

Refocusing Professional Learning: Cultivating Teacher Wellbeing to Promote Agency

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Abstract

This article argues that professional development that fosters teachers' sense of agency is one key to lowering the rate of teacher attrition and retaining teachers in the profession. A strong sense of agency can help teachers respond effectively to a wide range of potentially stressful situations; a strong sense of agency also contributes to a feeling of wellbeing. Conversely, a reduced sense of agency is a strong predictor of teacher burnout and attrition. Yet even professional development focused on social-emotional learning (SEL) for students often doesn't take into account the role of teachers' own wellbeing in supporting student success. Data emerging from the Teach from Your Best Self (TFYBS) institute, a professional-development initiative that focuses on teacher wellbeing, illustrates the link between teachers' sense of agency, their ability to effectively support students, and their likelihood to remain in the profession. Findings emerging from TFYBS suggest that professional-learning offerings for teachers should include foundational, holistic learning experiences focused on teachers' self-knowledge and their ability to relate productively to others even in stressful, challenging situations. More studies are needed to explore the impact of teacher wellbeing on student outcomes, both SEL-related and academic.

Keywords: *teacher professional development, teacher agency, teacher wellbeing, teacher retention*

Introduction: Teacher Agency and Teacher Retention

New teachers entering the profession are motivated to help young people fulfill their potential; they believe they will be able to make a difference. Yet for many, this belief is quickly tested. They know teaching isn't easy, and they expect

challenges. Yet often they are not prepared for the demands and pressures they encounter, including a mountain of bureaucratic tasks and insufficient support in and outside of the classroom (Herman et al., 2021). Today's teachers are "charged with the daunting task of preparing the next generation of students to restore the economy of the United

States to compete in the 21st century global market, while typically working long hours with...limited autonomy” (Leech et al., 2019). This combination of heavy responsibility and limited autonomy is more demoralizing than simply feeling overloaded: it can quickly erode the hopeful, motivating sense of agency with which teachers enter the profession.

The meaning of the term *agency* has long been debated among social scientists (Barker, 2005). We use the term here to refer to individuals’ capacity to make choices and take actions that will fulfill their potential as teachers. Specifically, we draw on Emirbayer and Mische’s (1998) view of agency as a “temporally embedded process of social engagement,” in which an individual’s past history (the “iterational” aspect) combines with their ability to envision future possibilities (the “projective” aspect). Agency entails a “practical-evaluative capacity”: individuals’ ability to make effective in-the-moment decisions from among multiple possibilities. These decisions are inevitably shaped by two inter-related forces: 1) our past experiences including our habits and the stories we carry about ourselves and our students, and 2) our ability to imagine alternate futures that our actions might help bring into being.

Contemporary psychologists believe that a strong sense of agency helps us remain “psychologically stable, yet flexible in the face of conflict or change” (Pattison Professional Counseling and Mediation Center, n.d.). In today’s classrooms, schools, and districts, teachers are constantly called upon to respond to many forms of conflict and change, both in and outside of the classroom. A strong sense of agency can help teachers respond effectively to a wide range of potentially stressful situations.

In a holistic view of education, a reciprocal relationship ideally exists between individual teachers’ agency and local/societal structures.

These include institutional structures, policies, and processes at the school/district level, as well as broader societal constructs like race, religion, gender, and so on. Pioneering sociologist Anthony Giddens’ (1984) compelling theory of “structuration” defined individuals’ agency as the ability to shape not only our own immediate experiences, but also broader institutional norms, policies, and structures of which we are a part. According to Giddens’ theory, in modern societies *agency* and *structure* ideally operate in a mutually constitutive relationship; neither dominates. Individuals both adapt to existing institutional structures and influence those structures through their everyday actions. Viewed through this lens, holistic professional-learning initiatives for teachers should not only help teachers meet “structural” (e.g., curricular, licensure, and reporting) requirements, but should also support their sense of agency in their classrooms, schools, districts, and communities. This type of agency sustains professionals regardless of field or career, fueling their desire to contribute to their field throughout their careers.

