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What About Me? The Importance of Teacher Social and Emotional Learning and Well-Being in the Classroom

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Abstract

Today's teachers experience high levels of stress and fatigue that can negatively affect their well-being. Teacher burnout is not a new educational phenomenon, but it has been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. In this article, we discuss the prevalence of teacher stress and its impact on teacher well-being and student achievement. We call for more attention to the social and emotional learning of special education teachers of students with emotional and behavioral disorders. After addressing myths and misconceptions regarding current expectations for educators, we propose a new framework for establishing individual and systemic interventions to support teacher well-being.

Keywords

emotional and behavioral disorders, teacher wellness, systemic intervention, COVID-19

People typically enter the field of education because of their passion to make a difference in the lives of children (Perryman & Calvert, 2020). Yet far too many teachers experience high levels of stress and job dissatisfaction, prompting them to give up on their goals and quit the profession earlier than planned. In a recent U.S. survey, the National Education Association (NEA, 2022) reported that over half (55%) of current educators are ready to leave the profession. This percentage increased a staggering 18% since educators were polled in August 2021.

Some may believe that teacher burnout is a fairly recent phenomenon and most likely due to the stress of the COVID-19 pandemic. However, teacher burnout has been a concern for more than 30 years. For example, Crane and Iwanicki (1986) reported on the compounding stressors that lead to eventual special education teacher burnout. Teachers reported a lack of communication and support from administrators, contributing to role conflict and ambiguity. Nearly four decades later, these issues are still relevant in schools today. Perryman and Calvert (2020) note that multiple factors continue to contribute to teacher distress and career burnout, including lack of school funding, weak administrative support, and lack of adequate training for required teaching duties. The COVID-19 pandemic has only exacerbated these issues over the past 2 years (NEA, 2022). The NEA (2022) reported that 74% of surveyed teachers had to cover for colleagues due to pandemic-related staff shortages. In addition, 80% of surveyed teachers regularly took on additional responsibilities because of unfilled job openings.

Research has indicated that the level of stress and burnout experienced by teachers results in many adverse outcomes including social and emotional difficulties, lowered job performance, high teacher turnover, and individuals choosing to leave the profession early (Brunsting et al., 2022). This can result in instability that affects the entire school system (Brasfield et al., 2019; Herman et al., 2017). These adverse events affect not only the teachers themselves but also their students. The results of a study conducted by Herman et al. (2017) suggested that classrooms instructed by teachers who report high levels of stress and burnout experience lower quality teaching practices, adverse student outcomes (including lower academic achievement), and increased behavioral problems. Conversely, Herman et al. (2017) stated that teachers characterized with high coping and low burnout typically did not experience adverse student.

Furthermore, existing research suggested that special education teachers may be even more likely to experience

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burnout because of their unique job requirements (Brunsting et al., 2022). Similar to general education teachers who experience burnout, the students of these special education teachers also exhibited lower academic achievement. Another complication is that students with Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) are less likely to meet their goals (Brunsting et al., 2022). The special education teachers who may experience the highest level of burnout are teachers who work with students with or at risk of emotional and behavioral disorders (EBD; Nichols & Sosnowsky, 2022; Park & Shin, 2020, as cited in Brunsting et al., 2022, p. 161). This higher level of burnout could be a result of the lack of experience or preparation to work with students with EBD. In this article, discussion about "teachers" refers to special education teachers of students with EBD unless otherwise noted.

Pandemic-related challenges that affect teacher stress and well-being include lack of fully staffed schools, increased workload for remaining staff, loss of institutional and community support, unsupportive political discourse about wearing protective masks, and oscillation between lesson planning and instruction for virtual, in-person, or combined platforms. These difficulties were magnified for teachers of students with EBD. For example, Brunsting and colleagues (2022) reported that special education teachers of students with EBD "may be at higher risk for burnout" (p. 1). The authors identified specific responsibilities of this teaching role which contribute to compassion fatigue and emotional exhaustion, including lack of adequate preparation to handle student behavioral challenges and insufficient support personnel. Students with or at risk of EBD have the right to free and appropriate instruction delivered by a qualified special education teacher. However, Monnin et al. (2021) suggested that students with EBD are rapidly losing access to an appropriate education because of high teacher attrition. Teacher well-being plays a critical role in establishing acceptable levels of school staffing, maintaining teacher attendance, and retaining teachers over time.

