

Introduction: Teacher Well-Being in English Language Teaching

An Ecological Introduction

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Introduction

Recent events such as pandemics, natural disasters, religious persecutions, forced migrations, war, and social and political unrest have affected children, youth, and adults all around the world. These national and global events have intensified the prolonged stressors and challenges of teachers, leading to increased teacher burnout, high teacher attrition, and teacher shortages. Teacher stress and burnout have been present in the literature for nearly four decades, with recent publications pointing to the serious consequences these have for the health and performance of educators (Ansley et al., 2021; Iancu et al., 2018; Lashuel, 2020; Mercer, 2020; Pentón Herrera et al., 2021). More recently, uncertainty, demands, and rapid changes resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic have pushed many educators to the brink, compromising their mental, social, and emotional well-being.

The teaching field has historically been characterized by being a profession filled with high levels of stress, contributing to low levels of teacher well-being (Enjuto Valentín, 2001; Mercer, 2020). Language teaching, in particular, has been described as a profession requiring additional emotional investment and labor compared to teaching other subjects (Golombek & Doran, 2014; King & Ng, 2018; Talbot & Mercer, 2018), “given the strong emphasis on interpersonal relations and the integration of personally meaningful content and identities” (Talbot & Mercer, 2018, p. 412). For second language (L2) educators, the issue of emotional labor and well-being is particularly prominent because the language taught is either their or their students’ L2, “which may bring [educators] tremendous anxiety and uneasiness. The challenge may be exacerbated if the teachers live in a foreign country and need to adapt to the context linguistically, socially, and culturally” (Xu, 2018, p. 36). In addition to these internal struggles (e.g., emotions, anxiety, stress), English language teachers may also be faced with emotional unbalance, mental exhaustion, compassion fatigue, and/or secondary traumatic stress emanating from vicariously experiencing the traumatic experiences of their English learners

(O’Loughlin & Custodio, 2021). Yet, relatively few works have explored effective practices and interventions that contribute to teacher well-being, especially in English language teaching (ELT; Mercer, 2021; Pentón Herrera & Martínez-Alba, 2021).

What Is Well-Being?

Well-being, sometimes used interchangeably with the term *wellness*, has a long distinguished history of philosophical exploration. Human beings have long considered what makes a life worth living and what makes individuals feel well, happy, and accomplished. Lessons from great philosophers like Aristotle’s cogitations on morality and virtues (O’Keefe, 2015) and Confucian thinkers Mencius’s and Xunzi’s writings on cultivating proper feelings and attitudes necessary for full participation in the family and community (Kim, 2015) point to the fact that our most important life decisions and events are connected to well-being. Although well-being remains a difficult concept to define, specifically because of its intricate, multilayered nature, most readers will agree that it is essential for our happiness, flourishing, and successful development as human beings.

Although different conceptualizations exist, we agree with The American Psychological Association’s definition of well-being as “a state of happiness and contentment, with low levels of distress, overall good physical and mental health outlook, or good quality of life” (APA Dictionary of Psychology, 2020, para. 1). Moreover, we also agree with the Center for Disease Control and Prevention (2018) that well-being has a direct correlation with—and directly affects—the quality of life. Lastly, well-being occurs when people are content with their lives (both professionally and personally), feel fulfilled, and are capable of transforming experiences into long-lasting positive memories and emotions. In our book, we define well-being as a state of equilibrium where individuals experience health, happiness, and prosperity, all of which lead to developing life satisfaction, self-realization, and the ability to engage in socially responsible behaviors—personally, professionally, emotionally, and spiritually—that produce long-lasting positive effects. Further, we hold that well-being is not an individual duty, but the responsibility of society and ecological systems where individuals reside as a whole.

Why Teacher Well-Being from an Ecological Perspective?

