

An Exploration of Why Languages Teachers in Germany and in England Stay in Teaching: To What Extent Is Wellbeing a Reason?

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Abstract: In this article, I discuss reasons why languages teachers stay in teaching. A former languages teacher myself, I believe that language teaching poses particular challenges in the classroom context. The teachers who are the focus of this bicultural study comprise ten teachers from schools in Lower Saxony and Hamburg, and ten in the Greater London area. Given the attention in research on teachers who leave or wish to leave, it seems apt to look at reasons that attract and keep teachers in the profession. My main interest is to see if, and to what extent, wellbeing could be a factor for teachers to remain in the profession. I used a questionnaire to ask the teachers about their reasons for staying, about the challenges they face and what might, ultimately, cause them to leave or, at least, contemplate leaving. Despite differences in the German and English contexts, some common core beliefs emerge from the teachers' responses, such as the enjoyment of working with students, commitment to language teaching, creative opportunities and autonomy in their work. These beliefs promote job satisfaction and wellbeing and can, in a positively charged environment, contribute to resolve problematic issues.

Keywords: staying teachers, students, languages, creativity, autonomy, wellbeing



1 Introduction

The focus of this article is about what makes teachers stay in teaching rather than leave. The article was fuelled by two main considerations. The first is to note that it is teachers who leave teaching who make for newsworthiness, media headlines and panic-strobed rhetoric. This is the case in the UK where retention of staff is problematic (Foster, 2018) as well as in Germany, where research conducted by the *Verband für Bildung und Erziehung* (VBE, 2019) found that, according to a baseline assessment need of teachers, every 9th teacher was deemed to be missing. Teachers who stay remain in the shade, quietly getting on with what they do, a matter of course, not attracting much attention and certainly not the media spotlight. The second consideration stems from my own personal positioning as a stayer. I identify in many ways with the subjects of this research, having taught for 16 years in the same secondary school in England. I have also enjoyed observing language lessons in many schools in Germany over the years. As a teacher, I was committed to seeing students through to the end of their schooling and never really thought about leaving.

These two factors led me to conduct a research into staying teachers and to shine a light on their reasons for staying. Much of the existing research on teacher retention focuses on the reasons why teachers leave (e.g. Struyven & Vanthournout, 2014), but there still remains limited research exploring the reasons why teachers stay in the profession. Turning the focus on why teachers stay can be more productive in order to better understand the conditions that encourage individuals to remain in teaching and what it is that nourishes ‘staying power’ (Towers, 2017).

2 Staying in the profession

First, it is important to clarify the definition of the key term used in this article – the notion of the ‘staying teacher’. The concept of the ‘stayer’ is complex and contested according to, for example, Smithers and Robinson (2003), and no general agreement is in evidence about how long a teacher must serve to qualify as being a stayer. Furthermore, there is no agreement as to whether a stayer must have remained in one school, or can have taught in a number of schools over a period of time. Returns to teaching after a career break and/or maternity leave further muddy the waters of the definition. There is, however, *some* agreement that stayers will have served at least five consecutive years in teaching (Bubb & Earley, 2007; Johnson & Birkeland, 2003) and it is this definition I use.

Whilst material factors such as location, pay and security will always impact decisions to stay or leave, I was concerned with how well teachers feel (or not) in their jobs and how these considerations influence their decisions to stay. The emotionality of teaching is much understated (Hargreaves, 1998) and yet, given the constant interactions with others, be they students, colleagues, leaders and others, emotions often provoke behaviours and decisions and frame our state of wellbeing (Sann & Preiser, 2016). Wellbeing is increasingly a widespread issue of concern on the global mental health agenda and a focus of research according to Dodge, Paly, Huyton and Lalage (2012). Furthermore, the wellbeing agenda is starting to gain traction in considering teacher retention and the ever growing pressure on teachers (Yougov with ESP, 2018).

It is for this reason that this article focuses on responses from teachers to understand how teachers feel about their staying decisions, in spite of the pressures. In what ways wellbeing is seen to be central to decisions is a main point of focus and radically opposite to the endless attention given to teachers’ ‘illbeing’, as Kern, Waters, Adler and White (2014, p. 501) put it. Their core approach to defining the wellbeing of teachers identifies three factors: ‘physical health’ – being in good health and thus able to cope with the challenges that teaching presents –, ‘life satisfaction’ – having a reasonable work-life

balance – and ‘professional thriving’ – having opportunities for professional development and positive engagement in the job.