The burnout resulting from the challenges that teachers face can have a detrimental effect on teacher well-being. The concept of well-being encompasses teachers' feelings about themselves as well as their attitudes toward their work (Collie et al., 2015). Well-being implies that an individual feels that they are "balanced." While "balance," in this context, may not have an explicit definition, O'Brien and Guiney (2021) suggested that this could refer to psychological, cognitive, and emotional balance. Recent research indicated that teachers report lower well-being than workers in other fields (Doan et al., 2022). To develop systems that achieve comprehensive and meaningful improvements for teachers, researchers and practitioners must consider and address multiple factors of teacher well-being (Gallagher et al., 2018).

Myths and Misconceptions

We believe that several misconceptions must be corrected to build a new framework that helps teachers find more satisfaction and joy in teaching. Below, we address four predominant myths in this research-informed discussion article.

Myth 1: Social and Emotional Learning Is Good for Students But Does Not Apply to Teachers

The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) provides the most widely accepted definition of social and emotional learning (SEL). It comprises the five core competencies of self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making (CASEL, 2022). The benefits of these core competencies are not limited to children, but also form the cornerstones of productive social, emotional, and occupational health at any age or stage of development. These SEL components are part of adult well-being. Unlike the research on SEL for students, studies related to teachers focus on well-being (Katz et al., 2020).

Social and emotional learning for students has been studied for decades with results indicating there are many benefits of SEL on the developing child, including improvements in peer interactions, academic gains, and decreases in both internalizing and externalizing behaviors (Durlak et al., 2011). Given the positive impact of these skills on youth, legislators and school stakeholders have supported the implementation of SEL programs in schools. Research shows that SEL instruction has the greatest impact on student learning when delivered directly by teachers (Durlak et al., 2011). But teachers incur an additional burden when asked to provide SEL instruction as well as academic instruction. To successfully carry out both types of instruction and minimize their own stress, teachers need both personnel and training supports.

Almost half (46%) of the teachers regularly experience high daily stress (Roberts & Kim, 2019). Stress has been a longstanding concern for teachers (Kyriacou, 1998) and has been reported across cultures and countries (Harney, 2008). Stressed teachers are less likely to form productive relationships with students or positively affect student achievement (Brady & Wilson, 2021; Katz et al., 2020).

Myth 2: Teachers Alone Are Responsible for Their Own Well-Being

School leaders sometimes encourage teachers to engage in self-care. They may even offer a few self-care tips or strategies such as exercising or getting more sleep. Although usually well-intentioned, this informal approach to promoting wellness is insufficient. Roberts and Kim (2019) provide a useful summary of the problem:

> If the ultimate goal of education is to promote student success, teacher well-being must be a central consideration. Teachers cannot be expected to try harder, breathe deeper, and "fix" their well-being. Organizations, systems, and policies play a crucial role in supporting teacher well-being and our teachers deserve better. (p. 4)

Due to the seriousness of this issue, a coordinated and comprehensive approach is required to identify promoters and detractors of teacher well-being. O'Brien and Guiney (2021) offer a process to help school officials identify areas of teacher well-being to pursue: (a) conduct action research to understand what well-being means in their school; (b) identify activities that build a compassionate school culture for self and others; (c) openly and critically examine current ways of thinking; (d) agree on a definition of well-being at their school; and (e) facilitate changes to support well-being and monitor the impact of these changes.

Myth 3: Teachers Should Keep School and Home Lives Separate

One part of mattering is for teachers to feel they can be the same person at school as at home. Wilfong and Donlan (2021) suggested that when school and individual aims are aligned, teachers are comfortable being themselves wherever they are. School district officials can facilitate this alignment by clearly communicating their mission "so teachers can determine if they can be their authentic selves within that structure" (Wilfong & Donlan, 2021, p. 53). There are necessary distinctions between the roles an individual fills at home versus at school. The researchers suggested that teachers should not have to change their personalities back and forth. In other words, teachers must determine whether they are a good fit for the school. According to the researchers, while it is necessary for teachers to set boundaries to establish a healthy work–life balance, administrators should allow teachers some flexibility in how teachers conduct themselves in their classrooms and honor their passions, within reason (Brady & Wilson, 2021; Wilfong & Donlan, 2021).

Myth 4: A Heavy Workload for Teachers Should Be Expected

Teachers often decry the heavy workload required of them. In interviewing teachers to define and describe their well-being, O'Brien and Guiney (2021) found that workload itself was not the real problem. Rather, the main detractor was the nature and purpose of the work. When additional work focused directly or indirectly on making teachers better educators so that they could help their students lead better lives, teachers viewed the initiatives as valuable.

