

## 2 Situating Teacher Well-Being in English Language Teaching

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### Introduction

The global events of the 21st century, especially during its second decade, contributed to rising rates of mental and emotional health issues around the world, including depression, anxiety, and social isolation. These concerns, which were compounded by the COVID-19 pandemic, are reminding policymakers, scholars, and stakeholders in the field of education about the importance of well-being in schools and in learning (Mercer, 2021). A flourishing number of publications in recent years have focused on the well-being of students in K–12 and higher education (e.g., Mercer, n.d.; Montero, 2019; O’Loughlin & Custodio, 2020; Pentón Herrera & Martínez-Alba, 2021). In contrast, the number of scholarly works focusing on the well-being of teachers, especially English language teachers,<sup>1</sup> remains scant (Dewaele et al., 2018; Mercer, 2020, 2021). The reason for the little attention paid to English language teachers’ well-being in research might emanate from the historical preoccupation of the language education field with instruction and academics, often leaving affective and social-emotional concerns in the periphery. However, important works shared in the last decade by leading scholars are beginning to change this trend.

Research tells us English language teachers’ well-being directly affects their effectiveness, teaching practices, classroom atmosphere, teacher-student relationships, and students’ well-being and performance, to name a few (Dewaele et al., 2018; Greenier et al., 2021; MacIntyre et al., 2020). In the same way that teacher preparation and knowledge affect teachers’ performance, so does teacher well-being. With the purpose of situating teacher well-being in English language teaching (ELT), we provide in this chapter a brief overview of existing published works highlighting the effects of well-being on teachers’ personal and professional lives. Thus, we first introduce the topic of well-being and teacher well-being in ELT. Then, we divide the manuscript into three main sections, each addressing a salient topic affecting language teacher well-being—namely, (1) emotions in ELT, (2) work-life balance in ELT, and (3) services and supports

in ELT. In each of these sections, we introduce the topic with a vignette, followed by a brief overview of the literature. The vignettes shared in the chapter are all fictional but inspired by real-life experiences. No real personal information or names are disclosed in the vignettes or throughout the chapter.

## **Teacher Well-Being and ELT**

There are many interpretations and understandings of well-being found in the literature. However, most publications agree that well-being is connected to experiencing positive emotions, good quality of life, and overall life satisfaction (McCallum et al., 2017; Mercer & Gregersen, 2020). Although there are different factors affecting well-being, researchers in the field of psychology agree that people's perception and emotional intelligence are key to well-being (Brackett, 2019; David, 2016). According to Brackett (2019), “[W]ell-being depends less on objective events than on how those events are perceived, dealt with, and shared with others” (p. 63). Further, David (2016) asserts that “being flexible with your thoughts and feelings so that you can respond optimally to everyday situations...is key to well-being and success” (p. 5). Thus, well-being is not about denying or ignoring unwanted emotions but, rather, it is about aiming to have a greater proportion of positive emotions in our everyday lives (Mercer & Gregersen, 2020).

An appropriate conceptualization of well-being is proposed by Dodge et al. (2012) who explain stable well-being is “when individuals have the psychological, social and physical resources they need to meet a particular psychological, social and/or physical challenge. When individuals have more challenges than resources, the see-saw dips, along with their wellbeing, and vice-versa” (p. 230). This conceptualization is relevant because it approaches the topic of teacher well-being from an ecological perspective, considering that well-being does not reside solely within the individual but is socially situated as well (Mercer, 2021). There are currently few definitions in the literature of well-being that are specific to teachers. However, Acton and Glasgow (2015) define teacher well-being as “an individual sense of personal professional fulfillment, satisfaction, purposefulness and happiness, constructed in a collaborative process with colleagues and students” (p. 101). We agree with this definition and believe that teacher well-being is, in fact, affected by different external factors such as colleagues and students. Thus, for the purpose of our chapter, we use Acton and Glasgow's (2015) definition to approach the topic of English language teacher well-being as a collective responsibility in the ELT community (also see our definition in this edited book's introduction).

## Emotions in ELT

Meili started off her first year as an English as an additional language teacher enthusiastic about the possibilities. She learned how to pronounce her students' names, studied their home countries, reviewed the goals and objectives she needed to cover, and felt prepared to make home-school connections. Meili wanted to make her class as welcoming as possible by truly getting to know her students and doing everything she could to make the experience for them a success. However, she found her new position to be much more complicated than she anticipated. Each of her students brought with them their lived experiences and backgrounds, which included traumatic events for some. The students' stories weighed heavily on Meili. She found herself feeling very depressed by hearing about some of the difficult challenges endured by her students. Moreover, parents did not always respond to her communications when she tried talking with them about her concerns. In addition, the number of hours she spent lesson planning and grading left her feeling exhausted at the end of every day.

