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Language Teacher Wellbeing in the Workplace: Balancing Needs

Abstract

Teachers who experience high wellbeing in their workplace teach more effectively, have better relationships with learners, and high attainment among their learners (Mason, 2017). To understand what contributes to language teacher wellbeing, we examined the three pillars of positive psychology (Seligman, 2011) and drew in particular on work in Positive Organizational Scholarship (Cameron & Spreitzer, 2012) to explore institutional and personal factors which teachers perceived as influential for their wellbeing. The paper reports on insights from 15 language teachers in 13 different countries. This sampling technique ensured a diverse set of perspectives on this topic. Data were gathered through in-depth, semi-structured interviews which were analyzed using Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The analysis revealed five main themes the teachers perceived as relevant for their wellbeing including workplace culture, social relationships, sense of meaning and purpose, language teacher status, and physical wellbeing. The findings highlight that wellbeing is not just a personal and subjective phenomenon, but it is also collectively and socially determined. The study concludes with a reflection on implications for practice, policy makers, and school leaders as well as a consideration of issues of individuality to address in future research.

Keywords: language teacher wellbeing, workplace, positive organizational scholarship, job satisfaction

Introduction

Wellbeing has become a topic of increased global interest (Calvo et al., 2012; Cho, 2014), particularly during the global pandemic in 2020 (MacIntyre et al., 2020; Zacher & Rudolph, 2020). In several countries, it has even formed the basis of economic policy. For example, New Zealand has adopted the Happiness Index, India has introduced the Ease of Living measurement in 2019, and Bhutan has utilized the Gross National Happiness (GNH) since 2008. In a survey conducted in the UK during the 2020 lockdown, a YouGov poll found that eight out of ten people in the UK would want the government to highlight health and wellbeing more (Harvey, 2020). This growing awareness of the importance of wellbeing generally has also been witnessed within education. For example, the OECD (2019) and PISA (2015) have included measurements of learner wellbeing since 2015, and countries such as Finland (Government of Finland, 2018), and the Republic of Ireland (Government of Ireland, 2019) have incorporated wellbeing initiatives into key education policies.

Language teaching is no exception to this trend of growing interest in wellbeing. Most notably, there has been a recent increase in studies focusing on the wellbeing of language teachers within language education (e.g., Hiver & Dörnyei, 2017; Mercer & Gregersen, 2020; Moskowitz & Dewaele, 2019; Ončevska Ager & Mercer, 2019) including papers published during the COVID-19 pandemic (e.g., MacIntyre et al., 2020).

The language teaching profession is often plagued by high levels of stress, growing burnout rates, and unfavorable work conditions, which can consequently lead to language teachers across the globe leaving the profession (Swanson, 2008). It seems that sustaining energy, commitment, motivation, and maintaining optimal levels of wellbeing over time has become increasingly challenging for teachers across the globe (Day & Gu, 2010; Sulis et al., in preparation). Therefore, it is now more important than ever to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the factors that influence teachers' sense of wellbeing in order to better understand how institutions and educational systems can best support teachers in their professional roles and help them thrive.

In this study, we explore the language teachers' perspective on factors which positively influenced and supported their wellbeing as language professionals. We placed a particular focus on the perceived contribution of organizational and school contextual factors given that most research to date has tended to emphasize the individual and personal traits affecting wellbeing with less consideration of context-specific characteristics. Indeed, MacIntyre highlighted that, apart from positive experiences (and emotions) and positive character traits, "positive institutions have been the least well studied" (2016, p. 5). Therefore, given that "wellbeing emerges from a blend of personal and

professional factors as well as contextual factors, in particular, our perception of our environment” (Mercer & Gregersen, 2020, p. 3), we accounted for personal but focused particularly on institutional factors that seem to contribute to the wellbeing of language teachers and promote the quality retention of these language professionals.

Literature Review

What Is Wellbeing and Why Is It Important?

To understand wellbeing, Seligman’s (2011) PERMA framework has been widely used. It encompasses five wellbeing components: positive emotions, engagement, relationships, meaning, and accomplishments. The PERMA model stems from Positive Psychology (PP) which suggests there are three pillars of wellbeing: positive experiences, positive individual traits, and positive institutions. The positive-experiences pillar is concerned with one’s satisfaction with the past, happiness in the present, and hope for the future. Positive individual traits refer to characteristics that typically lead to a fulfilling life, such as courage, perseverance, and the capacity to love. Finally, positive institutions deal with the systemic designs and strengths that are integral in developing and maintaining flourishing communities (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). These suggest that when investigating wellbeing, it is important to understand all three strands and the interplay between these, as wellbeing emerges from the dynamic interaction of personal and contextual components in people’s lives.