Teachers sometimes mentioned the burden of additional school tasks—such as bus duty and faculty meetings—that they perceived to be unrelated to their academic assignments (Brady & Wilson, 2021). Wilfong and Donlan (2021) argued that administrators should help teachers understand why these tasks are important, how they relate to the school's goals, and how they can enhance positive relationships with students.

Existing Models of Well-Being

For more than a century—perhaps back to the time of Aristotle—people have sought to define "the good life"—or, what an individual needs to achieve personal fulfillment. Maslow (1943) introduced a hierarchy of needs, including physiological needs, safety needs, the need to belong and feel loved, and the need for self-esteem. Recent models of needs and fulfillment have refrained from sequenced levels, placing the emphasis on meeting all needs simultaneously.

Seligman's (2011) PERMA model provides a framework of well-being characterized by the following priorities: **P**ositive emotion; **E**ngagement in our strengths; **R**elationships that yield authentic and energizing connections; **M**eaningfully connecting to a purpose larger than oneself; and **A**ccomplishments that reinforce the belief in our own effectivity. The PERMA model has been expanded to incorporate health, which includes nutrition, movement, and sleep (Butler & Kern, 2016). This model has been applied to educational systems as a way to prioritize well-being in schools (Kern et al., 2021).

The COVID-19 pandemic prompted new considerations of health and well-being focused on social determinants, such as income and wealth, employment and access to healing services, housing, the food environment, education, and safety. In their wellness model based on mattering, Wilfong and Donlan (2021) underscored the importance of the following eight foundational elements across interpersonal, intrapersonal, and external domains: community (job-related teamwork eliciting energy and belonging); authenticity (ability to be the same person at work and home); flow (thoroughly enjoying an activity and losing track of time); compensation (fair pay); purpose (belief in fulfilling passion and purpose); assimilation (including needed unpleasant tasks into one's own value system to reach the goal); job crafting (the capacity to make small changes in the work setting to meet individual needs); and stability (knowing the job is secure and unlikely to radically change). To implement this model, the researchers recommended specific actions for educational leaders, teachers, and policy makers. These actions are described in detail in the proceeding sections.

A New Framework for Teacher Well-Being

The COVID-19 pandemic increased teacher stress and exacerbated existing individual and systemic drivers of teacher job dissatisfaction and burnout. Nonetheless, we believe that many teachers during this time found themselves thinking to

Table 1. Wellness Resources for Special Education Teachers of Students With Emotional and Behavioral Disorders.

Area targeted	Resource	Website/more information
Resiliency	The Resilient Educator	https://resilienteducator.com/
Awareness and resiliency	Cultivating Awareness and Resiliency (CARE)	https://www.garrisoninstitute.org/initiatives/programs/cultivating-awareness-and-resilience-in-education/
Overall wellness	Edutopia Teacher Wellness	https://www.edutopia.org/topic/teacher-wellness
Overall wellness	*Educator Wellness: A Guide for Sustaining Physical, Mental, Emotional, and Social Well-Being*	Book by Timothy D. Kanold and Tina H. Boogren (2021)
Mindfulness	Passage Works Institute	https://passageworks.org/ourprograms/mindfulness/
Self-care	Waterford.org	https://www.waterford.org/education/teacher-self-care-activities/
Inspiration	*The Happy Teacher's Handbook: From Overwhelmed to Inspired*	Book by Jen Molitor (2019)
Overcoming burnout	*Overcoming Teacher Burnout in Early Childhood: Strategies for Change*	Book by Ellen M. Drolette (2019)

themselves, "I s*hould* be fine." We challenge that unhelpful thought. Educators are human beings, like everyone else, who have been doing their best to navigate extraordinary circumstances. We assert that few human beings could operate at 100% in such unfamiliar and challenging conditions. However, during the 2+ years of the outbreak, these unrealistic expectations began to be perceived as "normal" (Dabrowski, 2020).

Some educators started to judge themselves for not feeling as well as they did in pre-pandemic days. In reality, all feelings are normal and we believe that sometimes it is okay to not be okay. In fact, we believe that not feeling "fine" is an indication that one has universal human needs that are not being met. The first step toward meeting those needs is acknowledging that they exist. The next step is learning to monitor and recognize when needs are unmet and responding compassionately to that awareness. It is our opinion that the pandemic has taken an especially heavy toll on those who strived to meet pre-pandemic aspirations while experiencing unmet needs (Avery et al., 2023).