On the weekends, Meili would try to catch up with work, but that took away from her time to decompress, relax, get housework done, and have time for enjoyable activities. She felt herself sinking further into a depression like never before. In the past, if she was overwhelmed, she could figure out how to organize herself to work through numerous tasks with victory. Nevertheless, she kept feeling as if she was failing at work. She could not keep up, and that seeped into her home life as well. Once home, all she could think about was what she needed to do for work. Then, while working long hours, she thought about what she was neglecting at home. She was embarrassed to talk to her colleagues about it, so she just kept trying to work through it on her own, feeling more depressed and burned out with every passing day.

Meili's vignette is a common story that English language teachers have either heard about or experienced firsthand. English language teachers often face work-related stressors such as feelings of insecurities (Golombek & Doran, 2014)—especially novice and non-native English-speaking teachers (NNEST; see Mousavi, 2007; Talbot & Mercer, 2018)—burn-out (Kocabaş-Gedik & Ortaçtepe Hart, 2021), poor or unsatisfactory working conditions (Greenier et al., 2021), and secondary traumatic stress (O'Loughlin & Custodio, 2020). Available literature confirms that teaching is, inevitably, an emotionally laden profession (Gkonou et al., 2020; King, & Ng, 2018; Xu, 2018); however, scholars argue that language teaching requires additional emotional investment and labor “given the strong emphasis on interpersonal relations and the integration of personally meaningful content and identities” (Talbot & Mercer, 2018, p. 412).

Historically, English-speaking countries have been the largest recipients of migrants and refugees, many of whom are escaping persecution, social and political turmoil, and/or harm (Montero, 2019). Thus, English language teachers residing in English-speaking nations have been tasked with supporting English learners (ELs) who may arrive with unique circumstances resulting from their life experiences, through no fault of their own, which may include social-emotional, mental, physical, and academic challenges. Although teaching English to speakers of other languages (TESOL) teacher education programs prepare practitioners to support ELs through a multicultural, asset-based perspective valuing their funds of knowledge and lived experiences (Short et al., 2018; TESOL International Association, 2020), practitioners are rarely trained to consider their own well-being in their practice and beyond.

English language teachers supporting populations of learners who are considered uniquely vulnerable in their new society, such as refugees, students with limited or interrupted formal education, or students with trauma, tend to perform a multitude of tasks outside of their teaching expertise. Some of these tasks may include providing academic, physical, material, and emotional care both during and after regular school hours (Montero, 2019; Myeong et al., 2020), as well as becoming teacher advocates in their schools and communities. English language teachers feel a responsibility to engage in these practices for the benefit of their students' well-being because engaging in actions that protect and improve the quality of life of their learners is strongly linked to English language teachers' professional identity (Linville, 2021) and are also considered vital best-practices for educators in the ELT field (see Short et al., 2018). However, engaging in these practices requires continuous, intense emotional labor,<sup>2</sup> which may take a toll on teachers' well-being.

One of the major job-related forms of stress that educators supporting migrant learners experience is secondary traumatic stress (STS), sometimes used interchangeably with the term *compassion fatigue* (O'Loughlin & Custodio, 2020). STS is described as the emotional distress experienced by those supporting individuals with trauma, and it is often caused by teachers' simultaneous feelings of deep empathy and despair resulting from listening and learning about their students' stories. STS affects teachers' brains and emotions in the same way it affects their students, and when added to difficult work conditions, it can lead to teacher burnout, withdrawal, and unwanted emotions (Baicker, 2020; Matthews, 2008; O'Loughlin & Custodio, 2020). For English language teachers, the emotional toll and labor involved in the profession naturally percolate into other parts of their lives. As Day et al. (2006) state, there are unavoidable interrelationships between teachers' professional and personal selves; thus, work-life (im)balance has a direct effect on educators' well-being, commitment, and effectiveness (Day & Kington, 2008).