Wellbeing is not only “valuable because it feels good, but also [...] because it has beneficial consequences” (Diener & Seligman, 2004, p. 1). Studies have shown that higher levels of wellbeing are associated with increased levels of happiness and productivity (Krekel et al., 2019), higher income, social awareness, and connectedness (Diener & Seligman, 2004), better social equity (White, 2010), and physical health and longevity (Diener & Seligman, 2004; Lyubomirsky et al., 2005). Given the number of scientifically proven benefits, we believe that improving people’s wellbeing should become key aim of researchers, policy makers, and other relevant stakeholders for all social groups, but especially teachers who are known to work in a highly stressful profession but who can also influence learner wellbeing.

Indeed, experiencing higher levels of wellbeing is not only beneficial for teachers but also for their students (Roffey, 2012). Teachers who enjoy high wellbeing teach more creatively (Bajorek et al., 2014), cultivate better relation-

ships in the classroom (DeVries & Zan, 1995), attain higher levels of achievement among learners (Briner & Dewberry, 2007), and have fewer discipline problems (Kern et al., 2014). Finally, physically and mentally healthy teachers can better “cope with the daily challenges of teaching languages” (Mercer & Gregersen, 2020, p. 1). In sum, wellbeing is a key factor contributing to good teaching practice.

Factors Affecting Teacher Wellbeing

Teacher wellbeing can be affected by numerous factors, including how the individual teachers feel and think about their work (Sulis et al., in preparation). Some of these factors encompass, for example, self-efficacy (Wyatt, 2018), resilience (Gu & Day, 2007), and optimism (e.g., Luthans, Youssef-Morgan, & Avolio, 2015). However, wellbeing is not only determined by personal characteristics and psychological states, it is also influenced by social and contextual factors including a number of institutional factors. For example, positive organizational factors enhancing teacher wellbeing typically include positive social relations with administrators, parents, and colleagues (Butt & Retallick, 2002), a supportive school climate (Day et al., 2007), and teachers identifying with the school’s values (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2011). Organizational factors known to adversely affect teacher wellbeing include discipline issues (Skaalvik & Skaalvik 2011), excessive workload (Smithers & Robinson, 2008), potential for interpersonal conflicts (Skaalvik & Skaalvik 2007), role conflict and ambiguity (Travers & Cooper, 1996), lack of adequate resources and facilities (Aldrup et al., 2017), responsibility for evaluation (Kyriacou, 2001), and accountability demands (Rogers, 2012). Other threats to teacher wellbeing, in many countries, include negative media depictions of the teaching profession, which further lower already fragile teacher morale (McCallum & Price, 2010).

Understanding Language Teacher Wellbeing

Teaching has been identified as one of the most stressful occupations globally (Ingersoll, 2011). Record numbers of teachers in general (Borman & Dowling, 2008), and language teachers in particular, are choosing to leave the profession (Chang, 2009; Worth et al., 2017). Key factors foregrounded by Mason (2017) that contribute to language teacher attrition include heavy workload within foreign language teaching programs, detrimental legislation, a lack of institutional support, a lack of appreciation and respect, and low linguistic self-efficacy.

Language teachers face a number of challenges unique to language teaching (Piechurska-Kuciel, 2011). In terms of the psychological factors, for example, they typically experience a heightened emotional burden in their work due to the personally meaningful content and interpersonal relations in language classroom (Golombek & Doran, 2014). Language teaching and learning are “inherently emotional endeavours” (King & Ng, 2018, p. 141) and teaching languages thus requires increased emotional understanding from the teacher in comparison to other subjects (King & Ng, 2018). Another psychological challenge is foreign language anxiety (Horwitz, 1996), as some teachers may have to manage their own insecurities in the target language, while also dealing with the anxieties of their learners. In terms of social and contextual factors, languages have relatively low status compared to other school subjects and are undervalued within some schools and societies (Mason, 2017). Moreover, language teachers, especially those working in the private sector, may experience precarious working conditions such as income insecurity, zero-hour contracts, and an untenable workload (MacIntyre et al., 2019; Walsh, 2019; Wiczorek, 2016).

In this study, we seek to explore and better understand both the personal and contextual factors that contribute to language teacher wellbeing with an aim of drawing attention to individual and systemic strategies which could be employed to support teacher wellbeing. To do this, we draw on PP, which is a branch of psychology that looks at how and why people flourish in life (e.g., Seligman, 2011) and what makes life most worth living (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). PP is concerned with “positive experiences like happiness and engagement, positive traits like character strengths and talents, positive relationships like friendship and love, and the larger institutions like family and school that enable these” (Peterson et al., 2008, p. 20). Typically, work in PP has tended to focus largely on the first two pillars of wellbeing (positive experiences and individual traits) with notably less work examining the role and nature of positive institutions.

