

Promoting Teacher Psychological Well-Being: Implications for School Mental Health and Teacher Training

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Teachers have elevated levels of stress while facing various professional challenges throughout their career. This paper discusses the significance of enhancing teachers' well-being in school context. It analyses the benefits associated with their psychological growth. Interventions aiming at empowering teachers are presented, as they contribute to their professional development. Well-being aspects need to be incorporated into teacher education programs for empowering all members of school community, as they equip them with the core competencies that enable them to cope with the demands of their professional life. Their inclusion in educational agendas is crucial to be expanded across the globe.

Keywords: well-being, education, teacher, school

Introduction

Educational systems across the globe focus on the cognitive aspects of child development, while neglecting nurturing the social and emotional development of students (Nikolaou & Stamatis, 2023). In addition, although several educational systems have incorporated in their official mandates educational objectives related to well-being promotion, the majority of them across the globe have not introduced yet the goals that are associated with the movement of positive psychology, such as well-being promotion in education. Well-being impacts children's learning and developmental outcomes. The study of well-being in education is of fundamental importance as it is linked to mental health promotion, academic achievements and the prevention of emotional and behavioral difficulties (Glazzard & Rose, 2020). In addition, teachers' profession has high rates of stress and burnout (Sackleton et al., 2019). Within this concept, this paper aims to highlight the significance of promoting educators' well-being, as it is connected to the well-being of students and impacts their mental health and development. It clarifies the concept, and analyzes its implications in school mental health and teacher training, both preservice and in-service. Well-being is also included in the global goals of sustainable development (United Nations, 2023), which is linked to societal change and equity. It is a popular concept worldwide which has stimulated a plethora of research studies.

Seligman (2012) posits that positive emotion, engagement, relationships, meaning, and accomplishment are core elements of well-being. Ryff (1989) links psychological well-being to the following dimensions: self-acceptance, autonomy, positive relationships with others, personal growth, and purpose in life. While it is widely

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accepted that well-being is a multidimensional concept, there is no consensus among researchers regarding its definition, components, and variables with which it is correlated. Well-being can be considered as the opposite of burnout and stress (Hascher & Waber, 2021). It is negatively associated with burnout and stress and positively with resilience (Burić, Slišković, & Penezić, 2019; Beltman, Mansfield, & Price, 2011). Psychological well-being is the combination of positive emotional states such as happiness and functioning with maximum effectiveness in personal and social life (Huppert, 2009).

Basic Aspects of Teacher Well-Being

Teachers' well-being includes various aspects. One of them is cognitive well-being. It involves problem solving and decision making. It pertains to the extent to which teachers can absorb new information and concentrate on their work. Cognitive well-being is related to teachers' self-efficacy which refers to the beliefs they have in their abilities to perform. Self-efficacy is associated with the ability to manage classroom, teach, and engage students. It is also linked to students' experience (Morris, Usher, & Chen, 2017). The physical and mental dimension pertains to physical and mental health. The stress teachers feel can manifest itself in physical symptoms such as headaches and various pains. Teachers interact with students within the classroom, at school, with parents, colleagues, principals, support staff, counsellor, and specialized staff such as psychologists. The frequency of contact and the quality of relationships can have a positive and negative effect on teachers' well-being. Teachers' social well-being is defined as the quality of social interactions and relationships that influence professional well-being. They include student misbehavior, issues with parents, and support or lack of support from leadership (OECD, 2020).

Subjective well-being is conceptualized as the good state of mind that includes the various evaluations people make of their lives, both negative and positive, and their emotional responses to their experiences. This definition includes life satisfaction, which is an evaluation of a person's life or some aspects of it, the experience of specific feelings or emotional states, bliss, a sense of meaning and purpose in life or good psychological functioning. Subjective well-being is associated with positive child development (Dinisman & Ben-Arieh, 2016).

