

Nurturing the Nurturers: A Review of Preschool Teachers' Well-Being

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Abstract

The early childhood years constitute a critical period of development in which children establish the foundations for cognitive, social, emotional, physical, and language development. Preschool teachers play a significant role in creating responsive, stimulating, and emotionally secure learning environments for young children. However, the well-being of preschool teachers has received comparatively less attention than the well-being and developmental needs of children. Teaching young children is emotionally demanding and requires patience, creativity, continuous engagement, effective communication, classroom management, and collaboration with families. In addition, teachers may experience workload pressures, inadequate remuneration, limited professional recognition, insufficient resources, role ambiguity, and challenges associated with maintaining work-life balance. These factors can adversely affect teachers' physical, psychological, social, and professional well-being and may subsequently influence the quality of teacher-child interactions and early childhood learning environments.

The present review examines the concept of preschool teacher well-being, factors influencing it, its relationship with professional functioning, and strategies for promoting teacher well-being. The review highlights the importance of supportive leadership, professional development, collegial relationships, manageable workloads, recognition, autonomy, mentoring, and institutional wellness initiatives. It also emphasizes that teacher well-being should not be viewed merely as an individual responsibility but as a shared responsibility involving educational institutions, administrators, teacher-education institutions, families, and policymakers. Nurturing preschool teachers is essential for developing sustainable, responsive, and high-quality early childhood education systems.

Keywords: Preschool teachers, teacher well-being, early childhood education, occupational stress, burnout, professional well-being, emotional well-being, teacher support

1. Introduction

Early childhood is widely recognized as a significant stage of human development. Experiences during the early years influence children's subsequent learning, relationships, behaviour, emotional regulation, and overall development. Preschool education provides children with opportunities to explore, communicate, interact with peers, develop independence, and acquire foundational skills in a safe and stimulating environment.

At the centre of this process is the preschool teacher. The preschool teacher is not merely a provider of academic instruction. Rather, the teacher assumes multiple roles as caregiver, facilitator, observer,

communicator, role model, classroom manager, and partner to families. Young children require responsive adults who can recognize individual differences, understand developmental needs, respond sensitively to emotions, and provide opportunities for learning through play and exploration.

The quality of early childhood education is therefore closely associated with the quality of interactions between teachers and children. Research on early childhood education has repeatedly emphasized the importance of responsive and emotionally supportive teacher–child interactions. However, teachers cannot consistently provide emotionally responsive care and education if their own emotional and professional needs remain unaddressed.

The concept of teacher well-being has consequently gained increasing attention. Well-being is multidimensional and includes physical, psychological, emotional, social, and professional dimensions. For preschool teachers, well-being is particularly important because their work involves sustained emotional engagement and close interpersonal interaction with young children and their families.

The present review focuses on the question: How can preschool teachers be nurtured so that they themselves experience well-being while nurturing the development of young children?

2. Rationale for the Review

Much attention in early childhood education has traditionally been directed toward children's nutrition, health, development, learning outcomes, school readiness, and safety. Although these areas are essential, the adults who provide early childhood care and education are equally important.

Preschool teachers frequently work in environments characterized by multiple and sometimes competing expectations. They are expected to plan activities, manage classrooms, observe children's development, communicate with parents, maintain records, participate in institutional activities, and respond to individual children's needs. In some settings, these responsibilities may be accompanied by limited resources, inadequate preparation time, low remuneration, or insufficient professional recognition.

The emotional dimension of working with young children should also be acknowledged. Preschool teachers frequently regulate their own emotions while responding to children's crying, conflicts, separation anxiety, challenging behaviour, and individual developmental needs. Continuous emotional labour may become a source of stress when adequate support is unavailable.

Teacher well-being is therefore not simply an issue of personal comfort. It has implications for teacher motivation, job satisfaction, retention, classroom quality, relationships with children, and the broader quality of early childhood education.