To ensure a thorough consideration of the final pillar as well as the other two dimensions of wellbeing, we take a deliberate Positive Organizational Scholarship (POS) approach (Cameron & Spreitzer, 2012). POS refers to the study of factors that positively influence workplace culture and thriving work conditions within organizations and institutions (Cameron & Caza, 2004). POS is a scientific, theory-based and rigorous investigation of the factors that positively influence workplace culture and thriving work conditions within organizations and institutions (Cameron & Caza, 2004). Furthermore, it focuses on “positive processes, on value transparency, and on extending the range of what constitutes a positive organizational outcome” (Caza & Caza, 2008, p. 21). To gain further knowledge into the school ecologies and aspects that facilitate flourishing of language professionals, as perceived by professionals themselves,

we employed POS principals in our research. In this way, we hope the study will ensure balance in the consideration of both individual as well as institutional factors affecting wellbeing.

Methodological Design

Research Questions

This paper aims to investigate language teacher perspectives on personal and institutional factors that they feel contribute to their wellbeing in relation to the workplace and seeks to answer the following research question:

What factors on a personal and institutional level do language teachers feel affect their wellbeing?

The study was designed to explore diversity and engage with a range of teachers in various settings in order to generate a broad understanding of the possible factors involved in teacher wellbeing across institutional and cultural contexts. As such, the sampling procedure was designed to be as widely encompassing as possible.

Procedure

Participants in this study were recruited via the researchers' social media networks, such as Twitter and Facebook, as well as through email contacts. Social media platforms were used to share the call for participation with the international audience. The main advantage of this sampling method was to expand the geographical scope of this project and not limit it to one specific country. We encouraged anyone who received or saw the call to forward it to their networks, which has created a snowball effect (Goodman, 1961). Given the positive psychology-informed approach, this study was designed to only examine those language professionals' perspectives who felt that their current workplaces support their wellbeing. This was also ethically a desirable approach to ensure people were able to focus on the aspects that benefited their wellbeing, without an undue focus on the detrimental factors. As such, the call for participation specifically looked for EFL teachers who felt that, on the whole, their institution is a positive place to work in terms of their wellbeing. We asked for participation from teachers who identified as follows:

- I am currently teaching EFL.
- On the whole, my institution is good for my wellbeing.

As a next step, all participants were sent a link to a short biodata questionnaire to contextualize their responses. This questionnaire comprised items about participants' demographics as well as questions about their teaching situation, for example, information about the institution they were working at, the type of teaching contract they had, and any additional work responsibilities they had to fulfill. As a next step, participants were asked for an interview at a time and date of their convenience. The consent sheet was also sent to the teachers before the interview to read and sign. It outlined the purpose of the study, what is expected from them, how data will be used and stored, and it assured anonymity and confidentiality. Due to the variety of geographical locations of the participants, all interviews were conducted online (through Skype, WeChat, WhatsApp or Facebook Messenger). The interviews were transcribed by the team members. During transcription, any real names and places were removed or changed to protect participants' identities. All the interviews were transcribed for content, including anything which contributed to meaning such as pauses, laughter, and sighs. The audio files were deleted immediately following transcription.

Context and Participants

In this study, 15 participants from 13 different countries volunteered to participate. These include Argentina, Indonesia, Ukraine, Turkey, Slovakia, Belarus, Hungary, Poland, Serbia, Nicaragua, China, two participants from Japan, and two from Slovenia. Fourteen participants were female and one was male. The participants were working in various educational institutions and four participants identified as language school owners as well as teachers. They were of different ages (between 30 and 50 years old) and in different career phases. Their teaching experience ranged between nine months and 26 years. The majority ($n = 13$) of the participants were working full time, whereas two teachers were employed part time. Nine teachers had permanent contracts, five temporary, and one participant was working on zero-hours contract.

Further details about participants' demographic and contextual information can be found in Table 1. All participants have been given a pseudonym to protect their identity.

Table 1
Participants' demographic and contextual information ordered alphabetically by their country of residency

Participant	Gender	Age	Country they are currently working in	Educational institution	Duration of current employment	Part time/full time employment	Type of contract
Elena	Female	46	Argentina	Private language school (school owner)	17 years	Full time	Permanent
Darja	Female	n/a	Belarus	University or other tertiary institution	9 years	Part time	Temporary
Bao	Female	30	China	University or other tertiary institution	11 months	Full time	Permanent
Lili	Female	50	Hungary	Primary school, grammar school, and university or other tertiary institution	26 years	Full time	Permanent
Sari	Female	44	Indonesia	University or other tertiary institution	5 years	Full time	Permanent
Thomas	Male	34	Japan	University or other tertiary institution	9 months	Full time	Temporary
Niko	Female	47	Japan	University or other tertiary institution	9 years	Full time	Permanent
Abigail	Female	38	Nicaragua	Non-government organization	2 years	Part time	Temporary
Oliwia	Female	43	Poland	University or other tertiary institution	2 years	Full time	Temporary
Tatjana	Female	47	Serbia	Private language school (school owner), and university or other tertiary institution	21 years	Full time	Temporary
Mina	Female	39	Slovakia	Private language school (school owner)	10 years	Full time	Zero-hour contract
Ema	Female	38	Slovenia	University or other tertiary institution	6 years	Full time	Permanent
Hana	Female	45	Slovenia	University or other tertiary institution	18 years	Full time	Permanent
Ayla	Female	40	Turkey	University or other tertiary institution	15 years	Full time	Permanent
Oksana	Female	36	Ukraine	Private language school (school owner)	9 years	Full time	Permanent