The understanding of the concept of teachers' well-being is based on the theory of Bronfenbrenner (1989). It is defined by the individual characteristics, and the various contexts in which children are embedded, that is microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem and the macrosystem. Predisposing factors, life experiences, and temperament also exert influence. At the microsystem level, students' relationships with parents and teachers play a vital role in their development and behavior. Mesosystem comprises the interrelations between microsystems. For example, the relationship between work and family may exert an influence on children. The exosystem may include structures such as social structures. Macrosystem refers to wider political, economic, and cultural influences, for example, funding and school culture. Therefore, teacher well-being is related to factors related to contexts, relationships, and systemic influences. Consequently, interventions aiming at promoting their well-being could include both individual and organizational factors. Most interventions reported in the literature aim to contribute to stress management and the adoption of positive attitudes through mindfulness programs. They include stress management strategies and coping skills. Some of these strengthened the relationships between colleagues and the relationships between teachers and students (Berger, Essah, Blanusa, & Beaman, 2022).

Well-being in the workplace is associated with positive relationships with students, colleagues, and family, as well as with students' academic performance. Well-being is a multidimensional concept that includes cognitive

and emotional as well as physical and mental aspects. It includes predisposing factors, personal, organizational, and environmental. Targeting the protective factors can contribute to the development of resilience and lead to more effective ways to mitigate the negative impact that comes from the negative factors in the work environment (Benevene, De Stasio, & Fiorilli, 2020). Teachers believe that self-efficacy determines their well-being. Self-efficacy depends on the assessment of abilities and skills in relation to the demands of the task that they perform (Aelterman et al., 2007).

Implications of Teacher Well-Being for Enhancing School Mental Health and Teacher Education

Improving psychological well-being within the school environment is a useful strategy that offers the opportunity for self-actualization and maximum functioning of students. Schools are considered as important contexts for the promotion of psychological well-being and the realization of talents and abilities (Albieri & Visani, 2014). School well-being is related to the feeling of safety and respect, meaningful engagement in academic and social activities, a sense of autonomy, positive and supportive relationships with teachers and peers, a sense of belonging to school, happiness, and satisfaction within school environment (European Commission, European Education Area, 2023).

Relationships with students can be an important source of positive energy, enjoyment, and reward, and can determine teachers' daily feelings and thoughts in the classroom. Positive relationships with students are characterized by respect, warmth, support, trust, and low levels of interpersonal conflict. They are associated with a positive school climate. Teachers who are dedicating time to form warm and supportive relationships with students have higher levels of well-being and lower levels of emotional distress (Saloviita & Pakarinen, 2021). Efforts to foster emotional ties to school can reduce negative effects on development. Children who have supportive relationships at school report more positive attitudes toward school and greater satisfaction with it (Morrison et al., 2006).

Individuals who are able to experience high levels of well-being view life experiences involving pain and adversity as opportunities for transformation and exhibit high levels of ego development. Therefore, promoting psychological well-being involves recognizing strengths and weaknesses and making the most of them (Bauer, McAdams, & Pals, 2008).

According to Masten, Herbers, Cutuli, and Laffavor (2008) positive school experiences are included in the protective factors. Educators, counselors, and other staff can act as agents of resilience in the lives of at-risk children and nurture the skills children need to thrive. Counselors can contribute to children's resilience in many ways both at the individual level and at the school level in the whole school population with interventions aiming at highlighting the positive points of students. Effective schools provide opportunities for students to experience success, to enjoy their accomplishments as well as cultivating intrinsic motivation, self-efficacy, and persistence in the context of failure.

According to Luthar (1993), resilience is more related to the contexts, systems, or relationships to which a person belongs than to the characteristics of individuals. The psychological resilience of teachers is the ability to adapt to different situations and adapt under adverse conditions. It is shaped by the interaction between the individual and the environment (Gu & Day, 2007). Beltman et al. (2011) argue that the protective factors of teacher resilience are strong intrinsic motivation, positive attitudes, sense of humor, emotional intelligence, emotional stability, flexibility, self-efficacy, and the sense of competence, problem-solving skills, and high levels

of interpersonal relationships. Simultaneously, protective factors of resilience include reflection, self-evaluation, professional ambitions, commitment to continuous professional development, supportive relationships, and the development of their emotional well-being. Moreover, protective factors are related to support from leadership, school, and colleagues. People are more intrinsically motivated and engaged and show higher levels of well-being when they feel autonomous, self-sufficient, and have a sense of belonging by fostering an environment that embraces autonomy (Ryan & Deci, 2002). Students can have the opportunity to decide which strengths to cultivate and strengthen their sense of belonging (focusing on collaborative practices). In this way, educators cultivate environments that are conducive to learning and well-being.