The teachers’ insights into their personalised professional trajectories present an interesting combination of personal and professional identities and express wellbeing, and some illbeing, in their different contexts. Klusmann and Waschke (2018), in addition, point out that each individual teacher’s context varies according to personal conditions: health, home, age, energy levels and school environment.

3 The context of the study

The Anglo-German context framing this article relates to a long-standing connection between the University of Bielefeld and King’s College London that has generated research and collegial collaboration over many years. The bilingual and bicultural context has proved to be very fruitful in promoting intercultural understanding and in pollinating joint research projects, e.g. on Special Educational Needs support, teachers as researchers and teacher development.

In the vein of continuing collaboration, this article explores staying teachers and the reasons why they stay in the profession in both countries. Whilst no direct comparison is intended nor valid, given the differences between Germany and England – for example, training (average five years in Germany, the common one post-graduate year in the UK), teachers’ placements (centrally placed in Germany, individual application to schools by teachers in the UK), and job security (civil servant security in Germany, no security for UK teachers), to name just three – I was, even so, seeking insights that might have transcultural value in both contexts about reasons for which teachers ‘stay’. Another factor was the consideration that teaching languages represents a huge challenge to teachers in England, given the evident lack of need since English is considered the lingua franca of most of the world. School students need quite some persuasion that languages can be not just useful but life-enhancing, and government initiatives such as the inclusion of languages in a Baccalaureate type qualification (the English EBacc) that includes a language in 16+ examinations have not helped. German school students have the advantage of seeing the obvious need and thus might, arguably but not necessarily, accord the language learning experience some greater value.

Education policy reforms in the UK with a plethora of initiatives have led to the intensification of workload and greater accountability that has impacted wellbeing and cited as a key reason for teachers leaving the profession as mentioned previously in the Yougov with ESP (Educational Support Partnership) 2018 Wellbeing Index. In Germany, over recent years, there have been many policy changes impacting training, class size, diversity of intake and the inclusion agenda as reported by the OECD (2014) that have added to teacher stress, as detailed by headteachers (ZEIT online, 2019). In both countries, an increasingly diverse intake of children has necessitated a greater focus on inclusion and diversity and has created a need to rethink the pedagogical implications for languages teaching to diverse students (Extra & Gorter, 2001). Against this changing policy context, languages teachers appear as impassioned and committed as practitioners as ever, whatever context they work in, and are generally a hardy group of individuals, driven by their passion to spread their love of languages.

4 The rationale for the study

The key question for this research was to ask a small number of practising teachers ($n = 20$) why they have stayed in teaching. My suspicion behind this exploration was that various factors would come to light and supersede any vague notion of basic job satisfaction or, conversely, any sense of ‘being trapped’ – for it is important to recognise that not every (languages) teacher is happy in their job and some teachers are trapped in their jobs circumstantially. Every teacher will have travelled their individual, professional and personal journey in their decision to stay and it was the nuances of those journeys (to be revealed in their responses) that I was interested in.

This was a small-scale study that, nonetheless, needed an epistemological basis, a structure and an analytical lens. My epistemology is interpretive in that I wanted to understand and be empathetic towards the subjective worlds of experiences and explanations of the teachers. I believe that knowledge is not static but always emerging and transitional. Thus, I favoured a mainly qualitative approach, especially to the interpretation of the responses to the open-ended questions. I started by establishing basic details of time staying in teaching, age range and gender of the respondents. I kept a focus on unearthing factors that emerge as underpinning the staying power of the respondents, ensuring my natural empathy, given my own teaching experience, did not cloud an objective analysis of the teachers’ responses.

4.1 The sample

Ten teachers who have stayed in teaching in Germany and ten in England for a minimum of five years were asked to fill in a questionnaire about their reasons for staying. A questionnaire was used as it was relatively easy to collect information of the kind needed and straightforward to analyse (Birmingham & Wilkinson, 2003). As well as providing basic data about their ‘staying’ time, participants were asked to comment as much as they liked on their reasons for staying and what factors might cause them to leave, for leaving is the other side of the coin of staying and can easily be flipped. The teachers were selected on a purposive convenience sample basis, drawing on connections of mine and a teacher-researcher colleague in Germany who administered the questionnaires for the German teachers. The English teachers were all in different schools in either central or outer London. The German teachers were in different schools in Hamburg and in medium size towns in Lower Saxony. Purposive convenience according to Punch (1998, p. 193) refers to taking advantage of “cases, events, or informants, which are close at hand”. Such handpicking of participants was done “on the basis of [...] judgement of their typicality or possession of the particular characteristics being sought” (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2011, p. 156). The languages teachers in my sample had to fulfil one key criterion: they needed to have stayed in teaching for at least five years. The English teachers taught French/German/Spanish and the German teachers taught English/French/German as a foreign language. The 20 teachers were aged between 27 and 62 and were mainly women. Only one male was represented (just by chance, but perhaps reflecting the gender imbalance of languages teachers). The teachers had been in post between 7 and 29 years. See below for details of the teachers and their code (cp. table 1).