Research Instruments

Fifteen in-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted to encourage a conversational manner between the researcher and the participant, while, at the same time being guided by predetermined questions to create comparable content (Dörnyei, 2007). Semi-structured interviews also hold the advantage that participants are offered the chance to discuss topics they feel are important and which can deviate from the interviewer's questions (Dörnyei, 2007). These semi-structured interviews were based on a protocol which encompassed eleven sections covering the teachers' career trajectory, general information about their workplaces, physical space and resources, organizational structure, workplace culture, social relationships, autonomy, opportunities for professional development, work-life spillover, institution in its larger socio-cultural system, and overall statements about their general wellbeing. Each interview lasted between 45 minutes and one hour. A corpus of 108 836 words was generated.

Data Analysis

To analyze the data, we followed a Thematic Analysis approach (Braun & Clarke, 2006). To familiarize ourselves with the data, each researcher individually began the analysis by reading, commenting, and memoing on the transcripts. During this process, we met twice for discussions as a team to share ideas and generate initial code list. The interviews were coded in Atlas.ti. Three researchers coded four interviews each, and one coded three interviews. In the third group meeting, we compared and discussed the code lists, which we then combined into one set of codes ($n = 38$). This list included categories, such as social relationships, teacher autonomy, workplace culture, physical wellbeing, societal appreciation, pay, and continuing professional development. The interviews were revisited in light of this shared code list and any anomalies or exceptions were added and discussed with the whole team. Throughout the coding process, a joint notebook for memos was created, which was shared via Google Docs between the authors. Finally, in a fourth group meeting following the final wave of coding, the list of codes was grouped into themes which reflected the main issues across the data. These themes were workplace culture, relationships, sense of meaning and purpose, language teacher status and physical wellbeing, which served as the basis of the structure in the findings section.

Limitations

To recruit participants for the study, the call was shared on the authors' social media and via personal contacts. Naturally, this means volunteers stem from those who are active on social media and are possibly familiar with the work of the authors. This may suggest a bias to those with an interest in language teacher wellbeing. As such, they may be more aware and conscious of factors affecting wellbeing than other teachers, although there was no particular evidence of this in the data. In this study, participants self-identified as working in educational institutions that they felt contributed positively to their wellbeing. Typically, this perspective is subjective and the same workplace would perhaps be described differently by other employees in these institutions. However, it is the subjective perspective on the institutional factors which enhance their wellbeing which is at the heart of this study. Finally, we are aware that the paper could have gotten a different perspective had we included teachers who find their work conditions stressful and negative for their wellbeing. However, our research design encompassed and focused solely on teachers who identified their institutions as having a positive influence on their job satisfaction and overall wellbeing.

Findings

The findings section comprises five major themes that emerged from the data as affecting participants' wellbeing either positively or negatively: Workplace culture, social relationships, sense of meaning and purpose, language teacher status, and physical wellbeing.

Workplace Culture

Workplace culture typically “refers to the deep structure of organizations, which is rooted in the values, beliefs, attitudes, practices, norms, customs, and assumptions held by organizational members and that characterize a workplace environment” (Wentling & Thomas, 2009, p. 27). In this study, the most prominent aspects of the workplace culture mentioned by participants comprised the workplace atmosphere, support systems, autonomy, hierarchical structures, and the workplace as a physical space.

The majority of the participants ($n = 14$) described their workplace atmosphere as generally positive, open, friendly, and welcoming, which they felt

was important for their wellbeing. Thirteen participants particularly highlighted colleagues who are motivated, eager to learn, and help each other. For example, Thomas felt that staff members of the university were professional and positive and were, together, “rowing in the right direction.” Niko, a teacher from Japan, is a particularly interesting example of how the workplace atmosphere can be influenced by the behavior and attitude of the staff members. She explained that, in the past, she had worked with male teachers who “had the power” and had created a toxic work environment for her; however, since these teachers retired, the work atmosphere in Niko’s institution became pleasant and enjoyable—when “hard ones left the job at the university [...], we created quite a better atmosphere.”