Teacher well-being is linked to student mental health (Brown, Phillippo, Weston, & Rodger, 2019; Hardy et al., 2019). Jennings and Greenberg (2009) argue that teachers' social and emotional competence is associated with the development of healthy teacher-student relationships, effective classroom management, and effective implementation of socio-emotional learning programs. In addition, these interventions are linked to the prevention of behavior problems (Justicia-Arráez et al., 2021). Teachers' poor mental health impacts their capacity to be positive models for their students. In addition, teachers' ability to develop positive interpersonal relationships, their sense of autonomy and competence as well as opportunities for personal growth lead to optimal outcomes (Hadden & Smith, 2019). According to Chang (2009) teachers need to feel emotionally supported to be able to respond effectively to students' needs. Mental health promotion of students is related to teachers' psychological well-being and a positive school environment (Sisask et al., 2014).

Therefore, it is suggested that activities in undergraduate programs should include teaching social skills, self-regulation, empathy, and the cultivation of intrinsic motivation (Tait, 2008). Elias (2009) summarizes the key socioemotional skills as follows: perception, awareness and management of emotions, attentive listening and communication skills, the ability to see the perspective of others, problem-solving and decision-making skills, conflict management, negotiation skills, relationships and cooperation, recognition of the strengths of self and others. Problem solving skills could also be developed in prospective teachers. In addition (Castro, Kelly, & Shih, 2010; Mansfield et al., 2020). Enhancing self-regulation and coping strategies can increase job satisfaction and resilience as well as the quality of classroom instruction. Teaching the above skills will enable future teachers to be able to establish quality relationships with students, to regulate emotional situations in the classroom, and to manage student behavior problems more effectively. Mansfield et al. (2015) assert that resilience-related skill is a necessary component of teacher education which enhances teacher competence. Leon and Liew (2017) argue that teacher education should equip students with the skills to handle stressors in their work environment in order to avoid psychological burden. Teacher self-efficacy was associated with their psychological well-being according to their research findings. Early childhood teachers' psychological well-being was found to be associated with school climate in preschool classrooms.

Teachers model emotion expression and emotion regulation when they intentionally or unintentionally teach children to name, express, and control both negative and positive emotions (Ahn, 2005). In addition, promoting preschoolers' emotional skills can enhance their ability to accurately perceive both their own and others' emotions, with the goal of developing the ability to constructively discuss emotions with children. Emotional support from teachers is negatively related to internalizing problems and positively related to school adjustment (Tennent et al., 2014). The development of reflection in teachers could contribute to this direction, as well as to the better management of emotions. Also, as part of their training, preschool teachers could be sensitized to understanding the importance of talking with children about emotions and teaching coping strategies for more

difficult emotions, such as anger and sadness. Reducing teacher stress could contribute to positive response to children's emotions (Denham, Bassett, & Zinsser, 2012). Emotional well-being is a significant element of positive mental health (Westerhof & Keyes, 2010).

Educating and training teachers in positive mental health and coping skills makes more sense at the undergraduate level. By providing preservice teachers with mental health and education knowledge they will be better equipped when they work in schools. Preservice teachers are willing to participate in professional development courses when they enter the profession. It is also suggested that curricula should include specialized courses in mental health and training in well-being enhancement (Woloshyn & Savage, 2018; Pandori-Chuckal, 2020).

Educating undergraduate students on issues of promoting their well-being can be an effective way to prevent burnout (Hue & Lau, 2015). Principals' emotional support impacts teachers' emotional reframing (Berkovich & Eyal, 2018). Principals' supportive communication strategies, that is empathic listening, and empowering and normalizing messages can alleviate negative emotions and help teachers handle emotionally charged situations.