## **Work-Life in ELT**

Tuan is a Vietnamese immigrant currently teaching English as a second language (ESL) to adults at a local community college and is also pursuing a doctorate degree. Tuan uses they/them as their gender pronouns due to their gender-nonconforming identity. As an instructor, Tuan's heavy workload often leaves them feeling exhausted at the end of the day. After teaching, Tuan quickly goes through the assigned readings for the doctoral coursework while taking the train to go to their evening doctoral classes. Their daily schedule usually consists of leaving home around 7:00 in the morning to teach and returning home in the evening around 10:00 after the doctoral classes. There are no weekends for Tuan because they have to respond to students' emails, grade student work, and prepare new lesson plans for the classes they teach. In addition to their teaching responsibilities, Tuan also has to complete an extensive number of weekly assigned readings and writing assignments for their doctoral program. In addition to teaching and pursuing a doctoral degree, Tuan also serves at various local and international institutions to bolster their curriculum vitae (CV), as they hope to secure a full-time job at a higher education institution after earning their doctorate.

Even though Tuan works almost 17 hours per day, 7 days per week, their income consists of a modest salary from the community college, which is making them struggle with paying the doctoral degree's tuition fees, paying monthly expenses, and supporting their immigrant family. Tuan's fast-paced life is leaving little room for them to take care of their mental and physical health. All of these financial struggles and overwork have resulted in Tuan feeling overwhelmed and burned out. Recently, Tuan has been experiencing frustration and anger resulting from the mental and physical exhaustion they are feeling. These unwanted emotions, accompanied by episodes of rapid mood swings, have affected Tuan's relationships with their family and friends, and have affected their sleep and eating habits. After carefully analyzing their current situation, Tuan decided to quit their ESL teaching job at the local community college, take only one doctoral course for the coming semester, and isolate themselves from talking to peers and family for a few months. Currently, they are in the process of learning how to address their mental struggles in a healthy manner that contributes to finding balance.

Tuan's vignette reflects the struggles that English language teachers might experience in their lives, especially if they are teaching and continuing their education simultaneously. In many countries around the world, being an English language teacher extends various employment opportunities, some of which might be contractual, part-time positions with no benefits, or full-time jobs with insufficient income. In addition to salary and job security (Cardoso Pulido & Guijarro Ojeda, 2017), the pressure of time and the juggling of multiple roles and responsibilities are

considered the most powerful stressors for teachers (Gregersen et al., 2020), affecting their well-being and resulting in stress, burnout (Iancu et al., 2018; Mercer, 2020), decreased self-efficacy, and isolation (Dussault et al., 1999; Johnson et al., 2014; Mousavi, 2007), to name a few. When faced with various responsibilities and burdens in their professions and lives, English language teachers might find it difficult to engage in well-being practices that contribute to their work-life balance (Kinman & Wray, 2013).

Work-life balance affects all English language teachers at some point in their careers; however, the challenges each face is unique to their contexts and realities. For example, English language teachers hoping to secure a full-time job in higher education might encounter deep stress associated with publishing scholarly work and building a strong CV even before earning their doctorate (Barry et al., 2018; Pentón Herrera et al., 2021; Waight & Giordano, 2018). In addition to contexts and realities, English language teachers may also face work-life struggles emanating from their personal and professional identities. For example, research confirms that NNEST often face multiple layers of anxiety, loneliness, tensions, and pressure at work associated with conforming to diverse assumptions imposed by the institution and colleagues (e.g., Lin et al., 2004). Similarly, gender and gender identities affect English language teachers' work experiences and work-life balance. Klassen and Chiu (2010) reported that female English language teachers received on average a heavier workload than their male counterparts, causing stress and affecting their well-being. At the time of writing this chapter, there was scant research available on the work-life balance of LGBTQ+ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer/questioning, among other sexualities) English language teachers; however, available autoethnographic works shed light on how the emotional exhaustion and social and systematic oppressions LGBTQ+ professionals encounter may lead to suicidal thoughts (Trinh, 2020a, 2020b).

Tuan's vignette reflects the findings of the currently available literature and highlights the barriers English language teachers may face in achieving work-life balance. In addition, available research shows gaps that have not been expanded upon to support and care for marginalized and vulnerable teachers in ELT such as queer, gender nonconforming, NNEST, and/or teachers continuing their education. Although some interventions and practical tips have been proposed to support the work-life balance of teachers (see Iancu et al., 2018; Pentón Herrera & Martínez-Alba, 2021), ELT professionals oftentimes do not have the privilege to explore them because of the increasing requirements, expectations, and responsibilities of their workplace. Therefore, it is vital to explore how to support teachers in achieving balance in their personal and professional lives to improve their overall well-being and teaching practice. Indeed, English language teachers' well-being is not a personal concern but an ecological responsibility of institutions and those in positions of power (Mercer, 2021).

English language teachers cannot engage in well-being practices that positively influence their work-life balance if the institution and those in power do not give them the space, time, services, and support to do so.

