Mostly I’m driven to tears, and feeling totally unappreciated:
Exploring the emotional wellness of high school teachers

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Abstract

Teaching is a challenging profession in the 2000s. This is supported by international literature on education that reports on how the work environment, unreasonable expectations of school communities and the socio-economic challenges of society are creating the potential for emotional illness amongst teachers. Of concern is that extensive exposure to work-linked stressors could negatively affect teachers’ personal wellbeing as well as that of the organisational culture. There are, however, few studies that report on teachers’ understanding and experiences of their work context stressors. This article reports on research that was conducted in the Helderberg area of the Western Cape Province, South Africa on teachers’ personal constructions of their emotional wellbeing. The Helderberg area is serviced by eight high schools. Six teachers were purposively selected from two former model C-schools and two former coloured schools and researched on their experiences at their respective schools. The findings showed that all six teachers’ emotional vulnerability were linked to how they were being acted upon by the pupils, administrators, parents and national education department. Their sense of self worth was being eroded in the workplace and their mental state was impacting negatively on the quality of their work. They all reported a decrease in their productivity and work ethic. Furthermore, these professionals reported that they were exhibiting paranoid-type behaviour that is associated with overwhelmingly negative emotions. These findings suggest that the educational workplace is in need of transformation if teachers, as professionals, are to do their work effectively.

Keywords: Teacher wellness; emotional wellbeing; South Africa.

1. INTRODUCTION

Teaching as an expression of human interaction is assumed to be an effortless and natural activity rooted in the communication of worthwhile knowledge and skills (Campbell, 2008). Education has always been considered the basic tool in developing knowledge, skills and character in the individuals that have access to it. A lot has been written about the moral and ethical purpose of education, and about the school as a place that inculcate desirable qualities in the youth (Tom, 1984; Noddings, 1984). As a profession it probably holds the most important position in society as the worth and potentialities of a nation are tied to how well its citizens are being educated. The teachers, and their mental health and wellbeing should be of great importance given that they educate the nation. However, most South Africa’s schools are highly stressful workplaces due to, amongst others, the lack of resources, overcrowding, violence, and substance abuse. These are circumstances that potentially could threaten the emotional

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wellness of teachers. An individual’s emotional wellbeing is tied to experiences of positive feelings as well as his/her enthusiasm towards life (Meyers, Sweeney, & Witmer, 2000). Emotional wellbeing could serve as a strong indicator of an individual’s overall state of wellness (Adams, Bezner, & Steinhardt, 1997). In schools teachers are assumed to be the providers of wellbeing and their learners the consumers thereof (Peterson, Cooper, & Laird, 2001). The relationship between the wellness of the school community and that of the teacher, and how it is linked to the effective functioning of the school has been reported on in a study by Estabrooks, Dzewaltowski, Glasgow and Klesges (2003).

Burnout (Maslach & Jackson 1981), which is a work related psychological illness and depression are being diagnosed in many teachers working in Western Cape Educational Department (WCED) schools. Maslach and Jackson’s research have shown that burnout in teachers is often accompanied by emotional exhaustion and cynicism. When teachers’ unhappiness with their work circumstances cause them to leave the profession or to retire prematurely, then there is a problem. The research findings of a South African study undertaken by the Human Sciences Research Council, in collaboration with the Medical Research Council and the University of KwaZulu Natal (HSRC, 2005) highlighted the disturbing tendency of early retirement from the teaching profession due to low morale. Of those who were surveyed, 55% stated their intention to leave the profession while 25% indicated that they were considering their options. In related research, (Bloch, 2006) attributed the low morale of teachers to the lack of sufficient support structures together with the complexity of outcomes-based education. If these findings are reflective of South African teachers’ frame of mind, then the profession could be in crises. Thus far many South African studies have focussed on what contribute to stress and emotional illnesses in the workplace. However, what is lacking is research on teachers’ understanding and meaning making of their own emotional wellbeing in the workplace. This article is based on fieldwork that formed part of a master’s thesis project on the complexities that arise from threats that work related challenges pose to teachers’ wellbeing and that of their educational institutions.