Recent national polls suggest that many teachers do not experience this sustaining sense of agency. Educators report the highest feelings of burnout among all professions (Marken & Agrawal, 2022); and by all accounts, challenges to this important dimension of wellbeing have intensified for teachers since the COVID-19 pandemic. Teachers may feel pressure to produce higher test scores or implement tightly scripted curricula while dealing with classroom-management challenges and responding to a surge of student mental-health issues. They must build community with students in need of increased academic and social-emotional support (Santibañez & Guarino, 2021), and—with counseling and mental-health resources stretched thin—build relationships with students struggling with behavior issues, attendance, anxiety, and depression to a higher degree than ever before

(Welsh, 2022). With 84% of schools reporting increases in student behavior challenges since the pandemic (National Center for Education Statistics, 2022), teachers' ability to remain in their best selves—to respond (rather than react) to challenges and stressful situations with openness, authenticity, curiosity, and clarity of purpose—is severely tested. All of these “structural” factors can easily undermine teachers' feelings of wellbeing and erode their sense of agency and efficacy in the classroom.

Not surprisingly, a feeling of “reduced efficacy” is a strong predictor that teachers will leave the profession (Madigan & Kim, 2021a). In other words, when teachers don't feel empowered to make decisions that directly affect them and their students, they are more likely to quit. Thus, reducing burnout by fostering agency is one key to lowering the rate of teacher attrition and retaining teachers.

Social-Emotional Wellbeing and Agency

As participants in—and facilitators of—professional development for teachers, the authors of this article have noticed a strong correlation between teachers' sense of wellbeing and their sense of agency. Our working definition of teachers' wellbeing is based on a self-reported sense of personal and professional satisfaction, purposefulness, and happiness. Not surprisingly, teachers who experience a sense of “pedagogical wellbeing” (Soini et al., 2010) are more likely to remain in their best selves under pressure and better able to respond to challenges with a clear sense of agency. This can have a dramatic impact on student learning and achievement: multiple empirical studies show the positive effect of teachers' wellbeing on student learning outcomes (Brown et al., 2023; Madigan & Kim, 2021b; Klusman et al., 2016).

Drawing on neuroscience research, in *Culturally Responsive Teaching and the Brain* Zaretta

Hammond (2015) explains the importance of establishing a classroom environment where students from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds feel a strong sense of safety and belonging. This kind of wellbeing prevents students' limbic systems from jumping into fight-or-flight reactions and awakens their innate learning capacities. Hammond's important book has become required reading in many teacher-preparation programs as well as school districts' professional-development agendas; she offers clear reasoning and concrete strategies for teachers to support diverse students' wellbeing and sense of agency as learners.

Similarly, when teachers themselves are under pressure—whether feeling weighed down by mandates restricting their agency in the classroom or reacting to daily classroom-management challenges—their own limbic systems can hijack their ability to remain in their best selves. What teachers say and do when reacting from this less-than-best state not only undermines the sense of safety and belonging they strive to establish for students; it also undermines teachers' own sense of wellbeing. To make constructive in-the-moment decisions in high-stress environments, teachers need approaches that help them respond with agency rather than react defensively. This is often a missing link in professional development focused on supporting students' social-emotional wellbeing. In order to support the social and emotional needs of students as whole human beings, teachers need approaches that help them remain in their best selves and ultimately remain—and thrive—in the profession.

A laudable emphasis on social-emotional learning (SEL) for students has been gaining momentum nationally. More than 40 states have adopted SEL competencies and/or standards for students in grades preK-12 in partnership with the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional

Learning (CASEL, 2023). But mandating another set of standards to teach without ensuring that teachers themselves experience social-emotional wellbeing simply adds another ingredient to the recipe for teacher burnout.

The internet abounds with self-care advice for teachers (think guided meditations, breathing techniques, nutrition, hydration, calming music, nature walks). While these are useful suggestions, teachers need professional development that moves “beyond self-care to include relational strategies for addressing stress, compassion fatigue, and burnout” (Haines et al., 2022). The term *relational strategies* itself suggests agency: approaches we can apply with intentionality in order to create positive, empathetic relationships—whether with students, colleagues, or administrators. And importantly, teachers need to know that they are not alone in facing the challenges of the profession. Professional-learning initiatives that foreground these ideas can help build resiliency and agency without adding to teachers’ already-overflowing to-do lists.