### **Services and Supports in ELT**

Francesca recently graduated with a degree in teaching English as a second/foreign language. Upon graduation, Francesca was offered a position to teach English as a foreign language (EFL) at the Language Institute, a for-profit institution offering language courses for adult learners. This institute only offered part-time teaching opportunities, with most instructors teaching 10–20 hours per week and receiving no benefits (e.g., retirement, health). Excited about the opportunity to teach EFL for the first time in her career, Francesca accepted the position and began teaching Mondays to Thursdays, from 5 pm to 9 pm, for a total of 16 hours per week. Quickly realizing that this instructor position was not providing enough income, Francesca looked for additional teaching opportunities to teach EFL to adults, but most of the positions she found were part time and also provided no benefits. From this job-hunting experience, Francesca decided to explore teaching in K–12, where there were more opportunities for full-time positions. However, Francesca learned she had to complete a K–12 teaching certification program at a local university to be able to teach in K–12.

After completing her K–12 teaching certification program and searching for a job for almost a year, Francesca secured a full-time teaching position at an elementary school. For the first time in her teaching career, she was receiving benefits and the salary of a full-time job. Her salary, however, was barely enough to cover her monthly bills, including the debts Francesca had accrued as a university student during her time completing her degree and the K–12 teaching certification program. For this reason, Francesca decided to keep the part-time job at the Language Institute in addition to her full-time position. In the morning, she would teach EFL to children at the elementary school, and at night, she would teach EFL to adults at the for-profit institute. Teaching at two different institutions took a toll on Francesca's health. In addition to all the physical, mental, and emotional labor required in teaching EFL, Francesca often worried about having sufficient income to pay her monthly bills because her evening classes were dependent on student enrollment, so the for-profit institute could cancel her classes at any time.

New English language teachers can experience stress because of a variety of reasons, such as what Francesca experienced. Other areas that cause stress can be issues with classroom management, lack of planning time, grade complaints, and workload. Some English language teachers might also struggle with their own language abilities, being ELs themselves, which adds to their challenges (Sadat Mousavi, 2007). These and

other work-related issues are rarely addressed in teacher preparation programs. Preservice teachers could also profit from learning about these potential career pitfalls (i.e., the number of full-time jobs available in higher education or the effect of taking multiple teaching positions) and how to engage in well-being before they happen (Mousavi, 2007). In addition, peer observations and team teaching can be valuable to learn about and can potentially help with well-being (Kocabaş-Gedik & Ortaçtepe Hart, 2021).

Institutions, administrators, and teacher educators can have a positive influence on the preparation of English language teachers by being proactive about the issues that are known to affect teacher well-being. They can begin by maintaining a space for teachers to prosper (Gregersen et al., 2020). For example, teachers working with students who experienced trauma might benefit from structured times to share their emotions with their peers to obtain ways to back each other. They can also examine how to emphasize students' strengths. Having the opportunity to share questions, comments, or concerns publicly and privately has also been found to be helpful for those feeling overwhelmed or isolated. Moreover, restorative circles, time for reflection, networking through organizations or online forums, and time for enjoyable activities can provide teachers with the ability to push through their challenges and bond as colleagues and human beings. Last, making an effort to regularly share the successes of teachers and students can help create a more positive educational environment (Colorín Colorado, 2018).

Another important element teacher educators need to consider in teacher preparation is providing spaces to practice and develop positive psychology and positivity, as these directly affect teacher practice. Through a series of interviews, Talbot and Mercer (2018) found that teachers looking through a positive lens indicated that they enjoy interacting and teaching their students, and shared that the rapport and relationships they establish can be very fulfilling. They also said that seeing their students succeed was rewarding. Others disclosed how they believed they were making a difference and had an important role as English language teachers. Further, participants reframed negative circumstances, looking at them with a different lens, while consciously revisiting positive experiences to keep their emotions and well-being up. They also took the time to focus on and appreciate the positive events happening around them (Talbot & Mercer, 2018). For further knowledge on how to positively influence teacher well-being, see Gregersen, Mercer, and Merchant (Chapter 7, this book).

Self-care is another area that teachers have said helps them balance their well-being. To engage in self-care practices, teachers might give themselves rewards, such as a special cup of coffee or a nice dinner. Simple activities added to the daily activities may help teachers feel better. Self-care is vital for teachers to have the energy and well-being to care for their

students (Etherington et al., 2020). Self-care, however, should not be thought of as a teacher's responsibility but as an ecological practice (see Mercer, 2021). This means that institutions and those in positions of power must provide the time, resources, and support needed for teachers to engage in self-care practices. A simple meditation activity at the beginning of a meeting where teachers are consequently bombarded with a large number of tasks is the opposite of teacher self-care. Institutions and administrators must recognize that they, as leaders, have the responsibility to ensure teachers have the space, peace, and support needed to engage in authentic self-care practices in school and beyond.