Table 1: Teacher codes and details of experience in languages teaching

A (teachers from Germany)			
Teacher code	Years teaching	No. of schools	Languages taught
G1	10	1	E
G2	25	3	E
G3	6	2	E
G4	7	1	E
G5	15	3	E GFL
G6	29	3	E
G7	10	1	E
G8	8	4	E GFL
G9	27	2	E
G10	12	2	F
B (teachers from England)			
Teacher code	Years teaching	No. of schools	Languages taught
E1	7	1	F Sp
E2	14	1	F
E3	17	4	F G
E4	18	3	F Sp
E5	26	5	F G
E6	16	3	F
E7	6	3	F Sp
E8	5	1	F Sp
E9	17	2	F Sp
E10	8	2	Sp

Annotation: Languages key: E = English; F = French; G = German; Sp = Spanish; GF = German as a Foreign Language.

All the teachers who became involved did so willingly and expressed satisfaction in the interest being shown in their 'staying'. As one English teacher, E7, said: "*No-one asks us why we stay; all they are interested in is if we are planning to leave*". A typical end of questionnaire comment was (from a German teacher, G6): "*It was a pleasure to talk and to help*".

4.2 The questionnaire and data analysis

The questionnaire (see appendix of this article) comprised eight questions and was sent by email to the chosen teachers as described above. The only fact known about the teachers in advance was that they had been in post for at least five years. The first two questions aimed to establish key bio-facts. The next six were open questions about staying and potentially leaving. These questions were designed to elicit and probe in depth reasons for staying and for staying in spite of difficulties and the nature of these difficulties,

also to probe what would cause the teachers to leave and what strategies they employed to make them stay, and finally to secure insights as to the teachers' motivations as stayers.

The interviews were analysed on an open-coding basis, on hard copy documents. Coding is the first step in the analysis of data and is "nothing more than the assignment of some sort of short hand designation to data" according to Merriam (2009, p. 173). The initial coding entailed a simple process of colour-coding and underlining of any phrase that I thought significant such as anything repeated or 'quotable'. For question number 3, for example, codes concerning enjoyment of working with pupils, love of languages, variety, and the creative aspects of language teaching stood out. I thus highlighted anything that seemed to address my key question about staying until the point of saturation when no further codes could be found, all the while noting cultural nuances and possible interpretations in line with the view of Cohen et al. (2011) of the inevitability of the coding process as interpretive. I used the lens of wellbeing as an analytical tool, with reference to Kern's three dimensions – 'physical health', 'life satisfaction' and 'professional thriving' (Kern et al., 2014) – as frames to support the process. The emerging codes were then grouped into larger themes for each group of teachers – English and German teachers – that constitute the findings discussed thematically below. The themes that emerged for both groups of teachers were:

- enjoyment in working with students;
- commitment to languages and language teaching;
- variety and autonomy (for the German teachers), autonomy and variety (for the English teachers).

The themes were very similar but with some differences as would be expected given two different contexts and the use of two languages that did not however cause any conceptual difficulties. I discuss separately the findings first for the German teachers, then for the English teachers, since they provide internally coherent narratives of each context.

Following the two narratives, I then reflect on the responses overall in terms of the wellbeing focus before moving to a conclusion.

5 Findings

First of all, findings from the German teachers will be presented, then the themes analysed from the English teachers will be shown.

5.1 Themes of the German teachers

The German teachers were from two areas, unconnected and not knowing each other apart from two teachers in the same school in Hamburg. There were some clear points of convergence in their responses, half of which were written in German and the other half, interestingly, in English and which are reproduced verbatim.

