



Teacher wellbeing in early years contexts



ECE resources

Teacher wellbeing is imperative to early childhood education and care. When teachers are healthy, safe, and thriving, they are positioned to succeed in their work with children, families, and communities. This research review focuses on what teacher wellbeing is, why it matters, and what can be done to support teachers in their work and wellbeing.

What do we mean by 'wellbeing' and why is it important?

'Wellbeing' can be understood in different ways and is often a contested term, particularly in relation to education and teacher wellbeing. It is highlighted as a term which is 'notoriously difficult to define'¹ and which requires contextualising and personalising². Wellbeing can include multiple facets of health and wellness, including emotional, mental, physical, relational, or financial wellbeing. There are different approaches to understanding wellbeing – for example, some emphasise subjective dimensions such as emotions and satisfaction (the hedonistic view) while others emphasise psychological dimensions such as goal accomplishment, autonomy, interpersonal relations, and competence (the eudaimonic view)³. Furthermore, wellbeing is often linked to other terms or concepts, such as 'resilience', with which it is sometimes used interchangeably⁴. Wellbeing is complex, dynamic, and integral to the professional lives of teachers⁵.

It is imperative that teachers feel cared for, safe, and supported in the work they do. Supporting teacher wellbeing has benefits for individuals and, more collectively, for educational contexts and the communities in which they are situated. Stress, fatigue, and burnout are significant issues which deserve attention and intervention. There are a range of risks attached to issues like this, including threats to one's own health and wellbeing, impacts on relationships with children and families, and the potential for departure from the profession. Through a continued and meaningful focus on wellbeing, teachers can be supported and set up for success, and educational communities can be set up to thrive.

What does the research say?

The research on wellbeing in education covers a range of contexts, issues, and concerns. An ongoing concern of critical importance relates to the work required of teachers and the demands this places upon them⁶. It is interesting to note that prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, teacher stress was positioned at an 'all time high'⁷, and since 2020, this stress has demonstrably heightened⁸ with concerns raised regarding burnout.

The research on burnout indicates that there are considerable issues relating to teacher wellbeing and attrition from the profession. Burnout can impact on all members of the education setting – for example, a study on burnout in the ECE sector in Greece found that the impact on teachers of burnout may then impact on their relationships with children. This study also explored how the level of burnout experienced by teachers revealed a range of risks around emotional exhaustion and depersonalisation⁹, including the emergence of negative, impersonal, and even dehumanised attitudes, feelings, and perceptions.

Recent research has examined issues around toxic positivity¹⁰, which is defined as 'a response to a situation that does not fully acknowledge a person's negative emotions ... no matter how dire a situation is, people recommend a positive attitude'¹¹. The implications, broadly speaking, may include diminishing

people's experiences and concerns, denying necessary supports, and increasing risks related to wellbeing or the lack thereof¹². In the context of education, toxic positivity may manifest as pressure from leaders and managers to 'look on the bright side' or see challenges as opportunities to demonstrate resilience. This runs the risk of sidelining the issue of workplace stress and ignoring issues raised by teachers¹³.

A further focal point of a range of recent studies has been the stresses brought on or exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic¹⁴. In the early childhood sector, there were a range of escalated pressures and the need for quick adaptation amidst unprecedented challenges and demands¹⁵. In a study focusing on the impact of the pandemic on early childhood teachers, researchers documented pre-pandemic wellbeing and assessed the extent to which this changed¹⁶. It emerged that challenges relating to emotional wellbeing and career stability were compounded by the pandemic. It is key to note that research regarding wellbeing and related issues and concepts is continually evolving and, as such, it is an area which calls for continued attention and consideration.

How to work together to support and enhance wellbeing

It is essential that wellbeing be afforded continued focus, reflection, and investment to ensure that teachers are supported, protected, and nurtured. This can make a significant difference for good in multiple ways: to teachers as individuals in terms of their mental health and their capacity to engage in meaningful and rewarding relationship-building with children and colleagues; to educational communities collectively; and of course, to ensuring quality and meaningful education and care for children and families. Collective work is pivotal in supporting and enhancing wellbeing in education – for teachers, leaders, children, and family members alike. While there are many individual strategies that can help to an extent (such as connecting with loved ones, and taking time for hobbies, exercise, or social activities), focus should be afforded to more collective and comprehensive initiatives that serve educational settings and communities in holistic and meaningful ways.

The workplace environment and how it functions is a critical component. Wellbeing is best served where staff **share a feeling of safety and security** in their setting. There are many ways in which this sense of safety and security can be established and sustained. One critical contributor is relationships between staff, and teachers with positive collegial relationships cite this as a stronghold of their wellbeing¹⁷. While relationships can be a protective factor, they can equally be a detractor, and relational conflict is often cited as a source of stress¹⁸. Relational dynamics in this space can be complex and merit continued focus, reflection, and nurturing. There are many ways in which teachers and leaders can work together to invest in stronger collegial relationships by engaging in inclusive, collaborative, and nurturing ways of working within the team and with families and communities. Leaders can focus on a variety of approaches to ['leaderful' practice](#) to transform leadership from a position of authority to a set of collective social practices.

