

Wellbeing Strategies for Women Educators: A Resilience-Centered Framework to Empower Teachers and Students

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Abstract

Even though female educators constitute a significant majority of the educator population worldwide, very little attention has been directed until now to their distinct socio-psychological needs when dealing with stress and burnout, the more so during the COVID-19 outbreak. This study examines the current state of research for gender specific support of women educators suffering from stress. Resilience-centred strategies, both personal and societal, are substantiated as positive correlates to wellbeing and empowerment outcomes. Using these findings, a multi-dimensional, gender-specific intervention is proposed with five overarching aims—emotional intelligence, growth mindset, mindfulness, professional learning communities, and mentoring. NeuroLearningPower, an evidence-based framework is suggested as a means to support female educators to thrive.

Keywords: Female educators, stress, burnout, COVID-19, gender-specific support, emotional intelligence, NeuroLearningPower.

1 MetaMathesis Educational Organisation, Greece

Kadın Eğitimciler İçin İyilik Hali Stratejileri: Öğretmenleri ve Öğrencileri Güçlendirmek İçin Esneklik Merkezli Bir Çerçeve

Özet

Kadın eğitimciler dünya çapında eğitimci nüfusunun önemli bir çoğunluğunu oluştursa da, COVID-19 salgını sırasında daha da belirgin olmak üzere, stres ve tükenmişlikle başa çıkarken farklı sosyo-psikolojik ihtiyaçlarına şimdiye kadar çok az ilgi gösterilmiştir. Bu çalışma, stresten etkilenen kadın eğitimcilerin cinsiyete özel olarak desteklenmesine yönelik araştırmaların mevcut durumunu incelemektedir. Hem kişisel hem de toplumsal dayanıklılık merkezli stratejilerin, refah ve güçlendirme sonuçlarıyla pozitif ilişkili olduğu kanıtlanmıştır. Bu bulgulardan hareketle, duygusal zeka, büyüme zihniyeti, farkındalık, profesyonel öğrenme toplulukları ve mentorluk olmak üzere beş kapsayıcı amacı olan çok boyutlu, cinsiyete özgü bir müdahale önerilmektedir. Kanıta dayalı bir çerçeve olan NeuroLearningPower, kadın eğitimcilerin gelişmesini desteklemek için bir araç olarak sunulmaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Kadın eğitimciler, stres, tükenmişlik, COVID-19, cinsiyete özgü destek, duygusal zeka, NeuroLearningPower.

Introduction

Sophia loved her teacher and the English language learning process from the moment she set foot in the classroom. She decided then and there to become an English teacher herself. Her dream was to help young students love the culture she had also adored. Teachers are dreamers, often driven by their passion for learning and a desire to make a positive impact on their students' lives. TESOL teachers, in particular, are motivated by a deep and passionate urge to connect their students to the world. However, new teachers may face difficulties in realizing their aspirations due to increased workloads, challenging relationships, and lack of support, which can contribute to stress and burnout (Raiskaya & Tikhonova, 2019). This is a reality for which they are often unprepared, and bashes their dreams, as was the case with Sophia. The recent COVID-19 pandemic has added to the burden, leading to a worldwide phenomenon of quiet

quitting or outright turnover among educators, both novice and experienced (Sorensen and Ladd, 2020, Alliance for Excellent Education, 2014).

This article provides a review of teacher well-being based on current findings from positive psychology and cognitive neuroscience, highlighting its importance for student outcomes and educational success. Additionally, the unique support needs of women educators are addressed, and the role of peer communities and mentoring in empowering and supporting ESOL teachers is examined. Finally, the article introduces NeuroLearningPower®, an innovative framework, and a cognitive-behavioural intervention designed to empower women educators and support their students' thriving.

Women educators, a vulnerable majority

Looking around in any TESOL Conference one can only confirm empirically what studies state clearly; women form the majority of the educator population. According to a recent longitudinal study, the trend of female predominance in ESL is rising with women covering 68.6% of teaching ESL positions in the USA alone and still earning less than their male counterparts (Zippia, 2022). This follows the general trend with women forming 60% of the educational population worldwide, 72% in EU countries, and 76% in the US (Le Nestour & Moscovitz, 2020; (European Commission, 2019; NCES, 2021). Such percentages speak for themselves when addressing the void in gender-specific interventions for this specific population, whose mental health and occupational stress have been found to be more challenging in comparison to their male counterparts (Antoniou et al., 2013; Dagar & Mathur, 2016).