Palomera, Fernández-Berrocal, and Brackett (2008) point out the significance of adequate preservice and ongoing teacher training, which are related to the quality of education. Preservice teacher training should include teaching personal and interpersonal competencies. They suggest that educational objective is crucial to value the emotional development of preservice students. Educators' emotional skills can shape a supportive school environment and enable them to effectively implement socio-emotional interventions (Schovert-Reichl et al., 2019). Finally, a whole school well-being intervention includes all members of the school ecosystem, that is, principals, teachers, students, parents, and community services. These interventions aim to train stakeholders in the requisite skills that enable them to contribute to students' thriving (Bradley et al., 2018). Nurturing well-being is an ongoing process. It is intertwined with reflection and self-awareness. The implementation of well-being interventions in schools as well as in universities can empower educators' emotional intelligence and competence which are related to students' learning (Nikolaou & Markogiannakis, 2017; Stamatis & Nikolaou, 2020; Nikolaou & Stamatis, 2023).

The Promotion of Teachers' Well-Being in School Context

Among the programs that promote the well-being of teachers are the kids matter program which was implemented in Australia (Littlefield et al., 2017; Skrzypiec & Slee, 2017). Teachers had the opportunity to reflect on their professional well-being. Their personal well-being was considered critical to the effective implementation of programs and the well-being of the entire school. Roffey (2012) refers to the results of a survey carried out in Australia and investigated the factors that are critical to the well-being of students and teachers. The value of respect and acceptance, positive feelings about the school, the sense of belonging to the school environment, the formation of a safe learning environment were emphasized. Promoting teacher well-being impacts student well-being and strengthens school's ability to respond to the needs of diverse populations as well as enhancing teacher empathy and student well-being. In addition, staff's well-being is related to being able to demonstrate empathy for students.

CARE is a professional development program that can improve social-emotional competence and well-being. It combines emotional skills instruction, mindfulness practices, compassion development activities to empower teachers to reduce their stress and improve their social and emotional skills (Jennings et al, 2013) that are essential for forming supportive relationships with students and managing student challenges. This program

includes teaching as well as experiential activities (reflective practices, role play) to help teachers understand, recognize, and become aware of emotional states and explore common patterns of feelings and related thoughts. They practice eliciting positive emotions that promote resilience and self-regulation.

BRITE Program is another intervention aiming at increasing teacher well-being (Beltman, Glass, Dinham, Chalk, & Nguyen, 2015; Mansfield et al., 2016). The aim of the program is the development of personal and social skills which are linked to professional competence. The content of the program focuses on developing personal resources and teaching ways to utilize the resources of the environment as well as developing strategies to manage challenges. A strengths-focused approach was used to ensure that participants first identify their strengths.

Brite program includes the following aspects: the development of resilience, its importance and its contributing factors, the cultivation of relationships, the maintenance of support networks (friends and family, university colleagues, support networks and social media), the development of relationships in new environments (relationships with new colleagues, working with teacher-mentors, teamwork, positive communication with parents, being in a new community).

In addition, it includes well-being which pertains to personal well-being and mental health, reaction to stress and healthy lifestyle. Moreover, the balance between personal and work life (maintaining other interests, time management), maintaining motivation (reasons to become a teacher, optimistic thinking, persistence and self-efficacy), taking initiatives (resolving problem-solving processes) and effective communication (effective listening, assertiveness,) delimitation are core components of the program. In addition, it focuses on teachers' emotion awareness and management and the development of optimism. Seeking resources, goal-setting, a plan for developing skills, and continuing professional training are also components of the program.

Turner and Thielking (2019) implemented a program to promote teacher well-being in Australia which we based on Seligman's PERMA theoretical model. After completing the program, teachers reported that they felt less stressed and were more positive and calm in the classroom. Moreover, the quality of teaching improved, teachers spent more time with students and therefore developed better rapport and understanding. The program also improved students' performance and self-confidence. The teachers were consciously looking for the positive elements of the students. They gave more positive feedback to students, made the lesson more enjoyable, developed cooperative relationships, and gave more opportunities for initiatives to the students, considering their ideas and interests in order to make the lesson more interesting.