Another feature of a positive work climate according to these teachers was when institutions encouraged staff members to be autonomous and to openly voice their beliefs. In particular, six participants stressed that the staff opinions “matter” to the institution and that they felt teachers were involved in making important decisions related to the institutional policies. For example, Darja mentioned that her institution valued her opinion, as well as the opinion of her colleagues and students. She explained that the dean arranges meetings once a month in which student representatives participate together with university teachers. Similarly, Thomas referred to the program development at his institution as a “bottom-up approach” where he could share his ideas and influence certain decision-making. However, Hana’s portrayal of her institution was a unique example of a lack of open communication and ways in which it influences staff members:

I think that [the dean] doesn’t take into consideration that we are human beings, we are all academics and she cannot treat us like bags of something, push us around, right? People? I don’t think they really want to express their opinions, some of them don’t even dare.

She further mentioned that the hierarchical structure in her university has developed into a “talk-down management” in which the decision-making is only reserved for the dean. In contrast, other participants ($n = 14$), explained that the hierarchy in their respective institutions exists, but describe it as, “more of a flat structure” (Tatjana).

The physical space of the participants’ workplace cultures also appeared to play a role in their wellbeing. Eleven participants mentioned that they were generally satisfied with the physical space, which they referred to in terms of green spaces, cleanliness, and sports areas, as well as resources, such as technology, teaching materials, comfortable furnishings and staff rooms with sufficient office equipment. For example, Bao explained how the physical space of her university affected her wellbeing positively:

I feel the positive effect of the physical environment, for example, in my university [...], there's a very beautiful small forest, it's very green and a lot of benches, so I like to bring my phone there and [...] time spent there makes me refreshed.

Interestingly, four participants reported on poor work conditions in terms of physical space. Lili explained that her school “has not been renovated, maybe ever. [...] It's in a very bad shape. Literally the walls are crumbling, the wires, the electric system, it sometimes just catches fire, so, it's really in very bad need of renovating.” However, despite the negative aspects of the physical space, on balance, these participants still felt positive overall about their workplace, implying other factors played a more significant role.

Social Relationships

Relationships at the workplace were a prominent topic among all the participants as seen above in respect to workplace culture. Oksana explained that she enjoys working in her school because, “the team is wonderful, the people are very positive” and she added, “this is a positive place, we enjoy being here, together.” In another example, Lili said she and her colleagues love spending time together and any issues that might arise they resolve as a team. Eight participants reported that they have formed true friendships with some of their colleagues. Abigail said that with two colleagues she became “friends outside the office.” Having supportive relationships seems to have positively influenced the participants ($n = 12$) and appear to be crucial for their wellbeing.

However, three teachers explained that dysfunctional relationships with their colleagues can have a negative effect on their wellbeing. In particular, Mina said, “if the relationships in the workplace are not working well, that stresses me the most.” Hana, for example, explained that the unity between teachers was lost and, consequently, the overall satisfaction among the colleagues significantly decreased. She recalled multiple incidents in which her colleagues showed a lack of collegiality. In this way, the quality of relationships between colleagues can either bolster or hinder their wellbeing.

Another important aspect for eleven participants was their relationship with their boss. The other four participants were school owners themselves and felt that they were creating a positive and supportive work climate for their employees. Ten participants referred to their bosses as being motivating (e.g., Ayla and Sari), open for discussion and suggestions (e.g., Lili and Niko), full of understanding (e.g., Abigail), and friendly and approachable (e.g., Ema and Niko). Bao explained that her boss was “very supportive” and “when you get something or achieve something, you can feel she is very happy for you, [...].

this happiness is contagious, and you can feel like you are really supported.” As mentioned in the previous section, only one participant, Hana, was dissatisfied with her superiors who she felt were mistreating their employees and did not value their opinions.

An equally important aspect of the workplace was participants’ relationships with their students. Overall, all participants were especially proud of this relationship. They described it as friendly and trusting (e.g., Lili and Oksana), understanding and respectful (e.g., Abigail), caring (e.g., Elena and Bao), close (e.g., Sari and Oliwia), and humorous (e.g., Ema and Tatjana). Thomas depicted the reciprocal relationship between teachers and students in his institution:

Most of the students are really, really passionate, we challenge them a lot but they kind of rise to the challenge each time, and I think that [...] they feed a lot off the teachers’ professional enthusiasm for the course, and then the teachers feed so much more off the students, so you have this kind of virtuous cycle of positivity.

Sense of Meaning and Purpose

Eleven teachers in this study specifically reported seeing a purpose and meaning in their jobs, especially in educating the next generation. For example, Elena explained:

This is all for me. This is the idea. We work for education and for young people, especially for young people. We want to open young people’s minds, to open their minds to fly [...] and to be happy, to be full of dreams.

Building learners’ knowledge and seeing them grow gave these eleven teachers sense of meaning. Tatjana said:

What brings me satisfaction is when I see progress in students and when they are enjoying what they are doing here at school [...], these things make you really satisfied and [...] when I close the door at night and I go home, I really feel it was a good day.