Although stressors may be the same for both sexes, women experience more perceived stress (Battams et al., 2014). The educational context is not an exception, as women educators tend to experience more stress in their effort to manage their multiple roles both at home and in the workplace (Johnson et al., 2021). Antoniou et al. (2006), reporting on gender differences in teacher occupational stress, state that female educators “presented higher levels of emotional exhaustion compared to their male counterparts, which probably suggests that either they have not acquired or cannot utilize the suitable psychological-coping resources geared to the demands of the profession” (p. 688).

Female educators in all directions and levels of education consistently report higher stress than men (Antoniou et al., 2006; Donovan, 2018; Johnson et al., 2021; Kemeny et al., 2012; Raitskaya & Tikhonova, 2019). As a result, in the U.K. only, around 6,000 women teachers aged 30-39 (27% of all leavers in total) leave the profession yearly—the largest group of leavers other than retirees (Simons, 2016).

Extensive literature exists on reasons leading to women educators' distinct need for support due to their increased susceptibility to stress and burnout. These aggravating factors can be personal, societal, and organizational and may involve indicatively self-efficacy issues more common to women than men (Smetackova, 2017), schemata, i.e., psychological constructs of the self, deriving from social constructs with women still expected to emphasize the home-maker role (Eddleston et al., 2006).

Acquiring well-being strategies presents even more extended implications for women educators who aspire to leadership roles, as they need greater support than their male counterparts. Dickey et al. found in their comprehensive longitudinal study on TESOL organisations worldwide that women's presidentship - although improved recently - still needs to be representative of the women-educator membership ratio (Dickey, 2016). This poses the question of promoting equity and inclusion in educational leadership, as women educators report being more prone to stress than their male counterparts due to career development issues (Archibong et al., 2010). Fostering gender equity in education leadership means supporting women educators and their gender-specific needs by training them in active coping measures and psycho-prophylactic strategies, partly through peer support and mentoring.

Educator well-being as an essential factor of student outcomes

The impact of positive emotions and well-being on educational environments has been gaining attention in recent years, as evidence for the effectiveness of positive psychology interventions in educational settings continues to grow. Despite a historical emphasis on academic achievement in educational frameworks worldwide, there is an increasing recognition of the importance of social-emotional skills and wellness in educational settings. This shift is supported by recent advances in educational neuroscience (Seligman, 2012).

The construct of well-being, which is a dynamic concept from positive psychology, encompasses both personal and professional life. According to Acton and Glasgow (2015), teacher well-being can be defined as "an individual sense of personal professional fulfilment, satisfaction, purposefulness, and happiness, constructed in a collaborative process with colleagues and students" (p. 101). In the field of educational psychology, including language learning, there has been a growing emphasis on learner well-being, but often at the expense of acknowledging the critical role that educator well-being plays in achieving positive outcomes (Sulis et al., 2021).

However, there is mounting evidence to support the notion that teacher well-being is a crucial variable for both teacher success and student outcomes. For instance, stressed educators are more likely to adopt suboptimal instructional practices, such as teaching to the test, rather than the general curriculum (Putwain & Symes, 2010), which in turn can negatively impact students' academic achievement (Klusmann et al., 2016). Thus, it is imperative to prioritize teacher well-being as a means of optimizing student outcomes.

Mental health issues, a dual-faced challenge

A literature review can easily reveal a significant increase in mental health challenges among both educators and students, which requires urgent attention. Teaching is widely recognized as a highly stressful profession, with 73% of educators reporting frequent work-related stress even prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, which has further exacerbated the issue (American Federation of Teachers, 2015; Gallup, 2019; Mercer, 2020). This percentage is notably higher than that reported by the general population, which stands at approximately 30%. Recent research conducted during the pandemic suggests that six out of ten teachers in the US experienced heightened anxiety and declining well-being compared to the previous year, with those who experienced the most significant decline calling for greater support for their well-being (Dempsey & Burke, 2021).

Prolonged stress often leads to compassion fatigue, a term used to describe exhaustion experienced by individuals who are continuously required to assist others (DuBois & Mistretta, 2019). Teachers are considered a high-risk group for this type of burnout resulting from long-term stress, as they are among the helping professionals (Raitskaya & Tikhonova, 2019). In the context of TESOL, novice teachers report feelings of loneliness and stress, with deficient language skills, lack of pedagogy, and low self-efficacy additionally contributing as risk factors for burnout, even for experienced educators (Li, 2021).