According to self-determination theory, when people undergo chronic stress or trauma, three universal psychological needs become more pronounced—the needs for connection (or relatedness), control (or autonomy), and capacity (or competence) (Ryan & Deci, 2000). We believe that this is particularly important for teachers of students with EBD to recognize. The added stressors of this job can often lead to emotional exhaustion, secondary trauma, and burnout (Brady & Wilson, 2021; Brunsting et al., 2022; Hoffman et al., 2007). There are ways that people can address those heightened needs themselves and there are ways that systems can be modified to meet the needs of the whole community simultaneously. To simplify teachers' and the school system's approach to well-being, we propose the "three Cs"—Connection, Control, and Capacity—which are detailed below and highlighted in Table 1.

Connection

Humans are social creatures who have a universal need to connect with others. The desire to connect with and inspire others drives many individuals' passions for teaching (Perryman & Calvert, 2020). Research has shown that the relationship between a teacher and a student is powerful enough to significantly affect the student's emotional outcomes, positively or negatively (Mainhard et al., 2018). Another important factor influencing student emotions is the teacher's own emotions. Becker and colleagues (2014) reported that the manner in which a teacher behaves and portrays emotions in class has a direct effect on students' moods and emotions. Over time, a teacher's and students' unpleasant emotions are likely to affect the satisfaction they experience in their relationship.

Masking, social distancing, and quarantining disrupted many of the avenues by which educators and others typically met their needs for connection that existed prior to the COVID-19 shut down. We believe that at the very time that the stress of the pandemic was ramping up the need for connection, people had fewer opportunities and routines in place to meet that need. What is more, once a person begins to feel isolated or disconnected from this loss of socialization, there is a tendency to further withdraw and engage in distorted thinking about themselves in relation to others (Birditt et al., 2021). Systemic interventions such as coaching, networking, and mentorship can provide planned and predictable opportunities for meaningful connections to help teachers feel validated and less isolated. We believe that this is a shared responsibility, requiring changes in both self-preservation (self-determination) and educational systems.

Self-Preservation strategies for increasing teacher connection. Teachers, especially special education teachers working

with students with EBD, are often and routinely in the position of offering social support to others. While this can be rewarding, teachers also need opportunities to be on the receiving end of social support and in situations where they resonate with others (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009).

We believe that venting, problem solving, and socializing may be helpful with regard to meeting the need for connection. In our opinion, when an interaction results in connection, educators experience a felt sense of being seen, heard, and understood. They will have had an opportunity to express themselves and been acknowledged and accompanied by another. Moreover, we believe that when connection is regularly scheduled and thus anticipated, it often has an added lingering positive impact on well-being. Some educators will prefer individual connections afforded by therapy or "date night," while others may benefit from connection through a sense of belonging in community which can be found with relatives, support groups, or clubs with shared interests or causes (McCormick, 2021). Educators are encouraged to identify a minimum of three to four people or groups who seem to "get it" and plan to interact with them regularly, paying close attention to the relative impact of these connections on their feelings of wellness (Henderson, 2022).

System changes for increasing teacher connection. Among school district and building administrators, one of the most common recommendations for boosting teacher well-being is to increase participation in professional development (Brady & Wilson, 2021). Professional development can be effective, but we believe that often such training focuses solely on districtwide initiatives. It is typically not individualized to meet the needs of specific teachers and it should not be the only way schools address teacher well-being. We believe that an overreliance on easily implemented strategies, such as sending teachers to trainings, probably will not result in meaningful improvement in well-being. According to Roberts and Kim (2019),

> If real change is to happen, the onus cannot be solely on the educators themselves; workplaces, policies, and education systems must also work together to provide specific supports for teachers and change the culture around teaching to help reduce teacher stress, minimize the negative effects of that stress, and improve teacher well-being and student outcomes. (p. 2)

By developing policies and school practices that allow for meaningful professional development activities rather than perpetuate status-quo training objectives, administrators and school support staff can assist with the goal to decrease teacher burnout and improve teacher social-emotional functioning. We believe that what is often lost in larger systems when teachers are required to participate in poorly matched professional development is an unremarkable sense of not being understood, reinforcing notions of not mattering. The concept of "mattering" is useful in the present context. Wilfong and Donlan (2021) defined mattering as "the feeling that our actions are significant, and we would be missed if we were gone. It is the belief that another person cares about what we want, think, and do, and is concerned with our fate" (p. 52). In other words, teachers need to know they matter—to feel they are important to the world and valued for who they are.

