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Iranian EFL Teachers' Professional Development, Psychological Well-being and Reflection: A Mixed-methods Design

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Abstract

Although reflective teaching and well-being have been promoted as a means to promote teaching quality, there is little empirical evidence to illustrate their impact on enhancing professional development. To fill this existing gap, this study adopts a mixed-methods approach to examine the contribution of reflection and psychological well-being as predictors of professional development. In so doing, 350 English language teachers participated in a survey and follow-up interviews. The correlational analysis confirmed the positive relationship among these three constructs, and a structural equation modelling indicated that both reflection and well-being significantly predicted professional development; however, well-being was a stronger predictor compared to reflection. The qualitative analysis of data revealed four main themes contributing to professional development among teachers. The pedagogical implications are also elaborated and discussed.

Keywords: EFL language teachers, professional development, well-being, reflection

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1. Introduction

One of the important factors to improve student learning is the inclusion of teachers who are concerned about developing their pedagogical approaches. Teachers' ongoing professional commitment is crucial both for their own pedagogical progress and their students' success (Haneda et al., 2017). Teachers with higher levels of professional development (PD) are generally more involved with their profession, more passionate about their work, and more resilient in the face of everyday challenges occurring in their educational contexts (Fredrickson, 2009; Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). While PD should lead to basic changes in teachers' belief systems as a prerequisite for long-term change in behavior, such possible shifts in teacher beliefs can be highly complicated.

As a potential source of teachers' PD, psychological well-being (PWB) refers to the quality of life and sense of satisfaction. Different components contributing to PWB are personal growth, self-belief, autonomy, and making positive relationships with others (Rastogi, 2009; Ryff, 1995). Various studies have revealed that PWB is connected with variables such as work engagement (Çankir & Sahin, 2018; Joo et al., 2017; White, 2010), reflective practice (Winchester & Winchester, 2014), and self-acceptance or self-regulation.

On the other hand, as another antecedent of PD, teachers' reflection pertains to continuous critical examination of teaching practice with the final aim of promoting the quality of teaching (Borg, 2011; Farrell, 2016). While teaching is considered a profession filled with inevitable challenges and difficulties, reflective practice could play a positive role in teachers' engagement in their work and the improvement of their overall performance and their students' achievement (Winchester & Winchester, 2014).

Although PD research has been accumulated in various educational settings, it seems that there has been little attention paid to the contributing factors, such as PWB and reflection, in improving PD. Inspired by the paucity of research within this area,

the current study was an attempt to fill the mentioned gap and investigate such teacher-related factors simultaneously.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Professional Development

For decades, professional development has been a debatable issue in terms of its exact meaning in many educational circles. A considerable portion of this debate concerns the ways in which ‘development’ can be achieved by teachers. This controversy results in various conceptualizations of professional development (e.g., Adams, 2014; Coburn, 2016). It is considered a process of learning that happens in school contexts or outside school, such as self-regulated learning or a government project. However, for the purpose of the present study, the definition by Guskey (2000, p. 115) was adopted, which defines professional development as “the process and activities designed to enhance the professional knowledge, skills, and attitude of educators so that they might, in turn, improve the learning of students.”

To achieve professional development, two main approaches are documented: informal and formal (Farrell, 2004; Wilden & Porsch, 2017). In the informal approach, as a bottom-up approach, Dehghan (2022) considers self-initiated and self-directed learning of topics that are interesting to individual teachers and everyday teaching experiences or conversations with highly experienced teachers (Bennett, 2012). Within this approach, teachers are responsible for being up-to-date with new teaching methods and related skills, such as clarifying their understanding of principles and values, and their associations with their practice (Farrell, 2019). Improving the knowledge of subject matter, self-awareness, pedagogical expertise, insights of learners, curriculum, and job advancement (Farrell, 2019) are also among the examples of informal approaches in professional development.