2. A SOUTH AFRICAN HIGH SCHOOL LANDSCAPE

In order to contextualise the discussion, a brief overview will be provided of how schools were structured under the National Party government pre-1994. Then South Africa’s government schools were defined by a segregated school population according to the apartheid categories of white, Indian, Coloured and black. Separate but unequally resourced education departments were created for each racial group by the government. While the black education department mostly only provided school buildings to its black learners, the facilities in the white education department were comparable to the best in the developed world (Lemmon, 1999). In present day South Africa these racially and ethnically segregated government schools of the pre-1994s now serve racially diverse student populations. Studies on the deracialising of schools (Paterson & Kruss, 1998) (See also Naidoo, 1996; Vally & Dalamba, 1999) show an interesting demographic pattern in school desegregation. The former white schools have become prime sites for Indian, Coloured and African students, and schools in the Indian and coloured communities, to a lesser degree, for African students. The more affluent South African parents, both white and black, favour private schooling over government schools for their children.

The transformation of the South African educational system seem to be experienced as stressful to teachers, with the stressors being identified as the implementation of outcomes-based education, multiculturalism and multi-lingualism. Studies on transformation of the South African school have found that the rapid migration of the non-white groups to former white schools have in some schools been met with resistance. These studies identified mechanisms that those school administrators who are resistant to diversifying their student population, use to contain black students’ access to former white schools. Mechanisms such as, language in education as proxy to keep schools predominantly white (Johnson, 2007), ‘residing outside school feeder zone’ (Vally & Dalamba, 1999) and ‘insufficient space’ have often been used as deterrents to heterogeneous school communities. Some teachers struggle with making a paradigm shift in their thinking about their professional roles. (Engelbrecht, Oswald, Swart, & Eloff, 2003; Faber, 1991; Jepson & Forrest, 2006). They are unprepared for the challenges that a diverse learner population present. Mentz and Van der Walt found that it could be emotionally very challenging for teachers who
have lived racially separate lives and who have worked only in racially homogenous schools to now work with multi racial classes ([Mentz & Van der Walt, 2007]).

Other studies on the wellbeing of teachers have focussed on the influence of societal problems on the school environment ([Engelbrecht, Oswald, Swart, & Eloff, 2003]). More and more poverty, HIV AIDS, gang violence and drug abuse are linked to classroom stressors. These societal issues create social challenges that educators are not necessarily prepared for, nor trained for. The study by Myburg and Poggenpoel found that the imposition of these challenges could create confusion in educators as to their roles and responsibilities, ([Myburg & Poggenpoel, 2002]) especially in contexts where the teacher have limited power and where resources are lacking.

This far, we have sketched how stress amongst South African educators is mostly linked to the educational transformational processes that South Africa’s schools have been undergoing over the last two decades. Workplace-related stress has however, a longer run-up than the introduction of the outcomes-based curriculum and the diversification of school populations. Non-white educators’ historical situatedness in black and coloured education over the last four decades was defined by political crises: school boycotts, teacher strikes, and discriminatory allocation of resources. These were challenges and experiences that few white teachers in Model C schools experienced. Teachers who taught in black and coloured schools in the Western Cape from the mid 1970s to the late 1980s were at the epicentre of school unrests and boycotts. Four decades later, in 2010, these teachers continue to face historical challenges together with the new challenges. It has been argued by Wieder (2003) and so too Van Zyl (1997) that the persisting poor workcontexts of teachers working in the historically black schools makes it difficult for such teachers to move beyond using education as an ideological instrument to achieve political goals, as happened in 1976 with the schools uprisings (Van Zyl, 1997). By this we do not want to suggest that teachers at the former white schools are presented with no challenges. Instead, we argue that the challenges that teachers face have to be read within their school’s historical educational context, and not just as part of the educational reforms of the 1990s.

3. CONTEXTUALISATION

The region in the Western Cape Province of South Africa where the fieldwork was conducted is being served by eight high schools. The participating teachers were working at two former white (Model-C) and two coloured schools, all established more than 20 years ago. Both coloured schools are situated in townships and draw their students from the mostly black and coloured working class communities. In this basic interpretative research study six educators who are employed by the Western Cape Education department (WCED) were purposively selected to become participants. These participants are experienced educators with an average of 21 years teaching experience. The fieldwork entailed semi-structured interviews as well as a reflective journal in which the educators for one month recorded their experiences and emotions about school and the issues that they came up against. As can be seen from table 1, all were university graduates, and five were qualified teachers.