Research has shown that a sense of mattering results in less stress and a greater sense of efficacy—the ability to make a difference in the lives of students (Wilfong & Donlan, 2021). To create a sense of mattering in teachers, the workplace must actively create a sense of community. Among other things, this means allowing time for teachers to nurture themselves, connect with others, and develop a sense of belonging. Teacher empowerment training has been shown to enhance self-advocacy (Dail et al., 2018). Professional development can be offered by the school and district or teachers may be compensated for the time and cost of attending outside workshops, webinars, or courses to learn and practice personal empowerment strategies and skills.

Peer coaching is a widely used, easily implemented, cost-effective strategy that can increase feelings of connection among teachers (de Zwart et al., 2009). There is overwhelming evidence supporting peer coaching as a strategy to improve teacher wellness. According to Heider (2005), teachers in peer coaching relationships not only establish stronger relationships with their colleagues but also provide a sense of team membership. Peer coaching also gives individuals perspective on their strengths and weaknesses and also boosts self-efficacy and motivation levels.

Collaboration, or networking, is an informal method to increase feelings of connection among teachers. Providing teachers with opportunities for interactions with each other can benefit all involved. Typically, such relationship-based professional development groups are well-received by teachers (Cunningham et al., 2015). The purpose of networking is to offer teachers opportunities to ask questions, share ideas, and commiserate with others dealing with similar situations (Heider, 2005). Because teachers are not evaluated in these unofficial groups, they can feel free to discuss their challenges and seek advice from others. More formal teacher study groups also can be established as a gathering space for teachers to discuss practical problems, share points of pride, and strengthen professional learning.

Some school districts assign mentors to teachers new to the school (Bressman et al., 2018). This practical and effective strategy can assist a new teacher in forming a connection with a veteran staff member. The mentor can also lessen some of the new teacher's stress by being available to answer questions about acceptable practices in the school environment.

Control

Control, described by Ryan and Deci (2000) as "autonomy" in connection with feelings of competence or self-efficacy, has been shown to promote motivation not only for teachers themselves but also for their students. Conversely, the perceived lack of control, potentially stemming from deadlines or performance evaluations, has been shown to cause a decline in motivation and less effective learning for students (Ryan & Deci, 2000). During the pandemic, so much more has been unpredictable and out of one's control than before. For example, whether educators themselves were in classrooms or at home and whether their students were learning in classrooms or from at home was continually in flux. The procedures and protocols and demands placed on educators were constantly new and different. Again, just when the stress of the pandemic increased the need for control, less opportunities to exercise control over one's environment were available. We assert that thoughts such as "Nothing I do/say matters," or feeling helpless and out-of-control, can indicate an unmet need for control.

Self-efficacy refers to one's personal belief in the ability to accomplish a task, or to control one's personal life. It can play a significant role in teacher satisfaction. For example, Savas and colleagues (2014) showed that self-efficacy is positively related to job satisfaction and retention and negatively correlated with teacher burnout. Several strategies and systems exist to improve teachers' self-efficacy and increase their feelings of success and validation. Some of these strategies and systems include appropriate compensation, increased personnel (as well as qualified personnel), increased preparation time, and increased opportunities for choice.

Self-preservation strategies for increasing teacher control. To overcome feelings of powerlessness over their lives and work, stressed teachers can take a step back and reflect on what they do and do not have control over. Simply identifying and acknowledging the things that are out of one's control can lead to a form of acceptance (Monshat et al., 2013). Also, focusing on all the elements that one does have control over can be quite empowering.

For example, some teachers anecdotally reported looked at their physical environment and chose to change elements to be more comfortable or pleasing. Other teachers made changes in how they did certain things that they were required to do. We believe that taking charge of even small aspects of one's environment can make a big difference in meeting one's need for control. Paradoxically, some teachers experience decision fatigue when faced with new and unfamiliar demands. Some teachers feel more control in these situations by simplifying and automatizing. For example, at least one teacher bought five versions of the same wash-and-wear, comfortable outfit so she no longer had to put mental energy into her clothing. Other teachers built systems in their homes, similar to the student routines and stations in their classrooms, to experience a sense of order. Planning and organizing in advance what can feasibly be planned and organized leaves mental bandwidth to cope with those things that cannot. Finally, teachers can practice sketching out their thoughts and feelings and reflecting non-judgmentally on the relationship between the two. Acknowledging that one's thoughts and feelings make perfect sense and then experimenting with substitute thoughts that lead to different emotions can partially meet one's need for control.

