

Exploring Teacher Caring as a “Happy Object” in Language Teacher Accounts of Happiness

ELIZABETH R. MILLER AND CHRISTINA GKONOU

University of North Carolina at Charlotte, Charlotte, NC, USA

University of Essex, Wivenhoe Park, Colchester, UK

*Email: ermiller@uncc.edu

This article explores how the language teachers in our study associated particular teaching experiences with feeling happy in qualitative interview accounts. Adopting a critical poststructural orientation, it uses the concept of sticky objects (Ahmed 2010; Benesch 2017) to explore how contexts, social discourses, relationships and emotional norms are entangled in and shape emotions such as happiness. More particularly, it adopts Ahmed's (2010) notion of “happy objects” in exploring language teachers' associations of “teacher caring” with feeling happy. Rather than exploring what happiness is, this study investigates what happiness does to and for language teachers, focusing on their accounts of teacher caring. It argues that the happy object of teacher caring is enmeshed in normative discourses that cast individual teachers as responsible for caring enough in order to help their students to succeed as determined by institutional norms of student achievement. Ultimately, it contends that accounts of teacher happiness require careful scrutiny for what they can tell us about the complex intersections of emotions with normative discourses, structures and values.

INTRODUCTION

In conducting an interview study with 50 language teachers working in four national contexts (UK, US, Norway, and Germany), we asked them to select six emotional words from a list of twenty that they felt best represented their emotional experiences as teachers. Given that “negative” emotions such as frustration, anxiety, and disappointment are typically foregrounded in studies examining language teacher emotions (Loh and Liew 2016; Gkonou et al. 2020), we were quite surprised to discover that 45 out of the 50 teachers (90%) in our study selected “happiness” as one of their representative emotion words, making it the most frequently selected emotion word in our study. At the same time, teachers provided numerous accounts of emotional challenges and difficulties related to their professional practice, often linking what they treated as problematic experiences to the same situations that generated happiness for them. This outcome led us to explore the discursive constructions of language

teacher happiness more carefully. We wanted to understand and investigate the situations which the teachers described as happy to explore what discourses of happiness *do* to and for teachers.

The dramatic increase in research on language teacher emotions over the past decade points to the important role that emotions play in teacher practice and career longevity and the significance that teacher emotions have been accorded by language scholars (Benesch 2012, 2017, 2020a, b; Loh and Liew 2016; De Costa et al. 2018). However, we know of no other study that has focused on the effects of happiness for language teachers. We find that the current research on “positive” language teacher emotions such as enthusiasm (Dewaele and Li 2021) or “positive” emotional conditions such as wellbeing (MacIntyre et al. 2020) needs to be deepened and complexified to account for the ways such emotions can be complicit in normative schooling structures and relationships. In undertaking this study, we did not focus on what happiness *is* or what causes it but rather explored how the language teachers in our study created associations with happiness, as well as with unhappy emotions, in their interview accounts. Adopting a critical poststructural orientation, we view emotions, such as happiness, as contextually and discursively shaped, and we use the concept of sticky objects (Ahmed 2010; Benesch 2017) to theorize and analyze teacher caring as a happy object.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Happiness as contextual and discursive

In line with scholarship developed in a range of disciplines, including sociology, feminist cultural studies, and education (Zembylas 2007, 2011, 2020; Ahmed 2010; Burkitt 2014) as well as applied linguistics (Benesch 2012, 2017; De Costa et al. 2018; Miller and Gkonou 2018; Gkonou and Miller 2021), we approach emotions such as happiness as contextually, relationally, and discursively shaped phenomena rather than as individual internal responses to external stimuli. Drawing specifically on a critical poststructuralist perspective, educationist Michalinos Zembylas (2011: 152) describes emotions as a “public...object of inquiry...that [is] interactively embedded in power relations,” requiring a focus on “emotional practices and discourses.” In approaching emotions, and happiness in particular, from this perspective, we do not attempt to define what happiness *is* but rather we explore how it is discursively represented in language teacher interviews (see Benesch 2017). In doing so, we pay attention not only to the micro-level talk of how interviewees narrate their emotional experiences but also to macro-level discourses about teacher emotions, focusing particularly on discourses of teacher caring. When language teachers talk about their emotional experiences in their classrooms, they tend to orient to them as feelings that are internal and personal. However, as analysts, we contend that such talk can