On the other hand, formal learning involves the presence of teachers in an educational program with a defined curriculum on a specific topic. Since a majority of formal professional development programs set by an educational institution are in the form of in-service training (Adekola, 2007), they can be considered as top-down (Dehghan, 2022). Such training programs commonly are presented as seminars, conferences, and workshops with a focus on introducing new methods in teaching, practical classroom management strategies, and action research. Such programs can bring positive effects, such as helping teachers to promote the contextualized skills suited for their institutions (Farrell, 2004). In some schools, opportunities are built based on everyday teaching as a profession embedded development (Griffith et al., 2014). Professional development based on job embedded is “learning by doing, reflecting on the experience, and then generating and sharing new insights and learning with oneself and others” (Wood & Killian, 1998, p.211). This method is more than a seminar or workshop, and it provides the opportunity for teachers to think and reflect on their current knowledge and apply the newly learnt knowledge while receiving feedback on their performance (Cavazos et al., 2018). It involves an institutional viewpoint and is tailored to teachers’ personal interests, needs, and motivations (Atay, 2008; Crandall & Christison, 2016). Recently, there has been a strong emphasis on the ongoing integration of both formal and informal approaches to involve teachers with a variety of learning opportunities (Murphy, 2014; Rodriguez & McKay, 2010). In addition, it is crucial to reveal the positive contributing factors in enhancing professional development.

2.2. Psychological Well-being

Following Seligman’s proposal of positive psychology (Lopez & Gallagher, 2009), there has been a new trend in highlighting the positive factors, including well-being, optimism, growth, and a sense of satisfaction, with the final aim of enhancing individuals’ growth (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). PWB refers to one’s

judgment of happiness in life and sense of satisfaction concerning health (mental and physical), life, and profession (Garg & Rastogi, 2009). Based on the well-known model of PWB proposed by Ryff (1989), there are six elements for PWB, including autonomy, positive relations with others, purpose in life, self-acceptance, environmental mastery, and personal growth. Autonomy is the self-regulation or self-determination of behavior, while positive relations pertain to the ability to develop a trusting relationship with others. The purpose in life refers to setting aims and intentions in one's life, and self-acceptance means self-actualization, optimal functioning, and overall mental health. Finally, environmental mastery refers to making a context consistent with one's conditions, and personal growth means the capacity to enhance personal behaviors and increase self-awareness.

A good deal of research has addressed the concept of PWB associated with reflection and professional variables. For instance, Çankir et al. (2018) investigated the contributing role of PWB in job performance. Distributing an online questionnaire among 322 Turkish workers, he concluded (based on the results of structural equation modeling) that participants with lower levels of PWB showed lower levels of job performance. In another study conducted by White (2010), the promotion of work-related PWB by factors such as work stress and psychological detachment was examined. The findings of correlational analysis indicated a significant correlation between PWB and work stress, while a highly negative correlation was documented between PWB and psychological detachment. Therefore, work stress and psychological detachment were the predictors of PWB in the workplace. Other studies have emphasized the relationship between teachers' well-being and engagement (Chen & Tang, 2024), creativity and work engagement (Zhi & Wang, 2025), teachers' self-efficacy (Wang et al., 2024), and teacher growth mindset and grit (Fathi & Soleimani, 2025). Taken together, these variables significantly affect teachers' PD and reflective capacity (Derakhshan & Fathi, 2024; Derakhshan & Shakki, 2024).

Moreover, teachers' PWB and its investigation could be of great importance because it needs high levels of engagement and interpersonal connections, while teachers might

frequently encounter stressors such as methods, intercultural encounters, and language anxiety (King & Ng, 2018). In the same line, Talbot and Mercer (2018) believed that investigating PWB is noteworthy in understanding the positive qualities associated with teachers with a higher level of well-being. A study conducted by Mercer et al. (2020) documented that PWB is crucial for the efficacy of performance among language teachers and could lead to teaching creatively, constructing positive rapport with students, and consequently increasing students' accomplishment.

2.3. Reflection

Although the concept of reflection was introduced into the educational context by John Dewey (1933) for the first time, the expert who made reflective practice popular in the world of language teachers was Wallace (1991). Reflective thinking refers to “active, persistent, and careful consideration of any belief or supposed form of knowledge in light of grounds that support it and the further consequences to which it leads” (Dewey, 1933, p. 9). As such, reflective teachers are drawing on their instinct or actions, which mainly depend on authority and tradition (Griffiths, 2000). Teachers' reflection engagement requires three basic phases of description, comparison, and criticism (Jay & Johnson, 2002). Teachers' reflection is typically inspired by a problematic or an interesting phenomenon that makes them obsessed with. Then, they compare the phenomenon from various perspectives to gain a better understanding within their teaching context. Eventually, teachers integrate a variety of perspectives to make the best decision and enhance their teaching quality. Therefore, teachers with a high level of reflection typically “locate problems, question goals, explore contexts, analyze possibilities, and craft appropriate educational experiences to benefit learners” (Baleghizadeh & Javidanmehr, 2014, p.98). The reflective practice cycle could bring about positive changes in both teachers' classroom performance and their teaching philosophical backgrounds. It could also help them understand social and political issues as a critical aspect of reflection (Farrell, 2016).