5.1.1 Enjoyment in working with students

The teachers reported unanimously that they very much enjoyed their work with students, in spite of the presence of some challenging students. For the main part, their comments were unequivocal: "*I always stay because I love my job and because of the kids not the conditions*" (G1). Another teacher commented on the energising influence of the students: "*The pupils I have ever met since I started give me energy and incentive*"; "*As a fact, I feel I am the one learning most in a single day*" (G6). In the same vein, a teacher commented that "*[s]haring knowledge and skills with young people is so rewarding, to do it as a job is a pleasure*" (G8). Such learning is fun, asserted another teacher: "*Der Spaß am Unterricht, die Kinder, dass ich selbst noch etwas lernen kann – keine Langweile*" (G9). Satisfaction in student progress in their language knowledge is

emphasised by another teacher: *“The main reason [for staying] are the kids. I teach kids between 10 and 18 years old and it’s great fun to watch them in their development. When a kid comes to me during break and asks to tell me something in English [...]”* (G1). Teaching gives opportunities to work with students from all backgrounds, wrote one teacher: *“I can work with children, adolescents and adults. The students are different in terms of their ethnolinguistic backgrounds, their learning trajectories and their personalities so it does not get boring at all”* (G6).

Such comments reflect the inherent enjoyment of the job that teachers experience where the students are at the centre of the job, where teachers learn something from the students, find the student progress satisfying and, above all, enjoy their subject teaching.

5.1.2 Commitment to languages and language teaching

Language teaching is performative and expressive in a way that reflects teachers’ deeply felt cultural and linguistic identities. One teacher specified these aspects: *“Großes Interesse an den fachlichen Aspekten – Sprachen, Kulturen”* (G3). The following teachers’ comments on their love of languages was typical: *“Die Leidenschaft für das Unterrichten, da mir das Unterrichten Spaß macht”* (G5); *“I simply love languages teaching”* (G6). The personal enjoyment of the subject extends to the satisfaction of seeing the students making progress and in using one’s teaching skills to enable student learning: *“It is a challenge to try to meet everyone’s needs and to make the lessons interesting, fun, and rewarding”* (G1). One teacher had a particular way of meeting the challenge: *“I often behave like a pantomime and act a lot to get them to understand and enjoy. I praise a lot”* (G1). Another teacher asserted that there was nothing as good as language teaching whatever the context: *“I could change the school, change the place and country but I believe I would always enjoy teaching a language”* (G8). One teacher claimed she was *“born to teach”* (G6), and another wrote that she had harboured the ambition for a long time: *“I decided to become a teacher at the age of 15 when I went abroad as an exchange student and realised that language is the key to everything”* (G10).

Lest the picture seem too rosy, it is apposite to cite the following teacher on language learning; *“Vor allem hinsichtlich des Vokabellernens und der Einübung der Grammatik eine Katastrophe, stete Herausforderung die Schüler zu motivieren”* (G4), but this even so from a teacher who wanted to stay in her job. Some of the other teachers also commented on lack of student motivation and their role in motivating learners. This did not seem to be a hindrance to overall job satisfaction.

5.1.3 Variety and autonomy

The potential variety that teaching generates was a major theme emerging, and was specifically mentioned in 8 of the 10 questionnaires from the German teachers: *“Es gibt viele unterschiedliche Möglichkeiten”* (G7), for example, or this statement from another colleague on the different courses she used: *“Die abwechslungsreiche Arbeit, denn jeder Kurs ist anders”* (G5). Another teacher liked the different teaching methods she could use: *“Abwechslungsreiche Methoden”*, but within a framework: *“aber auch feste Strukturen”* (G4). One teacher referenced *“Die Vielfalt des Berufs”* (G3), in relation to the different age ranges of the pupils. Yet another emphasised the creative aspect of such variety: *“Der Arbeitsort und das kreative Basteln sind die Hauptmotivationen”* (G9). The next teacher referenced the variety of cultural backgrounds of the students that she found enjoyable: *“Interessante Tätigkeit mit Menschen aus verschiedenen Kulturen”* (G2). Variety, then, can be seen to relate to tasks, resources, different groups of pupils, different cultural backgrounds, but above all the opportunity to choose freely how to teach: *“Außerdem ist die Arbeit kreativ und bietet eine gewisse Freiheit, wie man Inhalte umsetzen und vermitteln kann”* (G5). In very practical terms, one teacher translates the creative process thus: *“I particularly enjoy the ‘mode’ of teaching; I don’t spend eight hours each day with the same students. Instead I have 90 or 135 minute lessons and after*

teaching I can reflect on the lesson, plan the next one, try to improve something, try out something new etc.” (G8). This deconstruction of the teaching and planning process epitomises the renewal in thinking of the creative process.

