


Chapter 21

An Investigation Into Teachers' Perceptions of Their Wellbeing in the ELT Sector in Malta

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ABSTRACT

Several studies have concluded that the teaching profession is characterized by high occurrences of emotional exhaustion and burnout. These conditions very often lead to low levels of wellbeing in teachers and constitute a major concern for the profession. Teachers who experience low levels of wellbeing are much more likely to suffer from mental health issues. This study investigates the wellbeing of teachers working in private language schools forming part of the English Language Teaching (ELT) sector in Malta. It focuses on the factors that can positively or negatively influence teacher wellbeing and examines the self-regulation strategies ELT practitioners apply. The study's findings show that conditions such as low salary, working without a proper contract, and student misbehaviour are the highest causative factors that negatively affect teacher wellbeing. The study concludes that more wellbeing development programmes are needed so as to equip language teachers with the knowledge and skills to safeguard their wellbeing.

1. INTRODUCTION

Teaching is seen as one of the most stressful professions and teachers have a high likelihood of experiencing burnout. Research has shown that stress has a negative impact on teacher wellbeing and it can affect the quality of teaching; this, in turn, can impinge on student learning (Rizqi, 2017). The shortage of teachers and the struggle to recruit new recruits into the profession are major concerns in many countries. For example, in the mainstream education sector in the United Kingdom, it has been

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reported that whilst there is a steady increase in the number of school-aged children, the recruitment and retention of teachers is in crisis (Weale, 2020). It is estimated that around 30% of teachers will leave the profession within the first five years of their employment; in most cases this is as a result of health-related stressors (Weale, 2020).

Teachers working in the private language schools forming part of the ELT sector are also likely to experience high amounts of stress and burnout due to their job demands (Mercer & Gregersen, 2020). For a variety of reasons, ELT can be more stressful and more demanding than the teaching of other subjects in mainstream education (Borg, 2006). For instance, compared to teachers in mainstream schools, ELT professionals have unstable contracts and poor working conditions (Mercer et al., 2016). They are also expected to be more creative, motivated and communicative in order to stimulate interest amongst their fee-paying learners; hence, this creates additional stress and anxiety for the teachers (Borg, 2006). The reality that these teachers encounter on a daily basis underscores the significance of research showing that teacher wellbeing is likely to improve when professionals are treated with respect, included in a school's decisions, and are valued and empowered (Kaynak, 2020).

The present study examines the wellbeing of teachers working in the ELT sector in Malta and highlights the factors that contribute to negative wellbeing, which can lead to stress, burnout and job resignations (Johnson et al., 2005). Thus, this study attempts to recognise and articulate the key features that can better support language teachers and encourage them to thrive in their profession. Its findings are meant to help pave the way for teacher education and development programmes geared towards enabling educators to adopt self-regulation strategies that nourish their professional wellbeing.

By means of data collected from participants working at different private language schools around Malta, this study identifies four domains that can positively or negatively influence the wellbeing of language teachers: general, environmental, communal, and personal. Additionally, it recognises the self-regulation strategies ELT professionals use in order to safeguard their wellbeing.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

In recent decades, the study of wellbeing has been undertaken by several psychologists and health professionals; however, limited research has been conducted on teacher wellbeing (Mercer & Kostoulas, 2018). The teaching profession is globally recognised as one of the most stressful (Johnson et al., 2005), and deemed to lead to high rates of burnout (Unterbrink et al., 2007). To some extent this is due to teachers suppressing negative feelings such as frustration, anxiety and anger (Mattern & Bauer, 2014). However, high levels of stress and burnout amongst ELT professionals are also caused by job demands and working conditions (Mercer et al., 2016; Piechurska-Kuciel, 2011). For example, the work challenges faced by ELT professionals in Greece lead them to experience job insecurity and heightened stress (Stavraki & Karagianni, 2020). This is very similar to the experiences of teachers in the Maltese ELT context.

2.1 Defining Wellbeing

The study of wellbeing can be traced back to Bradburn's (1969) research on psychological wellbeing. His work was a result of his interest in the way people managed the difficulties of daily life. He sought to find out if the effect on the individual in dealing with everyday problems led to any increase in positivity and any decrease in negativity. Ten years later, psychological wellbeing was largely being

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