



## **A close look at teachers' lives: Caring for the well-being of elementary teachers in the US**

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The purpose of this qualitative study is to shed light on elementary teachers' perspectives on their sense of well-being, with emphasis on contextual factors that promote or block their sense of well-being. Data were collected through background questionnaires, teachers' journal writings, and interviews with teachers. Findings reveal that teachers' sense of well-being was fostered mainly by student growth and supportive colleagues. The major themes that emerged as negatively affecting teachers' well-being were the influence of accountability testing, lack of power, sense of being scrutinized, student misbehavior, and heavy workload. The results of this study show the need for restructuring teaching contexts. When schools are places in which teachers feel valued, respected, empowered and involved in decision-making processes, they are likely to have a better sense of well-being.

**Keywords:** teacher well-being, elementary teachers, policy changes, empowerment

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### **Introduction**

Along with the growing awareness of the importance of children's well-being in education, researchers have become interested in teachers' well-being and its impact on students' outcomes, resulting in a body of literature presenting arguments as to why teachers' well-being matters in education. At the heart of these arguments is the assumption that to provide quality teaching and contribute to children's social, emotional, and psychological development, teachers need to remain physically, mentally and psychologically healthy (Pillay, et al., 2005). In elementary schools in particular, children spend six to seven hours a day with the same teacher.

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Teachers' states of wellness influence their attitudes towards students and directly impact students' learning (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009).

Successful teachers are identified as those who experience a high level of occupational well-being (Klusmann, et al., 2008). Galand, Lecocq and Philippot (2007) report that if teachers are, "anxious, depressed and disengaged" (p. 467), they are less likely than mentally healthy teachers to engage students academically and maintain their interest in learning.

This study is a qualitative investigation of elementary teachers' perspectives on well-being and the influence of contextual factors on their degree of well-being through examining their experiences and stories. Toward this end, this study is guided by the following two research questions, namely what factors and experiences do teachers believe promote their professional well-being, and what do teachers find most challenging and problematic to their professional well-being. In the next sections, the concepts of teacher well-being are discussed, followed by a description of the research design, data analysis, and presentation of findings.

### *Underpinnings of Teacher Well-being*

The phenomenon of well-being has been a subject of particular interest in the field of psychology (Diener, 2000; Ryan & Deci, 2001; Seligman, 2012). Within this field, two philosophical traditions, the hedonic and eudaimonic perspectives have widely influenced the ideas of scholars exploring teachers' well-being. In hedonistic thought, nature provides two motivators to humankind: pleasure and pain. When total pleasure is maximized and pain minimized, the greatest happiness ensues. According to this view, maximizing pleasure should be people's life goal, since only pleasure is intrinsically valuable for people (Kahneman et al., 1999). Psychologists who embrace the hedonic perspective view well-being as subjective happiness and pleasure (Ryan & Deci, 2001).

The second tradition, eudaimonic, is grounded in Aristotle's ethics. Aristotle used the term eudaimonia to refer to happiness. According to this view, happiness is achieved by leading a good and flourishing life and refers to the actualization of human potential. Supporters of the eudaimonic perspective believe that well-being is broader than the happiness produced by pleasure; it extends to achieving one's true self and full potential (Ryan & Deci, 2001). In general, well-being has been conceptualized in various and overlapping ways depending upon the discipline, such as feelings of equanimity and satisfaction (Holmes, 2005; Wei, 2013), a sense of meaningfulness and flourishing (Seligman, 2012), and a realization of autonomy (Schwartz, 2000).