| Participant | Gender | Qualifications | Years at school |
|-------------|--------|----------------|-----------------|
| Annemarie*  | F      | B.A., HDE, Diploma in Youth | 15 |
|             |        | Diploma in Technology |     |
| Bertha      | F      | B.A. Languages , HDE | 14 |
| Heleen      | F      | B.Sc. | 20 |
| Jan         | M      | Primary school diploma; B.Ed.; Enrolled M.Ed.student | 3, but 25 years in teaching |
| Chris       | M      | B.Soc.Sc., HDE, M.Ed. | 8 but 30 years in teaching |
| Deon        | M      | B.Sc., HDE | 21 |

In the rest of this article we present and discuss the findings that emerged from the fieldwork.
4. FINDINGS

4.1. WORKPLACE AS A TOXIC ENVIRONMENT

Teaching is a vocation that is carried out in a wide variety of environments and locations, of which many are challenging to work in. The participants work in two types of schools, namely former white (Model C) and coloured schools. The historical context for white schools is that they are excellently resourced schools when compared to coloured schools. Annemarie, Berta and Helen teach at Model C schools though Bertha’s school serves a more racially diverse student population who are from the working classes. Jan, Chris and Deon teach at former coloured schools and their students are predominantly coloured and black students from working class communities. A commonly held perception amongst teachers from the former coloured schools was that their school contexts and learner population disadvantage them and that these schools are more stressful than Model-C schools. Chris, referring to Model C educators, stated,

"There are educators in situations who do not know how well they have it. Their context is beautiful and smart and there are many things that count in their favour. Thus, it depends on the context within which you teach…"

Chris, Jan and Deon’s schools are under resourced schools with insufficient teaching equipment and materials. Their class sizes are big, and classes are overcrowded. The circumstances they work in cause untold frustration to them and constricts their effectiveness. At their schools teachers move from classroom to classroom to teach. Their schools are overcrowded and no classrooms are available to teachers where they can do lesson preparation and planning. According to Jan the shortage of resources and his big classes impacts on his efforts to provide individualized attention to his students.

The participants seem to all be assigned heavy workloads. Accordingly they say that teachers working for the WCED carry workloads that require super natural abilities to carry if their extra-mural responsibilities are also taken into consideration. Jan described his workload below.

"I am in the class full-time. In the afternoons I am involved in school sport. Saturdays we have rugby. I get home by three in the afternoons. Because of a full day, you work at home. You go home to work…in your own time. Your planning you do in your own time. …your employer does not include those things that you do in addition to your teaching load."

Those who teach the compulsory subjects such as the languages and the more specialized subjects such as Mathematics consider their workloads to be much high than those other subject teachers who have smaller, and thus more manageable student groups to work with. According to them, it is the language and the mathematics teachers who are the ones more likely to resign. Helen, a mathematics teacher, felt that she was being penalized for being a good teacher. She described her school’s administrators’ as unfair and unreasonable, as they have tasked her to teach extra Maths classes outside of official works hours.

The Western Cape Education department’s management of the implementation of both Curriculum 2005 and the revised curriculum drew a lot of comment from these participants, mostly negative. They criticized the national educational department for “forcing” these changes on them, and argued that the developers of the new curriculum were out of touch with what was required in the field.

"It is terrible to be the person in the classroom and you are given orders in an autocratic way by administrators. Our curricula, most of our curricula, they are outsourced … and most of the time the curricula are drawn up by somebody who has not been in teaching for years or probably has had a little bit of teaching experience. They draw up our curricula. They expect us to carry it out."

At Jan’s school the teachers lacked the necessary skills to implement the new curriculum effectively. As such they expected the department administrators to provide first hand support to help them during the transitional stages. However, this support was not forthcoming.

"We now have a new curriculum that is guided by new principles. New principles require new practices which should correspond with new theories. And those theories….we are still stuck with Pavlov’s stimulus-response theory. We have not yet reached Vygotsky, who talks about mediation…. But our teachers do not understand the concept yet….."
These educators had no confidence in the subject advisors’ ability to scaffold their transition. According to them these senior administrators were not knowledgeable, nor had they bought into the transition that was required. As former educators who have been out of education for a while, the subject advisors were found to be out of touch with what was happening in the schools. The subject advisors were also perceived as administrators who were shifting their responsibility, and workload onto the teachers.