Understanding Preschool Teacher Well-Being

Well-being is a multidimensional construct rather than the absence of stress or illness. It involves the ability of individuals to function effectively, experience positive emotions, maintain meaningful relationships, manage challenges, and experience a sense of purpose and professional fulfilment.

1 Physical Well-Being

Physical well-being includes adequate sleep, nutrition, physical activity, rest, and appropriate working conditions. Preschool teaching can involve considerable physical activity, including standing, moving around the classroom, assisting children, preparing learning materials, and participating in outdoor activities.

Inadequate opportunities for rest and excessive workload may contribute to physical fatigue. Consequently, institutional arrangements should provide teachers with reasonable working hours, appropriate breaks, safe classrooms, and adequate physical facilities.

2 Psychological and Emotional Well-Being

Psychological well-being involves emotional stability, self-confidence, resilience, positive self-perception, and the ability to manage occupational challenges.

Preschool teachers may experience stress arising from classroom management, parental expectations, workload, professional uncertainty, and limited resources. When stress becomes persistent and is accompanied by emotional exhaustion, it may contribute to burnout.

Promoting emotional well-being requires more than occasional wellness programmes. Teachers need psychologically safe workplaces where they can discuss challenges without fear of blame or judgment.

3 Social Well-Being

Teaching is inherently relational. Preschool teachers interact with children, colleagues, administrators, parents, and other professionals. Supportive relationships can serve as important protective factors.

A culture of collaboration and collegiality can provide teachers with opportunities to share experiences, discuss classroom challenges, exchange ideas, and obtain emotional support.

4 Professional Well-Being

Professional well-being relates to teachers' sense of competence, autonomy, recognition, professional identity, job satisfaction, and opportunities for development.

Teachers are more likely to experience professional fulfilment when they believe that their work is meaningful and valued. Opportunities to participate in decision-making and professional development can strengthen teachers' sense of agency and competence.

Challenges Affecting Preschool Teachers' Well-Being

1 Workload

Workload is one of the important factors influencing teacher well-being. Preschool teachers' responsibilities extend beyond classroom teaching. Planning, documentation, assessment, communication with parents, preparation of teaching-learning materials, institutional activities, and administrative responsibilities may add to their workload.

When workload becomes excessive, teachers may have limited opportunities for reflection, preparation, and recovery.

2 Emotional Demands of Teaching Young Children

Young children are developing their emotional regulation and social skills. Preschool teachers therefore need to respond sensitively to children's fears, frustration, conflicts, separation anxiety, and challenging behaviour.

This requires sustained emotional engagement. Teachers may need to remain calm and supportive even when they themselves are tired or stressed.

3 Classroom Management

Managing a group of young children requires continuous attention. Differences in temperament, developmental level, language ability, behaviour, and learning needs can make classroom management demanding.

Teachers require training in positive behaviour guidance, developmentally appropriate practice, and inclusive classroom strategies rather than relying primarily on disciplinary approaches.

4 Parent–Teacher Relationships

Parents are important partners in early childhood education. However, differences between parental expectations and teachers' professional understanding may occasionally create tension.

Teachers may experience pressure to demonstrate visible academic outcomes even when developmentally appropriate preschool education emphasizes play, exploration, social interaction, language development, and holistic development.

Constructive communication and shared understanding between families and teachers can reduce such tensions.

5 Professional Recognition

The work of preschool teachers is sometimes undervalued because early childhood education is perceived primarily as care rather than as a specialized educational field.

Such perceptions may affect professional identity, remuneration, career progression, and social recognition. Strengthening the professional status of early childhood educators is therefore an important component of teacher well-being.

6 Limited Professional Development

Preschool education is continually evolving. Teachers require knowledge of child development, inclusive education, play-based pedagogy, observation, assessment, technology, family engagement, and social-emotional learning.

Professional development should therefore be continuous rather than limited to occasional training programmes.

7 Work–Life Balance

The boundary between professional and personal responsibilities can become blurred when teachers undertake preparation and documentation beyond working hours.