Dolev and Leshem (2017) implemented an emotional intelligence development program in Israel, which provided the opportunity for reflection, introspection, and professional development. Participants enhanced self-awareness, emotional intelligence skills, and reported that they incorporated them into their personal and professional identities. Increased self-awareness resulted in increased awareness of students' emotions, greater student acceptance, and tolerance of diversity. The program also brought about changes in the teacher-student relationship, classroom management, teaching effectiveness, and their well-being, according to teacher reports. The program was implemented within the context of promoting the effectiveness and well-being of teachers. The findings show that emotional intelligence can be developed in teachers.

In addition, interventions based on positive psychology have been implemented. Positive psychology is a new branch of psychology that studies the factors that contribute to the positive development of individuals, communities, and organizations through the development of their strengths and assets. Positive psychology interventions refer to programs that aim to cultivate positive emotions, positive behaviors, or positive thoughts.

Seligman's model (2011) posits that positive emotions, involvement, relationships, the search for meaning, and a sense of accomplishment are related to well-being.

Positive education is the application of positive psychology to education. It is an approach to education that, beyond academic skills, aims to cultivate skills that lead to well-being. It is based on the idea that fostering positive emotions, positive relationships, and character strengths promotes learning and academic success. Kern and Wehmeier (2021) advocate that academic achievements and well-being are essential to be equally valued. A key principle of positive education is that skills and attitudes that promote positive emotions can be taught and assessed in schools. Hope is defined as the process of thinking about goals combined with the motivation about the path to achieving goals and the ways in which goals can be achieved. Hope is associated with perceived adequacy, self-esteem, and life satisfaction. Interventions in schools based on positive psychology include designing a curriculum that teaches students skills that aim to enhance positive emotions, character strengths with the ultimate goal of promoting their well-being. For example, they might include journals where they record moments associated with the feeling of gratitude. In addition, they may introduce positive psychology topics into traditional courses (Waters, 2011).

Forgiveness is also a core element of positive psychology interventions. Unforgiveness which refers to blaming others and holding on to hostility and anger is harmful. Negative emotional states have negative effects on the immune system. Additionally, forgiveness helps individuals maintain close and supportive relationships. Gratitude is associated with the recognition of a personal benefit and can establish supportive social relationships. People experience gratitude when they recognize that someone has an intention to promote their well-being, and they experience higher levels of gratitude when they perceive that the benefits are provided with an intention and in some cases come at a cost to the benefactor (Chan, 2010; Waters, 2011; Shankland & Rosset, 2017). The above concepts are character strengths within the framework of positive psychology interventions that could be incorporated into school-implemented programs and practices.

Baker, Green, and Falecki (2017) highlight the gap of the link between positive psychology and early childhood education and point out that the principles of positive psychology can be meaningfully applied in early childhood settings.

Conclusions

Schools are expected to foster not only academic development but also the emotional growth of students. The integration of positive psychology concepts into educational curricula will contribute to students flourishing. Education is crucial to incorporate teachers' and students' development of positive mental health into its goals, which are connected to their well-being. Teacher well-being is interconnected with students' mental health, academic achievements, and positive developmental outcomes. The adoption of positive psychology principles can enhance the emotional health of all members of the school community. They provide the framework for nurturing fundamental life skills and self-reflection. Socio-emotional competence is considered a salient capacity that it is vital to be developed within school context.

University programs need to nurture teachers' capacity to promote students' mental health. Subsequently, they should equip them with the competencies that will enable them to empower themselves and their students, by providing opportunities to enhance their emotional growth. These competencies can enhance their ability to form supportive relationships with students, parents, and colleagues, which exert an indirect influence in academic and socio-emotional outcomes. Students can thrive in a school environment which fosters their sense

of belonging to school community and respects their personality and their needs. School mental health promotion is related to the well-being of educators which should be one of the core educational objectives. Moreover, teacher stress which is associated with burn-out hinders the development of well-being. Therefore, school leadership and education policy makers need to value the promotion of teachers' well-being and mental health in preservice training as well as in professional development courses. Education is crucial to provide opportunities for nurturing well-being as it can buffer against students' emotional and behavioral difficulties. In addition, it is crucial to be incorporated into early childhood education university programs, as early education is a developmental phase that lays the foundation for important developmental outcomes.

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