16 Concluding Thoughts on Teacher Well-Being in English Language Teaching

An Ecological Pathway Forward

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Introduction

In this edited volume, we were privileged to include contributions from English language teaching (ELT) practitioners working in different contexts around the world. Individually, these contributions shed light on specific challenges and opportunities affecting teacher well-being in specific countries or settings, and, as a collective, these contributions represent an overview of the complex nature involved in promoting, ensuring, and maintaining teacher well-being at the personal, institutional, and societal levels. With contributions from ELT practitioners in K–12 and higher education reporting teacher wellness in Canada, China, Costa Rica, Greece, Iran, Nigeria, Palestine, Sri Lanka, countries in the Gulf Region (Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates), and the United States, this volume sought to bring attention to the ecological nature of teacher well-being in ELT, demonstrating that wellness is a complex and multilayered issue.

In this final chapter, we present salient lessons from the state-of-the-art contributions in this book and separate our analyses into factors affecting teacher well-being at the micro-, meso-, and macrosystems. We then revisit these salient key findings at each level by connecting them to the broader available literature. We end the chapter and edited book by proposing the next steps for ecological explorations of teacher well-being in ELT.

What We Have Learned

In the same way that agreeing on a definition of teacher well-being is difficult (Mercer & Gregersen, 2020), researching the well-being of teachers in ELT is far from unambiguous. First, individual well-being cannot and should not be homogeneously defined, as it varies and occurs in multiple forms. We, as the editors of this volume, have learned multiple ways of seeing and thinking about well-being through individual stories and lives situated in different places in the world.

ELT Teacher Well-Being at the Microsystem

Writing data about self is personal, emotional, and political (Trinh, 2021; Trinh et al., 2022). At the microsystem, Chapters 3 to 5 shed light on the complexity of boundaries ELT teachers experience at the personal and professional levels. From the examples presented in Chapters 3 to 5, we realize that, in order to have a more holistic view of teacher well-being at the microsystem, we need to acknowledge the different contexts, regions, nations, and struggles directly affecting ELT teachers' emotions, health, and wellness. Without a doubt, we have learned through the work in this edited volume, as well as in available research, that wellness looks different in each individual and that both internal and external factors greatly affect teachers' overall well-being.

While exploring teacher well-being at the microsystem (Part II of the book), contributors relied on their own (as well as on their colleagues') lived experiences to center their conversations and findings on well-being. For example, as an international doctoral student in the United States, Saurabh Anand (Chapter 3) reported on how he used poetry as a self-healing method, especially during the global pandemic, while balancing teaching responsibilities and the inquietudes that come from joining a PhD program. Likewise, in Chapter 4, Lakmini Siriwardana candidly reflected on her well-being, insecurities, and stress in relation to employment, professional growth, and financial stability while she was teaching English as a second language in Sri Lanka. The findings from both of these contributions remind us that emotions are ever-present in teaching, especially in ELT (Oxford, 2020; Xu, 2018), which reminds us that teachers, in addition to being professionals, are also complex human beings. At the same time, recognizing emotions alone is not enough.

As demonstrated in Chapters 3 and 4, engaging in meaningful practices and reflection that lead to healing (Chapter 3) and to critical emotional intelligence and growth (Chapter 4) supports the well-being of teachers and, in turn, positively affects their teaching practices and performance (Hascher & Waber, 2021; Pentón Herrera & Martínez-Alba, 2021). Likewise, Elisabeth L. Chan (Chapter 5) suggests radical self-care as a practice to challenge the infliction of pain, violence, and trauma caused by institutional practices that lead to systemic inequities and harm to teachers. From the lessons learned from each chapter in the microsystem (Chapters 3–5), we concur with Gregersen et al. (2020) that it is challenging to find a concrete and simple definition for individual well-being considering the multitude of factors affecting it, such as stressful life events and daily stressors. Similarly, the lessons learned in Chapters 3–5 support emerging findings in the literature directly linking institutional policies and policies with teacher well-being (Pagán-Castaño et al., 2021).