As a result of the events teachers have been going through in their work environments, most recently the global pandemic, they need time to regroup. More specifically, teachers need to feel supported with opportunities to reflect on and build on their well-being (Stafford-Brizard, 2021). Although practices targeting the social-emotional learning (SEL) of students have increased significantly as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic

(Li et al., 2021), teacher well-being, a vital foundation for SEL (Pentón Herrera & Martínez-Alba, 2021), has not been a priority. Instead, schools have adopted sterile and impersonal practices encouraging teachers to engage in self-care, placing the responsibility of being well on teachers alone. Similarly, school-wide workshops on wellness have been implemented, but for many teachers, these practices are hollow and just represent a way of ‘weaponizing’ self-care by holding teachers accountable to report that they are well.

At the time of writing this introduction in the fall of 2021, some of our teacher-colleagues have confided in us that most of the self-care workshops and other wellness practices are just there for schools to say that they did it, but offer little substance for educators. In the words of one of our colleagues,

[The leadership] says they care about our well-being, but they do a breathing or meditation exercise at the beginning of workshops or meetings, then assign us a never-ending list of additional duties and responsibilities, and finalize our training with “remember to self-care.” How can I self-care when they keep giving us additional work and responsibilities with everything else going on?!

Our colleague’s concerns greatly resonate with what we have personally experienced as teachers and with what we have seen online. For example, on November 16, 2021, Bored Teachers, a platform that amplifies educators’ voices, posted a video titled “Why So Many Teachers Are Leaving This Year – A Teacher’s Rant” (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TIYo35YV-DY>). In this video, the teacher explains the reasons behind teachers’ exhaustion, which are compounded by other school personnel shortages (i.e., bus drivers, etc.), upset parents, and never-ending responsibilities added by school officials. In the video the teacher shared,

We got admin [administration] and district officials shouting “practice self-care” while continually adding a million things to our plates. If y’all really cared about us practicing self-care, we wouldn’t be made to feel bad when we need to take a mental health day or when we have to take a personal day off. I mean, you got teachers out here coming to school mentally sick, coming to school physically sick because their admin makes them feel bad if they have to miss a day because there’s a teacher shortage. I shouldn’t have to sacrifice my health because y’all don’t have any teachers. Our prep [preparation] time is gone because there’s a teacher shortage and a substitute teacher shortage. So, nine times out of 10, we are having to cover a class during our prep period. So, when am I supposed to lesson plan, grade these papers, [and] get prepared for teacher observation?

(Bored Teachers, 2021)

The messages shared by our colleague and the teacher in the video are also reflected in our teacher-friends' social media posts. While writing this book introduction, there were two memes we saw in our teacher-friends' social media posts that particularly resonated with us and the work we are doing. In the first meme, there was an individual drowning with many papers (signifying tasks or responsibilities to complete) with the caption "me, trying to make it through the 2020/2021 school year." At the bottom of the visual, there was an individual (identified as 'them', which signifies the school leadership and stakeholders) yelling, "Don't forget to practice self-care!" In the second meme, teachers were depicted as helpless individuals being strangled on the floor by "the demands of the 2020–21 school year" while an individual captioned as "admin" watches from afar yelling. A woman entering the room captioned as "the presenter of self care PD [professional development]" is seen there watching the event motionless.

Although these comedic representations might give us a chuckle, the reality in these memes is no laughing matter; instead, it is a pressing and concerning one. Teachers feel helpless, burned out, and drowning, and there is only so much individual self-care practices can do for teachers' well-being when everything else in the educational system and society is overwhelming them. School systems have the duty to give teachers the space, resources, and time to engage in authentic self-care behaviors that will result in real long-term well-being. Teachers' well-being is not a commodity; it is a vital element of the school ecosystem, and without healthy teachers, schools are forced to shut down (Velez, 2021), tremendously affecting students, families, the community, and the educational field as a whole.

