Language teacher wellbeing: an individual–institutional pact

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Although positive psychology (PP) is characterized as a tripartite approach to human flourishing that considers emotions, traits, and institutions, to date the role of institutions has been relatively overlooked. This is particularly problematic when exploring language teacher wellbeing because a teacher’s ability to thrive is also dependent upon the context in which they work.

Combining the results of a web survey on teacher wellbeing with relevant concepts from PP on the collective responsibility of individuals and institutions, this study provides a podium from which teachers’ voices can be heard. When asked for specific advice on positively confronting challenges (particularly stemming from the Covid-19 pandemic), teachers’ recommendations coalesced around the four themes of doing your best: teaching practices, positive leadership, and positive attitudes and gratitude. The purpose of this study is to listen to teachers’ voices and provide implications for making more positive institutions.

Key words: positive psychology, institutional wellbeing, positive leadership, appreciative inquiry, teacher wellbeing

Responsibility for the wellbeing of language teachers is a collective endeavor requiring a combination of institutional and individual efforts (Mercer and Gregersen 2020). However, often there is a danger that the responsibility for teacher wellbeing rests solely on individuals, without institutions acknowledging their duty to step up and take positive action to promote, nurture, and strengthen teacher wellbeing. Although there are numerous examples of teachers rising above adverse conditions, institutions have every reason not to reduce or neglect their responsibility for improving those conditions wherever possible. Worldwide, institutional responses to the Covid-19 pandemic were highlighted by an emergency conversion to online learning with minimal (if any) support. This emergency exposed the need for institutions to engage with their responsibility for teacher wellbeing immediately and over the long term. In this brief article we refer to responses from teachers to the question of what would be needed to deal with some of the fallout from the pandemic.

We have connected teacher responses with specific actions educational institutions and systems could take to enhance teacher wellbeing. Our approach is grounded in the literature on positive psychology (PP) which is
rapidly emerging as an influential source of new directions of thinking for language teaching and learning.

PP is the study of the conditions and processes that contribute to the flourishing or optimal functioning of people, groups, and institutions (Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi 2000). Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi, in their seminal paper establishing the area of PP, defined the three original pillars of PP as positive subjective experience, positive individual characteristics (strengths and virtues), and positive institutions and communities. Formally established just over 20 years ago, PP has generated a great deal of original research on the first two pillars, but a much smaller amount on the third. It is widely acknowledged that further work is needed to address positive institutions and communities.

Focusing on institutions means that we must improve the functioning of schools as workplaces, both private and public. With this goal in mind, we examine advice that individual language teachers offered in a web survey on teacher wellbeing and we pair it with relevant concepts from PP to highlight the capacity and the responsibility institutions have to improve teacher wellbeing.

This study revisits data from previously published studies (MacIntyre, Gregersen, and Mercer 2020) that sampled language teachers from across the globe using a web-based survey. The information gathered by the survey reflects ways in which language teachers dealt with the challenges of the Covid-19 pandemic, with implications for making more positive institutions. The data were collected in April and May of 2020, with a total of 756 participants and again in November 2020, with 255 participants. The online survey was distributed through various social media platforms and professional organizations that included a closing open-ended question: What advice would you offer fellow language teacher colleagues facing challenging times? We received 529 responses in the first survey distribution and 171 in the second. The respondents were language teachers from Europe, North America, Asia, South America, and the Middle East. Over three-quarters of respondents were women ranging in age from 22 to older than 65. Three-quarters of participants taught English, while the other quarter taught a variety of other world languages. The sample was quite experienced, with more than half of the respondents having taught for over 15 years. All levels of instruction were represented, from primary (10%) to secondary (35%) to tertiary (55%) with many teachers affiliated with more than one context.

Across the two waves of data collection, the open-ended question produced a data set with a corpus of approximately 32,928 words. It was coded in three stages:

1. line-by-line coding, maintaining separate codes but within one analytical unit,
2. comparison and categorization of codes, merging and refining categories using a constant comparison approach,
3. identifying main themes.