In this study, the professional well-being of teachers refers to the state defined by Aelterman, Engels, Petegem and Verhaeghe (2007) as "a positive emotional state, which is the harmony between the sum of specific environmental factors on the one hand, the personal needs and expectations of teachers on the other hand (p. 286). The conceptual framework is informed primarily by Aelterman et al. (2007), Seligman (2012), and Soini, Pyhalto and Pietarinen (2010). Aelterman et al. (2007) found that teacher well-being is affected

mainly by workload, self-efficacy and support from colleagues and principals. Soini et al. (2010) likewise discussed the importance of ‘positive school atmosphere’ and ‘perceived sense of empowerment’ to support teachers’ well-being. Seligman (2012) stated that positive emotions and relations with others, finding meaning in a job, and a sense of achievement are important means to well-being. By compiling the emergent factors in these studies, it is possible to see five components of teacher well-being as shown in Figure 1.



Figure 1. Aspects of professional well-being of teachers.

Although these aspects are explained individually, they are interrelated, synergetic, and mutually enhancing, and all should be considered in evaluating the overall professional well-being of teachers, as exemplified in the literature.

Self-efficacy has been found to impact well-being due to its role in one’s beliefs, motivations, activities and behaviors (Bandura, 1997). People with high self-efficacy believe that they are capable of managing their behaviors and overcoming the challenges they face (Bandura, 1997). In similar way teachers who have high self-efficacy believe that they can be effective teachers even when teaching students in challenging contexts (Ross et al., 2012) and that they can contribute to students’ learning and success (Wei, 2013). They are able to carry their beliefs to the classroom and demonstrate their effectiveness in teaching. It is argued that “teachers with higher levels of perceived self-efficacy set more challenging goals, collaborate with colleagues and parents, take personal responsibility for student outcomes, such as individualizing instruction, and are more likely to successfully implement new programs” (Ross et al., 2012, p.119). Teachers with a high level of self-efficacy are highly dedicated and committed teachers who come to class well-prepared (Wei, 2013)

Aelterman et al. (2007) considered self-efficacy as the most important aspect, mediating both the influence of other aspects of well-being and greatly influenced by the aspects given in the model. They described teacher self-efficacy as “the extent to which a teacher finds himself competent. It includes the assessment of one’s own capacities and skills in relation to the demands of the task that has to be performed” (p. 292). Therefore, self-efficacy serves as a mechanism by which teachers assess their own skills and abilities. Sense of efficacy represents teachers’ confidence in their ability to contribute to students’ growth and learning. When teachers feel that these are sufficient to contribute to students’ growth, they are intrinsically more motivated, which in turn promotes their sense of well-being.

The other aspects of teacher well-being include job satisfaction, autonomy and reasonable workload and supportive school culture. Job satisfaction refers to teachers’ sense of engagement, achievement and pleasure in teaching. Weiss (2002) defined job satisfaction as “a positive (or negative) and evaluative judgment one makes about one’s job or job situation” (p.175). From this point of view, teacher job satisfaction refers to how teachers evaluate and perceive their professional role (Ma & MacMillan, 1999). Job satisfaction is a multi-dimensional domain that is associated with both teachers’ individual experiences and contextual factors such as age, the number of years of teaching, the degree of administrative support and the nature of school climate.

Autonomy and teacher empowerment have also been considered essential elements in increasing teachers’ well-being and in promoting teachers’ sense of control and power in the ownership of their job. It is argued that empowered teachers have more freedom to apply their best teaching methods as other professionals have done (Pearson & Moomaw, 2005). In addition, they will be entrusted with more autonomy and decision-making power, resulting in increased teacher authority.

The other element of teachers’ well-being is having a reasonable workload that allows sufficient time for all duties, thus relieving the extra stress of time pressures and energy limitations and allowing teachers to easily manage the tasks of teaching. Also, critical to teacher well-being is a supportive school environment in which teachers feel valued, respected and appreciated by colleagues and the school administration. School administrators and the working context they provide play key roles in teachers’ lives since they affect teachers’ sense of being valued for their work, their perceptions of involvement in the operation of the school, and their interactions with other school members (Darling-Hammond, 1995).