A healthy work–life balance requires realistic expectations, adequate planning time, workload management, and institutional support.

Teacher Well-Being and Quality of Early Childhood Education

Teacher well-being and educational quality are closely interconnected. A teacher experiencing emotional exhaustion may find it more difficult to sustain patience, responsiveness, creativity, and positive interactions.

Conversely, teachers who experience supportive working environments may be better positioned to establish warm and responsive relationships with children.

The relationship can therefore be understood as a cycle:

Supportive Work Environment → Teacher Well-Being → Positive Teacher–Child Interactions → Better Learning Environment → Positive Child Development

This relationship does not imply that teacher well-being alone determines children's outcomes. Children's development is influenced by multiple factors, including family, community, socioeconomic conditions, educational resources, and individual characteristics. Nevertheless, teacher well-being represents an important component of the quality of the educational environment.

Nurturing the Nurturers: Strategies for Promoting Teacher Well-Being**1 Supportive Leadership**

Institutional leadership has an important role in shaping teachers' experiences at work. Administrators can promote well-being by encouraging open communication, recognizing teachers' contributions, providing constructive feedback, and responding sensitively to professional concerns.

Leadership should move beyond supervision and compliance toward support, mentoring, and professional empowerment.

2 Mentoring and Peer Support

Beginning preschool teachers may particularly benefit from mentoring by experienced educators. Peer-support groups can provide opportunities to share experiences, solve problems collaboratively, and develop professional confidence.

Regular professional learning communities can also help reduce professional isolation.

3 Continuous Professional Development

Professional development should be relevant, practical, and continuous. Areas may include:

- Child development
- Play-based learning
- Classroom management
- Inclusive education
- Social-emotional development
- Observation and documentation
- Communication with families
- Conflict resolution
- Digital literacy
- Teacher self-care and resilience

Professional development should also allow teachers to reflect on their own practice rather than merely receiving information.

4 Reasonable Workload

Institutions should periodically examine teachers' responsibilities and identify tasks that can be streamlined, shared, or digitized.

Adequate planning time should be considered part of teachers' professional work rather than an additional responsibility.

5 Recognition and Appreciation

Recognition can contribute significantly to professional morale. Appreciation need not always take the form of financial incentives. Acknowledgement of teachers' creativity, commitment, innovation, classroom practices, and contributions to institutional development can strengthen professional identity.

6 Teacher Autonomy

Teachers should have opportunities to make appropriate professional decisions concerning classroom activities, teaching strategies, learning materials, and approaches to individual children's needs.

Professional autonomy can strengthen teachers' sense of competence and ownership.

7 Emotional Support and Counselling

Institutions can provide access to confidential counselling or employee assistance services where feasible. Workshops on stress management, emotional regulation, mindfulness, and resilience may also be useful. However, wellness initiatives should complement—not replace—organizational changes addressing workload, resources, remuneration, and working conditions.

8 Creating a Culture of Collegiality

A positive institutional culture can be developed through collaborative planning, staff meetings focused on problem-solving, informal interaction, peer appreciation, and shared professional learning.

Teachers should feel that they are part of a professional community rather than isolated individuals carrying individual responsibilities.

9 Family Engagement

Strong teacher–family relationships can reduce misunderstandings and promote shared responsibility for children's development.

Institutions can support teachers by developing clear communication systems, parent orientation programmes, and guidelines for constructive parent–teacher interaction.

The Indian Context

The importance of early childhood care and education has received increasing policy attention in India. The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 places strong emphasis on Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) and recognizes the foundational importance of the early years.

The implementation of ECCE requires adequately prepared and supported personnel. Teachers and educators working with young children need appropriate knowledge, skills, resources, and professional support.

The Indian context is diverse. Preschool education is delivered through multiple settings, including anganwadi centres, private preschools, nursery and kindergarten sections of schools, and other early childhood education centres. Teachers' working conditions, qualifications, responsibilities, remuneration, and access to professional development may vary substantially across these settings.