In this book, we approach teacher well-being from an ecological perspective because we believe teacher well-being is a societal duty, not a personal responsibility. An ecological model considers individuals, relationships, organizations, communities, policy, society, and how they all fit together, which is very important to take into account since health is affected by multiple factors. For example, public and institutional policies can have a positive effect on teachers by creating rules and regulations to promote healthy environments (American College of Health Association, n.d.). When looking more closely at the factors affecting teacher well-being, we can best make sense of them by using Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological lens: micro (e.g., individuals and their relationships), meso (e.g., credentialing regulations of teachers), and macro (e.g., national policies in education). Through this lens, we can further unpack how an ecological perspective can be beneficial through its consideration of all facets of a person's life.

In this edited volume, we amplify the clarion call to action made by Sarah Mercer (2021) and urge the ELT field to make well-being a priority both in research and practice. Teacher "well-being is not a vacuous

nonsense. It is the absolute core of what it means to exist as a human being within a social and global ecology” (p. 21). Thus, in this edited volume, we place teacher well-being in ELT front and center throughout the different chapters that speak directly to teacher well-being in ELT at the micro, meso, and macrosystems. Our vision is that this edited book will serve as foundational work in the field, advancing the conversation of teacher well-being as an ecological responsibility rather than a personal duty.

The Organization of This Edited Book

We have divided this edited volume into five parts.

Part I. Situating Teacher Well-Being in English Language Teaching

The contributions in Part I: Situating Teacher Well-Being in English Language Teaching provide a foundation for the edited volume by situating and expanding the understanding of teacher well-being in ELT. In Chapter 1, titled “Psychological Perspectives on Teachers’ Well-Being: Principles and Possibilities,” Antonio Aguilar-Diaz provides a general overview of the available literature regarding teacher well-being and emphasizes the wide array of stressors that teachers face today. Antonio Aguilar-Diaz concludes the chapter by proposing ideas of what can be done in order to support teachers’ personal growth and overall well-being in ELT and beyond. In Chapter 2, titled “Situating Teacher Well-Being in English Language Teaching,” Gilda Martínez-Alba, Luis Javier Pentón Herrera, and Ethan Trinh situate teacher well-being in ELT by providing a brief overview of existing published works highlighting the effects of well-being on teachers’ personal and professional lives. The manuscript is divided into three main sections, each addressing a salient topic found in the currently available literature about language teacher well-being—namely, (1) emotions in ELT, (2) work-life balance in ELT, and (3) services and supports in ELT.

Part II. Teacher Well-Being at the Microsystem

The contributions in Part II: Teacher Well-Being at the Microsystem shed light on how English language educators engage in practices that contribute to well-being. In “A Poetic Autoethnography of When Poetry Became My Synergistic Approach for Pedagogy and Andragogy” (Chapter 3), Saurabh Anand engages in a poetic autoethnography to explore teacher well-being. Findings from his study suggest that the act of reading and writing poetry can be the next step toward healing-centered education. However, those affordances go beyond benefiting learners’ language acquisition as it also helps emotionally vulnerable teachers such as himself.

In Chapter 4, “ESL Teacher Well-Being in Sri Lanka: An Autoethnography,” Lakmini Grant Siriwardana employs autoethnography to understand her experiences as an ESL teacher in Sri Lanka. Lakmini Grant Siriwardana finds that lack of opportunities for professional development, lower salary scales, job instability, and workload sometimes caused her burnout, making her feel drained both mentally and emotionally, and affecting her overall well-being. In Chapter 5, “Radical (Collective) Self-Care: Reflections for the Activist TESOL Educator,” Elisabeth L. Chan takes a critical feminist lens to explore radical self-care, walking readers through reflective practices for strengthening critical consciousness and suggesting community actions for radical self-care and sustainability.

