

Happiness in the classroom: Strategies for teacher retention and development

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Abstract This Viewpoint proposes a new perspective on why so many teachers leave the profession after only a very short time. While existing studies have largely focused on employment and working conditions, this essay argues that happiness is key to keeping new teachers in the workplace. Juxtaposing two fields that have heretofore been oblivious of one another (positive psychology; and teacher retention and development), it offers a pragmatic look at 10 strategies that might help to keep beginning teachers in the classroom.

Keywords Professional integration · Beginning teachers · Abandonment · Happiness · Well-being · Teacher retention and development

In recent years, an increasing number of studies have undertaken to identify the reasons why some new teachers who are just entering the profession lose interest in classroom work and why others choose to remain (De Stercke, Temperman, and De Lièvre 2014; Goyette 2014; Karsenti, Collin, and Dumouchel 2013; Mukamurera 2014; Rots, Aalterman, Devos, and Vlerick 2010; Théorêt and Leroux 2014). While existing studies have largely focused on employment and working conditions, we are occasionally glimpsing

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other aspects. Specifically, studies that focus on the participants' subjectivity and personality, particularly in relation to the question of happiness, are emerging.

Happiness—more commonly referred to as “well-being” in the field of positive psychology (Martin-Krumm and Tarquinio 2011)—is key to keeping new teachers in the workplace for the simple reason that its pursuit informs everyone's existence, universally. As Matthieu Ricard (2004) so aptly stated: “No one wakes up in the morning thinking ‘May I suffer the whole day’”. The universality of this quest for well-being contrasts markedly with the diversity to be found in its definition. Nevertheless, irrespective of the approaches taken in studying this topic (Waterman, Schwartz, and Conti 2008), well-being remains less dependent on objective circumstances than on individual perceptions (Diener, Lucas, and Oishi 2002). (For an overview of well-being, as it relates to the question of continuing to teach, see De Stercke [forthcoming].) With that in mind, it is clear that the reasons why new teachers leave the profession cannot be understood unless we are able to appreciate an individual's point of view, using methodologies that go beyond the manipulation of sociodemographic variables. In addition, it is useful to couple the analysis of abandonment factors with perseverance/resilience factors, in order to gain a greater understanding of this complex phenomenon. Looking at positive elements of the process of integration into the profession may make a more pragmatic overview of the problem possible, thereby leading from a “diagnosis” to a potential “treatment”.

From that starting point, we offer 10 approaches to promoting well-being that can keep beginning teachers active in the profession through action, research, and educational policy. These paths, which represent the sum of two doctoral theses (De Stercke 2014; Goyette 2014), can be divided into three themes: educational advising/orientation, mindfulness, and emotional intelligence. Anyone who is familiar with these notions will likely consider the following suggestions obvious; however, given that they have not, as yet, been broached in concert in the field of new-teacher integration, we felt it was essential to establish such a link. We hope that this (nonexhaustive) list will inspire education professionals who must work hand-in-hand to ensure that every new teacher find a more satisfying and rewarding work environment, in everyone's interest.

Theme 1: Educational advising/orientation

More effective advising of students prior to and immediately upon entering teacher education is essential in reducing the rate at which new teachers abandon the profession. It is safe to assume that teachers who have chosen the profession consciously and deliberately find it more satisfying than those who turn to teaching for lack of more attractive alternatives, or out of necessity. Several recent studies (Bastin 2015; Watt and Richardson 2008) support this assumption. One way to work toward improved orientation is the *guidance-oriented approach*—that is,

a concerted action between the school team and its partners in which objectives are set and services (individual and collective), tools and pedagogical activities, implemented to guide students in their identity development and career planning. These activities and services are integrated into the school's success plan and its educational project; they are not simply a series of isolated actions in which the school team is not closely involved. (MELS 2002, p. 18)

The three approaches proposed below refer to research projects involving educational advising/orientation as a potential means of keeping beginning teachers in the profession.

1. Determine whether the guidance-oriented approach might lead to a more positive perception of teaching as a profession among potential candidates who have just left secondary school, and whether those who ultimately choose teaching have that perception as well as more intrinsic and altruistic motivations.
2. Analyze the influence of guidance counselors (in educational systems where such counseling exists) on secondary students' decisions about a career in teaching.
3. Explore the question of whether *strength of character* theories (Peterson and Seligman 2004; Seligman 2002) might be used as a framework for orientation programs, and whether such framework might ultimately prompt a greater number of students to consider teaching as a viable career choice.