Journals, action research, concept mapping, discussion groups, self and peer observation, meticulous evaluation of lesson plans, and video analysis of the class are the methods through which reflective teaching can be practiced (Farrell, 2008). It is worth mentioning that some aforementioned approaches, such as self-observation or reflection-in-action, are more practical compared to some others, such as post-observation or reflection-on-action (Schon, 1991). Another type of reflection is reflection before initiating a lesson, which is called reflection-for-action (Farrell, 2016). A good example of this type is careful examination of a lesson plan before its implementation in the classroom.

Reviewing different studies on teacher reflection suggests that the majority of studies were conducted through a qualitative approach. For instance, Abednia et al. (2013) examined teachers' viewpoints on the benefits and challenges of adopting reflective journals. Gathering data through a focus group interview, they found that reflective journals could help teachers to obtain self-awareness of their held beliefs, develop reasoning skills, and enhance their understanding of the course. Lee (2007) found that engagement in reflective practice through journals or dialogues could improve critical thinking among pre-service teachers. Farell (2016) also reported that involvement of teachers in group reflection could help them get a better understanding of the possible shocks they may face during their teaching, especially in their first year of teaching. An obvious gap can be observed through the reviewed literature in establishing a connection between the benefits of reflective practice and teachers' professional development.

The significance of teachers' professional development in their successful teaching and students' achievement on the one hand and the contributing role of teachers' reflection and PWB on the other seem to have motivated many researchers to continue this recent line of inquiry factors (Golombek & Doran, 2014; MacIntyre et al., 2019; Mercer et al., 2020; Yong et al., 2020) and examine the relationship among these three factors. The current study could pave the way for future research in this regard with the

aim of generalizing conclusions among these variables and implementing them in teacher education programs.

Therefore, the present study is an attempt to address the following research questions:

1. To what extent can teachers' Professional Development (PD) be predicted by reflection and Psychological Well-being (PWB) of language teachers?
2. Can language teachers' Professional Development (PD), reflection, and psychological well-being (PWB) be measured by the scales adopted in this study?
3. What are the attitudes of teachers on the relationship between Professional Development (PD), Psychological Well-being (PWB), and reflection in the ELT context?

3. Method

3.1. Participants

In order to gather the quantitative data, a total of 350 English teachers were selected through convenience sampling. To be precise, 165 female and 135 male in-service teachers filled out a battery of questionnaires. The participants ranged in their teaching experience, teaching at a university or high school for different proficiency levels. Concerning their educational background, they were graduates from different English-related majors.

For the qualitative phase, six teachers, through purposeful sampling, participated in a focus group interview to investigate the relationship among the variables focused on in the study. It was assured that all participating teachers had taken teacher training courses and had at least three years of teaching experience.

3.2. Instruments

To address the research questions, three questionnaires were distributed in three sections; the initial part aims at gathering background information such as age, years of experience, gender, and degree. Then, the adopted instruments of well-being (Dagenais-Desmarais & Savoie, 2012), professional development (De Vries et al., 2013), and reflection inventory (Akbari et al., 2010) are distributed.

3.3. Design

A convergent parallel mixed-methods design (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2003) is selected for the present study, in which the researchers gather and conduct the analysis for both qualitative and quantitative data independently and integrate them only at the interpretation phase.

3.4. Procedure

For the quantitative phase, the participating teachers filled out the questionnaires, including three self-report scales for PD, SWB, and reflection. The online questionnaires were made using the Google Docs application, and the final booklet was shared with various groups of teachers on WhatsApp and Telegram channels. The participants were assured that the data gathered would be kept confidential and used just for the purpose of the study. In the qualitative phase, six teachers voluntarily participated in a semi-structured interview lasting 30-35 minutes. The main criterion for the number of teachers selected for the interview was data saturation (O'Reilly & Parker, 2013) in a way that collecting more information would suggest no new data. The interviews were conducted in English and were recorded and transcribed for further analysis.