## **Research Design**

### *Research Site and Sampling*

The purpose of the study is to develop an in-depth understanding of factors influencing teachers’ overall professional well-being and thus a qualitative research design involving purposeful sampling was utilized. Purposeful sampling, which enables the researcher to select an information-rich setting that serves the purpose of the research (Patton, 2002), was chosen in order to explore in depth a small group of teachers’ perceptions of professional well-being in relation to their work-related experiences. Nine teachers, seven females and two males, were willing to be part of the study.

The elementary school in which this research was carried out was located in a small town in the Midwest of the United States. In total, 31 female and 4 male teachers were working in the school with one principal, one assistant principal and the school secretary. Around 500 students attended the school. The diverse student body was 60% White, 30% Hispanic and 10% African-American and other ethnicities and came from middle or low-income families. The school was identified as a Title 1 school, in which almost 75% of the children were eligible for either a free or a reduced-price lunch.

Table I provides brief background information for the nine participants in this study, the majority of whom had been working in the school for several years.

**Table I. Backgrounds of participant teachers.**

Participants	Gender	Age	Highest degree earned	Teaching certificate	Number of years in teaching
P1	F	45	Bachelor	K-6	12
P2	M	44	Master	K-6	18
P3	F	52	Master	ESL	30
P4	M	51	High School	ESL	14
P5	F	58	Master	K-6	20
P6	F	60	Bachelor	K-6	21
P7	F	53	Master	K-6	26
P8	F	47	Master	K-6	26
P9	F	39	Bachelor	K-6	16

*Data Sources and Instrumentation*

Using multiple methods of data collection in any research approach maximizes the inherent strengths and minimizes the limitations of that approach (Patton, 2002). In this study, data were collected through participant background questionnaires, semi-structured interviews with teachers, and teachers’ journal entries.

The background questionnaire was given to participants after they had given consent and prior to beginning the interview. The first part of the questionnaire included items eliciting the teachers’ demographic information, education background, current and prior employment, and teaching experience. In the second part, the teachers were asked about their motivation for entering teaching and their beliefs about the profession.

Following the administration of the background questionnaire, a face-to-face individual interview with each teacher at a time and place of the interviewee’s choosing was arranged. The interviews lasted from 30 to 60 minutes, averaging around 40 minutes, and were audio-recorded. I structured the semi-structured interview protocols for each teacher following Carspecken’s (1996) four steps as exemplified below:

Topic domain: Being a teacher

Lead off question: Could you tell me what it is like to be a school-teacher today?

Covert categories to listen for: workloads, public views of teachers, student-parent behaviors, prompted by such questions as the following:

- i. What are the rewards and challenges of being a teacher?
- ii. If you could change three things in teachers' lives, what would they be?

As part of the study, the participating teachers were asked to keep journals during a six-month period. One purpose of these participant journals was to allow teachers to share any reflections or ideas that they might not have shared in the interviews. Another purpose was to provide an alternative channel of communication for teachers who could express their feelings and ideas better in writing than through verbal conversation. The teachers' journal writing served as an effective data source that both enriched what they said and added insights that did not emerge in the interviews and was thus a valuable augmentation to how they conveyed their sense of well-being.

The participants were given four prompts for journal writing, e.g., "Describe a situation that supports your sense of well-being," and informed that these were examples of what they might include in their writing, not required responses. In addition to these prompts, participants were told that they could include any comments they had neglected to mention during the interview or thought of afterwards. Seven out of nine of the participating teachers answered the prompt questions directly, whilst two participants wrote additional reflections. The participants stated that they would like to write more in their journals, but because of their busy schedules and time constraints, they could not write as often as they wanted.

### *Data Analysis*

Data analysis consisted of multiple stages. Merriam (2009) asserts that data "collection and analysis should be a simultaneous process...[that] is recursive and dynamic" (p. 169). Accordingly, from the beginning of the study, the collected data were simultaneously reviewed and organized by such means as typing up reflective notes related to interviews or participants and labelling them in folders. A thematic-analysis was conducted with data derived from the interviews and journal writings (Boyatzis, 1998; Patton, 2002; Saldana, 2009), a methodology described by O'Reilly and Kiyimba, (2015) as "used to identify, analyze, and report patterns within a data set, allowing for the descriptive organization of the data in a way that facilitates interpretation of various aspects of the research topic" (p. 75).