Theme 2: Mindfulness

Anchored in the philosophical tradition of Buddhism, and more specifically in *calm abiding meditation*, Mindfulness is a modern lay practice whose name is synonymous with “attention”. (This kind of meditation, also known as *Shamatha* [Sanskrit] or *Shiné* [Tibetan], consists in calming the mind and remaining in this state [Bokar Rinpoche 2008]. In the context of mindfulness, it is often associated with loving-kindness meditation and the practice of compassion, which are at the root of mahāyana Buddhism.) In the words of Jon Kabat-Zinn, founder of the first mindfulness program at the University of Massachusetts, “Mindfulness means paying attention in a particular way; on purpose, in the present moment, and non-judgmentally” (1994, p. 4). Though mindfulness has achieved recognition in North America, it remains little known in Europe, despite the fact that studies have indicated its positive effects on psychological health and mental agitation, as well as on educational problems such as group management and feelings of self-efficacy (Albrecht, Albrecht, and Cohen 2012; Davis and Hayes 2011; Hutcherson, Seppala, and Gross 2014; Jazaieri et al. 2015; Keng, Smoski, and Robins 2011; Klimecki, Leiberg, Claus, and Singer 2013; Kuyken et al. 2013; Rempel 2012; Sin and Lyubomirsky 2009).

We base the following approaches on using mindfulness, in empirical research, to cultivate well-being and to facilitate the professional integration of new teachers. The last approach goes one step further in that it proposes formal changes to educational policy.

4. Drawing on the experiences already documented in existing projects, set up trial partnerships between educational establishments and mindfulness instructors—certified in Open Mindfulness Fundamental Training (OMFT) or in Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR)—to promote the practice of mindfulness among educators, school directors, and parents.
5. Evaluate the effect that the practice of mindfulness has on student-teachers' capacity to deal with conflicting emotions and to maintain a positive mindset throughout their student-teaching internships and the early days of their careers until they become fully integrated, as described by Meikljohn et al. (2012).
6. Analyze the effects of building a mindfulness training program into a new-teacher induction program as support, either separately or in combination with other more standard measures such as mentoring and co-development groups.

7. Integrate the practice of mindfulness into the curriculum gradually as part of a global approach to well-being in the workplace, beginning with teachers and then extending it to all of the staff.

Theme 3: Emotional intelligence

Given that it means more than “simply” paying attention to the present moment to (re)gain a greater understanding of both self and others, mindfulness calls upon what scientists call emotional intelligence (EI). Although it harkens back to ancient philosophical traditions, the concept of emotional intelligence is fairly new. According to Emmerling and Goleman (2003), emotional intelligence “reflects how an individual’s potential for mastering the skills of Self-Awareness, Self-Management, Social Awareness, and Relationship Management translates into success in the workplace” (p. 16). Mayer and Salovey (1997) define it as “the ability to perceive emotions, to access and generate emotions so as to assist thought, to understand emotions and emotional knowledge, and to reflectively regulate emotions so as to promote emotional and intellectual growth” (p. 5).

Thus, emotional intelligence has two facets: a personal one, which relates to an individual’s internal processes (or intrapersonal intelligence) and a social one, which refers to elements found outside of oneself in one’s environment (interpersonal intelligence) (Goleman 1998). Work on emotional intelligence is based on the premise that by becoming consciously aware of one’s own emotions through experiencing them, it is possible to gain perspective on oneself. In current teacher-training, which encourages the practice of reflexive thinking (Schön 1994), the teacher’s capacity to reflect on his/her actions strengthens his/her perseverance in the profession despite difficulties (Goyette 2014).

The three final approaches we offer focus on educational policy initiatives and decisions that encourage the development of emotional intelligence among those working in the field. The impact of their implementation on the well-being of new teachers, though indirect, would nevertheless be beneficial.

8. Create and share effective tools for familiarizing teachers with emotional intelligence, systemic thinking, and ethical consciousness (Goleman and Senge 2014), in light of the fact that well-being is interdependent (Hitokoto and Uchida 2014). (This reality of interdependence is the core of universal ethics, illustrated by the Golden Rule, “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you” (Denys Rinpoche 2002.) The RULER Project, running at the Yale Center for Emotional Intelligence, is one example.
9. See that school directors are better trained to lead using emotional intelligence, then study the impact of that skill on the professional well-being of new teachers, in the knowledge that emotionally intelligent managers constitute an asset to any organization (Gardner and Stough 2002; Rosete and Ciarrochi 2005; Wong and Law 2002; cited by Mikolajczak, Balon, Ruosi, and Kotsou 2012).
10. Integrate emotional intelligence into curricula as one of the cross-curricular competencies at all levels of teaching, based on a solid theoretical model (Hansenne, Nélis, Feyer, Salmon, and Majerus 2014) and with the aim of producing citizens who are more open and more socially responsible.

Conclusions

There is no doubt that we could, by embracing even one of these proposed approaches, move in the right direction, in terms both of keeping new teachers in the classroom and of promoting well-being in teaching and in society, in general. In some countries, the movement is already in place and must be extended. In others, it has yet to be tried. Whatever the configuration, concern for others, which is an innate characteristic of human beings, must be placed at the top of the list of priorities of twenty-first-century schools. With “courage”—i.e., “enthusiasm for good”, as defined by the eighth-century Indian poet Shantideva in his *Bodhicaryāvatāra*—let us take good care of our teachers. We will also be taking good care of our future.

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