Elena reported on a student who won a scholarship and thanked Elena for believing in her, “I owe this especially to you because you believed in me and my dreams.’ I started crying. Imagine. Because I say ‘well, this was my aim when I opened this school.’” This filled Elena with pride and joy, knowing that she has made a difference in this student’s life. Eleven participants in this study reported on feeling positive about the fact that they are making

a difference “leaving a mark on someone’s life, a positive one” (Hana). In line with a PERMA perspective on wellbeing (Seligman, 2011), it can be seen that having a sense of meaning and purpose appeared fundamental for these teachers’ wellbeing in the workplace and in life more broadly.

Language Teacher Status

In this study, we specifically asked participants to comment on their perception of the status of language teachers in their resident countries. Twelve teachers reported that the teaching profession in their respective countries is low and underappreciated. Ayla expressed that teachers in Turkey “are not respected” and felt that this was generally “the problem of education.” She further added: “The education issue is the only thing that every person in my country can comment on. Everyone is an expert in that issue, everybody has an idea, but nobody asks the real teachers, the real workers of that sector.”

Ayla believed that teachers are “not well paid”; a fact which was also highlighted by eight other participants. Lili said that, in Hungary, the media typically report that teachers get “a huge raise every year. I mean, that’s what’s in the media, but that’s not true, but somehow they manage to communicate it in a way that half the country thinks that teachers are overpaid.” In addition, Elena said that she had “suffered a lot” and that being underpaid caused other teachers in Argentina to become demotivated: “They don’t want to do anything because they say there is no sense in anything because we are not well-paid.”

Interestingly, only three participants, who came from Japan and China and were employed at universities, reported on high teacher status in their respective countries and institutions. One participant, Bao, explained that the status of teachers in China is very high, although this is not reflected in their salaries. Similarly, Niko said that

[s]ocial appreciation of university faculty in Japan is quite high, so it is really appreciated, especially at top universities [...]. So, I feel very much appreciated in social settings and money-wise, of course, I would like to get more, but I really have enough, and I appreciate what I have.

Two participants explained that although they are not content with their salaries, they see their work as meaningful beyond the financial issues. For example, Hana said that, “salaries are not enough, but we have other advantages” and Bao mentioned that “money is just an amount, one of the dimensions, that’s it.”

Physical Wellbeing

Five participants explicitly mentioned that the absence of physical health affected their work and overall wellbeing. For example, Niko explained that, in the past, when she lived far from her campus, she “wasn’t able to manage to cook [...] and it caused a lot of health problems.” However, she moved “closer to the campus” and added: “I am cooking for myself, so I think I have a good balance.” Hana mentioned “problems with [her] heart,” and Oksana said that she suffered from back pain. Perhaps the most eye-opening example of how overall wellbeing can be influenced by physical health and contextual factors was portrayed by Abigail. She explained that she experienced burnout which she attributed to too many deadlines, her former boss who was unsupportive, frequent travelling, and a generally hectic lifestyle:

We had a social political crisis in the country that burst in April and hasn’t ended yet [...]. I had no idea what was going to be, I just went every step, one after the other, and personally, I got a lot of physical effects. You know the symptoms, you know your stressors, and you know how it shows up in your body, but I had something new. By the end of the year, like a month before finishing everything I just couldn’t, I almost couldn’t get out of bed one day. I just couldn’t move my arms anymore [...] it was a most terrible experience I had, and I ended up going to the hospital.

Other participants ($n = 7$) showed an awareness of the importance of remaining physically healthy and reported on employing several strategies such as taking care of nutrition, spending time in nature, making sure they were physically active and doing sports and meditation. For example, Bao said: “Exercise is really helpful both for physical and mental health, especially when you feel tired, exhausted and you are just running.” Thomas explained that he goes “for a little bike ride round the forest. [...] This is just a very relaxing place to go.” Finally, Oliwia said: “When I’m stressed, [...] I do yoga and I do meditation and without it, I would be a different person.”

Discussion

This study examined the perspectives of language teachers on the factors that seemed to have supported their wellbeing in relation to the workplace. In particular, we looked for EFL teachers across institutional contexts and countries, who felt that their workplaces were generally positive for their wellbeing.

Five main themes perceived as relevant for professional wellbeing dominated the data across settings and participants: Workplace culture, social relationships, sense of meaning and purpose, language teacher status, and physical wellbeing. Interestingly, all participants talked about the relevance of their lives beyond the workplace, including most notably physical health. This highlights the importance of considering teachers' lives from a holistic perspective when examining their wellbeing. Day and Gu (2010) refer to the 'blurry boundaries' between different teachers' life domains and highlight that wellbeing does not stem just from one isolated area of a person's life. Indeed, as the spillover-crossover model (Bakker & Demerouti, 2013) makes clear, there are permeable boundaries across an individual's life domains and experiences in each domain influence each other. Our sense of wellbeing emerges from the interaction of experiences in all areas although these are potentially weighted differently by an individual according to the relative importance of the respective domain for their overall sense of wellbeing (Robertson & Cooper, 2011).