In the olden days the inspector came, and sat in your class. Now you have to… for each grade….at least once a quarter…. five or six schools come together to meet with the subject advisor. Then you have to show them the books of your students and then the other schools evaluate your work. If you teach in five grades….that is five times per quarter you have to drive with your books…for someone else to say you are doing your work, or not….

These peer evaluations left teachers feeling exposed and vulnerable. According to them the senior administrators have passed on their responsibility to junior educators who might not be capable of fairly judging their work. The participants discussed their school management team as if it was an extension of the education department. The management styles at their schools appeared to be top-down and autocratic. At Bertha’s school decisions are taken without consultation and are forced down on them. She described the channels of communication between staff and management as inaccessible; Helen described it as dysfunctional. Both Helen and Bertha feel that they are being silenced and that they do not have the right to an opinion.

Here you don’t make waves. If you do, then the waves hit salt water into your eyes. There are repercussions. They find you. It is much better to keep a low profile and to stay unaffected. They described the ideal work environment as one in which good relationships between colleagues are nurtured. For Deon it was both important and rewarding to be able to work with others. However, his experience has been in the region’s schools that teachers have become very individualistic and critical about one another. As one stated:

We cannot talk about a whole school. Rather, we should say there is a school community that is fragmented…. we cannot refer to the school as a community.

4.2. PROBLEMATIC PARENT, PROBLEM CHILD....

One of the themes that featured strongly in the reflective journals was the educators’ relationships with their students and their parents, and the participants’ views on mutual respect. At three of the schools the students come from communities where societal problems such as poverty, drug abuse, and violence are common place. These societal issues often spill over in the schools and impact on the classroom management and teacher-student relationships. These participants’ relational wellness was tied to the support that parents provide to their children. Chris, Jan and Deon’s experiences are that teachers at their schools mostly are solely responsible for the psychological and educational support of their learners. This is because working class parents tend to not be as involved in the education of their children as they should be. While the lack of parent involvement in the education of their children was a major cause of stress for the teachers who serve poor school communities, parental over involvement in their children’s progress and school matters were found to be as stressful for the teachers from the affluent schools. According to Helen, “with money comes emotional harassment”. Her experience has been that affluent parents tend to disrespect teachers and treat them as the underclass.

Irrespective of social standing, students in general were experienced as disrespectful towards their teachers. The participants who taught at the poor schools tended to linked discipline problems to socio-economic standing. The examples they gave of disrespectful behaviour included rowdiness, loudness when entering or leaving classes, and ignoring teachers’ instructions in class. These teachers attributed the lack of respect shown towards teachers, to working class children “not being raised properly”. Chris said he spends a big part of his teaching time struggling to get his students’ to pay attention in class and to do their school work. Due to the escalating discipline problems at schools, teachers such as Deon spend valuable teaching time on educating students about values and manners.

We serve an area where the socio-economic circumstances are bad and where parents do not know how to address certain social problems. They cannot even solve their own problems. When a school serves a community where people are well off, it just makes the teacher’s job so much easier.
This assumption of Chris was refuted by the Model C school teachers. Students, irrespective of their socio-economic standing, were being experienced as disrespectful. Annemarie’s journal entry describes her experience as follows:

It is unacceptable for me when a learner applies lip gloss, sprays on deodorant and plaits another’s hair while I am teaching. I am explaining new work and this one is plaits that one’s hair. They treat us like they are watching TV.

Though examples of disrespectful behaviour of learners towards educators differ, what they have in common is that they are impacting negatively on these educators’ emotional wellbeing. At the end of the work day Chris is exhausted from trying to discipline his students, and his health is suffering. So too, Annemarie is frustrated and despondent with this type of behaviour, and wishes that a “tsunami wipes them (students) off the face of the earth”. Listening to their stories, the impressions were that these teachers were struggling to keep their emotions under control so that they not physically attack their students. However, in some cases their negative emotions do find an outlet in physical outbursts and aggressive behaviour towards their students and colleagues. Deon recalled an incident where he physically pushed a student who had provoked him. Bertha also recalled the aggressive behaviour of a former colleague towards his students. “One cannot believe how aggressive he used to be. The teacher’s behaviour was out of character for him and he would sit in a corner and question what was happening to him.” After he resigned, his aggressive and abusive behaviour stopped. Jan blamed educator aggression that teachers resort to, on the unkind ways in which their school communities respond to them: "Educators are not treated with dignity. When they retaliate, they behave in unacceptable ways.” According to Jan acknowledgement of what they do is important in advancing wellness in educators. However, teachers seldom receive praise from the community, parents or students. Instead, they look down on teachers and treat them as if they are not worthy of respect.