simultaneously align or disalign with social norms or discourses regarding desirable and undesirable emotions and points to how contexts, relationships, and objects are entangled in these emotions. On this point, [Zembylas \(2011\)](#) argues for the need to interrogate emotional discourses at both micro- and macro-levels of discourse. In examining discourses of happiness, in particular, [Zembylas \(2020\)](#) argues that if we consider only micro-level individual experiences, we miss the political dimensions of happiness discourses. He adds that focusing only on individual accounts, without regard for the macro-level discourses, risks holding individual teachers responsible for their own happiness or unhappiness and “depoliticize[es] (un)happiness from its wider socio-political context, especially racial and social inequities and suffering more generally” ([Zembylas 2020: 19](#)) (see also [Jackson and Bingham 2018](#); [Benesch 2020a](#)).

Earlier research in applied linguistics tended to focus on specific learner emotions and had in fact approached them as individualized efforts and as factors squarely impacting upon learning. This approach largely determined the way such emotions were empirically researched too, that is mainly through statistical tests and relationships. For example, language anxiety, which remains the most widely studied emotion within second language acquisition research designs ([Gkonou et al. 2017](#)), has been found to significantly correlate with academic performance and achievement (see, e.g. [Horwitz 2001](#); [Elkhafaifi 2005](#)). More recent efforts to broaden the research agenda to include other specific language learner emotions have shifted to enjoyment ([Dewaele and MacIntyre 2016](#)), shame and guilt ([Teimouri 2018](#)), and boredom ([Li et al. 2021](#)), albeit still adopting a rather individualizing approach.

Research into language teacher emotions, on the other hand, has drawn heavily on general education scholarship, which focused on specific emotions among teachers, the intersection of student and teacher emotions, and how emotions manifest at times of educational reform and uncertainty (see, e.g. [Hargreaves 2000](#); [Zembylas and Schutz 2016](#)). In addition, it has been largely inspired by positive psychology tenets and interventions to take into account teacher wellbeing and examine emotions and emotional states in tandem rather than as distinct, separate entities ([Brierton and Gkonou, forthcoming](#); [Mercer and Gregersen 2020](#)). Such approaches have viewed language teacher emotions holistically but have not always concentrated on the historical and socio-political context which gives shape to teachers’ current professional identities and classroom practices. Taking a critical poststructural approach to happiness requires that as we consider teachers’ micro-level accounts, we also scrutinize how social discourses and emotional norms are entangled in how teachers’ emotions are understood and experienced in particular classroom spaces. In undertaking this effort in this study, we examined accounts of language teacher’s happiness that were linked to the notion of teacher caring by using the notion of *happy objects* as developed by feminist scholar Sara [Ahmed \(2004, 2010\)](#) and as applied to language teacher research by Sarah [Benesch \(2012, 2017, 2020 a, b\)](#).

Happy objects and language teacher happiness

Ahmed regards emotions, and happiness in particular (see [Ahmed 2010](#)), as social and cultural practices rather than something "we have" ([Ahmed 2004: 10](#)). Furthermore, she treats emotions as a kind of "stickiness" such that they become attached to particular objects, discourses, or configurations of bodies. Drawing on Ahmed, [Benesch \(2017: 29\)](#) notes that as "emotions adhere to ideas, activities, policies, and so on, [these objects] become sticky with affect." From this perspective, emotions can attach to actual material objects, such as dictionaries in language classrooms ([Benesch 2012](#)), or conceptual objects such as "values, practices, and styles, as well as aspirations" ([Ahmed 2010: 41](#)). As we encounter such emotionalized objects repeatedly, these encounters contribute to building durable forms of social practice ([Benesch 2017: 29](#)). In fact, Ahmed contends that social norms develop as "they become emotional things" (in [Schmitz and Ahmed 2014: 97](#)). In focusing on happiness, she notes that we need to consider how we "give value to things" and how "bodies turn to things" ([Ahmed 2010: 31](#)) that we *treat* as sources of happiness. [Ahmed \(2010: 35\)](#) adds that a higher valuation of happy objects develops as individuals "cohere" around objects that are already regarded as "good...as the cause of delight." This shared cohering around objects is made possible through macro-level discourses regarding their seeming "goodness" and "delightfulness". As we become increasingly invested in such objects, their normative, discursively constructed quality typically remains opaque to us; they come to seem common-sensical and necessary as well as desirable.