Developing Professionals

In this section and the next, we offer an example of a professional development initiative that focuses explicitly on cultivating teachers’ wellbeing, in order to explore the connection between teacher wellbeing and agency. The authors of this article are all participants (or facilitators) in the Teach from Your Best Self institute, a partnership between the Southern Oregon Regional Educator Network and the Oregon Writing Project at Southern Oregon University. The institute is designed and facilitated by Jay Schroder, veteran teacher and author of *Teach from Your Best Self: A Teacher’s Guide to Thriving in the Classroom* (2023).

Launched in 2021 and now in its fourth year, Teach from Your Best Self (TFYBS) is one of a

small-but-growing number of initiatives across the U.S. focused specifically on teacher wellbeing rather than subject-matter content, instructional frameworks, or programs for responding to behavioral challenges (see resources below for other examples of such initiatives). Simply put, TFYBS offers teachers approaches to maintain their best under pressure, regardless of their subject area or grade level. To date, over 150 K-12 teachers participated in the program, which one teacher calls “professional development that actually develops us as professionals.”

The TFYBS institute features several hallmarks of high-quality professional development (DeMonte, 2013):

- It is *intensive* and *sustained*. A one-week summer institute is followed by monthly half-day meetings on Saturdays, for a total of 70 hours that are structured to provide *follow-up*, *debriefing*, and *ongoing feedback* throughout the academic year.
- It is *teacher-led*, developed, and facilitated by a veteran teacher, grounded in teachers’ lived experiences, and emphasizes collaboration and sharing among participants in a professional-learning community.
- Approaches and strategies are modeled and practiced in a *hands-on*, *active* way.
- An optional second-year leadership strand *builds teachers’ leadership skills* as they design and implement projects to support their colleagues.

The TFYBS institute is based on a simple but powerful premise: the self that a teacher brings to the classroom—who we *are* in our relationships—matters even more than the things we *do* as teachers.

Preliminary Findings

We are currently in the process of collecting and analyzing data from TFYBS for a future mixed-methods study, intended to illustrate the connection between holistic professional development, teachers' sense of wellbeing, their experience of agency in and outside of the classroom, and their likelihood of staying in the profession. Data informing the longitudinal study will include annual pre/post surveys, short monthly questionnaires, a retrospective survey, field notes from participant-observation, and short essays written by teachers pursuing optional graduate credits in the program. In the remainder of this article, we offer preliminary evidence of the overall positive impact of the institute, as well as specific anecdotal data from three teachers (elementary, middle school, and high school) exploring the connection between wellbeing, agency, and teacher retention.

Preliminary results from pre- and post- survey data (2021-22 and 2022-23 cohorts) confirm that the TFYBS institute boosts teachers' ability to remain in their best selves in stressful situations and reduces feelings of burnout that might cause them to leave the profession.

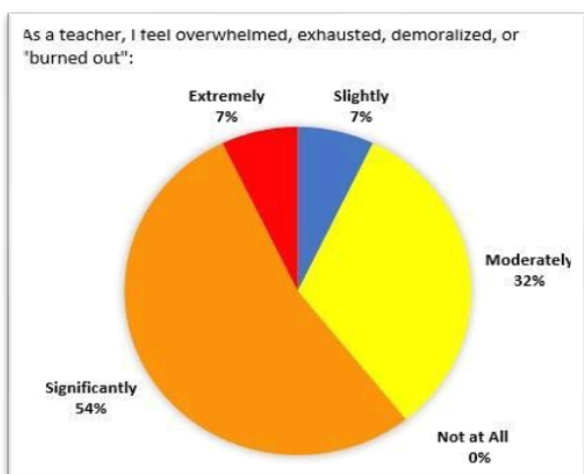


Figure 1: Pre-survey responses (“burned out”)