System changes for increasing teacher control. Perhaps the most divisive issue in the education field is the lack of appropriate compensation (Allegretto & Mishel, 2018). Simply put, in order for improvements to be made, compensation and wages must be increased to bring in new teachers and retain them (Allegretto & Mishel, 2018). With more money, teachers have more choices outside the workday. For example, teachers who spend evening hours grading papers or preparing lessons may, with added income, choose timesaving or stress-reducing options, such as grocery delivery. Mason-Williams and colleagues (2020) reported lower teacher attrition rates following wage increases. Raising wages can be particularly effective in content areas where heightened shortages exist—such as teachers of students with EBD (Mason-Williams et al., 2020). We assert that teachers should be fairly compensated not just for the educational credentials they have earned but also for the work they do.

The aforementioned teacher shortages have been heavily affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. Even before the pandemic, teacher shortages were ubiquitous—especially in special education (Billingsley, 2004). During the pandemic, this already stressful situation worsened. Teachers historically have carried heavy workloads, but the burden became more prevalent due to pandemic-related shortages. A recent NEA (2022) survey revealed that 74% of surveyed teachers had to cover for colleagues during the pandemic. In addition, 80% of surveyed teachers regularly took on more responsibility because of unfilled job openings (NEA, 2022). With increased personnel, smaller class sizes could become a reality, which might make all aspects of teaching more manageable and increase teachers' sense of control.

In addition to the general shortage of teachers, many schools also lack teachers with qualifications to work with students with disabilities. Many educators and researchers have argued for the inclusion of students with disabilities in standard classroom settings. This stance is widely regarded as a positive step forward in the realm of disability rights and justice (Hayes & Bulat, 2017). But there is an extreme shortage of special education teachers, and most teachers

are not qualified to serve students with disabilities. In 2017, about 6 million students covered by the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) were taught by 389,456 teachers, of whom about 27,000 were unqualified (Loeppky, 2021). As the shortage worsens, overworked and burned-out teachers are being assigned more responsibilities, including developing and managing individualized education programs (IEPs). Unfortunately, unqualified teachers tend to be less compliant with the IDEA and have more IEP violations than licensed special education teachers (Lachman, 2017). School officials could mitigate the problem by offering co-teaching and other support personnel, a strategy which has proven effective in assisting teachers and promoting inclusion of students with disabilities (Hang & Rabren, 2009).

Teachers, paraprofessionals, school social workers, and school psychologists might be encouraged to share the workload to ensure that students with disabilities receive the individualized attention they need to succeed (Asamoah et al., 2021; Kellems et al., 2016). For instance, in the IEP development process, social workers can suggest ways for students with EBD to foster positive relationships with their peers (Asamoah et al., 2021) while psychologists can recommend appropriate interventions, accommodations, and resources (Asamoah et al., 2021; Kellems et al., 2016). The multidisciplinary approach may not only reduce teacher workload, but it also might provide assistance and expertise from a diverse group of professionals.

We believe that to attract and retain teachers to mitigate issues related to personnel shortages, changes could be made to provide teachers with fair compensation for all education-related responsibilities. Some teachers spend "unpaid" time outside the classroom—including nights, weekends, holidays, and summers—completing school-related work. These tasks involve planning lessons, attending trainings, grading assignments, phoning parents, collaborating with colleagues, and writing IEPs. Teachers also may be assigned non-classroom jobs such as lunchtime, bus, and playground duty. We believe that to reduce teacher job dissatisfaction, school districts could provide increased preparation time, a sound rationale for duties assigned, and fair compensation.

Another way to provide teachers with a sense of control could be to give them opportunities to make their own choices in relation to professional development and trainings. Most professional development currently offered to teachers by schools is targeted to districtwide initiatives and does not address the interests and needs of individual teachers (Farah & Barnett, 2021). Administrators might encourage teachers to take advantage of training opportunities that are interesting and applicable to their specific positions and then compensate them for the cost and time. With a broad range of choices and reimbursement, teachers might be more likely to attend trainings and, possibly, make significant improvements in their well-being (Wolpert-Gawron, 2018).