5.1.4 So, what might make the German teachers leave?

In spite of the largely constructive views about staying in their jobs, the teachers wrote about the challenges, mainly lack of pupil motivation – *“Teilweise großes Desinteresse der Schüler”* (G4) –, lack of cooperation with parents – *“Herausforderung war der Umgang mit Eltern”* (G7) –, dislike of the head of their current school – *“One challenge is my head of school [...] but there isn’t anything I can do about it and if I could I would change schools but not leave language teaching and top down missives”* –, and of the Ministry – *“Every time that the Ministry or my head of school think of utterly stupid things only people who are not in contact with kids can think of”* (G1), and what might push them to leave their secure, largely satisfying jobs. There was, in spite of the small number of comments as the above, some reluctance to respond to this question: *“I can’t think of any [reason to leave] right now. Maybe if they changed the curriculum to something crazy, but even then I would probably stay and try to make it work as well as I could for the pupils”* (G8); *“Keine Gründe, da ich Freude an meiner Arbeit habe”* (G10). Pay was a factor for two teachers who said they needed the money, so could not under any circumstances leave other than with *“Ein Lottogewinn”* (G9). One teacher said she would leave if she deemed her own standards slipped: *“Wenn ich das Gefühl hätte, meine Arbeit nicht mehr gut machen zu können”* (G2). Another teacher had thought about leaving: *“Zu viel Stress, Ungerechtigkeit und Mobbing unter Kollegen”* (G7). Whilst there is much general stress in the profession, the one colleague’s comment on bullying is one too many and concerning. Strategies teachers put into place for coping with the challenges included: *“Resilienz, Abkehr vom Perfektionismus und Idealismus”*; *“Teamwork und Lehrer als Einzelkämpfer”* and *“stärkere Betonung der positiven Aspekte des Lehrens”* (G3), reflecting a positive mindset and determination that was shared by all the teachers.

5.2 Themes of the English teachers

Whilst the findings were similar as I will discuss later, the priorities were slightly different for the English teachers and, as might be expected, expressed rather differently. However, their main reason for staying was also the joy of working with students.

5.2.1 Enjoyment in working with students

The English teachers were quite emotional in their expression of affection for the students, as the following comments show: *“I love spending time with teenagers”*; *“I genuinely get a kick out of teaching young people”* (E3). This was coupled by the pleasure of engaging them in the joys of language learning: *“It is the best job in the world when students are engaged, enjoying themselves and learning about my passion for languages”* (E3). Another teacher put it thus: *“My favourite part of the day still has to be closing the door when the last student has entered the classroom and getting down to the business of learning”* (E7). One teacher expressed the innate satisfaction of such engagement as *“the feeling of happiness you get when something just clicks for one student. It does not get better than that!”* (E8) This love of the students was contextualised in the different schools in which the teachers taught, some with very motivated students (as cited above), yet others with more challenging students: *“boys in particular who pretend they don’t care about languages”* (E1). This same teacher saw it as a challenge to engage all students: *“No matter what level or background, an enthused state educated language learner is my main motivation”* (E1). Meeting such a challenge provided the ultimate job satisfaction: *“I stay positive and try to enjoy every moment I can in the classroom with my students. Student achievements are the most rewarding”* (E4).

5.2.2 Commitment to languages and languages teaching

The ten English teachers strongly asserted their professional identity and displayed a passionate belief in languages and languages teaching. Some of the respondents described it as a vocation: *“Since the age of 11 I knew I wanted to be a languages teacher. It is the only thing I ever wanted to do”* (E3); *“it has always been my vocation and I cannot imagine not teaching”* (E5). Several teachers asserted their personal passion for languages, and a desire to pass this on to youngsters was clearly highlighted: *“My passion for languages and sharing it with students [...] breaking stereotypes and making students feel confident enough to go on an exchange and stay with a foreign family and have the best time of their life. That’s priceless. The kids are priceless”* (E9). One teacher felt she had all the luck: *“I get to teach the subject that I love to polite, self-motivated students”* (E2). *“I have always been passionate about languages since I started learning them at school myself and I enjoy finding ways to make my subject accessible to all students”* (E5). Against this framing of professional commitment towards their ‘staying status’, it was evident that a key reason for staying was working with languages with the students: *“Above all I like imparting my subject knowledge and attempting to enthuse children with my subject. I like to see the children grow”* (E9).

