

PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

Practitioners respond to Carol Griffiths ‘What about the teacher?’ (*Language Teaching*, 56(2), 210–222)

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I read Carol Griffiths’ article with great interest. This is due in part to being in what I feel is a privileged position as book reviewer for a UK journal, the *EL Gazette*,¹ for whom I have read several titles by authors she references on teacher wellbeing, such as Mercer and Gregersen (2020). I wondered, however, why Brierton and Gkonou (2022) was not listed there as it also deals with issues raised by Griffiths such as how academic managers can help create an environment that reduces stress and mental health problems. It was also interesting to note that Griffiths, like myself, has spent most of her working life involved in English language teaching, almost all of which has taken place in Turkey. Her article also resonated with my own experience as a teacher-educator as it draws upon research carried out in a Turkish context (Griffiths & Sönmez, 2020).

In the ‘Background’ section, Griffiths’ reference to the thuggish Dickens’ schoolmaster, Wackford Squeers, in *Nicholas Nickleby* reminded me of what I was told by Turkish parents of the 11-year-olds in my charge at the start of my first teaching post in a private school in central Anatolia: ‘eti benim’ (‘his/her flesh is yours; the bones are mine’). In practice, it was a licence for me to give students a hiding if they misbehaved. I would never admit such action of course, but stern words from time to time were helpful. When I read Griffiths’ statement from Furrer et al. (2014) that ‘the quality of students’ relationship with teachers is fundamental to students’ academic engagement and achievement’, I felt I could have told her that much a long time ago. Ultimately, learners at all ages need to know who is the boss. And maybe it is the case that parents of my classes in central Anatolia back in 1981 pre-empted later findings by Hattie (2003), and quoted by Griffiths (p. 211), which state: ‘It is teachers that make the difference.’ I thought as much then, and the parents probably did, too. And that is why an article that outlines the need to take care of teachers is so important.

Griffiths also refers to research from Hattie (2003), which states that, when it comes to language learning, 30% variance in achievement is down to teacher performance. How to enable teachers to continually meet this level in safe mental and physical health is another matter. Griffiths states: ‘There is very little (in the literature) that considers the teacher as an individual.’ She goes on to suggest ‘High levels of stress may help to explain the teaching profession’s worryingly high rates of attrition’ (p. 212), which reminded me that language teachers themselves do not burn out; it is over-worked and badly managed English language teaching (ELT) departments that cause them to burn out. And this is why more reference to not only Mercer and Gregersen (2020), but also Brierton and Gkonou (2022) should appear in Griffiths’ paper. In particular, I would suggest useful details might be gleaned from chapter 2: *Me and my workplace* in Mercer and Gregersen (2020), and chapter 4: *Teacher wellbeing inside the classroom* in Brierton and Gkonou (2022).

In my experience as a teacher-educator, I visit schools in Turkey to deliver presentations. Offered the list of topics available, department heads show much less preference for the teacher self-care issues to which Griffiths refers (p. 215). My own presentation for schools, based on Mercer and Gregersen’s

¹<https://www.elgazette.com/category/reviews-resources/main-reviews/>

(2020) chapter 2, covers areas such as identifying with your workplace, and working with others. When I managed to persuade a couple of heads to let me present this, the response was largely positive. But while staff attrition in Turkish schools continues, sessions on areas like learner autonomy and vocabulary learning are still deemed of more use. Administrators in schools that I have experience of working with, at least in Turkey, seem to view staff attrition as something inevitable rather than avoidable, and due to the unemployment situation, it is currently not difficult to replace teachers who have had enough of unpaid duties such as online meetings with parents in what used to be called ‘free periods’.

When tackling ‘a depressing state of affairs’ regarding burnout, Griffiths lists four directions from which this might be approached: more effective preparation at the pre-service level to better prepare new teachers for the stresses they are likely to encounter; developing positive teacher mindsets; developing supportive mindsets among other stakeholders, that is, the educational/school authorities and the parents/students; developing teacher coping strategies, autonomy, agency and pro-activity. I felt her list of 17 suggestions relating to positive self-management, including turning off one’s mobile phone, would surely help teachers. What enables many involved in ELT to survive is seemingly enabling themselves to become immune to a rather toxic or unmotivating work environment, and that is why I felt I would have liked to read more research by Hiver and Dörnyei (2017) on developing the level of ‘immunity’ they refer to.

Griffiths is right to say that developing positive mindsets is only going to solve part of the problem, and that support from stakeholders is vital. Parents, in particular, need to be more involved. From lesson observations in recent years in Turkey, I have noticed even experienced teachers being shown very little respect on occasions by learners with disruptive agendas. Suggesting they be removed from the school is too often met with incredulity, however. But where do teachers go for help? It was astonishing to read Griffiths’ search through the archives of the *ELT Journal* revealed only a single article (Wadden and McGovern, 1991) dealing with student misbehaviour.

Although Griffiths’ conclusion provides several potential avenues for future teacher research, the fifth she lists there ‘to explore which aspects of a teacher’s job..... actually cause the stress and burnout’ (p. 218) is what I believe would produce the most interesting data. In this regard, I cannot help thinking that, along with support from stakeholders with students’ unruly behaviour, schools might avoid high staff attrition levels by reducing the amount of unpaid work, such as online meetings with sometimes just a single parent, or at least paying them extra for such duties.

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