What would Francesca's story look like if she had some of these supports in place? She could have started her career knowing what opportunities were available and how to work toward achieving her goals with guidance. Institutions and administrators could have made a positive difference for her that not only contributed to her well-being but could have also helped with retention. Teachers leave their institutions and the profession many times due to feeling a lack of administrative support; thus, it is an administrator's responsibility to provide these types of scaffolds for teachers to thrive.

Rather than struggling on her own, Francesca, supported by her leadership, might have joined her colleagues during structured times provided by her workplace to discuss concerns. She could have found out about online forums, associations, and other networking opportunities to discuss solutions. Perhaps she could have been provided with sufficient time at work for self-care to ensure she is feeling better. Or, she could have been provided with a mentor who could help her navigate through all the issues new English language teachers face. Having these supports and services could greatly affect teachers' well-being and make the difference between quickly burning out or finding her career a rewarding choice.

## **Final Thoughts**

In a recent edited volume, Mercer and Kostoulas (2018) aptly explain how teachers and learners represent two sides of the same coin when it comes to the psychologies of teaching and learning. Indeed, "successful language learning depends to a large degree on teachers and, as such, for all concerned, we must make their professional well-being a priority" (Mercer et al., 2016, p. 224). However, the reality is that in the ELT field, teachers have been "relatively neglected in favour of projects which put learners at [the] centre" (King et al., 2020, p. 288). This has resulted in an imbalance of interest and knowledge benefiting language learners' well-being and success, placing language teachers on the periphery. Further, the majority of studies focusing on emotional and affective concerns primarily examine how teachers influence their learners, rarely addressing English language teachers as the independent, vital entities they are in ELT. Nonetheless,

the knowledge we have gained from the recent surge of publications addressing affective and psychological dimensions of language teaching has affirmed that well-being is inextricably connected to English language teachers' practices, effectiveness, and motivation.

The brief overview of available literature shared in this chapter has provided some insights into language teachers' well-being as it relates to emotions, work-life balance, and services and support. First, research suggests that teachers find the time for themselves to get involved in some typical well-being-enhancing activities such as resting at home, socializing with friends, or working out (Gregersen et al., 2020). Specifically, research has shown that active engagement with interpersonal relationships with colleagues (Deci & Ryan, 2000); family, friends, and partners (Hartney, 2008); or sports (Ratey & Hagerman, 2008) are critical to well-being to reduce stress, anxiety, and burnout for the teachers. Second, for those who are teaching and continuing their education at the same time, research has demonstrated that collaborative, self-exploring conversations among peers are helpful in mental and emotional well-being (Pentón Herrera et al., 2021). Last but not least, in addition to emotional self-regulation strategies (Talbot & Mercer, 2018), it is suggested that support at the workplace, including the transparency of roles and responsibilities of the teachers to avoid multiple, added tasks, contributes to lower levels of stress and work-life balance for teachers (Gates, 2000; Kinman & Wray, 2013).

Available and forthcoming research about the well-being of ELT shows promise and, in our view, will contribute to (finally) placing teachers at the heart of ELT, where they belong. We would like to end this chapter by stating that teacher well-being cannot be thought of or enforced as prescriptive. On the contrary, teacher well-being must be acknowledged as individual and holistic, considering the individual teacher's context, needs, and wants. As Mercer and Gregersen (2020) remind us, teacher well-being does not mean denying unwanted emotions, as they are a normal part of the tapestry of everyday life. Rather, teacher well-being is more about aiming for a greater proportion of positive emotions. In this chapter, our purpose is not to generalize English language teachers' experiences of well-being, but to share some practical examples of how personal and professional situations affect educators in their daily lives. We hope English language teachers, teacher educators, and administrators will find this chapter relevant in their practice and, with the knowledge gained here, will continue to explore what teacher well-being looks like to them.

## Notes

- 1 Throughout the chapter, we use the term 'English language teachers' to refer to all English educators in all contexts and grade levels around the world.
- 2 In this chapter, we understand emotional labor as the struggle between workplace expectations and "employees' prior training and/or beliefs about appropriate workplace conduct" (Benesch, 2017, p. 1).

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