[Professional networks](#) can also contribute to nurturing wellbeing, particularly when these networks extend beyond a teacher's usual setting and further afield into the community and across the sector¹⁹. Membership in professional organisations, links with broader networks of teachers, and a commitment to lifelong learning can strengthen a sense of belonging and connectedness, and support wellbeing²⁰.

As part of a holistic approach that serves and sustains wellbeing for all, inclusive of teachers, children, and families, there is an increasing emphasis on [trauma-informed pedagogies](#) which centre on an [understanding of trauma](#). **Trauma results from an event, series of events, or circumstances that are physically or emotionally harmful, or life threatening, and is increasingly prevalent.** In enacting trauma-

informed pedagogies, it is imperative to consider how staff are coping and ensure that harm is avoided, as teachers may be at risk of harm from vicarious trauma.

Teacher wellbeing is a critically important issue which deserves continued attention, reflection, discussion, and advocacy. Focus should be given to meaningful change that takes into consideration the complex and significant work that teachers do with and for children, families, and communities.

Recommended further reading

Beltman, S., Dobson, M., Mansfield, C.F. & Jay, J. (2019). 'The thing that keeps me going': Teacher resilience in early learning settings. *International Journal of Early Years Education*. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09669760.2019.1605885>

Karnovsky, S. & Gobby, B. (2022). Teachers can't keep pretending everything is OK – toxic positivity will only make them sick. *The Conversation*.

Markowitz, A.J. & Bassok, D. (2022). Understanding the wellbeing of early teachers in the wake of the Coronavirus pandemic: Lessons from Louisiana. *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*, 61(4), 1-14. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ecresq.2022.05.001>

O'Brien, T. & Guiney, D. (2021). Wellbeing: How we make sense of it and what this means for teachers. *Support for Learning*, 36(3), 342-355. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9604.12366>

Endnotes

1 White, M.A., & McCallum, F. (2021). Crisis or catalyst? Examining COVID-19's implications for wellbeing and resilience education. In *Wellbeing and Resilience Education*, pp. 1-17. Taylor & Francis.

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7 Clement, 2017.

- 8 Bertram, T. & Pascal, C. (2021). Creating forums for plural COVID narratives and dialogues in early childhood. *European Early Childhood Education Research Journal*, 29(1), 1-5. <http://doi.org/10.1080/1350293X.2021.1873673>;
- Lacomba-Trejo, L., Schoeps, K., Valero-Moreno, S., del Rosario, C. Montoya-Castilla, I. (2022). Teachers' response to stress, anxiety and depression during COVID-19 lockdown: What have we learned from the pandemic? *Journal of School Health*. <https://doi.org/10.1111/josh.13192> ;
- Markowitz, A.J. & Bassok, D. (2022). Understanding the wellbeing of early teachers in the wake of the coronavirus pandemic: Lessons from Louisiana. *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*, 61(4), 1-14. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ecresq.2022.05.001>; White & McCallum, 2021.
- 9 Rentzou, K. (2015). Prevalence of burnout syndrome of Greek child care workers and kindergarten teachers. *Education* 43(3), 249–262. <http://doi.org/10.1080/03004279.2013.804853>
- 10 Karnovsky & Gobby, 2022.
- 11 Cross, K.L. (2022). Platitudes and toxic positivity. *Journal of Palliative Medicine*, 25(8), 1168-1169. <http://doi.org/10.1089/jpm.2022.0295>
- 12 Cross, 2022.
- 13 Karnovsky & Gobby, 2022.
- 14 Atilas, J.T., Almodóvar, M., Chavarría Vargas, A., Dias, M.J.A. & Zúñiga León, I.M. (2021). International responses to COVID-19: challenges faced by early childhood professionals. *European Early Childhood Education Research Journal*, 29(1), 66-78. <http://doi.org/10.1080/1350293X.2021.1872674>;
- Markowitz & Bassok, 2022.
- 15 Atilas et al., 2021.
- 16 Markowitz & Bassok, 2022.
- 17 Beltman et al., 2019.
- 18 Beltman et al., 2019. ; Clement, 2017.
- 19 Beltman et al., 2019.
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PREPARED FOR THE EDUCATION HUB BY



Dr Madeleine Dobson

Dr Madeleine Dobson is a Senior Lecturer in Early Childhood Education & Care and the Director of Student Experience & Community Engagement in the Curtin University School of Education. Her research focuses on children's rights, social justice, and caring and trauma-informed pedagogies in ECEC and other educational contexts.