Codes were grouped into four main categories: doing your best, teaching practices, positive leadership, and positive attitudes and gratitude.
The most popular piece of advice respondents provided was to avoid expecting perfection from ourselves as teachers. One of our concerns in studying teachers and their wellbeing is a concern that institutions sometimes place ill-defined expectations on teachers that are impossible to meet, setting the institutional conditions for maladaptive perfectionism. In the spirit of the phrase often attributed to Voltaire, the perfect is the enemy of the good, the teachers’ most frequent advice to peers advocated the need for realistic expectations. Accepting the situation and doing one’s best is the appropriate goal to pursue; perfection is—and always will remain—an illusion beyond our grasp.

Perfectionism is often characterized by the pursuit of flawlessness, the imposition of extremely high performance standards and excessively harsh evaluation (Hewitt and Flett 1991), and it can also be exacerbated by institutional pressures. Yet, ironically, perfectionism is associated with diminished productivity, efficiency, and rumination over work-related issues that have a negative impact on one’s work–life balance, health, and wellbeing (Rice, Richardson, and Ray 2016).

To be clear, research shows that high performance standards are not necessarily the problem with perfectionism. Rice, Richardson, and Ray (2016) attribute the problem with perfectionism to a combination of high standards coupled with high levels of self-criticism that can be incapacitating. Within the school context, excessive standards and criticism can at times originate and form institutional expectations. Dealing with excessive criticism is the most significant difference between ‘adaptive’ and ‘maladaptive’ perfectionism. Rice and colleagues focused their research on perfectionism in academic settings, drawing attention to issues such as ‘performance indicators (e.g., grades), academic behaviors, motivation, performance under pressure and extensions of academic topics such as academic self-efficacy, commitment to academic pursuits, and career decision-making’ (p. 246). Issues such as these can activate the self-doubt and criticism that, when paired with perfectionism, may tip the balance toward negative outcomes for teachers. One respondent eloquently made the connection in her advice:

Don’t be afraid to reach out to your fellow teachers for support or a venting session as they might need it just as much as you do . . . Be graceful and forgiving with yourself and your students . . . Ask for forgiveness, not permission. Trust your professional judgement and do what’s best for your students even if you fear pushback from parents or administrators. Incorporate social justice in your teaching, students are hungry for it . . . Don’t let perfect be the enemy of good.

Institutional interventions that diminish self-criticism and enhance teachers’ emotional and cognitive regulation strategies to reduce anxiety and disappointment are more likely to be advantageous than interventions intended to lower standards (Rice, Ashby, and Gilman 2011). As we look at the data, we see a need for institutions to consider how their performance standards, teacher feedback, and staff evaluations may impact teacher wellbeing. Institutions would be wise to consider the advice of this teacher:
Life is so much less stressful when you know you’ll make mistakes and that they will end. Being perfect doesn’t serve anyone. Take risks and laugh when they fail miserably. It’s a great opportunity for students to see that too.

An educational institution concerned about the potentially corrosive effects of perfectionism and criticism perspective might begin the process of examining their institution via Appreciate Inquiry (AI). AI is an analysis method from organizational psychology. It functions as an alternative to traditional problem-focused strategies of institutions that aim to mitigate threats. ‘Appreciative Inquiry is a way to engage groups of people in self-determined change, focusing on what’s working rather than what’s not working and leads people to co-designing their future’ (Moore 2019, para 7). The central aim of AI is to address transformation and development from a positive, strengths-based viewpoint to improve workplace culture, efficiency, and performance. The goal of AI is to avoid overemphasis on deficit thinking focused on fixing what is decidedly broken.