3.5. Data Analysis

All the quantitative analyses were conducted using SPSS AMOS 22. First, the outliers and missing data were recognized and considered. The analyses showed no wrongly coded data in the data set. Then, Structural Equation Modelling (SEM) was utilized to investigate the hypothesized model (Van de Schoot et al., 2012) using the sample of teachers. More specifically, the predictive role of reflection and PWB on PD among English teachers was examined. The indices of comparative fit index (CFI), chi-square (χ^2), the root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA), and Tucker-Lewis index (TLI) were taken into account for the goodness-of-fit indices (Hu & Bentler, 1999). The acceptable values for these indices were reported as follows: GFI>.95, $\chi^2/df < 3$, RMSEA<.06, and CFI>.95, and TLI>.95 (Hu & Bentler, 1999).

The qualitative analysis was done through thematic analysis of the interview transcripts (Boyatzis, 1998). The interview data were transcribed verbatim in Microsoft Word, and pseudonyms of the teachers were used. Then, the transcribed data were analyzed qualitatively based on thematic analysis(TA), which involved the specification of the main themes and sub-themes. TA refers to a systematic method of organizing data to obtain patterns of meaning (themes). Through focusing on meaningful patterns in the dataset, TA helps the researcher identify idiosyncratic and unique meanings and commonalities across the data. The main themes extracted were then put together to form categories. The obtained themes and the transcripts were given to another person, well-versed in the scope of research, for rechecking the thematic analysis. There was over 85% agreement between the analysis by the researcher and the categorization of the second person.

4. Results

As the first step in the quantitative analysis, descriptive statistics such as Standard Deviation (SD), Mean (M), and correlations between the three variables were

measured. Table 1 shows the related descriptive statistics and internal consistencies for each variable.

Table 1

Related Internal Consistencies and Descriptive Statistics for the Constructs

	M (SD)	Cronbach's alpha
Reflection	49.35 (9.12)	0.79
Psychological well-being	74.21 (16.32)	0.87
Professional development	66.84 (12.45)	0.82

As can be observed in Table 1, the internal consistency of questionnaires was checked by Cronbach's alpha coefficient to be 0.79 for all the used questionnaires, showing that all the scales enjoyed good indices of internal consistency.

Table 2 indicates the indices of correlations between the variables of reflection, PWB, and PD.

Table 2

Correlations among the Constructs

	1	2	3
1. Reflection	-	0.32***	0.41***
2. Psychological well-being	0.34**	-	0.35***
3. Professional development	0.46**	0.61***	-

As shown, the degree of correlation between PWB and PD ($r = .61$, $p < .01$) is greater than the connection between reflection and PD ($r = .46$, $p < .01$). These results suggest that PWB and PD were more associated among English teachers.

To investigate the significance of teacher PWB and teacher reflection as predictors of PD, SEM was utilized to check the structural model in this study. SEM, as a powerful multivariate technique, provides an assessment of latent constructs and a precise

estimation of the measurement error function. Table 3 displays *the* Goodness of Fit Indices of Reflection and Psychological Well-being.

Table 3

Goodness of Fit Indices of Reflection and Psychological Well-being

	χ^2	χ^2/df	GFI	TLI	CFI	RMSEA	$\Delta\chi^2$
Models A and B	10.01	1.62	0.98	0.98	0.97	.04	
Model A1 (β REF = 0)	13.22	2.21	0.96	0.97	0.96	.07	4.31*
Model A2 (β PWB = 0)	16.32	2.64	0.97	0.98	0.98	.05	5.09*

Note. REF= reflection; PWB= psychological well-being. * $p < .05$.