While happy objects often appear "normal," we need to interrogate how they can function as normative. The stickiness of objects often develops from the political component of discourses and social relationships, manifestations of power relationships that are unequal and produce deleterious effects on some individuals and social groups. We can see this power dynamic illustrated in [Ahmed's \(2010\)](#) discussion of happy objects as well as a number of "unhappy" objects such as the "melancholy migrant" and the "feminist killjoy." We find her discussion of "happy families" particularly useful for developing our understanding of some of the normative features of the sticky object of teacher caring linked to language teacher happiness. [Ahmed \(2010: 38\)](#) contends that families are associated with happiness because "we share an orientation towards the family as being good, as being what promises happiness in return for loyalty." On this point of "loyalty," she adds that "happiness can be a way of going along with what you are being asked to do" (2010: 210), not because of overt coercion but through tacit agreement with what happy families "should" look like and how family members will orient to normative family structures. She then discusses how "the queer child" (p. 92) can be understood to interfere with these normative alignments with the happy family. In the following long quote, Ahmed describes the complex circulation of emotions that can arise because of a breach in such structuring of the sticky object of happy families:

The father is unhappy as he thinks the daughter will be unhappy with her being queer. The daughter is unhappy as the father is unhappy with her being queer. The father witnesses the daughter's unhappiness as a sign of the truth of his position: that she will be unhappy because she is queer. The happy queer becomes unhappy at this point. In other words, the unhappy queer is made unhappy by the world that reads queers as unhappy. And clearly the family can only be maintained as a happy object, as being what is anticipated to cause happiness, by making the unhappiness of the queer child the point." (Ahmed 2010: 94)

A shared orientation to what happy families look like mobilizes particular practices and identities and emotions. This shared orientation is made durable through power relations that police and enforce heteronormativity. Queer happiness is not recognized as a viable emotion in family structures which conform to the status quo. How does such an example of a happy object (and its often unhappy effects) help us conceptualize happiness among language teachers? We understand that a shared orientation to happy objects will mobilize teachers to invest their energy and time toward aligning with and maintaining the objects that have been predetermined to be happiness causing. We next explore how the happy object of (language) teacher caring can be understood as normative, not merely "normal."

Teacher caring and the norming of teacher happiness

Teacher caring has developed into an important and influential discourse in education research and practice, due in large part to the work of Nel Noddings (1988, 2003, 2013). Over the past several decades, she has argued that educators must pay attention to the whole child, including their "moral and social growth as citizens" (Noddings 1988: 220) in addition to their intellectual development. Noddings (2003: 38) has critiqued the reform movements of the late 20th century which elevated the role of standards and subsequent testing to the detriment of students' "needs and wants" and with little regard for their happiness. Researchers who have promoted the importance of teacher caring argue that it can help to create classroom environments in which "students will feel accepted and will be comfortable taking risks as they learn" (Isenbarger and Zembylas 2006: 121). As such, the discourses related to teacher caring are associated not only with students feeling happy but also with student academic achievement. For example, Furrer et al. (2014: 102) contend that "an extensive body of research suggests the importance of close, caring teacher-student relationships and high-quality peer relationships for students' academic self-perception, school engagement, motivation, learning, and performance." Focusing on English language teachers, Kumuravadivelu (2012: 67) posits the need for teachers to adopt a "relational approach to caring" given the fraughtness of teaching "a language of globality and coloniality" which can lead to "numerous dilemmas and conflicts almost on a regular basis" in their classroom spaces.

