

Be Well, Teach Well:

Understanding the well-being of teachers in Uganda's primary schools

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WHY IS TEACHER WELL-BEING IMPORTANT?

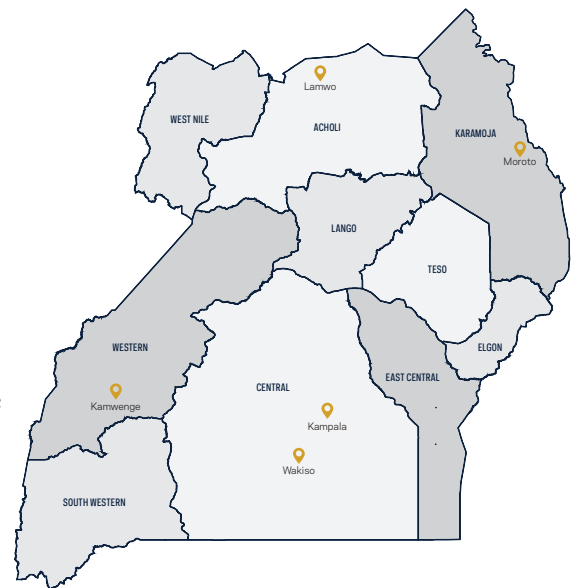
Teachers are a key factor in student success, but there is limited literature exploring how the well-being of teachers—their affections, attitudes, and perspectives of their occupation—affect teachers' practice and students' learning in the global south. Even when teacher well-being is studied, it is often defined by considerations from the global north: very few studies consider a proximal (“local”) understanding of teacher well-being. This is especially concerning since teaching can be a stressful and demanding profession. In Uganda, the TISSA¹ report (2013, p. 129) highlights a high rate of work-dissatisfaction and anxiety among teachers. Through the National Teacher Policy,² the Ministry of Education and Sports (MoES) has demonstrated a strong interest in professionalizing the teaching profession, increasing teacher productivity, and increasing teacher retention and well-being. However, there is a limited understanding of what teacher well-being looks like for primary school teachers in Uganda and how it can be best supported. If we are able to understand the factors affecting the well-being of primary school teachers in Uganda, the MoES and its education partners will be better placed to support teachers staying and thriving in the teaching profession.

WHAT WERE THE OBJECTIVES OF OUR STUDY?

The research consortium's³ study aimed to better understand Ugandan primary school teachers' perspective on well-being and the factors that support and hinder it. We will use this information to measure teacher well-being and provide evidence-based recommendations and practical tools for further action in Uganda.

WHAT WAS THE METHOD OF OUR STUDY?

We conducted interviews with 148 primary school teachers (49% female) from 5 sites in 4 regions of the country: Lamwo, Kamwenge, Kampala, Moroto, and Wakiso. The five sites were selected based on two criteria: diversity of rural/urban primary schools and refugee/non-refugee contexts. We asked each teacher to think of an example of a male and female teacher who was doing well. Teachers then identified and ranked the five most relevant factors⁴ that characterized these example teachers and supported them in doing well. The interviews were conducted in English, recorded, and transcribed. A research team based in Kampala, Washington DC, and New York analysed the data, identifying the most relevant factors that contribute to the well-being of teachers.



1. TISSA (2013). Teacher issues in Uganda: A shared vision for an effective teachers policy. Kampala, UG: Ministry of Education and Sports. https://teachertaskforce.org/sites/default/files/migrate_default_content_files/tissa_uganda_full_report_1.pdf

2. Ministry of Education and Sport (2019). National Teacher Policy.

3. The research consortium includes the Global Center for the Development of the Whole Child (GC-DWC), Save the Children, and the Luigi Giussani Institute of Higher Education (LGIHE).

4. Defined as skills, attitudes, training, people, or systems

WHAT DID WE FIND?

Teachers had a very broad definition of well-being. Teachers defined well-being as being free from problems and stress, and holistically healthy. "I understand it as not being disturbed socially, emotionally and physically. Not being disturbed socially is not being prevented from socializing with other teachers. Not being disturbed emotionally is when one is not isolated. Not being disturbed physically is when your health is okay." Well-being was also described as being financial independent and having the support of school administrators and peers.

Teachers identified seven groups of factors that support their well-being: These factors covered the intrapersonal (individual skills and beliefs) and interpersonal skills of teachers (social skills), as well as the settings and systems (external motivation and learning community) that allow teachers to succeed. Teachers also highlighted the skills and preparation that are required for the teaching profession (work ethic and teaching methods) as being critically important for well-being. Overall, teachers noted that peer cooperation, classroom methods, training, being prepared, and responsibility were the most important factors that supported a teacher in doing well.