I first coded initial patterns using descriptive codes that referred to a summary of the basic topic of the data in a word or a short phrase (Saldana, 2009). In the second phase, I categorized the codes based on commonalities and differences within and across interviews and journal writings. In the last phase, I generated themes by combining codes. Table II provides an example of how themes were created:

**Table II. Codes for analysis**

Short phrases for codes	Categories	Themes
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Lack of student respect</li> <li>- Misbehaving students threaten safety of the classroom</li> <li>- Feeling of exhaustion and stress</li> <li>- Thinking of leaving teaching</li> </ul>	Classroom management is challenging	Student misbehavior
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Control over curriculum</li> <li>- Concerns about teacher evaluation</li> <li>- The nature of teaching has changed</li> </ul>	Sense of loss autonomy	Lack of control and power

To address trustworthiness in the present research, triangulation of data sources, member checks, and peer review, were used. Triangulation involving comparison of data derived from multiple sources strengthens the credibility of the information reported and conclusions reached (Merriam, 2009). In this study, multiple data sources were triangulated to check the consistency of information derived at different moments (Patton, 2002). During the study, I used also member-checks, in which participants were allowed to review and check the accuracy of my understanding. In some situations, I contacted participants for clarification of what they said in an interview or to be sure that I presented their ideas correctly. Peer review formed another part of the process of my analysis. I reviewed drafts of my data analysis with a college professor to obtain his perspectives on my interpretations, including proposed themes and patterns. I also sought advice and feedback from experienced researchers and scholars. This allowed me to make necessary modifications that enhanced the credibility of my study.

## Results

The participant teachers often concurrently described their perceptions of well-being and the factors that affected it in relation to one another. I first organized these findings into two main categories: promoters of well-being and obstacles to well-being. Within these two categories, seven themes were identified.

### *Promoters of well-being*

When sharing their perspectives on what promoted their sense of well-being, teachers emphasized contextual factors, values associated with teaching, and the nature of the teaching profession. Following is a discussion of the two themes that emerged from their data as promoters of teacher well-being, namely collegial support and witnessing student growth.

*Theme 1. Collegial support.* On a typical school day, teachers were extremely busy teaching and working with their students, but they still tried to make time to interact with their colleagues. Five participants stated in the interviews that they especially valued collegial support. One teacher reflected,

Our grade level, or at least me and the other teacher, work really well together. We're very complimentary to each other. She will come and say, "That's great. That's fantastic." I'm like, "Would you like to have it?" We share stuff with each other. (P6)

Another teacher commented,

Right now, my colleagues and my principals are great, and we work well together. We respect each other, I think, as professionals. I feel supported now. (P9).

Such comments provided evidence that the school atmosphere encouraged teachers to come together, share their ideas, and support each other. The collegial support and steady interaction among the teachers played an essential role in creating a positive school atmosphere.

*Theme 2: Witnessing student growth.* From the teachers' perspectives, witnessing children's development, helping them change their behaviors in positive ways, and contributing to children's lives represented the joyful aspects of teaching and an important source of well-being. In particular, witnessing student growth affected teachers' sense of well-being in two ways, by increasing their motivation, and rewarding their dedicated efforts.