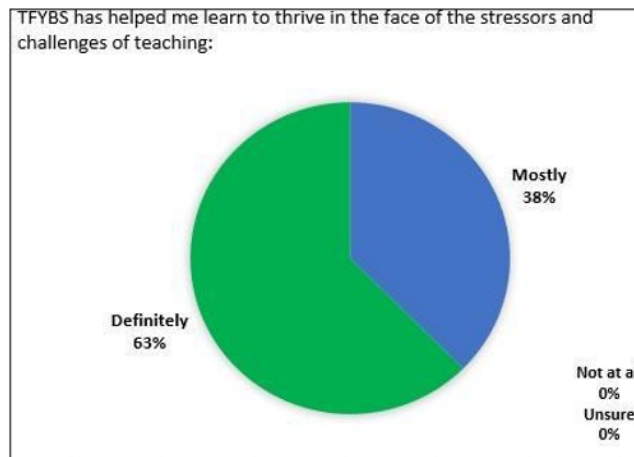


Figure 2: Post-survey responses (“thriving”)

As Figure 1 shows, 63% felt “extremely” or “significantly” burned out at the start of the institute. After the institute (Figure 2), 100% of participants said TFYBS had “definitely” or “mostly” helped them thrive in the face of the stressors of teaching.

Specific strategies that contribute to these results—which participating teachers mention frequently—include expressive and reflective writing, understanding the distinction between spheres of control and influence, applying return-on-investment thinking, using a “cool pause” to reframe the stories we tell ourselves, positive messaging, and crafting an individual “prime directive” to help ground decision-making. With respect to our working definition of *agency*, these strategies operate at the intersection of our past (the stories we have about ourselves and our students) and our ability to imagine alternate futures. Applying the TFYBS strategies in their classrooms, teachers begin to see choices they didn’t see before—or might have glimpsed but didn’t have a framework to help them respond consistently, confidently, and intentionally.

These strategies are introduced and practiced in a learning community that provides teachers with the experience of safety, belonging, and significance—core aspects of wellbeing— while

reinforcing the critical awareness that they are not alone. The power of this support network is evident in recurrent comments like these:

“For the first time in my seven years as an educator, I feel seen and heard. This space of belonging, safety, and sharing perspectives is something I want to replicate in my own classroom.”

“At the institute, I was able to express my own vulnerability, frustrations and hopes, in a way that was wholly productive.”

“With each monthly meeting, I am brought back to remembering who my best self is, which in turn allows me to return to my classroom in my best self.”

Because TFYBS focuses on teacher wellbeing in a supportive professional community, it lays important groundwork for teacher agency in institutional contexts that may feel disempowering. Teachers who have experienced a sense of belonging and connection in their own professional community are better equipped to provide students with the same experience. TFYBS strategies enable shifts in mindset or point-of-view: teachers learn ways to navigate stressful situations with best-self agency, where they might otherwise experience themselves as powerless.

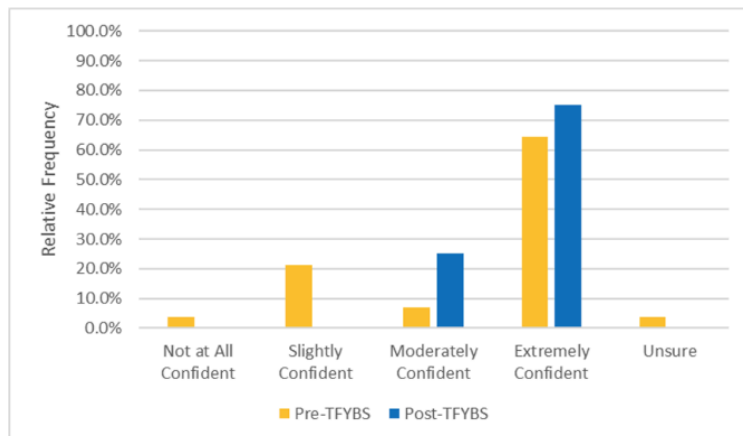


Figure 3: *How confident are you in your ability to create and sustain a learning environment where ALL students experience a sense of belonging that supports their receptivity to learning?*

As Figure 3 shows, at the beginning of the institute, nearly 30% of TFYBS participants felt “not at all confident,” “slightly confident,” or “unsure” in their ability to create and sustain a learning environment where all students experience a sense of belonging that supports receptivity to learning. After the institute, 100% reported feeling “moderately” or “extremely” confident in their ability to do so.