Social Skills	Teacher has the interpersonal skills (kindness, respect, trustworthiness, and general sociability) that makes them approachable to students/peers and allows them to communicate effectively inside and outside the school.
Learning Community	Teacher feels supported by community of peers, community members, and students that share a common goal. This includes helping and being helped by peers, being open to advice from colleagues, having a strong relationship with students, and receiving constructive feedback from parents/community.
Individual Skills and Beliefs	Teacher loves their job and has the confidence and perseverance to deliver lessons, deal with challenges, and adapt to changing situations. They may also draw on their religion for support when making big decisions or dealing with problems.
Engagement	Teacher is committed to the profession and goes beyond their regular teaching duties to counsel students parents, and peers; mobilize resources to support their school; and proactively address gaps in programming.
Teaching Methods and Skills	Teacher has had sufficient pre-service and in-service training to use the right teaching methods in their classroom. This includes doing research on a topic they are teaching, preparing prior to entering the classroom, and using unique methods/materials in their teaching.
Work Ethic	Teacher is hardworking and completes all of their tasks in a timely manner. They are also generally well-dressed, well-behaved, and a role model for other teachers.
External Motivation	Teacher feels valued, respected, and supported by the school administration and broader community. They also experience a sense of independence, primarily through their economic needs being met through their salary, subsidized accommodations, or support for a business venture.

Cultivating supportive and caring relationships with colleagues is integral to teacher well-being. Cooperation among teachers was the most frequently mentioned factor as well as the most highly ranked by participants: “He relates with others in [the] way that he cooperates with others, he likes to work in a team. In that way he is able to share knowledge with other fellow teachers.” This factor consists of sharing knowledge and resources with peers as well as receiving help from others.

Strong teaching methods were most commonly prioritized by teachers working in a refugee context. Teachers that are doing well can be recognised by their training, how they design and conduct their lessons, and how they prepare before entering the classroom. While these teaching methods and skills were important for all teachers, they were most frequently identified and prioritized by teachers working with refugee children in Lamwo and Kamwenge.

School administration is important to teacher well-being, especially when administrators are supportive, approachable, and respectful. For Ugandan teachers, external motivation consisted of their economic status as well as the emotional, physical, and material support given by the school administration. The lack of this support is perceived to hinder instruction and therefore well-being.

Not many important gender differences. The gender of the participant or the example teacher did not influence which factors participants identified or which factors they prioritized. The only difference in gender that we found was in the overall definition of well-being: female teachers more frequently articulated the importance of holistic health in doing well while male teachers underlined the support given from administration and their economic status as being part of their well-being.

WHAT WERE THE LIMITATIONS OF OUR STUDY?

Because of limited time and resources, we restricted our sample to five sites across four regions of the country. We picked these sites based on where our research consortium had a strong local presence so that we could ensure the rigor of the data collection. While we tried to capture the diversity of teachers working in primary schools in Uganda, we understand that our sample does not capture the lived experience of all teachers across Uganda. Further research on teacher well-being in Uganda should add to our findings.

The rapid ethnographic interview we used is meant to collect meaningful data from a large group of participants in a short period of time. However, it does not allow us to deeply and comprehensively understand the lived experience of teachers in Uganda. We are working with nine teachers to more fully understand how the factors identified through the interviews function in the daily life of teachers in Uganda.



WHAT ARE THE IMPLICATIONS OF OUR FINDINGS?

Teacher well-being for primary school teachers is much more than the absence of illness or stress, or even feeling happy; it is about them flourishing in a holistic manner. After listening to the voices of Ugandan primary school teachers, we understand that teacher well-being is supported by a positive attitude towards teaching and strong teaching techniques that stem from supportive relationships with colleagues and students; the belief that one has the ability to teach effectively; and the feeling that one's personal and professional needs and expectations are met.

Understanding that there are multiple factors that contribute to teacher well-being is an important first step in creating more comprehensive approaches for supporting teachers. We have identified three levels of recommendations.

1. **Research:** To complement this study, we recommend complementary approaches to understanding teacher well-being in Uganda that (a) involve teachers in the research process, (b) incorporate teachers' perspectives into the data being gathered, and (c) work to develop refined measures of teacher well-being so that it can be better understood across the diverse population of primary school teachers.
2. **Practice:** Focus on the relationships—especially peers and administrators—that support teachers doing well and use them as a platform to strengthen teachers' preparation with teaching methods and skills.
3. **Policy:** The findings of the 2013 TISSA report resonate with our findings. This report identified the social environment within which teachers operate as an important factor to increase teacher well-being. Additionally, the report highlighted the importance of teacher salaries and career opportunities on the relative attractiveness of the teaching profession. As part of the discussion on the National Teacher Policy, we recommend that teachers be deeply involved in the policymaking process and that the relational nature of teacher well-being be focused on along with external factors of teacher remuneration and training.

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