Making meaningful changes in children's lives and seeing them grow and flourish were the main motivating factors that had influenced the participating teachers' decisions to start teaching and kept them in their careers. Seven participants stated that the value they placed on contributing to children's lives had been their motivation to enter teaching. One teacher reflected in the interview:

I remember a time that we happened to be working on teaching kids how to tell time. I remember thinking, [as] I was driving home, and I thought, "You know what? I taught them something that their parents didn't teach them and it's something, telling time, they're going to use that the whole rest of their life." I did that. No one else did that. (P5)

This teacher captured a moment of awe in regard to her own experiences, when she considered that teaching children something they might use during their entire lives made teaching special. For her, teaching was the most important job, next to being a parent. Much like parents, teachers are able to play critical roles in children's development. Other participating teachers were also motivated by the belief that they were making influential changes in their students' lives even though it took time for them to see their impacts, and in some situations they would never see the outcomes, as expressed by one teacher in his journal:

After 18 years of teaching, I still believe that teaching is the noblest of professions. Teachers can and do make a tremendous difference in the lives of every student that they teach. I think that many times teachers are not around to see the differences that they do make. (P2)

This teacher's experience conveyed the frequent need for teachers to be patient to see students' growth and realize that their efforts were worthwhile and contributed to students' accomplishments well beyond their time in a particular classroom.



### *Obstacles and Challenges to Well-being*

Regardless of age, amount of teaching experience, or grades they had taught, all the participating teachers recognized that over the course of their careers they had experienced a variety of discordant aspects of teaching, including increased emphasis on state standards, prescribed curricula, and accountability testing, that negatively impacted their sense of well-being, in particular the sense of being scrutinized, student misbehaviors, heavy workloads, emphasis on accountability testing, and lack of professional autonomy.

*Theme 3: Sense of being scrutinized.* Most participant teachers took issue with the ways in which they were being monitored. In discussions of their day-to-day teaching practices, four participants stated their dissatisfaction with the part of teacher evaluation in which school administrators (usually the school principal) visited each classroom and rated the teachers on their teaching, classroom management, and communication skills. Even though all the participating teachers expressed being very satisfied with their administration, they disliked being observed, evaluated, and given performance scores. Referring to this practice, one teacher said, “I feel like we're just under the microscope all the time with whatever we do” (P8). Two teachers expressed an especially high level of discomfort with the process of classroom evaluation. In the words of one teacher:

People are watching every little thing that I do all the time. It can make you feel nervous. What I was referring to was when our administrators come in and watch and that sort of thing, and then we get graded on every little thing that we do. (P7)

Another teacher who was confident in her teaching skills stated that being observed by school and district administrators was the biggest stressor in her career and the one which most negatively influenced her well-being.

I don't like being observed all the time. I understand that, if a teacher is doing a poor job, the administrators need to come in and watch and try to help to improve it, but I feel like if I'm doing a good job and they know that I'm doing a good job .... I'm being watched all the time every single day and being critiqued every day. I don't think it's fair to do that in our profession when other professions don't have people watching them all the time and grading them all the time for every little thing that they do. (P5)

As these statements show, teachers' level of confidence was undermined and their sense of autonomy in the classroom diminished by a report-card system of evaluation that fostered destructive comparisons and denied their professionalism, which implies the capability to monitor oneself, make responsible decisions, and engage in effective practices. This de-professionalizing treatment could not be compensated for with praise. As one teacher wrote:

The worst threat to a teacher's well-being is emotional. This year has been difficult. We have been told that we are wonderful, hardworking teachers corporately, but quietly, and one on one, we have been told that we are “ineffective” because our scores are not as high as a colleague's, or that even though our kids showed good growth, that it wasn't as much as another teacher's. (P1)

While the administration's practice of grading teachers created a scale of comparison and competition that emotionally affected teachers' well-being, for the teachers the key issue was that they wanted the autonomy

taken for granted in other professions in order to have the flexibility to organize and plan their instruction in accordance with students' needs and their own preferences.

*Theme 4. Student misbehaviour.* Referring to obstacles to their well-being, participant teachers drew attention to classroom-related factors, including student misbehavior, classroom management issues, and lack of student motivation. In relation to the challenges they faced, teachers described incidents in which children physically harmed other students or even teachers by kicking, biting, punching, or throwing objects. One teacher wrote in her journal that: "There are different types of threats to a teacher's well-being. Physical threats come from children who punch and kick or bite you". (P5) Another teacher stated:

I have had several behaviorally challenging students through the years. They have screamed at me, kicked me, hit me, and damaged classroom items. At these times, my main concern is to keep the other students safe. It's pretty stressful but you have to try to remain calm. Those kinds of things are just exhausting (P3).