Below, three teachers—high school, middle school, and elementary—explain how TFYBS has cultivated their wellbeing and contributed to their sense of agency (see also Perrow et al., 2023):

Maureen Loomis (high school)

My students have experienced displacement due to natural disasters, work forty hours per week on top of a full high school schedule, face extreme poverty and language barriers—and read international law statutes for our mock trial, and analyze literature at an Advanced Placement level.

I am able to support my students’ social-emotional needs while holding high academic expectations for them thanks to habits and skills I’ve learned in TFYBS. I regularly practice reflective writing, try

to align all my decisions with my “prime directive,” and model positive messaging.

One morning I was emphatically not in my best teaching self, stressed about some big changes coming from the district. I’d had no time during the school day to prep for classes; safety drills and other interruptions had left me feeling overwhelmed, frustrated, and stretched thin. I hit my breaking point.

Instead of crying alone in my classroom (my previous coping strategy), I did some reflective journaling about my emotions. We do weekly circles in my class where students name their emotions, discuss self-regulation strategies, and give and receive positive messages. In the circle that day, I shared what I was feeling and listened to my students’ positive messages for me and for each other.

Thanks to TFYBS, I had the skills to respond to circumstances outside of my control without feeling powerless. Rather than leaving school too tired to do anything other than go to bed, I left rejuvenated and reminded of why I teach: to create a classroom community that supports students’ high academic engagement and nurtures everyone’s well-being.

Jeremy Krull (middle school)

I student-taught online during the pandemic and began teaching in 2021 in the aftermath of COVID. I joined TFYBS because I knew I would need every advantage to keep myself from burning out.

I won’t lie. My first year would have been rough even without the shockwaves from COVID, which seemed to radically mutate those student behaviors that we’d discussed in my teacher-ed program. My students were just trying to survive after having their social-educational environment torn asunder. It was almost...feral. I would have

thrown in the towel without TFYBS. No matter how hard the day, no matter how astonishing the behavior, I could leave work and not feel exhausted. I handled the stress with resilience that made many of my colleagues comment that it seemed I had been teaching for much longer than a year.

One student emphatically stated it was his mission to make my first year unbearable. Utilizing the skills from TFYBS, I was able to engage with him in a way that was authentic, facing his disruptive behavior with grace and radical acceptance; I didn’t let him push me over, nor did I give into the stress in a way that would damage my psyche. Eventually I forged a relationship that gained his trust and eliminated the serious behavioral issues.

With TFYBS as the bedrock foundation of my career, I’ve been able to approach teaching with resilience. When I am in my best self, I am able to help my students. Without TFYBS, my first year might have easily been my last.

Kim Neiswanger (elementary)

The pandemic years were tough for all students. Teachers are now left to add “psychologist” to our job description; this added role brought me to my breaking point. I had hit burnout and was ready to find a new career. As a last effort to save my job and sanity, I enrolled in TFYBS and I fell in love with teaching again.

I had a first-grade student who was having a hard time adapting to the classroom environment. One day, he emphatically told me he was not going to do his seatwork. I called him to my desk to help him, but he had already shut down and was unteachable. I started to get frustrated, and then remembered a technique I had learned in TFYBS. I needed to take a “cool pause,” and this student did as well.

I asked him to go back to his seat. When he was ready, he could come back up to ask for help. He went back to his seat and sat, very angry, looking at his paper. I took a drink of water and a few deep breaths. After about five minutes, his demeanor completely changed. He came back up and asked if I would help him. I explained that he'd been angry and unteachable the first time he came to my desk, and I'd been getting frustrated. If we'd continued that way, we both would feel awful, and nothing would be accomplished. He cocked his head, let out a little sigh, and agreed. I'd stayed in my best self, which allowed him to stay in his best self—and ultimately allowed my class to stay in their best selves. It was a win-win-win situation.