The happy object of teacher caring is thus cast as highly laudable. It is not surprising that teachers value and turn toward it. However, we need to consider how political factors help structure this object and who might be structured as outside normativity, much like the queer child in relation to happy families. [Pereira \(2018: 488\)](#) has argued that the ethic of care expected of language teachers needs to be understood as an ideological perspective and a “disciplinary technology for evaluating the professional, social and emotional competencies of teachers.” Likewise, [Isenbarger and Zembylas \(2006: 122\)](#) highlight how discourses of teacher caring “act upon teachers in terms of the emotional labour demanded and the systems of beliefs and emotions that underpin these practices and are embodied with them.” Teacher caring must thus be examined not merely as a “natural” emotional response, but as one that is shaped by institutional hierarchies and inequities. When institutional discourses construct teacher caring as an expected disposition for teachers to be regarded as competent and professional, even in the face of often impossible institutional demands and increasing accountability measures, then teachers will likely contend with emotions such as anger, frustration, guilt, and, in some cases, eventual burnout ([Loh and Liew 2016](#)). In this way, discourses regarding the foundational role of caring teachers in motivating happy, successful students can become not only normative but hegemonic.

We conducted a qualitative, exploratory investigation based on individual, in-depth interviews which allowed us to explore language teachers’ accounts of happiness and how they associate that emotion with teacher caring. By paying attention to where happiness sticks, we can understand more clearly what teachers invest in their professional practice and the things that they turn toward and those that they do not. We are able to learn what happiness, or at least the promise of happiness, *does* to and for teachers.

THE STUDY

The following research questions have guided our study:

1. What do language teachers associate with explicit mentions of *happiness* and “unhappy” emotion words?
2. How is the focal happy object of teacher caring characterized?
3. What does this happy object do to and for teachers?

Participants and data collection

This study is based on a series of interviews conducted with language teachers in four national contexts: the US, the UK, Germany, and Norway. In the first three contexts, the teachers are teachers of English; in Norway, they are teachers of Norwegian. The study was conducted in two timeframes, with the first round of interviews ($N = 25$) conducted in the Summer 2016 with

teachers located in the US (conducted by Elizabeth Miller) and the UK (conducted by Christina Gkonou). The second round of interviews (25) was conducted in Spring 2019 with teachers located in Norway (conducted by Elizabeth Miller and Anne Golden, see Acknowledgements) and in Germany (conducted by Elizabeth Miller). All of the interviews were conducted in English. These national settings were selected out of convenience, and the study was never intended to serve as a comparison of teachers in different national contexts. The first-round interview settings corresponded with the national contexts in which we as researchers are located; the second-round interviews were made possible through Elizabeth Miller's Fulbright fellowship at the University of Cologne in Germany. An invitation email was sent to the directors of each of the programs, and once permission to proceed was obtained from them, emails were sent to individual teachers, inviting their participation. The interview protocol consisted of eleven questions that asked the participants to discuss their emotional experiences as language teachers. The questions asked about teachers' emotional experiences in general terms (e.g. What do you enjoy most and what do you enjoy least about teaching?) rather than taking a narrow focus on emotions as they related to particular practices or policies. When creating the interview questions, we aligned them with "the theoretical conceptions of the research topic" (Brinkmann and Kvale 2015: 157) as we understood them by drawing on key readings on the topic of teacher emotions.