5.2.3 Autonomy and variety

Most teachers considered that being a languages teacher enabled them to exercise a considerable measure of autonomy in their teaching: *“I appreciate having a fair degree of autonomy in deciding how I do my job. I enjoy developing resources and systems that enable pupils to learn”* (E6). Another teacher focused on her lessons in this respect: *“In your classroom, you get to decide the direction of the lesson and what is covered (to a degree) which keep you thinking and engaged with your work”* (E8). The variety in a languages teacher’s life was considered as a positive, one teacher commenting that since *“no two days are the same”* (E10), space was created to re-think her teaching and to develop new teacher/pupil relationships: *“There are always new teaching methods and ideas that can be explored (if you have time between marking books) and you teach different students every year so you have the chance to build new relationships with students all the time”* (E10). The autonomy that English teachers enjoy, provides opportunities to be creative and pursue their professional development, all within a safe, supportive context: *“I feel like my teaching is something that I have a lot of autonomy over but also I work in a supportive environment with a range of expertise to call upon”* (E4).

5.2.4 So, what might make the English teachers leave?

The English teachers, as the German teachers, appeared fairly well satisfied with their jobs. This did not mean that there were no challenges; on the contrary, they faced many that included workload – *“the day to day admin, logging of everything”*; *“excessive marking”*; *“tick box exercises with no real impact on the quality of teaching”* (E8) –, challenging behaviour – *“no real behaviour policy and a lack of support”*; *“the daily battle to get students to sit down”* (E2) –, and stress – *“I have suffered long periods of insomnia”* (E6). For the most part, the teachers faced these challenges with fortitude, strategies and resilience: *“be realistic”*; *“focus on the positives, blank out the nonsense”*; *“walk the dog”*; *“be organised”*; *“talk and share”* (E5) and *“take a step back, put things down for a while”* (E9). However, it would take little to push the teachers over the line to become leavers if the workload increased further, in particular. The English teachers stated they might also leave for a better job opportunity: *“a change of scenery, and hours to suit my lifestyle with my family”* (E2). Lack of opportunities – *“I want to progress up the ladder”*; *“I came to do a project and that is now finished!”* (E2) – was also mentioned, and as one teacher said, reflecting the view of other teachers, if languages were dropped from or curtailed in the curriculum *“as that is where the heart is”* (E5).

6 Discussion of findings

There are many points of convergence to reflect on as well as contextual differences that emerge from an analysis of the two narratives. In this discussion, I will at first explore the wellbeing framework of each of the findings. Then I will emphasize the overall job satisfaction of the interviewed teachers.

6.1 Wellbeing

The wellbeing framework advocated by Kern et al. (2014) draws on the factors of ‘physical health’, ‘life satisfaction’ and ‘professional thriving’ (cp. chapter 2). The German and English teachers are united by the major themes of working with the students, love of languages and variety and autonomy of the job.

As regards *working with students*, this was central to the wellbeing factor of the teachers, the main *raison d’être*, and what kept them on board, reflecting the findings of Spilt, Koomen and Thijs (2011) on the student influence on teacher wellbeing. All of the other factors interface with this key factor of working with students. The students, teachers claimed, were energising and could be fun, but at the same time presented challenges: motivation, behaviour issues (especially the English teachers who, interestingly, in spite of this, eulogised the students more), lack of commitment and parental support (the German teachers), challenges that the teachers faced with a range of resourceful strategies. Here the teachers score highly on ‘professional thriving’ in terms of their enjoyment of working with pupils although sometimes health issues caused by student issues impacted negatively on them causing stress, rather more to the English teachers than the German teachers in these data. There is thus a degree of tension between ‘professional thriving’ and ‘physical health’, although generally the teachers felt that they were in control as long as an overall balance was kept.

The *commitment to their love of languages and teaching languages* of both the German and the English teachers was absolutely on the same level. I would venture that languages, like no other subject, is the one that is inhabited physically and mentally and the passion for languages overrides many practical and circumstantial obstacles in the way. As was seen in the responses, teachers wanted to teach languages in any context and none of them seriously had contemplated a change to this. This passion relates strongly to ‘life satisfaction’ as well as to ‘professional thriving’ and yokes the two in harmony. This balance could be destroyed if the language was dropped from the school curriculum as often happens in English schools leaving the teacher literally heart-broken (cp. supra: English teacher comment about her language as her heart), although demotivated students could also tip the balance. In the case of demotivated students, the teachers indicated the need for intense resourcefulness and support that might, otherwise, have some impact on physical health.