Among the incidents teachers shared that decreased their well-being, one was especially sad. In a kindergarten class, while one girl was lying on the floor drawing, another student playfully jumped on top of her. In the process, a pencil the student was holding in her hand penetrated her eye, injuring the girl and leaving her without sight in that eye. Even though this traumatic incident had occurred two years previous to the time of this study, the teacher of that kindergarten classroom was still affected by it, and it continued to have a negative impact on her. She said that every day that she entered the classroom she was always on edge to avoid having a similar bad experience. As misbehaving students destabilize the safe atmosphere of the classroom, they are likely to distract from the ongoing instruction in the classroom as well as hinder other students' learning.

In response to the journal prompt, "Describe a time when your well-being as a teacher was threatened," two teachers stated that unmotivated students diminished their sense of well-being. One teacher wrote,

When the kids are not motivated, when the kids are not respectful to me, it can be just very stressful. The same sort of things that I just talked about only in reverse when you're trying and you're trying and you're trying for them to get a concept or something and they don't get it no matter what you do. Sometimes you just feel like you're ready to quit because it's exhausting and you don't know what else to do to get them to learn it (P5).

Similar to this statement, another teacher noted the following in his journal:

I have a second grader who struggles in many areas. We started out making progress and moving forward. As time passed things began to go downhill fast. He was just not making any more progress. I tried different things to see if I could jumpstart him again...I became frustrated with myself trying to find out where I went wrong. (P4).

As is apparent in such comments, students who lacked or lost motivation made teachers feel that their efforts were futile, lowering their sense of well-being. Also students who misbehaved and were disrespectful made teaching less manageable and threatened the safe learning environment of the class.

*Theme 5. Heavy workload.* In the course of this study, participant teachers complained about their heavy workload. For example, one kindergarten teacher wrote the following statement in her journal:

Being a teacher is like the story of a horse who is hitched to a heavy wagon loaded up with too many things. The farmer keeps piling on more and more until the weight of the wagon is too heavy to pull. At the same time the horse is being yelled at for not pulling the wagon, someone comes every now and then to offer a tiny carrot to the horse. When the horse still can't pull the wagon, the person who offered the carrot uses a stick to hit the horse. Neither the farmer nor the person with the carrots and stick understand or want to understand that the weight of the wagon is just too much for the horse, no matter what kind of motivation is offered. Sadly, neither one of them care one way or the other. They just want the wagon moved at all cost. In the end of the story, under the strain of the wagon and the abuses of the farmer and guy with the stick, the horse collapses. Again, neither the farmer or person with the carrots and stick cares, and they just get another horse and start the whole process over again. (P1)

Her metaphor for teaching expressed the heavy work of teachers in a school that serves children from low-income and otherwise distressed families. All the participants expressed similar views of their struggles to coordinate the day's work and deal with the variety of issues that came up in a day. One teacher reflected "As a lower grade teacher, you don't get to sit down. You don't have a minute to yourself, you really don't unless it's lunch time" (P9). Even during their lunch hours, teachers were mostly dealing with such tasks as filling out administrative forms, calling parents, or tutoring students who were behind in math and reading.

*Theme 6. The influence of accountability testing.* When participating teachers were asked in interviews what changes in their current working conditions would improve their well-being, the accountability testing policy was everyone's first choice of something to change. All of the nine teachers agreed that a better testing system should be implemented, one that would show students' growth and remove the excessive pressure on teachers and students to achieve certain scores. State testing was given once a year to grades K and 3-6, which affected teachers as well as students as the results constituted 10% of teacher evaluations.