Implications

Teach from Your Best Self provides an example of the power of holistic professional development that focuses on teachers as whole social and emotional human beings, offering them the potential to transform their (and in turn their students') classroom experience. Unfortunately, the focus on supporting who teachers *are*, rather than what they ought to *do* in the classroom, is far from the norm in our current professional-development landscape.

TFYBS demonstrates that when teachers are able to remain in their best selves in stressful situations, they can consistently turn challenging classroom situations into pivotal moments of possibility and change. Conversely, if teachers are not able to remain in their best selves, even acclaimed curricula, instructional processes, classroom-management techniques, or behavioral programs will fall short of their promise. Equipping teachers with approaches to remain in—and respond from—their best selves cultivates teacher wellbeing, in turn boosting teachers' agency to create classroom environments where students can thrive and

learn, and retaining teachers who might otherwise leave the profession.

Administrators know, of course, that “when professional development is done well, it provides an opportunity for teachers to grow their knowledge and sharpen their skills, which can lead to better student outcomes” (Schwartz, 2023). *Knowledge* and *skills*, however, often remain limited to content knowledge and instructional practices, not teachers' self-knowledge and social-emotional proficiency. Content knowledge and the pedagogical skills to share that knowledge with students are, of course, vital aspects of teachers' professional learning throughout their careers. But data emerging from TFYBS suggests that professional-learning offerings for teachers should include foundational, holistic learning experiences—those focused on teachers' self-knowledge and their ability to relate productively to others even in stressful, challenging situations.

More studies are needed to explore the impact of teacher wellbeing on student outcomes, both SEL-related and academic. There is a particular need for studies that demonstrate the value of “relational strategies” (Haines et al., 2022) as a key pedagogical skill with significant payback in terms of student outcomes and teacher retention, and for studies that explore the impact of teachers' social-emotional wellbeing on their ability to enact those relational strategies with a strong sense of agency. Our experience with TFYBS points to the importance and the promise of such empirical studies in order to refocus professional learning holistically: on the wellbeing and agency of the professionals themselves.

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Resources for Teacher Wellbeing

Character Strong <https://characterstrong.com/>
CREATE for Education
<https://createforeducation.org/>
Educators Thriving:
<https://www.educatorsthiving.org>
Happy Teacher Revolution
<https://www.happyteacherrevolution.com/>
Onward <https://www.onwardthebook.com/>
Panorama Education
<https://www.panoramaed.com/>
Teach from Your Best Self
<https://www.teachfromyourbestself.org/>

Author Bios

Margaret Perrow is a professor of English and English Education at Southern Oregon University (SOU). As director of the Oregon Writing Project at SOU, she designs and facilitates professional learning opportunities for K-16 teachers. She is the author of *A Hidden History of Youth Development in South Africa: Learning in Transition* (Routledge, 2021).

Jay Schroder is a 24-year veteran in the classroom and currently works as an educator trainer/coach/mentor with the Southern Oregon Regional Educator Network. He is the author of *Teach from Your Best Self: A Teacher's Guide to Thriving in the Classroom* (Routledge, 2023).

Jeremy Krull has taught 8th grade language arts in Oregon for 2 years. He currently teaches at a middle school in Roseburg, Oregon where he sees, every day, the inherent connection between teacher wellbeing and student success.

Maureen Loomis has been a tutor, teacher, and teacher-trainer for over a decade, working in classrooms in California, Oregon, and Liberia. She teaches AP Literature, English, Civics, and World History to juniors and seniors at a Title I high school in a semi-rural school district in southern Oregon.

Kaylin Carpenter has taught 3rd grade in Oregon for four years. As a new teacher who has already experienced burnout and seen the effect that it can have on students, she is passionate about teacher retention and the importance of teacher wellbeing.

Kim Neiswanger has taught kindergarten through third grade for 14 years. She teaches at a small rural K-8 school in southern Oregon.

Haley Martin-Sherman teaches English at Rogue Community College. She has also taught high school English in southern Oregon.

Sunshine Perry has taught high school mathematics for 11 years. She currently teaches Algebra 2 and AP Statistics, and provides dual credit through Rogue Community College and Southern Oregon University.