In this study, the analysis showed that although the participants rated their workplaces as positive for their wellbeing (hence their participation), it did not mean these places were perceived as being perfect. Instead, the teachers flourished despite potential problems in the workplace. Dodge, Daly, Huyton, and Sanders (2012) suggest that wellbeing can be conceived of as a 'see-saw' with individuals balancing challenges to their wellbeing with resources available (e.g., personal, social, and material). This implies that teacher wellbeing can fluctuate according to the relative weighting of positive resources to draw on, balanced against negative factors and demands challenging their wellbeing. In other words, if the sense of positivity outweighs the significance for the individual of the negative factors, the overall sense of wellbeing can be balanced as positive without denying potential negative influences.

As was evinced in these data, certain factors are important for everyone, but some factors more or less, important for each individual. For example, Abigail's experience of burnout makes clear that when one's health is severely damaged by stress in the workplace, then no matter how significant other factors may be, nothing else really matters; wellbeing is at zero. In other words, her experience highlights that basic physical needs must be met first and foremost, otherwise other factors affecting wellbeing remain merely a luxury. From the perspective of the researchers in the field of positive psychology, it was heartening to see, in this specific instance, that the majority of the teachers in this study were aware of the importance of physical health and took conscious steps to protect and enhance their wellbeing in physical terms such as by attending to sleep, nutrition, and exercise.

The factor which was consistently emphasized as important by all participants was the workplace culture. As evinced in these data, this can be conveyed through communication structures within an institution, the degree of autonomy

given to staff, the level of personalization, the shared values of staff, and the attention to the care and quality of physical space among others (Fernet et al., 2014). All of these participants tended to see their workplace culture as positive with a friendly atmosphere and motivated colleagues. However, different facets of the workplace culture were rated differently by individuals. For example, Hana reported on the lack of democratic procedures and autonomy, whereas Lili was dissatisfied with the physical space. Yet, for these participants, despite these issues, they retained an overall sense of positive workplace culture. The research and theory of “person-organizational fit” (O’Reilly et al., 1991) can help us to understand this finding. This model suggests that the degree of wellbeing/stress experienced by an individual depends on how well they as an individual ‘fit’ with the conditions in that organization. This is important to appreciate as it emphasizes that it is not only the objective conditions that matter, but it is also their relative importance for an individual and how the two fit together that is defining. In other words, two people working under the same conditions can experience their wellbeing in that organization differently. It is the interaction of the personal, individual, and subjective experience of objective conditions that lead to an emergent sense of wellbeing.

Related to the workplace culture is the importance of social relationships in the workplace including relationships with colleagues, students, and director or principal. While this was critically important for all the participants, not all participants enjoyed positive relationships, most notably, Hana who felt a lack of unity and community across colleagues and an especially challenging relationship with leadership. Relationships have been shown to be critically important for teacher wellbeing (Kinman et al., 2011). For example, Hargreaves (2001) examined emotional dynamics between teachers and their colleagues. He conducted 53 interviews with elementary and secondary school teachers in Canada and found that teachers who work together, are in good relations, and support and value each other typically try to avoid conflicts and have more harmony in the workplace. Indeed, Morrison (2004) shows that having a friend at work can enhance one’s satisfaction with the workplace. Another dominant theme across all the data was having a sense of purpose and meaning in one’s work; however, this may be a double-edged sword for teacher wellbeing. It could imply that some teachers are willing to tolerate poor working conditions, including low remuneration (e.g., Hana and Bao), as they rated that aspect of their job on balance as less important for them than the positivity gained from helping learners to succeed. There are studies at all levels of education (primary, secondary, and tertiary) which show that educators’ intrinsic motivation and dedication to the profession often means they work beyond what is expected of them (Ballet & Kelchtermans, 2009). This is potentially one contributory factor to the high levels of burnout which characterize the profession. Interestingly, this finding cautions against the value of so-called objective list theories of wellbeing that

refer to a “catalog of goods required for a well lived life” (Jayawickreme et al., 2012, pp. 329–330). What is needed for an individual to flourish in the workplace may vary considerably and it emerges from the interaction of personal perspectives on contextual factors. However, a vital word of caution is needed here. It is imperative that basic existential needs must be met, and teachers should receive just and fair remuneration and working conditions. Their intrinsic motivation and dedication to the profession must never be exploited by policy makers and/or owners or heads of schools. The issue of precarity in the ELT profession suggests that, sadly, this is not always the case (Walsh, 2019).

