

# *An Overview of Theoretical Perspectives of Researches on Teacher Well-being*

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**Abstract:** By reviewing the literature on teacher well-being, there remain several problems unresolved in the theoretical dimension. For one thing, the term teacher well-being cannot be defined explicitly. For another, some existing studies did not construct the definition of teacher well-being concerning the researches themselves. On the basis of empirical and non-empirical studies, this paper elucidates the definition of teacher well-being first and then reviews teacher well-being from three theoretical perspectives, which may help researchers understand this term deeply and comprehensively, thus establishing a solid theoretical foundation for future studies.

## 1. Introduction

Well-being can be conceptualized as multidimensional and includes a consideration of positive affect as well as a life lived with a sense of meaning<sup>[1]</sup>. It is likely to reflect an integration of both “feeling good” and “living well”<sup>[1]</sup>. Although scholars understand and define this concept in slightly different ways, the general sense of the term includes subjective well-being (SWB) and psychological well-being (PWB)<sup>[2][3]</sup>. Teacher well-being not only affects their own performance and the quality of education and teaching, but also has a bearing on students’ learning, growth and well-being. However, teachers are currently facing greater physical and psychological pressures and challenges, leading to teacher burnout and even leaving the profession, which is not conducive to the development of teachers and the cultivation of quality education.

In recent years, relevant studies have shown that there are still some theoretical problems in the study of teacher well-being. First, the term of teacher well-being is not defined clearly, which is easy to confuse with similar concepts such as happiness. Second, the definition lacks to be combined with the practice, and it is not based on its own research to explain what teacher well-being is. In addition, the theoretical perspective of teacher well-being research in China is relatively weak. In view of this, this paper will first clarify what teacher well-being is, and then explain how the definition and research of teacher well-being differ in different theoretical perspectives, so as to lay a theoretical foundation for exploring teacher well-being.

## 2. Theoretical Perspectives of Researches on Teacher Wellbeing

### 2.1. Positive Psychology

Positive Psychology focuses on studying positive human qualities, habits and mental models [4]. In recent years, with the development and maturity of the education related discipline, the theory has been gradually applied to second language acquisition as well as foreign language teaching and learning [5]. The PERMA model, proposed by Seligman [6], represents the core elements of psychological wellbeing and flourishing. PERMA stands for: positive emotions, engagement, relationships, meaning, and accomplishment. The model has already been the basis of some work within language teaching [7]. The model combines both hedonic and eudemonic perspectives, suggesting that well-being denotes both “feeling good” and “living well”[1]. Teacher well-being is multidimensional, and it is important to consider teachers’ positive emotions while also paying attention to their meaningful lives.

Based on positive psychology, the studies can be broadly categorized into three types: the first type investigated the current state of teacher well-being. In order to enhance teacher well-being, schools do take measures, but results showed that this rather increased the burden of teachers in terms of time and workload, so how to apply the relevant theories of positive psychology in practice, and effectively promote teacher well-being is an urgent problem to be solved. The second category clarifies the relationship between teacher well-being and some certain concepts, such as self-efficacy, resilience. The third category of research examines the role and ways in which positive psychology interventions contribute to teacher well-being, one of the most commonly used interventions is the PERMA model, which has been used by researchers as a basis for designing interventions aimed at improving teacher well-being and consciously used in real-world settings, with the results showing that teachers’ instructional practices, collegiality, and emotions are all enhanced, further enhancing teacher well-being.

However, while positive psychology theory is not perfect, little empirical research has been conducted to address issues such as the overemphasis on “positive” experiences [8] and the polarization of the positive-negative dichotomy [9]. The PERMA model from positive psychology perspective focuses largely on the subjective personal psychological sense of well-being, while ignoring the influence of systemic or contextual factors as determinants of teacher well-being. Well-being is subjective and individual, as well as objective and social [1], so the ecological system theory combines the subjective feelings of teachers and the objective environment in which they live, in order to have a more comprehensive understanding of teacher well-being.

### 2.2. Ecological System theory

The ecological perspective views individual development as the result of complex interactions between human beings and their contextual conditions [1]. It sees an individual as having the agency to actively and consciously relate to their sociopolitical, institutional, cultural, personal, and interactional ecologies [1]. From this perspective, well-being is defined as the dynamic sense of meaning and life satisfaction emerging from a person’s subjective personal relationships with the affordances within their social ecologies [1].

Bronfenbrenner’s [10] ecological system theory comprises five socially organized subsystems: microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem, chronosystem. For teachers, microsystem refers to the relationships between different people, such as teachers and parents, teachers and students. Mesosystem are the interrelations between different contexts in which teachers are involved, such as school and home. A teacher’s union or association might be regarded as exosystem. Macrosystem represents the broader social, cultural, and political settings.

Chronosystem might be teacher career span. Teachers are not passive recipients of environmental change; they can utilize their subjective initiative to adapt to the environment and guide their own development.