Variety and autonomy was a major theme arising, and on a rough word count, variety was the most common in the German teachers’ responses, whilst autonomy was the most common in the English teachers’ ones, hence the inversion in the thematic heading to autonomy and variety for the English teachers. The pupils themselves present as varied or diverse and as several teachers said, no one day is ever the same and there is no fear of boredom: “*Never a dull moment*”, said one English teacher (E10), “*Keine Langeweile*” (G7) mirrored a German teacher. Interestingly, the ‘discourse of disappointment’ newcomers to the profession found in the study by Perryman and Calvert (2019, p. 2) when idealism and reality clashed, did not really emerge in any of the responses in my study, although this could have been because of the small sample being potentially skewed by mainly enthusiastic respondents and because they were ‘stayers’ and resilient. The teachers also seemed very level-headed and realistic. The freedom to design their own lessons and to create their own resources and teach in their own way is very precious to the teachers and may be at the heart of languages teacher wellbeing, bringing together

wellbeing factors in a way that is very specific to the modus operandi of languages teachers. Languages teachers have, arguably, the most challenging subject to teach but great rewards: *“Lernerfolg jedes Einzelnen zu sehen, ist immer wieder motivierend für mich als Lehrerin”* (G5).

6.2 Overall job satisfaction

The findings from the three themes create an overwhelming sense of job satisfaction for both groups of teachers. As would be expected, some factors feature differentially in the teachers' narratives such as pay and security of German teachers: *“Gutes Gehalt”* (G3), *“Ein angemessenes Honorar”* (G2) and the status of civil servant: *“Sicheres Arbeitsverhältnis (Beamtenstatus)”* (G3), beneficial for those in the German state sector. The German teachers asserted that there was no other job as satisfying as teaching, expressed pragmatically thus: *“Ist ein sicherer Job und es haben sich keine Alternativen geboten”* (G10). One teacher wrote, with magnificent understatement, that she thought about leaving *“Fast täglich (aber nicht ernsthaft) [...], aber ich versuche bis 60 durchzuhalten”* (G7). Being valued – *“Wertschätzung für meine Arbeit”* (G2) – and pupil achievement – *“Die Lernerfolge der Schüler”* (G5) – were also deemed very satisfying. The English teachers did not cite pay nor security, but claimed immense satisfaction experienced in the job generally and often, as with the German teachers, compared it to other professions: *“It would be difficult to find this feeling of achievement in any other profession”* (E3); *“I find this rewarding and doubt I would get the same sense of job satisfaction elsewhere”* (E9). The English teachers mentioned career opportunities – *“endless scope for honing your practice and self-improvement and eventually going up the ladder”* (E4) – as a benefit, not mentioned at all by the German teachers.

Language teaching was seen as a social and collegial activity, more so by the English teachers, perhaps because they have to work closely in a subject department as part of the school structure. Colleagues were usually (but not exclusively!) considered as supportive, collegial, friends: *“Great departmental team – good working relationships”* (E4); *“I have always felt inspired by colleagues who are happy to share their ideas/resources”* (E9), and like G4 who commented on a *“Gute Arbeitsatmosphäre”* in which to work. As might be expected, in any social space, tensions were mentioned, but teachers commented on their coping strategies, for example: *“I have been mindful to avoid the grumblers who can lower morale at times”* (E2), or conversely sharing problems with colleagues: *“My colleagues are incredibly supportive and non-judgemental and we share troubles with each other and plan together which helps reduce the work load a little”* (E9). G2 said she had *“mit einer ehemaligen Kollegin einen Stammtisch gegründet”*.

In terms of intrinsic reward, both German and English teachers derived much satisfaction from what it is that they are paid to do, i.e. teach languages that are so much a part of their personal and professional identities. Teaching the subject they love is reward in itself and serves to affirm and stabilise their identities (Day, Kington, Stobart & Sammons, 2006). Assuming good physical health generally, although there were some references to stress and one teacher had suffered from insomnia, then Kern et al.'s wellbeing factors – ‘physical health’, ‘life satisfaction’ and ‘professional thriving’ – jostle around in the teachers' lives in a more or less balanced way. ‘Professional thriving’ tends to be the dominant factor. As Klusmann and Waschke (2018, p. 13) assert, healthy teachers can be stressed but still remain *“mit ihrer Arbeit zufrieden und engagiert”*.