4.3. MY SOUL HAS BEEN DAMAGED

The school context was sketched as a very hostile environment for teachers to work in. The above heading was taken from a statement that Helen made, and it refers to her sense of wellbeing. However, this quote can also represented the emotional state of all six participants that this article is reporting on. Though all six educators initially created the impression that they were very positive about their jobs during the interviews, this impression quickly changed as they started relating incidents that happen to them in their worlds of work. Our observations were that when this façade slipped, a very negative picture of their work environments emerged: Helen was ready to “throw in all my cards” and Annemarie said that she felt emotionally drained. Bertha said: “So here I am, driven to tears, because we are so unappreciated.” All three were tearful and emotionally very vulnerable during the interviews. They said they were ready to give up, because they felt under valued, unappreciated, and drained.

Jan, Chris and Deon, though not as emotional, were in agreement that the morale amongst teachers was very low. One of Deon’s friends is a psychiatrist who works at Lentegeur, a state mental facility in the Western Cape. His friend has commented that the majority of his patients were teachers, something that did not surprise Deon. “I said to him that I am surprised that I am not one of them. But I am trying ...” He was referring to his efforts to resist giving in to defeat. Due to the multi dimensional nature of emotional wellbeing (Diener, 2000) we were interested in determining the specific emotions that these educators were experiencing. The following journal entry of Deon is reflective of the multitude emotions that he was experiencing and the influence it was having on his physical wellness:

I still experience the following stress related symptoms, namely depression, hopelessness, powerlessness. I cannot sleep no more, I am having dietary problems, I feel listless and much more.....

The impressions these educators left were of individuals who suffered from low morale, have a negative self image and were being disempowered by their work environment. This lack of empowerment was also creating a sense of victimhood in them, as the following journal entry shows:

I am a disempowered person. I feel like a victim, but I have to empower the child in my class setup. It cannot work. It can never work. (O:D4/5)
What was often heard in their narratives, was a cynicism about other role-players’ take on their abilities and their commitment. Helen said that, “for some, you are an eccentric shady pile of @**&@#... (expletive)” while Berta, whose school is in a poor neighbourhood, felt that her worth was equated to her low socio-economic school and its disadvantaged student populations. Their perceptions that they were being under-valued influenced their sense of self-worth and were contributing to their lack of confidence. The following two excerpts support this. Annemarie’s comment, “This is bad for me... I am becoming smaller. I am becoming lesser…” speaks to her diminishing confidence. So too, Berta’s narrative when she says: "Your educated confidence is a fragile whisper ... that is the thing, you are been [sic] broken down, your educated confidence". The consensus view of the participants was that teachers from the region were experiencing negative emotional wellness and were becoming less dedicated towards the profession. There was agreement amongst them that an unhappy teacher is a less productive teacher. In such cases, they become apathetic about their work responsibilities, and do the bare minimum of what is required. Or they become passive aggressive. Even though Helen had not openly challenging management’s decision to assign her evening mathematics classes, she has coerced her grade11-students to miss the school assembly periods so that she can teach them maths in that time. Helen has taken this decision in defiance of the school’s decision, and is challenging the school’s authority when she states: 

I "bunk" all the assembly periods, me and my grade 11's. Oh, they are having a ball, because they are not attending the boring assembly session. Now we bunk assembly and have Maths. ‘Sue me!’