As illustrated in Table 3, it was revealed that the connections among the latent constructs were statistically significant. More specifically, the unique effect of reflection and PWB as the two predictor variables was investigated on PD, regarded as the criterion factor. In so doing, each corresponding beta weight was limited to zero, and afterwards, their χ^2 changes were evaluated. In a case where constraining beta weights to zero results in a significant difference in χ^2 , it can be concluded that each variable and its unique effect in influencing PD are regarded as substantial. Table 3 indicates the fit indices of both models. It was also revealed that constraining beta weights to zero in the case of model A1 (β reflection = 0) and model A2 (β psychological well-being = 0) led to significant differences in the chi-square test (model A1 (β reflection = 0): $\Delta\chi^2 (1, N = 350) = 4.31, p < .05$; model A2 (β PWB = 0): $\Delta\chi^2 (1, N = 350) = 5.09, p < .05$). The findings showed that reflection and PWB had a significant effect on PD as the criterion variable in this study and PWB is a stronger predictor of PD.

To have a better understanding of PD, reflection, and PWB, semi-structured interviews were conducted. The interview data were all recorded and subsequently transcribed for more detailed analysis. The transcribed data were analyzed through

thematic analysis (TA). A noticeable theme was concerned with the agency of teachers as an important causal factor in their professional development.

Teacher A: *There are so many governmental and cultural restrictions that hinder the kind of agency needed by teachers to have their own voice and agency. Sometimes, you get disappointed with concerns about your professional development.*

Another teacher mentioned the significance of social support for improving the professional part. She believed that without social and institutional support, it is not possible to engage teachers in their professional development.

Teacher B: *There should be some inspiration from the institution or other social centers to make teachers reflect on their teaching and be concerned about their professional development. This kind of support could contribute to teachers' well-being as well. For example, providing extra salary or any kind of promotion and job security are among the factors motivating teachers to engage with reflection and PD.*

Another factor contributing to PD, according to one of the teachers, was the role of self-actualization and intrinsic motivation.

Teacher D: *Teachers themselves should care about their PD, and they should not wait for any external rewards or something like that. They accepted the role of being a teacher, so they should take the responsibility of developing their professional self.*

Some teachers pointed out the organizational equality and justice in their teaching context.

Teacher H: *I think if teachers see equality and justice in their workplace, they will be more competitive to be involved in PD to achieve a higher level of qualifications in their teaching. A fair educational environment could motivate teachers to prioritize reflection and PD.*

Finally, another teacher referred to the healthy and friendly working environment as a contributing factor in teachers' PD.

Teacher C: *Teaching in a friendly context with motivated, energetic students is effective in enhancing teachers' PD. Establishing a positive rapport with students plays a significant role in teachers' sense of development.*

Overall, the mentioned themes proposed by teachers should be considered as contributing factors in PD.

5. Discussion

The main purpose of this study was to probe the relationship between the three constructs of interest. More specifically, this research was an attempt to examine whether teachers' reflection, as well as PWB, could be a predictor of their PD. The obtained results showed that both reflection and PWB significantly predicted PD, while PWB was a stronger predictor. Theoretically, the findings provide more credence to increasingly recent research and application of well-being in the process of language learning and acquisition. Language teachers' reflection and PWB are two influential factors that, by themselves, are desirable professional outcomes (Dewaele et al., 2019; MacIntyre et al., 2016).

The significance of the relationship between reflection and PD is in line with a considerable number of studies (Zhu Liu et al., 2015), which documented the positive role of reflection in PD. It is consistent with the recent flourishing studies with a focus on the role of reflection and PWB for teachers' healthy performance and willingness to thrive in their professional life (Benesch, 2018; Bielak & Mystkowska-Wiertelak, 2020; Gregersen et al., 2020).

It can be argued that teachers' reflecting on their practice is more likely to result in their PD. Reflective teachers can successfully criticize their teaching practice to evaluate, modify, or replace their strategies with the aim of accomplishing higher levels of practice in their teaching. Due to this accomplishment, they experience the feelings of happiness, encouragement, and inspiration, and subsequently become immersed in

their PD. The findings of the current study are in line with Pena et al.'s (2012) findings. They found that a higher degree of reflection among teachers was associated with higher levels of engagement and dedication to work, and this could result in being more optimistic, engaged, and motivated in their teaching. Teachers who enjoyed an acceptable level of PWB are more successful in facing everyday challenges and various sources of stressors in their educational settings, which by itself led to further PD. In the same vein, Phan and Locke (2014) emphasized the significant contribution of PD, showing that teachers with a richer command of pedagogical knowledge indicated higher self-efficacy and PWB.