Gregersen and Mercer (2022) implemented AI as a four-step self-determined approach to professional growth for pre-service language teachers. Participants began by isolating teaching competences on which they wanted feedback, thus placing them in charge of the process and its criteria. Secondly, mentor, teacher, and peer observed the student teacher during a teaching mockup, taking notes, concentrating on the positive features, and offering feedback on the competences selected by the student teacher. Next, the mentor, peer, and student teacher together considered the successes of the simulation in a co-creative reflective practice and then contemplated ways positive experiences might be expanded. Finally, the student teacher wrote a personal reflection on the feedback, their teaching experience, cooperative reflection phases, and tangible steps for prospective growth.

Appreciative inquiry is one way that teachers and their institution can work together to advance the idea that language teachers should let their best be good enough. AI permits educational institutions to understand the strengths of their teaching staff. Teaching contexts constantly change and adapt. In a context that is ever-changing, AI can aid educational leadership to limit the pursuit of pinpointing flaws and targeting repair of deficits. AI helps to limit institutional and teacher maladaptive perfectionistic tendencies by focusing on existing patterns of strengths and positive growth.

Responses to the survey generated a second category related to teaching practices, especially during the time of the Covid-19 pandemic. Rather than advocating specific teaching techniques, survey respondents emphasized the need to be adaptive. This broad category included sub-categories such as keeping things simple, exploring the potential of new ideas and re-evaluating traditional norms, embracing challenges, finding ways to work cooperatively, connecting emotionally with learners and colleagues, and getting involved in the ELT community both regionally and globally. The underlying current within this advice suggests that generic, one-size-fits-all recommendations are likely to be ineffective, possibly even harmful. Every context brings its own affordances and challenges; each individual
brings their own strengths and weaknesses, creating almost limitless ways in which the individual and context interact, which argues against making sweeping recommendations.

The PP literature on institutions and workplaces has developed the idea of **job crafting**, refining work conditions at the organizational level (Ellis, Skidmore, and Combs 2017) which can target one or more of the subcategories found in the language teachers’ advice. Institutions can provide space for individuals to manipulate and contour their jobs in ways that align their preferences and skill sets with features of their professional context. Through the process of job crafting, teachers can increase their potential for greater wellbeing by capitalizing on their individual and collective strengths. At the institutional level, job crafting can take different forms including task crafting (molding the margins and methods of job tasks), relational crafting (regulating the qualities and quantities of job-related relationships), and cognitive crafting (adjusting personal attitudes towards the job). Research with teachers shows that job crafting can be beneficial to wellbeing by generating higher rates of job satisfaction, organizational commitment, and lower turnover (Leana, Appelbaum, and Shevchuk 2009). Institutions will be well served by cultivating a positive identification between teachers and their job roles.

At the level of teams, a group-based approach to job crafting may heighten classroom quality even more than relying exclusively on individuals (Leana, Appelbaum, and Shevchuk 2009). Team-based job crafting, supported by school leadership, can help alleviate some of the stressors placed on teachers in contexts where teachers must work together. In team job crafting, members join forces to improve job resources and address challenging job demands, which means that the team decides, for example, which resources are required to achieve their tasks and collectively guarantee that the necessary resources are mobilized. Furthermore, job crafting teams can learn innovative skills to complete their current tasks and identify the presence of obstructions or stressors. Determining relevant ways and means is a team process, but not all team members need to work on crafting the same job resources and demands. Teams that function in contexts that are jointly crafted tend to be more engaged because they are able to accomplish their tasks in a context that better fits the people working in them. Where teachers work with other teachers, collaboration and communal experiences of the members can provide advantages to the institution.

One respondent, who recognized the role of institutional responsibility, also saw the need for teamwork during pandemic teaching when they advised the following:

Lean on each other, because right now teachers are the primary support of other teachers. Additionally, don’t let the workload that your administration may be putting on you weigh you down. Teaching may be a large part of your life, but it is not your [whole] life. Take time to explore the other parts of life that make you happy. Take time for yourself and things that bring you joy.