Finally, an interesting factor was the role of teacher status in the respective countries. This factor came out as the least positive for the majority of participants—only the teachers in China and Japan felt that their work and profession were esteemed but yet also not especially well remunerated. It is interesting to note that research has shown that professional status can affect teacher wellbeing (Troman, 2000), and yet, overall, these teachers retained a positive sense of wellbeing despite the low status assigned to their chosen professions. Notably, most of them complained about poor salaries which they felt did not reflect their qualifications and investment of time and energy. Again, on balance, for this group of teachers, although this situation is somewhat dispiriting, the other positive factors outweighed on balance, and they felt that they were still flourishing in spite of these societal and institutional conditions.

Conclusion

This study has examined the perspectives and experiences of language teachers who feel that their respective institutions contribute positively to their wellbeing. They were interviewed to explore the kinds of factors in their organizations and their own experiences which they felt supported their wellbeing. It was found that a number of key factors not just restricted to the workplace in isolation emerged and these were not always reported on in positive terms, despite the participants’ overall conclusion that their situation in their workplace was positive for their wellbeing. This led us to reflect on the relative importance of various factors for individuals and the personal wellbeing needs of individuals where the positivity of certain factors could outweigh the negative effects of others.

The study has a number of implications for practice. Investing in the quality of staff relationships and opportunities for staff to connect socially would seem prudent given the strong emphasis throughout the data on a positive climate in the workplace. Despite the tolerance displayed by these specific individuals,

there is also a need to address the issues they raise about payment and the quality of physical space and resources provided. While they were merely a source of dissatisfaction for these participants, we know from research that for other individuals, they could contribute to them leaving the profession (Borman & Dowling, 2008; Karsenti & Collin, 2013; Kelchtermans, 2017).

Teachers are qualified professionals who typically exhibit great dedication to their chosen career, and their expertise and professionalism should receive the recognition in esteem and financial terms that they deserve throughout educational systems across the globe. Language teaching specifically has in part been characterized by precarity and poor working conditions (Mercer et al., 2016; Wieczorek, 2016) and the field must collectively consider how to counter these conditions for educators (Mercer, 2021).

With the experiences of online and remote teaching during COVID-19, there has been a further awakening and acknowledgement of the incredible work done by teachers and the centrality of their wellbeing for good practice (Arvisais et al., 2020; MacIntyre et al., 2020). It is hoped that this public and state recognition will remain even once the crisis has passed as will the emergent research agenda on teacher wellbeing. A concern raised by this study is that teachers' intrinsic motivation, commitment, and sense of purpose drawn from their work should not be exploited and utilized as an excuse explicitly or implicitly not to directly support teacher wellbeing and work conditions in systemic practical terms. Wellbeing is never the sole responsibility of the individual, but it is very much the responsibility of institutions and communities to provide the best conditions to enable each individual educator to thrive in their professional roles. When teachers flourish in the workplace, everyone benefits including the learners.

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Wohlbefinden der Sprachlehrer am Arbeitsplatz: Bedürfnisausgleich

Zusammenfassung

Lehrkräfte, die sich an ihrem Arbeitsplatz wohlfühlen, unterrichten effektiver, haben bessere Beziehungen zu Lernenden und erzielen höhere Leistungen bei ihren Studenten (Mason, 2017). Um zu verstehen, was einen Einfluss auf das Wohlbefinden der Sprachlehrer hat, wurden drei Säulen der positiven Psychologie (Seligman, 2011) untersucht. Dabei stützten sich die Autoren insbesondere auf das Konzept von Positive Organizational Scholarship (Cameron & Spreitzer, 2012), um institutionelle und persönliche Faktoren zu erforschen, die von den Lehrkräften als maßgebend für ihr Wohlbefinden wahrgenommen werden. In der Studie werden Erfahrungen von 15 Sprachlehrern aus 13 verschiedenen Ländern präsentiert. Die gewählte Stichprobenmethode bietet eine umfassende Betrachtung des Themas. Die Daten wurden in ausführlichen, halbstrukturierten Interviews erhoben und mittels der Thematischen Analyse (Braun & Clarke, 2006) ausgewertet. Die Analyse ergab fünf Hauptaspekte, die von den Lehrkräften als relevant für ihr Wohlbefinden erachtet werden, darunter Arbeitsplatzkultur, soziale Beziehungen, Sinnstiftung, Status als Sprachlehrer und körperliches Wohlbefinden.

Die Ergebnisse machen deutlich, dass Wohlbefinden nicht nur ein persönliches und subjektives Phänomen ist, sondern auch kollektiv und gesellschaftlich bestimmt wird. Die Studie schließt mit Überlegungen zu den Auswirkungen auf die Praxis, politische Entscheidungsträger und Schulleiter sowie zu den Fragen der Individualität, die in der künftigen Forschung zu berücksichtigen sind.

Schlüsselwörter: Wohlbefinden der Sprachlehrer, Arbeitsplatz, Positive Organisational Scholarship, Arbeitszufriedenheit