The contribution of teachers' reflection in PD can be justified in the light of social constructivism, which highlights the role of social interactions (Kalina & Powell, 2009). According to this viewpoint, teachers' reflection is heavily affected by a variety of socio-cultural and institutional variables as well as their interactions with learners and colleagues. It could also be argued that reflection as a source of agency can foster teachers' PD through motivating and energizing them to be more involved in their profession (Benesch, 2018).

On the other hand, the positive association between PWB and PD can be legitimized based on a broad-and-build theory proposed by Fredrickson (2001). In this theory, it is argued that the sense of satisfaction and positive emotions can expand within individuals and foster their PWB and optimal functioning. In return, individuals who are more engaged in PD are more likely to reflect on their practice and experience higher PWB (Buric & Macuka, 2018; Xanthopoulou et al., 2012).

The findings also indicated that PWB was a stronger predictor of PD compared to reflection. This can be explained in light of the importance of PWB as a factor contributing to teachers' practice and function (Roffey, 2012; Kidger et al., 2016) in teaching language (Gregersen et al., 2020; MacIntyre et al., 2019). Teachers with maturity and mental health could create a trusting connection with others, monitor and reflect on their practice, establish a context suitable for their psychological conditions,

set particular goals, and determine to pursue their personal and professional growth. It is documented that teachers with greater reflection and PD enjoy higher levels of PWB and subsequently experience more professional achievement (Shuck & Reio, 2014). It is also found that reflection possesses a mediating role in influencing the association between teachers' PWB and PD.

Furthermore, qualitative data collection and thematic analyses revealed various factors relating to PD. The main themes uncovered in teachers' attitudes towards PD were autonomy, social support, intrinsic motives, organizational fairness, and workplace context. Concerning a positive relationship in the workplace context, it is proven that better interpersonal relationships among teachers and administrators lead to better performance and PWB (Butt & Retallick, 2002; Gozzoli et al., 2015; Turner et al., 2002). Similarly, it is claimed that there is a positive relationship between social support in teachers' work life and their PWB (Ilgan et al., 2015).

Regarding self-actualization and intrinsic motivation, doing self-regulated activities plays a crucial role in reducing the effect of teaching challenges and promoting their sense of happiness at work (Bentea, 2015; Tadic et al., 2013; Wong & Zhang, 2014). Workplace context can be a contributing factor in teachers' PWB if they experience a better relationship with their colleagues and are a part of a collaborative work culture. It is argued that collegial support in a friendly school climate through participating in collaborative groups can improve a sense of satisfaction or PWB among teachers (Wong & Zhang, 2014). Moreover, the perceived agency and autonomy are backed by a considerable number of studies highlighting the positive role of agency in PWB among teachers (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2014).

Overall, the positive connections between PWB and PD on the one hand and reflection and PWB on the other hand highlight the role of these factors in preparing highly qualified teachers. Language teaching is a job that requires continuous PD training, reflection with the aim of enhancing job satisfaction, autonomy, and PWB.

6. Conclusion

The results of the current study indicated that reflection and PWB significantly predicted PD among language teachers, although PWB was proven to be a stronger predictor of PD compared to reflection. Furthermore, the qualitative analysis of data illustrated that the stronger association between teachers' PWB and PD could be attributed to the aforementioned factors. Therefore, it is concluded that a sense of satisfaction or PWB and reflection are indispensable components of teachers' PD, resulting in better quality of teaching and more effective interpersonal communication as the primary determinants of teachers' effective practice and students' achievements. Besides, teachers with high levels of PWB and reflection can figure out practical solutions for the challenging teaching context and establish a supportive relationship through mutual cooperation and understanding.

The findings of this study provide significant pedagogical implications for different stakeholders in educational programs. Teachers' PWB needs serious attention in every educational program for teachers, as overall mental health and well-being play a major role in teaching function and performance, and learners' well-being as well (Bentea, 2015; Mercer et al., 2020; Roffey, 2012). Focusing on teachers' PWB in a rich teacher education program could guarantee teachers' mental health and reflection on their PD. The final output would be a positive climate school and teaching context with successful learners (Roffey, 2012). Such a teacher training program could enhance other desirable qualities such as resilience, efficacy, and job satisfaction (Vesely et al., 2014).

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