This teacher’s comment underscores the role of teachers working together to support each other while at the same time contextualizing the demands
of the institution within the rest of a teacher’s life. The idea of job crafting can be used by institutions to accomplish larger goals as a team while developing the strengths of individual teachers who deal with widely diverse personal contexts.

The third theme emerging from the survey data concerns leadership. Leaders have a significant role in setting the conditions for teacher wellbeing, such as setting temporal boundaries, creating time for teachers and their families, and not expecting that teachers make themselves available at all times. School leaders can encourage a healthy work–family balance not only by making and communicating institutional decisions concerning available work–family practices (e.g., teaching schedules, parental leave, working from home), but also by demonstrating what an appropriate work–family balance looks like. In psychology literature, positive leadership is defined as an organizational approach that heightens wellbeing through elements such as commitment, dignity, willingness to act, unity, social encouragement, and open consultation (Lloyd and Atella 2000). The institutional approaches described above, namely, appreciative inquiry and job crafting, can be tools adopted within a larger positive leadership framework. Key indicators of performance for both teachers and administrators, such as hopeful leaders, worker (e.g., teacher) retention, and greater job satisfaction, can be facilitated by particular administrative practices (Peterson and Luthans 2003).

Positive leadership emphasizes communication and the importance of providing support and attending to teachers’ emotional needs. Such practices take advantage of emotional contagion whereby reactions spread from one person to another in a self-sustaining way. Leaders are a critically important node in the transmission network of positive emotions that enhance cooperation, reduce conflict, stimulate original solutions to problems, permit obstacles to be perceived as external and temporary and successes as internal and enduring, and boost resilience to adverse events (Avey, Avolio, and Luthans 2011). Emotional contagion can also spread negativity. School administrators and/or teachers with a pessimistic explanatory style suffer more social isolation therefore reducing their chance to offer or receive social support. Furthermore, work tasks that can be identified as personal and professional growth opportunities emphasize an optimistic explanatory style. School leaders significantly contribute to teachers’ and staff’s awareness of work–family culture. Likewise, school leaders can inspire teachers to contemplate how their school and home conditions can be mutually facilitative when career-related decisions need to be made. Administrators can strengthen teacher engagement in realistic, positive thinking, emphasizing ways of coping with work–life issues, which has been shown to aid in finding meaning in challenging conditions and linked to easing tensions between work and family life roles (Rotondo and Kincaid 2008).

We hasten to add that positive communication will have a limited impact without authentic positive relationships supporting it. Leaders who exercise work–life balance and self-care foster trusting, productive relations with teachers who value work–life balance. A strong relationship between administration and teachers is pivotal to achieving desired outcomes at
school, including the promotion of work–life balance. Likewise, a positive relationship between leaders and teachers permits administrators to provide instrumental work–life support for teachers, whether it be through handling class schedules, replying to programming requests, modifying teaching and/or out-of-class duties, granting schedule changes and time off, and apportioning resources. In exerting positive leadership to encourage productive interaction, and contemplating the complexity of a situation, positive leaders increase both teacher and institutional wellbeing. The following excerpt from a teacher extolled the virtues of their administration’s positive leadership:

The same advice our administration has given us . . . less is more, keep it simple, one objective per week per class, provide no more than 90 minutes of work per week. And my own personal advice, utilize this time to make home-cooked meals, pursue an interest you haven’t had time for, spend quality time with your family, and maintain a healthy routine/schedule! Take advantage of this once in a lifetime opportunity to stop running yourselves ragged with activity after activity and overscheduled lives!

A final theme in the teachers’ advice was to protect one’s wellbeing by focusing on the positives in situations and finding ways to express gratitude. Responses from teachers emphasized that actively identifying positive aspects of a situation, which might be called ‘finding the silver lining’, can lead to a greater sense of wellbeing. Identifying small positives in the complexity of day-to-day life, inside and outside the institution, can lift one’s spirits. A related idea offered by the teachers involved finding something for which to be grateful. The combination of people and contexts that comprise a complex, constantly changing institution will rarely produce situations that are all good or all bad. Peer advice in the survey emphasized that searching for the positives is a choice that can have a positive impact. One respondent articulately commented:

Try and keep a positive note during lessons, encourage students to reflect on what good outcomes have resulted from an awful situation, use good news stories that are available online - e.g. reports of a reduction in air and noise pollution, community spirit, etc.