Simultaneously, the world is facing an unprecedented mental health crisis among young people, with mental health issues in children and teenagers on the rise globally (Twenge et al., 2019; Wilson & Dumornay, 2022). According to the World Health Organization (WHO), one in seven young people between the ages of 10 and 19 experiences some form of mental health disorder, which impacts their educational readiness but frequently goes unrecognized and unaddressed (WHO, 2021).

Connections as a mutual empowerment factor

The traditional view that learning is a solitary activity has been challenged by recent advances in cognitive neuroscience. It has been found that teacher-student relationships are critical to the well-being of both teachers and students and play a key role in determining student outcomes, particularly in challenging circumstances such as those brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic (Frenzel et al., 2021). Social relationships and connections are also crucial components of multidimensional well-being models over time. Lhospital and Gregory (2009) conducted a study involving 33 teachers who were part of a prereferral intervention team, and found that student-teacher stress decreased steadily over time, with an effect size of $d = 0.66$ between the first and third time points. Participation in a supportive team was identified as a contributing factor to this reduction in stress.

However, long-term stress and burnout have been shown to be associated with health problems, depersonalization, and attrition. Teacher exhaustion can have a negative impact on teacher-student relationships, which in turn can affect the relational aspect of student well-being. This is defined as a “sustainable state, characterized by predominantly positive feelings and attitudes, positive relationships at school, resilience, self-optimization, and a high level of satisfaction with learning experiences” (Noble et al., 2008, p.30). Additionally, teachers’ difficulty in engaging with students and forming relationships has been found to mediate the effect of peer acceptance on students (Hughes & Kwok, 2006). Finally, emotional contagion between teachers and students can lead to the transfer of stress and other negative emotions, inadvertently affecting students’ emotions and outcomes (Frenzel et al., 2021; Harding et al., 2019).

Considering these findings, it is essential to recognize the significance of teacher-student connections and to prioritize the well-being of educators parallelly and with similar care as that of learners. This is particularly important in the context after the COVID-19 pandemic, when educators and students are still facing numerous challenges and stressors. By fostering supportive relationships between teachers and students, and creating a positive and nurturing learning environment, it is possible to promote student well-being and academic success.

Peer support communities contribute to resilience

In literature, resilience has been identified as a critical factor in promoting teacher well-being and success (Beltman, 2020; Mansfield et al., 2018). Resilience has been linked to various predictive factors, including having a sense of purpose and meaning in life, realistic optimism, and goal creation, among oth-

ers, which have been associated with teacher coping and success. However, it is important to note that teacher resilience extends beyond the ability to recover from adverse experiences. Instead, it involves the capacity to maintain a sense of commitment and agency in the face of daily work conditions (Gu & Day, 2013).

Interestingly, Gu (2014) argues that teacher resilience is not merely a personal resource, but rather a collective issue. This perspective is supported by the social brain hypothesis (Dunbar, 1998), which suggests that humans have a biological predisposition to form social connections. From a psychological viewpoint, the quality of relationships at school plays a critical role in promoting teacher well-being, effectiveness, and positive identity. The concept of relational resilience (Miller, 1986; Jordan, 2004) is based on the idea that all psychological growth occurs within relationships. Peer and social support networks have been found to be central to both the learning communities and the development of resilience, especially among novice teachers and women educators (Raitskaya & Tikhonova, 2019). Sharing daily challenges with peers can help relieve stress and maintain morale (Howard & Johnson, 2004), and such relationships are essential for both personal and collective resilience. In Gu's (2014) longitudinal study, 91% of teachers who remained resilient and committed reported the positive influence of collegial and collaborative support on their morale and teaching capacity.

Furthermore, the changing educational landscape, where teachers act as coaches and learning facilitators, requires a new outlook on pedagogy and learning processes. Professional learning communities (PLCs) provide a supportive environment for teachers to share new practices and develop their social schemata (Cottam et al., 2015). In case-study methodology research, teachers emphasized the importance of building trust in groups, collaborating, and establishing shared norms and identity with others in the team (Owen, 2016). Reflection on positive psychology outlooks enables teachers to take on leadership roles, inquire, risk, and explore, resulting in enhanced effectiveness, purpose, and well-being. Women educators are more likely to benefit from the power of these communities due to their stronger communal orientation (Jordan, 2004). Sharing ideas and practices in PLC networks positively affects both teacher problem-solving, social skills, independence, and creativity and student academic outcomes (Owen, 2016).