Part III. Teacher Well-Being at the Mesosystem

The contributions in Part III: Teacher Well-Being at the Mesosystem highlight the direct effects of organizational support (or lack thereof) on teacher well-being. In Chapter 6, “English Language Teacher Well-Being and Professional Identity Construction: A Self-Determination Theory Perspective,” Mostafa Nazari and Ismail Xodabande present a qualitative study exploring the un(der)explored nexus between Iranian English language teacher well-being and professional identity construction. Findings highlight how the teachers’ subjectivity clashes with institutional particularities to shape their well-being and the associated bearings for their professional identity construction. In Chapter 7, “Appreciative Inquiry as a Pathway to Language Teacher Well-Being,” Tammy Gregersen, Sarah Mercer, and Faren Angel Merchant share the findings of a study conducted at a United Arab Emirates institution preparing English teachers. The study demonstrated that using an appreciative inquiry lens provided positive, constructive, collaborative feedback on teachers’ classroom performance, proving empowering and positive for their well-being. In Chapter 8, “Vicarious Trauma and the Unregulated Education of Preservice Adult Language Instructors,” Katie Crossman provided insights on how instructors of adult learners in Canada experience vicarious trauma, compassion fatigue, and burnout.

In Chapter 9, “English Teacher Well-Being in the Face of the Pandemic: An Investigation in the Southeast of Nigeria,” Ugochi Mbagwu employed a qualitative case study to explore English language teachers’ well-being in selected tertiary institutions in the southeast of Nigeria. Data reflected that lack of emotional support from the workplace and poor psychological well-being were some of the factors that hindered teachers’ effective ELT at the institutions. In Chapter 10, “Embedding Well-Being into Language Teacher Education and Professional Development: Starting the Conversation,” Amea Wilbur and Taslim Damji address well-being through a trauma-informed lens and provide pedagogical trauma-informed practices to promote well-being in the teaching profession. In Chapter 11,

“Building Young Teacher Well-Being in Universities: A Case Study of the Teachers’ Development Center in SISU,” Yushan Zhu analyzes the current situation of young teachers in Chinese higher education and shares possible solutions provided by the practice of the Teachers’ Development Center at Sichuan International Studies University (SISU).

Part IV. Teacher Well-Being at the Macrosystem

The contributions in Part IV: Teacher Well-Being at the Macrosystem advance the conversation by looking at teacher well-being in ELT through the lens of social practices and ideologies. In Chapter 12, “Language Teacher Candidates’ Emotion Labor: Transcending Circulating Language Ideologies,” Hazel Vega and Christian Fallas-Escobar employ a comparative case study to examine teacher candidates’ (TCs) emotional responses to language ideologies that prescribe and enforce marginalizing identity positions. Findings have implications for teacher education in the United States and Latin America, with special regard to the adoption of teacher education policies and practices that may cultivate English and bilingual education TCs’ engagement in practices of well-being. In Chapter 13, “What University-Level Institutions Are Doing to Promote Teacher Self-Care and Well-Being: Reflections from the Gulf,” Christine Coombe and Doaa Hamam discuss best practices for university-level teachers in the Gulf and share recommendations and strategies to improve teachers’ well-being. In Chapter 14, “English Language Teaching Associations on Teacher Well-Being during the COVID-19 Pandemic and Beyond,” Georgios Kormpas highlights events organized by English language teaching associations (ELTAs) during the COVID-19 pandemic that supported the well-being of English language teachers and suggests that ELTAs can play a pivotal role in the future of well-being for English teachers. Lastly, in Chapter 15, “Palestinian English Teachers’ Challenges for Well-Being and Excellence,” Anwar Hussein-Abdel Razeq focuses on the challenges that Palestinian English teachers currently face in performing their teaching duties and the strategies they use for their cognitive, emotional, and physical well-being.

Part V. Final Thoughts and Ecological Pathway Forward

In the final chapter, “Concluding Thoughts on Teacher Well-Being in English Language Teaching: An Ecological Pathway Forward,” Ethan Trinh, Gilda Martínez-Alba, and Luis Javier Pentón Herrera summarize the key elements and findings discussed throughout the book, ending with reflections for next steps. Within that, the micro, meso, and macrosystems are fleshed out to provide a clear picture of how wellness is being addressed around the world, which sheds light on many positive methods in place that can be replicated and implemented in other contexts. We end

this chapter and edited volume by describing enigmas that remain unanswered and providing some suggestions for ecological explorations of teacher well-being in English language teaching and beyond.

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