ELT Teacher Well-Being at the Mesosystem

Research on/about/with English teachers that examine their complex psychologies, working conditions, and well-being in public and private settings remains relatively rare (Mercer, 2021). At the mesosystem (Part III of the book), contributors showcased concrete examples of promoting, working with, and centering teacher well-being in ELT despite challenges in their own settings/institutions and beyond.

To start with, a trauma-informed approach was introduced to push the field to think about teachers' well-being in teaching and professional development (PD). For example, Katie Crossman (Chapter 8) centers on discussing self-care in relation to institutional support and trauma-informed education for teachers. By interviewing 52 instructors in Canada who experience vicarious trauma, compassion fatigue, and burnout, Katie learned that students and teachers were able to build a trusting relationship and disclose traumatic histories with one another. The trauma-informed approach was recommended to be incorporated into the teacher training programs and for accreditation. Likewise, Amea Wilbur and Taslim Damji (Chapter 10) addressed well-being through a trauma-informed lens. Through a critical dialogic approach, they used pedagogical trauma-informed practices to push us to rethink and reconceptualize the intentions of teacher education and PD. Specifically, they recommend English teachers re-evaluate and humanize the teaching profession, teach trauma-informed practices to instructors and teacher candidates, create space for self-examinations of their own identities and positionality, and build a sense of community and support for teachers and students to overcome the academic threats.

Second, a systematic change was strongly recommended to support teachers' well-being. For instance, Mostafa Nazari and Ismail Xodabande (Chapter 6) demonstrated how institutional membership mediates teachers' positive and negative emotions and agentive experiences and how these factors relate to teachers' identity construction in Iran. On the other hand, Ugochi Mbagwu (Chapter 9) reported on English teachers' emphasis on the lack of emotional support they received at the workplace and the poor psychological well-being they are exposed to in Southeast Nigeria classrooms. Ugochi Mbagwu urged stakeholders to work together toward systematic change to create a positive school environment and work climate in order to support teachers' well-being and teaching performances across contexts. In Chapter 11, Yushan Zhu reflected on the dilemma young teachers are facing in higher education in China in regards to teaching, research, and PD. In her chapter, Yushan introduced an initiative adopted by her institution, the Teachers' Development Center, which centered on the care and well-being of individual teachers. In unison, the authors of those chapters (6, 9, and 11) offer some ways in which communities and organizations can approach the topic of well-being for educators.

Departing from the traditional focus on negative experiences and emotions in teacher education, Tammy Gregersen, Sarah Mercer, and Fareen Angel Merchant, in Chapter 7, employed the appreciative inquiry (AI) lens to explore the effects of positive, constructive, collaborative feedback on teachers' classroom performance. Through the AI approach, the participants (i.e., teachers) were empowered to give authentic feedback to their peers, were given a sense of agency to choose pathways of practice that reflect their own strengths, and demonstrated an increased sense of self-efficacy and positivity.

Findings from Chapters 6 to 11 add a variety of perspectives to the global conversation about how to improve and support English language teachers' well-being around the world. Specifically, these findings at the mesosystem contribute rich data about the effects of positive interventions, strategies, and lenses to address teachers' well-being across settings and times (Mercer, 2021; Talbot & Mercer, 2018) and emphasize the importance of collaborative, self-exploring conversations about mental and emotional well-being among peers (Pentón Herrera et al., 2021). The findings of these chapters encourage readers to rethink teacher well-being at the mesosystem. Specifically, these chapters give us hope to think critically about how to (1) disrupt the ELT industry versus the ELT profession that moves beyond the neoliberal educational policies and practices (Chapters 9 and 11), (2) think more deeply about critical incidents that happened to teachers and students (Chapters 8 and 10), and (3) promote voice, choice, and rejoice in teacher training (Chapter 7).