7 Conclusion

Whilst not generalizable, this small scale research is relatable to issues raised and gives insights into why languages teachers might choose to stay in their jobs. Teachers in both contexts have something important and unified to say about staying and their ‘staying’ strategies. Larrivee (2000, p. 294) writes that when teachers are critically reflexive, they have the ability to “create personal solutions to problems”. The research of van Dick, Wagner and Petzel (1999) found that teachers having an internal locus of control was essential whereby they mean teachers having the capability to take and maintain control of their situation.

There are implications in what the teachers tell us about the conditions and the contexts that enable them to make a positive and healthy choice to stay: a supportive culture and colleagues, time and space to do their work, but above all, positivity about and self-efficacy in their teaching. Kern et al. (2014) use a diagram of a central circle that represents wellbeing on a see-saw, with, on the right hand side, a box of ‘challenges’ and, on the left hand side, a box of ‘resources’: in both cases they include the psychological, the social and the physical. They claim, sensibly, that a balance is needed. A perfectly sustained balance, I would say, is not possible since wellbeing is not a permanent euphoric state, but one that fluctuates according to context and to personal issues. The teachers in their responses show remarkable resilience and commitment to task – “*Was man macht, macht man zu Ende*” (G9) – and a high tolerance threshold of some instances of illbeing such as impossible directives from higher authorities, and student concerns. This reflects the staying teachers’ emotional understanding of others and of themselves and the way that the teachers are strategic in their accommodation of needs (Hargreaves, 2001). When a teacher can say that “*ich Freude an meiner Arbeit habe*”(G3) or in the case of E9, “*constantly proving to myself that I can improve and motivate students, seeing their progress, helping them to build something they can take with them for life*”, then this is surely indicative of a synergy between the motivational needs of the teachers, and what they actually experience. The comments indicate a deep sense of wellbeing and what Sieland (2000, pp. 35f.) calls the essential ‘mental hygiene’ [Psychohygiene] that may well influence a potential leaving teacher to stay in the profession.

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Appendix. The Questionnaire

Fragen an Sprachlehrkräfte, die im Beruf bleiben – Questions for staying Languages teachers

Wenn über die Beschäftigung von Lehrkräften geschrieben wird, geht es meist um Lehrkräfte, die aus dem Beruf aussteigen. Wir interessieren uns für Lehrkräfte, die im Beruf bleiben. Ich untersuche die Umstände des Bleibens und möchte Sie bitten, mir zu helfen, diese besser zu verstehen. Bitte erzählen Sie mir davon. Vielen Dank.

Most of the writing about languages teachers' recruitment concerns leaving teachers. We are interested in staying teachers. Please help me to understand about 'staying' which is the topic I am researching. I would be very grateful for your information and views. Please tell me about it. Thank you.

- (1) Seit wie vielen Jahren sind Sie Lehrkraft (inklusive Pausen, z.B. wegen Mutterschutzes)? (For how many years have you been a teacher (this may include breaks such as for maternity leave)?)
- (2) Falls es mehr als eine war, an wie vielen Schulen haben Sie unterrichtet? Wie viele Jahre sind Sie an jeder Schule geblieben? (How many schools have you taught in if more than one? How many years have you stayed in each school?)
- (3) Aus welchen Gründen sind Sie bisher in der Lehre geblieben? (For what reasons have you stayed in teaching?)
- (4) Auf welche Herausforderungen sind Sie gestoßen? Was hat Sie trotz der Schwierigkeiten dazu gebracht zu bleiben? (What challenges have you encountered? What caused you to stay in spite of these difficulties?)
- (5) Was tun Sie, um die Herausforderungen, denen Sie gegenüberstehen, anzugehen? (What do you do to help address the challenges you encounter?)
- (6) Was wären Gründe, dass Sie aus Ihrem Beruf aussteigen würden? (What would be the reasons that would make you leave?)
- (7) Haben Sie je darüber nachgedacht, aus der Lehre auszusteigen und, wenn ja, wann und warum? (Have you ever thought about leaving teaching and if so, when and why?)
- (8) Was ist Ihre Hauptmotivation, Sprachlehrkraft zu bleiben? Z.B. die Liebe zu Kindern, die Leidenschaft für Sprachen, die bisherige Berufserfahrung, der Arbeitsort, die Schule etc. (What is your main motivation for staying a Languages teacher? E.g. love of children, passion for languages, previous work experience, work location, the school itself etc.)

Vielen, vielen Dank für Ihre Hilfe. (Thank you so much for your help.)

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