Consequently, strategies for promoting teacher well-being should be context-sensitive. A uniform approach may not adequately address the realities of teachers working in different institutional and socioeconomic environments.

There is a need for more systematic research examining the well-being of preschool teachers in India, including their occupational stress, professional identity, job satisfaction, emotional demands, workload, support systems, and access to professional development.

Institutional Responsibility for Teacher Well-Being

Teacher well-being should not be viewed solely as an individual's responsibility. Advising teachers to practise self-care while leaving excessive workload or inadequate institutional support unchanged may have limited impact.

A comprehensive approach should operate at three levels.

1 Individual Level

Teachers can be encouraged to develop:

- Self-awareness
- Emotional regulation
- Healthy routines
- Reflective practice
- Professional learning
- Social support networks

2 Institutional Level

Educational institutions can provide:

- Supportive leadership
- Manageable workloads
- Adequate resources
- Professional development
- Mentoring
- Recognition
- Collaborative work environments
- Access to counselling and wellness programmes

3 Policy Level

Policymakers can contribute through:

- Appropriate qualification frameworks
- Professional development opportunities
- Adequate staffing
- Reasonable working conditions
- Professional recognition
- Quality standards for ECCE settings
- Research-based teacher-support policies

A sustainable approach requires coordination among all three levels.

Research Gaps

The review indicates several areas that require further investigation.

First, more empirical studies are required on preschool teachers' well-being in the Indian context. Much of the available discussion on teacher well-being has focused on school teachers or broader educational populations.

Second, research should examine the relationship between specific workplace factors and teacher well-being. Variables such as workload, teacher–child ratio, salary, professional autonomy, leadership style, parental expectations, and institutional resources can be examined systematically.

Third, intervention research is needed. Studies should investigate whether mentoring, mindfulness programmes, peer-support groups, professional learning communities, workload interventions, and organizational wellness programmes produce measurable improvements in teacher well-being.

Fourth, research should examine the relationship between teacher well-being and children's experiences. Longitudinal studies could provide greater insight into how changes in teacher well-being influence teacher–child interactions, classroom climate, and children's social-emotional development.

Finally, greater attention should be given to the voices of preschool teachers themselves. Qualitative research can provide valuable insight into how teachers understand well-being, what challenges they experience, and what forms of institutional support they consider meaningful.

Implications for Early Childhood Education

The review has several implications for preschool education.

1 For preschool administrators: Teacher well-being should be incorporated into institutional planning and quality-assurance processes.

2 For teacher educators: Teacher preparation programmes should address not only pedagogical competencies but also emotional resilience, reflective practice, communication, and professional well-being.

3 For policymakers: Policies concerning ECCE should consider the conditions under which teachers and educators work.

4 For preschool teachers: Self-care, reflective practice, peer collaboration, and continuing professional learning can contribute to professional well-being.

5 For families: Parents can contribute to teacher well-being by developing respectful, collaborative relationships with preschool educators and recognizing the professional nature of early childhood education.

3. Conclusion

Preschool teachers are among the most important adults in children's early educational experiences. They nurture children's curiosity, communication, emotional development, social competence, and emerging independence. Yet the individuals responsible for nurturing young children also require nurturing themselves.

Teacher well-being is multidimensional and encompasses physical, emotional, psychological, social, and professional dimensions. Excessive workload, emotional demands, classroom management challenges,

limited resources, insufficient recognition, inadequate professional development, and work–life imbalance may undermine this well-being.

Promoting preschool teacher well-being requires a shift from an individualistic understanding of self-care toward a broader culture of institutional care. Supportive leadership, professional autonomy, meaningful recognition, collegial relationships, mentoring, continuous professional development, manageable workloads, and access to emotional support can contribute to healthier professional environments.

The conclusion of this review is : the quality of care and education provided to young children is inseparable from the well-being of the adults who care for and educate them.

Nurturing the nurturers is not an additional component of quality early childhood education; it is an essential foundation of it.

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