ELT Teacher Well-Being at the Macrosystem

The chapters on the macrosystem (Part IV) offer an insightful understanding of the mismatch (Mercer, 2021) between policymaking and advocacy for teachers' well-being in different contexts. To begin with, Hazel Vega and Christian Fallas-Escobar (Chapter 12) examined the emotional responses of two teacher candidates (TCs), one from Costa Rica and the other from the United States. The study demonstrates the TCs' emotional responses to language ideologies that enforced marginalizing identity positions (e.g., native speaker, linguistic purism, and academic language) embedded in their respective sociocultural contexts. The findings show that as TCs engaged in the critical negotiation process to explore their emotional experiences and linguistic and teacher identities, they were able to engage in practices of well-being and transform themselves across all levels (i.e., micro-, meso-, and macrosystems).

Further, Christine Coombe and Doaa Hamam (Chapter 13) encouraged readers to think about the important role of organizations and institutions in promoting teachers' well-being. In addition, they shared practices and strategies that have been implemented in the Gulf Region to improve language teachers' well-being at the university level. Christine

and Doaa asked their universities and institutions to reflect on and explore different ways to support English language teachers' well-being for the betterment of the whole system. In Chapter 14, Georgios Kormpas provided examples of how English Language Teachers Associations (ELTAs) supported the well-being of its members through different activities and initiatives. Further, Georgios extended the conversation about the importance of professional organizations, such as ELTAs, in supporting and promoting teachers' well-being around the world. In the final chapter of the macrosystem, Chapter 15, Anwar Hussein-Abdel Razeq presents unique macrolevel insights into Palestinian English teachers' struggles in relation to performing their teaching duties while maintaining cognitive, emotional, and physical well-being. Anwar Hussein-Abdel Razeq first described factors affecting Palestinian English teachers' well-being and performance and then suggested effective practices for institutions to consider in promoting teachers' well-being.

From these chapters in Part IV of the book, we have compiled some of the practices and strategies that institutions should consider adopting to support teachers' well-being in their own settings and cultures. Those practices include offering responses, initiatives, and events that direct attention to faculty's self-care and well-being, providing various facilities on campus to support teachers' physical and mental health, and encouraging teaching and learning activities that promote well-being (Chapter 13). In addition, institutions can develop a social and emotional program for teachers; distribute workload fairly; employ a transformational leadership style; hold workshops on using healthy coping strategies; empower teachers and involve them in the decision-making process; build a culture of trust in the school; develop a mentorship program for supporting beginning teachers; promote awareness, understanding, and commitment to achieve school goals together; and support teachers' professional growth (Chapter 15). These strategies and practices are also illustrated in the work of Hascher and Waber (2021), Pentón Herrera and Martínez-Alba (2021), and other contributors in this book.

The strategies from Chapters 12 to 15 include practicing critical self-reflection; using elements of positive psychology; increasing emotional intelligence; ensuring that physical activities are part of teachers' lives; avoiding negativity in the workplace; being mindful and gentle with self; practicing gratitude, meditation, reflection, setting time and boundaries between self and work; and building emotional connections despite social distancing. Above all, these chapters on the macrosystem encourage us to reenvision the concept of *teacher self-care* as a *system of care for teachers.* That is, the content in these chapters reminds us that, while promoting teacher self-care practices is appropriate, leaders and decision-makers have the power to improve teachers' well-being by implementing systematic strategies and practices that contribute to the creation of more supportive school environments.

These chapters in Part IV reflect on the importance of school connectedness, teaching autonomy, and teaching efficacy in promoting professional well-being for teachers across contexts. We acknowledge and concur with Antonio Aguilar-Diaz (Chapter 1) that social and emotional wellness is a community responsibility rather than the sole responsibility of any individual. These chapters showcase that the social-cultural and institutional contexts play a significant role in uplifting English language teachers, making their well-being central and "a collective concern" (Gregersen et al., 2020, p. 19) that deserves a priority in policy and decision-making. In fact, the authors in Part IV, as well as other authors in different sections, have continuously asked institutions and policymakers to shift immediate attention to teachers' well-being by providing PD, workshops, and other venues for the growth of ELT wellness. These are urgent and worldwide needs that require immediate support and advocacy from all levels so that teachers can continue to carry on their work. In addition, Mercer (2021) reminds us that the threats to the well-being of individual beings *are* those of collective community issues; hence, we all need to work with one another to disrupt the cultural, social, linguistic, and systematic issues to contribute to more positive and better ecological conditions for the teachers to continue this heavy work moving forward.