There are interventions at the institutional level that mirror teachers’ individual-level emphasis on attitude and gratitude; we offer three interventions that can be implemented at education institutions in a wide variety of contexts: (1) sharing personal feedback; (2) constructing best-self-portraits; and (3) networking with positive energy. ‘Personal feedback’ exercises are a means to enrich positive energy. In this instance, leaders can prompt the school community to share three things they observed about a colleague’s distinctive value-adding contributions; an approach that is likely to reveal underappreciated qualities. In similar ways, the ‘reflected best-self’ exercise helps to capture and highlight teachers’ talents and capabilities. This exercise invites teachers to provide narratives from others that respond to a prompt such as: ‘What distinctive strengths do I display with the special contributions I make to our institution?’ With the behavioral descriptions of when they displayed their best selves, each teacher participant then crafts a ‘best-self-portrait’, which underscores strengths
and personal resources. Finally, examining positive energy networks can identify the people in an organization who inspire others, and enliven the institution and its affiliates. Owens et al. (2016) emphasize that positive energizing is a learned behavior; institutions can nurture and optimize such conduct by encouraging positive energizers to increase both personal productivity and promoting the contributions of others.

Our goal in outlining the specific suggestions reviewed above was to avoid a singular focus on the individual teacher as the source of their own wellbeing. The ongoing dialectic between teachers and institutions has the strongest capacity to make changes for better. The interaction between teachers and institutions sets the conditions for thriving or languishing. The data set we referenced is a rich source of peer-to-peer teachers’ advice, the kind one might expect from an experienced counselor or therapist. The advice is remarkably consistent with the robust literature on PP interventions, which are defined and studied almost exclusively as activities for an individual, not an institution. We hope that the present paper offers food for thought in creating a more powerful, shared responsibility for wellbeing.

In revisiting the data with a focus on an institutional perspective, we seek to better balance the wellbeing narrative, away from an over-emphasis on individuals, moving toward a ‘person-in-context’ perspective by presenting concrete suggestions that can be adapted by school leaders and policy makers. With respect to language teacher wellbeing, we argue that communities must resist ‘blaming the victim’ in cases where teacher wellbeing is a concern. Critics of PP problematize its relatively strong emphasis on the individual rather than institutions and systemic structures. This paper seeks to provide a counter-narrative.

An approach that features only individual responsibility is far too simplistic, as it absolves the third pillar of PP—the institution—of its responsibility. Individual teachers cannot be held solely responsible for the institutional structures, policies, and circumstances in which they work. The data we reviewed show teachers striving to find positives in difficult situations. However, parallel to individual efforts to enhance wellbeing, an institution-level responsibility must be fostered which critically examines the ways in which structures and processes affect the people involved.

Using institution-level interventions such as the ones offered herein, and others that might better fit local contexts, school leadership can focus more consciously and actively on teachers’ wellbeing and nurturing positivity in their institutions, showing their commitment to teacher wellbeing as a shared goal and responsibility.

Although there are three pillars of experiences, traits, and institutions undergirding the study of PP (Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi 2000), research targeting the third pillar, institutions, remains the least developed and the contributions of institutions to wellbeing are under-examined and under-estimated. Teachers interested in exploring the impact of their institutions on their personal wellbeing might consider creating an action research plan to systematically address questions through data-driven means using some of the interventions detailed in this article. Language
teaching is difficult work (Mercer and Gregersen 2020); to experience sustained wellbeing, the individual and the institution ideally will share the responsibility for wellbeing as an explicit goal.

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References

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