as when teachers are marking student work or students' examination scripts. At the beginning of each academic year, review school-based practices and systems of working that may divert teachers' time away from supporting students' learning. Communicate any changes to teachers and actively seek and respond to their feedback. Additionally, consider taking on some of the duties typically assigned to teachers to help to reduce the demands on their time.

2. Displaying affective-ness.

It is essential to show empathy and respect for teachers by considering them as whole individuals and being flexible and understanding in meeting their needs. If empathy is challenging, work on being friendly and approachable to help teachers feel comfortable in your presence. Ensure you are available so teachers can seek your help, and check in on them in ways that are not perceived as monitoring, surveillance or judgmental. Identify those who are struggling with personal and professional issues and plan morale-boosting activities. Offer constructive criticism and advice, help them develop corrective measures and encourage their perseverance. During lesson observations, focus not only on the "mechanics" of teaching and areas for improvement but also on recognizing and celebrating the individual teacher's achievements, providing helpful ways forward.

3. Offer recognition and rewards.

Encourage and create opportunities for teachers to engage in school activities that interest them. When feasible, offer financial recognition or rewards and facilitate their progression through the pay scale. Publicly acknowledge and thank teachers, presenting badges or awards for years of service. Encourage students to express their gratitude to teachers and reward outstanding project outcomes with an extra day off. Additionally, send cards to teachers and letters to parents highlighting staff achievements.

4. Communicating effectively

Implement an open-door policy and develop an open-discussion culture, where teachers feel heard and valued. Engage in regular and informal conversations in the school hall and corridors. During interactions or other occasions, share your vision for the school and actively listen to their perspectives on various matters. Utilise staff surveys to capture teachers' thoughts or opinions on school issues and share the findings to keep the whole school community informed. This approach ensures ongoing communication and reinforces a supportive and inclusive school environment.

5. Motivate teachers.

Talk with teachers to understand their interests and what motivates them. Assign them to roles or projects that align with their interests. Provide support for both new and experienced teachers to develop the necessary competencies and skills for their assigned tasks or roles. This approach fosters professional growth and enhance job satisfaction.

6. Treating teachers as professionals

Maintain a positive outlook and focus on improving practice for everyone, including teachers' professional development.   Show respect for teachers by acknowledging their professional expertise as intellectuals, not just technicians. Trust them to undertake their assigned tasks without micromanaging, and encourage them to use their skills and initiative during teaching. Talk openly and frequently discuss with teachers, instructional practices, seeking their advice and opinions on classroom strategies. Involve them in decision-making processes, especially concerning teaching and learning activities. Provide opportunities and funding for continued professional development (CPD) activities, and encourage teachers to share the knowledge and best practices gained from CPD sessions during staff meetings.

7. Enabling teachers' voice.

Take the responsibility for creating a suitable work environment (space) where teachers can express their opinions (voice) without fear of reprisal. Ensure their opinions are

taken seriously (audience) and appropriately act on their opinions (influence) (Lundy, 2007, Lambersky, 2016).

8. Offering leadership opportunities.

Promote teachers into middle leadership positions and implement distributed leadership whenever possible. This approach involves sharing responsibilities among multiple individuals or teams within the school rather than doing it all yourself. Promote teachers from all levels of the school based on their skills and areas of interest, ensuring a diverse and capable leadership team.

9. Promoting teacher collaboration

Create dedicated time and opportunities for peer connections among teachers by scheduling regular collaborative sessions. Ensure that these interactions focus on the exchange of strategic information aimed at the growth and improvement of both the teacher and their practices, not just the needs of the school and students. Adopting a collaborative approach when discussing changes and their potential impact, and involving teachers in the decision-making process helps to foster a supportive school environment.

Conclusion

This opinion piece draws the readers' attention to the issue of head teachers' failing to value and respect teachers. More importantly, it provides a solution to this issue that came out of recent research. The solution to the issue was the need for head teachers to be supportive of teachers and create a supportive workplace. Several practical examples of what support and a supportive workplace are like in practice were presented. From my viewpoint, these examples may be directly applied to or modified and applied to different contexts. As a reader of this essay, to what extent do you think my assumption is correct, and the suggestions may or may not apply to your context?

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