Conclusion and Next Steps

As we continue to gain knowledge about what teacher well-being in ELT is and what it looks like, we need to go beyond prescriptive practices often adopted by institutions (e.g., telling teachers to self-care by doing x, y, and z) and consider ecological perspectives. As we now know, well-being is not the sole responsibility of English language teachers and should not be enforced or expected as such. The community (inside and outside of school) needs to work together to support English language teachers' well-being because teachers, like students, are at the heart of our educational system and constitute the most vital stakeholders in a healthy and educated society. As Mercer (2021) acknowledges,

> Everyone can potentially contribute something to putting learner and teacher well-being on the agenda within their local, national, and global ELT domains. On the whole, the field needs to be talking openly and seriously about the topic as well as taking concrete action steps to improve the well-being of all stakeholders in the ELT ecology.
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> (p. 20)

English language teachers' support needs to span across the micro-, meso-, and macrosystems for them to be able to successfully achieve and sustain wellness. Institutions, supervisors, and policies all play a mutually

significant role in the well-being of teachers, and having these entities work together is key. Wellness has to be respected and assisted by supervisors, institutions, and policies, and they are tasked with helping in creating environments that support English language teachers' well-being. Moreover, policies—in particular—that clearly ensure English language teachers' well-being guarantees sustainable and protected wellness for educators. With the amount of teacher burnout and attrition that we are currently experiencing in the field (Dill, 2022; Will, 2021) and predictably increasing due to global events, such as wars and pandemics, centering the well-being of teachers is now, more than ever, a national and global priority.

Fortunately, many of the authors in this book share insights about how their institutions provided well-being support for English language teachers at different levels (micro, meso, and macro). Some examples include supervisors, organizations, and institutions helping teachers work through challenges while focusing on positive events, which is a practice Talbot and Mercer (2021) point out as necessary. Moreover, supervisors, organizations, and institutions provided PD opportunities for English language teachers to learn about social-emotional strategies, for example, to help cope with their stress, which MacIntyre et al. (2019) suggest for teacher well-being. However, policies were not always in place to create ongoing and supporting systems to aid the well-being of English language teachers, which might account for the catastrophic number of teachers leaving the profession around the world, prompting nationwide school closures and affecting the field of education as a whole (Kamenetz, 2021; UNESCO, 2021; Wilson & Carabetta, 2022). As such, we urge policymakers and leaders to put the well-being of teachers at the heart of education and to allow *systems of care for teachers* to be part of institutional visions in the future.

Next Steps for Ecological Explorations of Teacher Well-Being

The voices in this edited volume have advanced our knowledge of the factors affecting English language teachers' well-being around the world. However, we recognize that the field of language teacher well-being is still developing and more research is needed to continue advancing our understanding. For this reason, we would like to end this chapter and edited volume with some suggestions and enigmas that remain unanswered, hoping that researchers will use these to guide them in further exploring teacher well-being in ELT and beyond:

- What research methods are best suited to explore the complexity of teacher well-being?
- What policies and practices can institutions adopt (and/or adapt) in different settings to improve the well-being of teachers in schools and beyond?

- What factors at the micro-, meso-, and macrosystems affect teacher well-being inside and outside the classroom?
- What is the relationship between nature, the environment, and teacher well-being?
- What role does critical storytelling (see Pentón Herrera & Trinh, 2021) have in promoting a collective understanding of teacher well-being around the world?
- What does individual and collective radical self-care look like in and outside of English language classrooms? What are un/successful stories and implications to shape institutional policymaking in the future?
- How are *systems of care for teachers* defined in ELT? What do they look like in different contexts?

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