Capacity

Capacity describes the process of recognizing one's ability to deal effectively with situations and stressors. In terms of the five components of SEL (CASEL, 2022), capacity reflects both self-awareness and self-management. Building capacity emphasizes an awareness of one's basic sense of safety and level of emotional stimulation, which is experienced internally. Coping with these stressors requires effective self-management.

We believe that the pandemic posed a challenge to even those most proficient with navigating their inner landscapes. While the pandemic has been difficult for everyone, students with EBD may be affected more than most. Those responsible for their instruction may find it nearly impossible to regulate their own nervous systems while simultaneously creating a warm and safe climate for a classroom of students. Feeling overstimulated or dysregulated, and having thoughts such as "This is all too much," can be indications of an unmet need for capacity.

Self-preservation strategies for increasing teacher capacity. Teachers' needs for capacity can be met by implementing strategies that reduce the overall level of stress they are experiencing. For example, self-care routines for sleep, nutrition, and movement can increase positive mood and make one more resilient in times of adversity. Gratitude practices and connecting with nature can have a similar effect on overall wellness. Teachers can plan a brief activity to close the stress cycle at the end of each day to avoid carrying over cares from school to home or from one day to the next. Some examples include laughter, crying, breathing, physical activity, affection, creative expression, and socializing (Nagoski & Nagoski, 2020). Breathing and mindfulness are strategies that have an overall impact on a teacher's well-being and can also be used in the moment to cope with a particularly stressful event (Nagoski & Nagoski, 2020).

Researchers have demonstrated the stress-reducing effects of mindfulness training. In one study, a mindfulness-based emotional balance program improved teacher occupational self-compassion, decreased job stress, decreased work-related anxiety, lowered emotional exhaustion, and improved classroom organization, compared to controls (Roeser et al., 2021). Meta-analyses evaluating teacher mindfulness training identified development of mindfulness skills, changes in occupational stress and burnout, and improved psychological well-being (Klingbeil & Renshaw, 2018). Most effective are programs that pair behavioral techniques with individualizable plans for managing personal stress (Jenkins & Calhoun, 1991).

System changes for increasing teacher capacity. With increased responsibilities, overburdened teachers are more likely to be stressed and dissatisfied with their jobs, and to burn out (Brasfield et al., 2019). In 2013, the Gallup-Sharecare Well-Being Index® revealed that 46% of teachers from kindergarten to 12th grade experienced high work-related stress (Lever et al., 2017). The National Wellness Institute defines wellness as "an active process through which people become aware of, and make choices toward, a more successful existence" (Lever et al., 2017, p. 4). Wellness is a holistic concept, addressing multiple components of personal well-being (Brasfield et al., 2019; Lever et al., 2017). Research suggests that wellness programs could reduce teacher stress and improve job satisfaction.

Mindfulness, coping strategies, social supports, and promoting teacher resilience have been shown to improve teacher well-being and job satisfaction (Brasfield et al., 2019; Herman et al., 2017; Iancu et al., 2018; Lever et al., 2017). The professional development program Cultivating Awareness and Resilience in Education (CARE) improved teacher well-being and reduced teacher burnout (Lever et al., 2017). A psychologically oriented program developed by Brown and Uehara (1999) effectively helped teachers build an awareness to stress, engage in physiological training (e.g., muscle relaxation, focused medication, aerobic activity), make environmental adjustments, and develop cognitive reappraisal skills. However, as of 2015, only 25.5% of schools offered stress-management programs (Lever et al., 2017).

School district officials can provide teachers with choices to develop personal capacity for enhancing wellness. School-mandated programs that do not respect individual needs are far less likely to make a positive impact. To enhance self-awareness and self-management, stressed teachers could be encouraged to participate in mindfulness trainings and wellness programs of their own choosing, inside and outside the school district, and be compensated for the cost and time.

Final Thoughts

Many teachers experience high stress, job dissatisfaction, and burnout as a result of unmet needs, which, in turn, negatively affect their students' social, emotional, and academic achievement. The COVID-19 pandemic only made matters worse by exacerbating those needs and making it harder to prosocially address them. To address this problem, it is essential that attention is given to the well-being of teachers—especially teachers of students with EBD—at both the individual level and systemwide. In this article, we addressed four current myths about teacher well-being and offered a new, research-based framework for establishing SEL interventions geared to teachers. The proposed model holds promise for meaningful improvements in the social, emotional, and occupational health of teachers.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

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