Teachers' main concern was that high-stakes testing affected both teachers and students emotionally by putting pressure on them. The major source of pressure for teachers was that test scores affected their evaluations, which caused anxiety that affected their professional lives. One teacher said, "Everything is based on test results, and teachers are looked down on if the test results are not good" (P6). Another teacher provided a metaphor of potential execution to communicate the level of threat that teachers associate with testing:

It pretty much feels like you have a noose around your neck all the time. Sort of the sword hanging over your head, because, take for instance in my classroom, we wanted to talk about bats. We want to talk about these things because it gets the kids excited, we want to write about them, we want to do math about them, we want to do all these things but then the state says "Okay, but we want the kids to pass this test" and it's dry as toast. (P1)

Testing puts pressure not only on teachers but also on students, which added to the teachers' level of stress due to their empathy with the students. Seeing students cry or become terrified aroused equally negative emotions in teachers, as the following comment illustrates:

I think there should be testing, but when there's, I think -- when you're giving tests and kids are so horrified by the tests that they're crying and they're upset, and so much pressure is put on kids for those tests, I think that's a problem. I would like to see that changed. (P2)

Another teacher stated, "The amount of testing in school is daunting for both teachers and students" (P3).

The other issue related to testing that the participants raised was that testing caused teachers to change their ways of teaching, resulting in more time spent on preparing children to take tests and less time on engaging them in meaningful learning activities. One teacher stated:

As a teacher, I think that testing, and the high stakes testing, I think has changed everything for teachers. I think that teachers are more preparing students for the test... because everything we do, you know, a big part of what we do, a big part of how we are graded by our principals and things is based on our kids' scores on the tests. (P8)

Another teacher highlighted the same concern:

People change the way that they teach, almost teach to the test because this test is coming and they know in their minds, they don't want to teach like that but at the same time, they know that when those kids get there, they're going to freak out. (P7)

Other teachers agreed that while administering tests to evaluate students' learning was a normal part of instruction, high-stakes testing put undue pressure on both teachers and students and exerted excessive control over the curriculum and how teaching was carried out. Here the data clearly pointed to the need for changes in testing policies to ease pressures that teachers considered destructive and detrimental to their well-being.

*Theme 7. Lack of control and power.* Teachers' sense of inadequate control over their work, often connected with the pressures of high stakes testing, and their lack of power within the school hierarchy were among the issues discussed most often. All participants shared the perception that they had less power and less control over what they were doing in the classroom now than in the past, which reduced the pleasure they took in teaching. One teacher who had begun her career 26 years earlier, expressed her sense of loss of autonomy as follows:

I feel like how I teach now is more boring than what I used to. I hate that. I try to come up with creative ways to address the standards, but I'm given the textbook I'm supposed to use, I'm given the stories I'm supposed to do, I'm given the map so I can only do so much. (P8)

This comment highlighting one teacher's frustration at not being free to use her own creativity to make her instruction more enjoyable for both her and her students was echoed by other participating teachers. The following captures the perspective of a sixth grade teacher:

I've been teaching for 18 years. I think when I first started teaching, we had a lot more freedom to do bigger projects and be creative, things like that. Now they want you to teach in a certain way, and they want you to do things in a certain way to prepare your kids for a test. (P2)

Referring to the same issue, a first grade teacher commented, "I feel like a lot of the creativity with teaching has kind of gone away because it's all about the test scores." (P5)

The teachers' reflections converged on two common wishes: to teach in the ways they enjoyed and to be free to use their own creative approaches in the classroom. They felt they now had less room to be creative

and enact their own ways of teaching, as well as less time to implement their ideas due to the excessive emphasis on testing and prescribed standards.

