

Reviews



**Sarah Mercer, Tammy Gregersen, *Teacher Wellbeing*
[Handbooks for Language Teachers].
Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020.
ISBN 978-0-19-440563-8, 155 pp.**

The book *Teacher Wellbeing* is a long-awaited resource handbook for (language) teachers. It comes from two renowned scholars, Sarah Mercer and Tammy Gregersen. They are both well-known for their pioneering work on positive psychology applications in second language acquisition and foreign language teaching and learning contexts. The present book is also written within the paradigm of positive psychology and the PERMA model of Martin Seligman (also the EMAPHATICS framework of Rebecca Oxford) in its understanding of human emotions, character strengths, relationships and enabling institutions as applied in teaching contexts.

The choice of the topic's focus, which is the well-being of a language teacher, is justified by scarcity of material on how to keep teachers happy and functioning effectively and with full satisfaction in their jobs. As a consequence, advice given in the book shows how to avoid burn-out after some years spent in the classroom and how to keep high spirits and at least some degree of satisfaction and happiness in doing this demanding job. The aims that the authors set for themselves are to introduce and make teachers aware of the concept of teacher well-being in its different dimensions, pointing out its importance as a necessary condition for learner well-being. As the authors say in the Introduction, “[d]rawing on research, we want to guide you towards a recognition of the importance of self-care, not only for you personally but also for your capacity to teach to the best of your abilities” (p. 1). A teacher who cares about his/her wellbeing is also seen as being well-prepared to develop his/her learners' well-being. So the authors offer a helping hand to teachers not only in making them aware,

but also in offering ideas on how to develop their wellbeing in various dimensions.

The book contains eight chapters, an extensive bibliography and, importantly, a glossary of terms and an index. The chapters constitute a comprehensive picture of the concept of (teacher) wellbeing, as each of them focuses on a different aspect of wellbeing. The book starts with the introductory text entitled “It’s All about Me,” which offers a justification for the topic, defines the concept of wellbeing and gives an outline of the book to help the readers make the best use of it. It resembles a guidebook leading its readers through different domains of well-being, where the authors discuss both external factors such as workplace and institutions, and internal qualities (mindsets, emotions) conducive to (or impeding) the development of one’s state of wellbeing. Wellbeing is portrayed from the personal perspective of an individual but importantly the role of context and collaboration are also stressed as part of it.

What is to be found in the chapter to follow, “Me and My Workplace” is the idea of a positive (enabling) institution, a construct well-known from positive psychology and defined as a place of work which allows the teacher to thrive both as a teacher and as a human being, to be autonomous and creative but, at the same time, to be able to identify with the institution. The authors believe that “the well-being of language teachers is a shared responsibility—for individuals and institutions as well as for wider educational and cultural systems” (p. 33), thus promoting a proactive approach of the teacher which will allow him/her to improve the workplace through autonomy and innovation. In turn, the chapter “Me and My Mind” introduces the role of self-beliefs, mindsets, multitasking—all the different facets of how our mind and the beliefs we hold influence what we do and how we do it. As the authors put it, “[...] we have asked you to reflect on how the habits of your mind influence the way you see yourself, juggling the multiple identities and roles” (p. 48). The next chapter, “Me and My Motivation” offers teachers a moment of reflection on different dynamics of teacher motivation combined with learner motivation and the role of achievement in the former case. The main consideration is said to be “the role of time as a resource, and how safeguarding time and using it wisely can sustain language teachers’ motivation [...] the boost to our wellbeing that can be found through achievements, and the especially gratifying emotions that ensue when such accomplishments are savoured” (p. 67). Being a teacher and functioning in a given educational context (and beyond it) is the main theme of “Me and My Relationships,” where the role of interaction (for example, a rapport with learners and with colleagues) is reflected upon and the development of socio-emotional competences is seen as fundamental. The authors focused, among other things, on “how we can strengthen our relationships with and between learners, and also with colleagues, by attending to our interactional style” (p. 85). One of the corner-stone principles of positive psychology is portrayed in