Helen was very distrustful of her school’s administrators, and was keeping record of all decisions and actions that concerned her. “Everything has to be in writing. Nothing verbal is acceptable anymore”. She defended her actions by saying that this is how she protects herself. Similar to Helen, some teachers who are unhappy about the way that the school management treats them use absenteeism as a mechanism of resistance as well as protection when their work environments become unbearable. Bertha, Deon and Helen described absenteeism as a real problem at their schools and could relate to it. Teachers at their schools usually stay away for one to two days at a time. “They don’t come to school because it is just hell going to school.” Bertha, Deon and Helen have empathy with their absent colleagues, and blame their unsupportive school environments for their absenteeism. At the same time they also find teacher absenteeism to be very disruptive to the school’s workings. Absenteeism as well as resignation was described by these teachers as coping mechanisms. As Deon commented, “Educators leave when they have had enough.” Helen used the time-bomb–on-a-sinking-ship metaphor for the explosive school environment she finds herself in.

I am quickly getting off this ship. I am one of those who are getting off in this round. No, he is sinking. For her, resignation was the only workable solutions for her work problems. She, at some stage of the interview laughed uncomfortably and remarked,

At this stage I am dangerous. I am going to walk out with my suitcase. Up, against that stairs there. I can see myself... with a cowboy stride. I am going to walk out and wave at them...like this. (Waving). And I will go lie on my bed in a foetal position ....and they can call. No, it is going to happen. And then they will know that I am far gone. Oh, at least I can still laugh.

This comment of Helen remind of de-realisation. Due to continued traumatisation in her workplace and her growing negativity about the profession, she seems to be separating herself from the reality. This is a mechanism that also Deon mentioned when he spoke about his colleagues who have suffered emotional breakdowns.

5. DISCUSSION

In this article we reported on the emotional wellness of educators from one region in the Western Cape province of South Africa. The findings show that the work environment at these schools is threatening these six individuals’ emotional wellbeing. Optimal emotional wellbeing is typified by mostly positive emotions and optimism (Meyers, Sweeney, & Witmer, 2000). However, when one listens to these educators’ views and experiences, and that of their colleagues, then mostly negative emotions are being expressed about work and the school environment. 

Their work environment has become emotionally exhausting, and their interactions with their colleagues and their students have become energy sapping exchanges. Discipline problems, parental attitude and the lack of institutional support were reported on as risk factors by all the participants, with the specificity of the problems
being tied to their unique contexts. The fragility of these highly experienced teachers was evident. They exuded very low levels of emotional wellbeing. Their own emotional state show similarities with the clinical diagnosis of a major depressive episode as described in the DSM-IV TR (Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, 2000). Frustration, feeling depressed, stress, uncaring, unworthy, disempowered, negative self-concept are symptoms that these teachers say are being diagnosed by them. This finding is disturbing as teachers who continuously experience negative emotions run the risk of developing emotional diseases. Our understanding of their concern for fellow colleagues who continuously stay absent from school due to depression, was a concern for their own wellbeing too.

The narratives contain many examples of a growing negative, cynical attitude towards their work and strategic role players in education. The WCED is being experienced as an unsympathetic employer with an autocratic management style. This style of management is contributing to these teachers’ frustrations and their disempowerment as professionals. A theme that ran through all the data was the devaluing of teachers’ worth in the workplace. Those who were teaching at the poorer schools felt that they were being acted upon as if their value as educators is tied to where they work and who they teach. Their internalisation of being unworthy and under valued has become a contributing factor in how work tasks are consequently undertaken. They take on an apathetic attitude towards their work and only do the minimum of what is required. Our findings show that the low levels of emotional wellbeing amongst the participants lead to specific actions by them. The most common form of action was absenteeism. When the situation at their schools become unbearable, teachers stay absent from school. These findings are supported by other research (Berndt, et al., 1998; Elinson, Houck, & Pincus, 2004) that found that lower work performance and increased absenteeism is closely associated with depression. Maslach and Jackson (1981) found that burnout tend to have a negative effect on the quality of an organisation’s work due to continuous absenteeism, low morale, and rapid worker turnover. At these schools, the rest of the teaching staff’s workloads escalate when their colleagues absent themselves on a regular basis. A vicious circle is then created for all in the workplace.

These findings have implications for how the WCED engage with their worker force in the schools, and what their channels of communication ought to be. It is crucial that the work contexts within which teachers are expected to function, be investigated so that it can be transformed into an environment where teachers can perform their role as educators without feeling undermined by their school communities. If national government expects teachers to advance the moral and ethical purpose of education, and transform schools into sites that inculcate desirable qualities in the youth, then teachers’ emotional wellness should be prioritized as an important investment in delivering quality education.

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