The case for mentoring

Empowerment plays a crucial role in the resilience process, and mentoring is an essential factor in this regard. Positive mentoring relationships have a significant impact on the satisfaction, identity, and self-efficacy of teachers (Le

Cornu, 2013), providing them with supportive and challenging scaffolding for the process of learning to teach, as well as for supporting experienced teachers to persevere and develop (Nguyen, 2013). While educators may not consider vulnerability and trust to be signs of resilience (Gilmore et al., 2018), female educators, who are more prone to perceived stress (Antonioni et al., 2006), require this support. Like oxygen masks first put on by adults in flight emergencies, teachers need to learn to empower themselves systematically, so as to be in a position to support their students adequately.

Mentoring is also a crucial component of professional development and advancement, providing important social support. Research indicates that being mentored can help women attain higher positions in educational leadership, develop the necessary personal resources, and overcome contextual barriers (Ballenger, 2010; Cullen and Luna, 1993). In fact, having multiple mentors can be beneficial, as it caters to various needs (Hansman, 1998).

The NeuroLearningPower® framework

The NeuroLearningPower® framework is an intervention tailored to the needs of women educators with the purpose of promoting psycho-social strategies aimed at reducing stress and burnout symptoms, while enhancing resilience and social-emotional well-being both for teachers and their students. By systematically and systemically integrating teacher communities focused on female teachers' well-being NeuroLearningPower® aims to enrich and deepen the knowledge of teacher flourishing at both personal and professional levels, with a specific emphasis on improving the quality of education through the quality of connections (García-Álvarez, 2020; VanderWeele, 2017).

Through the integration of the most current literature findings, the NeuroLearningPower® framework endeavours to foster the concept of flourishing while also promoting coping and resilience strategies for women educators via a multivariate process that longitudinally and dynamically contributes to well-being. Innovative features of this framework include the utilization of structured supportive communities as well as delivery via a mobile application.

Intervention design

The current study presents an eight-week intervention aimed at enhancing the well-being of women educators through the development of a resilience mindset, daily habit consolidation, and strengthening of social connections. The intervention is designed to combine neuroeducation with cognitive-behavioural and mindfulness training, delivered through online meetings and a mobile application. The design includes:

The cognitive training component of the intervention involves the delivery of an hourly video in the mobile application every week, which addresses the scientific background of the framework and assists participants in developing emotional intelligence and a growth mindset.

The daily contemplative practice section assigns succinct activities through the mobile application, which aims to increase resilience and mindfulness. The mobile application is gamified to encourage adherence to the self-care program, enabling participants to monitor their progress over time.

The social support teams organized through the mobile application, enable participants to interact daily to provide mutual support in consolidating their new mindset and self-care practices.

Structured mentoring with an expert mentor provides emotional and practical facilitation weekly towards the sustenance of the participants' new mindset and an increase in skills and resilience.

The use of a mobile application enables the gamification of the process, allowing for extra points to be allocated for timely task execution, thereby supporting participants in achieving their goals in a more enjoyable manner. Indicative daily goals in the application include learning to unwind through breathing, stopping the inner critic, using empathy towards oneself, growing through failure, and finding the gift in every situation. This approach trains participants to take frequent breaks from their busy schedules and gradually develop the habit of self-care under any circumstances, increasing their sense of self-efficacy.

Conclusion

There is a vast body of literature demonstrating the adverse effects of stress and burnout among teachers (Friedman, 2019; Maslach, Schaufeli, & Leiter, 2001). Therefore, it is justifiable to propose that mental health interventions in schools should prioritize the emotional and mental well-being of teachers to promote student well-being.

Women are more vulnerable to stress, and women educators are no exception. Seeding the seeds of resilience for women educators is not only dictated by a moral responsibility to two-thirds of the educator population. It will also lead to a thriving educational ecosystem with teachers and students contributing to global flourishing.

To truly support educators and the broader school community, it is imperative to focus on the factors that foster teacher well-being and address their unique

needs. By doing so, teachers will be empowered to remain committed, motivated, and enthusiastic while effectively managing the daily challenges of their roles. To achieve this, interventions for the majority of educators, women, should incorporate a combination of structured measures such as emotional support through peer communities and mentoring programs that can have a systemic impact on the educational environment.

One such framework is NeuroLearningPower®, which aims to promote flourishing and well-being at all levels of education, rather than success at all costs. By prioritizing the well-being of women educators, interventions such as NeuroLearningPower® can catalyse a paradigm shift in education, creating a more positive and sustainable educational ecosystem.

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