Teacher well-being is a unified and dynamic ecology, which is composed of teachers' internal feelings, such as professional identity, and the external conditions, such as salary. These two parts interact and influence each other, and their dynamic developments are directly related to the increase and decrease of teacher well-being. Therefore, researchers have turned their attention to teachers in different environments, who come from different levels of schools (e.g., private schools), or with various teaching ages (e.g., in-service and pre-service teachers), or teaching in different countries (e.g., Chinese teachers teaching in the UK), and have elaborated on their views about the careers, work environments and their future development, which are not without the positive aspects, but the problem exposed is that the cultivation and enhancement of well-being is not enough for teachers to play initiative alone, which requires the joint efforts of organizations, society, policies, and systems inside and outside the school. However, the reality is that we lack effective policies which can support teachers appropriately and timely. Moreover, in the ecological perspective, teachers' activities are not confined to the school only, so what policy measures can be taken to guarantee teacher well-being in different settings needs to be further discussed by scholars and policymakers <sup>[11]</sup>. Some other studies started from Bronfenbrenner's ecological system framework to analyze the factors within each subsystem that may affect teacher well-being <sup>[12]</sup>. Results showed that teacher well-being is affected by the complex dynamics of multilayered contextual factors, and that teachers' initiative and their own positive mindset also play an important role in the research process.

### 2.3. Job Demands-Resources Theory

Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) theory <sup>[13]</sup> proposes that employee outcomes can be understood by examining two organizational aspects of work: job demands and job resources <sup>[14]</sup>. Job demands are the physical, psychological, social, or organizational aspects of the job that require physical and psychological efforts <sup>[14]</sup>, such as burnout. Conversely, job resources are the physical, psychological, social, or organizational aspects of the job that are conducive to achieving work goals, reduce job demands and the related physiological and psychological costs, and stimulate personal growth and development <sup>[13]</sup>, such as engagement.

Since the JD-R theory combines individual and organizational aspects, a number of educational researchers have adopted the theory to explore the nature of teachers, the factors that cause the depletion and maintenance of teacher well-being and their developmental processes. Collie et al. <sup>[15]</sup> defined teacher well-being as a positive assessment of the environment in which teachers work while teachers are able to function virtuously in it, thus, teacher well-being covers many different assessment factors such as job satisfaction and organizational support. One of the strengths of the JD-R theory is its ability to link a number of key environmental and personal factors to the relevant outcomes that arise from the work process <sup>[16]</sup>, which allows researchers to quickly identify certain salient demand and resource factors and further explore how these factors influence teacher well-being. Based on this, various studies have been carried out, even though the factors explored in each study are different, all of them explored the relationship between teacher well-being and other factors. Results also reflected the JD-R theory, that is, job demands reduce teacher well-being, leading to burnout or even more serious physical and psychological problems, while job resources are the opposite, which improves teacher well-being and engagement, thus reducing their willingness to leave. Some other researchers extended the JD-R theory on the basis of the above studies, and used it to discuss what role personal resources play in teacher well-being, such as

self-efficacy and adaptability. The above two types of studies aim to clarify the effects of job demands and job resources on teacher well-being. However, there are interactions between the two factors<sup>[13]</sup>, that is, job resources can buffer the negative effects of job demands on teacher well-being, which attracts researchers to discover the ways and extent of buffering or boosting. The results found that not only were job demands and job resources directly related to teacher well-being, but that job resources protected teachers from the negative effects of job demands and further enhanced their positive experiences at work<sup>[17]</sup>.

### 3. Analysis and Reflection

This study reviews the theoretical perspectives commonly used in teacher well-being research, including the positive psychology perspective, the ecological perspective, and the job demands-resources perspective. Overall, the PERMA model under the positive psychology perspective has been widely used in research on factors influencing teacher well-being as well as interventions, but the theory fails to integrate the individual with the environment. The ecological perspective remedies this, seeking to promote teachers' individual development from the process of their complex interactions with schools and society. In addition, research on teacher well-being from positive psychology focuses on internal factors on teacher well-being; ecological perspective explores external factors, including both social and school levels. Both of these perspectives start from a single variable, while job demands-resources theory sheds light on multivariate interaction factors in teacher well-being research.

In conclusion, this paper can give researchers some insights in the following aspects. First, future research on teacher well-being can combine more with ecological perspective and job demands-resources theory, and expand the research on influencing factors, such as school and society, so as to explore effective paths to enhance teacher well-being. Second, teacher well-being should be recognized and explored from multiple disciplines, because the study of teacher well-being involves multidisciplinary theories such as psychology and sociology. Multi-dimensional analysis can provide researchers with a more comprehensive understanding and build a deep theoretical foundation. Third, strengthen theoretical research while combining practice. We need to clearly define the concept based on the research, and then targeted to guide the research practice.

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