From their perspectives, a lot of top down decisions were made for teachers to implement. While reflecting on the changes in teaching, one teacher shared:

I think that I have total control over what's in these four walls but I don't think we get to make a lot of decisions. I think a lot of decisions are made for us. (P8)

Another teacher criticized the way politicians made decisions for teachers to carry out:

A lot of people making decisions for schools and education that have no clue what education is about. They have not spent their lives around children.... They don't go to schools; they don't even run in any semblance close to the social classes that we're dealing with in the schools. They're completely out of touch. They're making decisions for us based on just what they want to see. (P1)

It can be inferred from the teachers' reflections that they desired to be treated as other professionals are, that is, entrusted with more autonomy and decision-making power. This level of professionalism would give them more freedom to organize and plan their instruction in accordance with students' needs as well as follow their preferences in how they teach.

## **Discussion and Conclusions**

One line of inquiry discussed in the literature is how aspects of the school atmosphere, including school leadership and interactions among teachers, shape teachers' perceptions of well-being (Kraft & Papay, 2014; Ladd, 2011). As illustrated in the well-being model, Aelterman et. al. (2007) and Soini et al. (2010) posited that support coming from the school principal and colleagues is a critical component of positive school atmosphere and therefore an important dimension of teacher well-being.

In this study, the participating teachers reported feeling satisfied with working in their school and supported by the school principal and colleagues. Their positive interactions with the school administration seemed to increase their sense of community, which made them feel comfortable asking for help or sharing their concerns and problems. These findings support Ladd's (2011) and Kraft and Papay's (2014) findings, which draw attention to the role of leadership in creating a satisfying and comfortable working atmosphere for teachers.

In addition to productive interactions with principal and colleagues, the teacher well-being model includes reasonable workload and strong self-efficacy (Aelterman et al., 2007). In this study, the participating teachers all perceived that they carried a heavy workload and struggled to coordinate the day's work while dealing with the variety of issues that came up in a day. Aside from teaching, their daily tasks included planning lessons, grading, and filling out forms, and they desired the opportunity to spend more time with their colleagues and engage in intellectual discussions. Thus, in keeping with Aelterman et al.'s (2007) suggestion that a manageable workload fosters teachers' well-being, the outcomes of this study indicate that the participants' heavy workload was an impediment to their sense of well-being.

The period of time in which this study was conducted prevented a full evaluation of the participant teachers' sense of efficacy. However, based upon their reflections in interviews and journals, making meaningful changes in children's lives and seeing them grow and flourish, was a powerfully satisfying factor that motivated the participating teachers to remain committed to their careers and school (Bandura, 1997; Seligman, 2012). Their career consistency in one school contributed to their experience of increasing competency and professional growth, leading to a high sense of efficacy.

While to a large extent the findings of this study support much of the literature and are congruent with many aspects of the model of well-being, some important factors affecting well-being emerged that are not represented in the well-being model, namely accountability test pressure and student misbehaviour. Teachers desired a testing policy which did not put pressure on them and their students and would give them more latitude to embrace creative teaching approaches and provide interesting activities rather than unduly focusing on preparing for tests. Predictably, students who behaved well, showed respect to teachers, and were eager to learn and engage in activities boosted participant teachers' well-being. In contrast, students who lacked motivation made them feel that their efforts were futile, lowering their feelings of well-being.

The results of this study show the need for restructuring teaching contexts. The first implication thus is the need for greater empowerment of teachers. When schools are places in which teachers feel valued, respected, empowered and involved in decision-making processes, they are likely to have a better sense of well-being. Another implication is that there is a great need for carefully designed testing policies that evaluate students' learning and show their growth rather than cause pressure and stress.

Although this study touched on issues in relation to teachers' sense of well-being in their working context, its limitations must be acknowledged. There are more factors than are found in this study that may influence teachers' sense of well-being, such as family support, health, and living conditions. The limited scope of this study precluded exploring such factors, and future research may determine additional factors and their relationships with teachers' sense of well-being. This study also indicates a need for researchers to consider the depth and complexity of teachers' lives, including the rewards and challenges of teaching and how they affect teacher well-being. Listening to teachers' stories related to well-being and observing their lives can result in valuable perspectives that will encourage more studies of teacher well-being at different school levels.

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