the chapter on “Me and My Emotions,” where the authors reflect on the multiplicity of emotions that exist in the workplace and assign a major role to them in managing teacher well-being. Thus, the chapter looks at Hochschild’s idea of emotion labor (Hochschild, 1983), this time in the educational context to cope with a variety of teacher personal anxieties, emphasizing the role of compassion—for oneself and for others. The authors, however, express the belief that “[s]elf-compassion needs to come first; only then we are in a position to share strength and positivity with others” (p. 101). The holistic view of human functioning so strongly promoted by humanistic psychology, and now by positive psychology, in particular postulates the view that physical well-being is also a necessary condition for success in life, here teacher life (the embodied mind). Thus, the chapter “Me and My Physical Wellbeing” reflects upon how stress and an inappropriate (unhealthy) balance between one’s personal life and work can affect one’s physical condition. The authors propose the need to achieve the physical wellbeing of teachers by “improving time management, rethinking how one perceives stressors, optimizing beneficial stress, and reducing negative concerns” (p. 117). In the concluding chapter, “Me and My Future,” the need to reflect on one’s personal development combined with personal growth and taking pride in being a teacher are the major focus. The authors ask the readers to visualize their ideal self, ought-to-be self, and feared self in a form of reflection looking into their future as (language) teachers. The authors also stress the importance of professional development through exploratory practice (EP), in which a teacher becomes a researcher in his/her own pedagogical context but, at the same, time stressing the need for Appreciative Inquiry for teacher wellbeing (4D model). In conclusion, the authors once again express their main aim in publishing a practical manual in language teacher wellbeing and offer a way forward for readers in the form of a list of questions for action, which are meant to “motivate you and inspire you to take steps towards wellbeing goals that are realistic, meaningful, and sustainable for you” (p. 130).

In terms of presentation, each aspect of well-being is reflected upon in an individual chapter in a structured way. On each occasion, the authors introduce some theory; digested enough not to be too heavy for the readers. In this way, it constitutes background and gives credibility to what is the core of each chapter, that is, “a moment of reflection” for teachers based on a carefully constructed variety of tasks to be performed. The tasks embrace various reflective activities in a form of short surveys, each relating to a given aspect of well-being, sharing thoughts and observations with other colleagues in the staffroom, assessing one’s development over a prescribed period of time, making pledges, using De Bono’s six hats, challenging one’s beliefs through reflection, to mention just a few. It is not only the “Be Inspired” quotations that the authors placed in each chapter, but also the tasks, which are so well-focused and uplifting that compel to become engaged in these genuinely creative awareness-raising activities. The

tasks in each chapter are followed by a brief summary and a set of questions for individual reflection. For those who would like to read a bit more on a given topic, the authors have prepared a list of further reading for each chapter.

There is much to admire in the comprehensive content, clarity of expression and engaging character of reflective tasks. The main merit of the book, I would say, is its treatment of the topic of teacher wellbeing, which is fundamental in helping teachers to discover or recover their sense of professionalism and the satisfaction they can draw from it. Second, the book is grounded in theory but balances it well with practical applications and advice. Last, it is so well-structured and reader-friendly that it cannot help but be engaging and inspiring. It clearly demonstrates the authors' passionate desire to pass on their conviction to other teachers. The authors cut the distance between themselves and the reader by using an informal *you* form of address, which creates a climate of caring and sharing (Moskowitz, 1978).

If I were to point out an element that is perhaps less achieved, it would be that although the authors refer to language teachers as addressees of the book, language teaching itself is not developed equally strongly throughout the book. It is loaded with specific anxieties of a linguistic nature (Am I good enough to teach a language? Will my learners spot my mistakes? Will I lose authority?). On the other hand, all that is said and reflected upon in the book is universal for all the teachers. It demonstrates what significant implications positive psychology may have for teachers (and learners) and contributes to a whole body of research and its practical applications for (foreign language) education and beyond that, for the personal growth of teachers.

I believe that this publication, although meant to be a handbook for language teachers, is much more valuable than that. It can become an important source for mentors, teacher trainers, and their trainees as well as for scholars not working in the area of second language acquisition and foreign language teaching. Above all, it is an effective tool for making the reader reflect. This is in fact the authors' ultimate goal, as they themselves write, "We hope this book offered you support in nurturing your wellbeing and understanding the value of self-care for your personal and professional lives" (p. 129). Certainly, this book has the potential to achieve this ambitious outcome.

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