The language teachers were presented with a list of 20 emotion words (adapted from Zembylas 2005, see Appendix) and were asked to select six words from the list that they deemed best represented their most common emotional experiences as language teachers. This emotion-word selection activity was conducted prior to asking teachers to talk about their emotional experiences as teachers. We decided to use Zembylas's list of twenty emotion words as a way to provide our interviewees with a range of emotion types. We hoped it would help them think broadly about their emotional selves as teachers and give them a jumping-off point as they discussed their emotional experiences. In asking them to select only six representative words, however, we hoped that they would focus on their most prominent emotional experiences that came to mind relatively quickly. That said, we recognize that using an itemized format such as this can suggest that the words serve as labels for pre-existing, autonomous, or universal affective states. We did not explicitly ask interviewees to talk about happiness but rather asked them to talk about the aspects of their teaching that they enjoyed most and that they enjoyed least. They produced unsolicited accounts of happiness in their responses to other questions in these semi-structured interviews as well. Given the spontaneous nature of these accounts, many of the interviewees who selected happiness in the emotion-word selection activity did not directly address it in their interview conversations. In fact, only 36 of the 50 language teachers explicitly referred to it. Interestingly, one of the five interviewees who did not select it as a representative emotion word from the list of 20 words produced an account of happiness in her interview.

Table 1: Most frequent emotion word selections

Emotion word	Happiness	Enthusiasm	Caring	Satisfaction	Frustration
# Out of 50 participants who selected word	45	43	39	31	22

The top five emotion-word selections are listed below in order of frequency to provide context for the teachers’ selection of *happiness* most frequently. Only one “unhappy” emotion word appears in [Table 1](#).

Data analysis

In conducting the analysis, we each coded a set of 13 interviews separately (25% of the total) which included a subset of three to four interviews from each of the four national contexts. These codes identified situations, practices, people, and/or places associated with explicit mentions of *happy* or *happiness*. We also coded mentions of “unhappy” emotion words such as *frustration*, *anger*, *hate*, and/or *stress*, among others, to examine what entities interviewees associated with these words. We then discussed our first-round codes associated with *happy* or *happiness* with each other ([Creswell 2014](#); [Mann 2016](#)) and found high inter-rater agreement. These included “relationships with students,” “student success,” “helping people,” “caring for students”, among others. Following this, we refined our codes and used them to analyze the remaining 37 interviews for associations with particular phenomena that teachers made using *happy* or *happiness* and “unhappy” emotion words. Upon finding that language teachers’ most frequent associations to *happiness* involved their relationships with students and teacher caring, we chose to explore these as intersecting topics and analyze them more fully. In doing so, we found that teachers also associated many unhappy emotion words with teacher caring. Given our theoretical focus, we examined how the teacher interviewees represented happiness in their micro-level accounts and also analyzed those accounts from the perspective of happy objects.

More than two-thirds of the teachers who selected happiness were employed full-time and just under one-third of them were part-time teachers (see [Table 2](#)). Out of the five who did not select happiness, only one was employed as a part-time instructor. Although we cannot make any strong claims about the relationship between happiness and job security and better income, as suggested by teachers’ employment status, it does not seem that they can be considered causal factors in themselves. Teacher caring has been researched as a gendered phenomenon ([Acker, 1995](#); [Pullen and Simpson, 2009](#)); however, we did not observe any quantitative or qualitative differences between how the male ($N = 18$, see [Table 2](#)) and female ($N = 32$) interviewees described *happiness* in relation to teacher caring. We also considered years of teaching experience. We found that the average number of years of teaching experience among the 45 teachers

Table 2: Demographic information of teacher participants (N=50)

Location	US: 15 UK: 10 Germany: 18 Norway: 7
Type of institution	University-affiliated program (US, UK, Norway): 32 Gymnasium (Germany, grades 5-13 with a focus on university preparation): 13 Volkshochschule (Germany, adult-focused continuing education institutions): 5
Gender	Female: 32 Male: 18 Prefer not to disclose: 0
Full-time/part-time	Full-time: 36 Part-time: 14
Academic qualifications	M.A. or its equivalent: 41 Ph.D.: 5 B.A.: 4 Language teaching certification: 11
Years of teaching experience	Mean: 14 (min=2, max=45)

who selected happiness from the list came to 14.65, with a range of 2–45 years of experience (see Table 2). Of the five teachers who did not select this word, the average number of years of teaching experience came to 8.2 years, though one of the five had been a teacher for 25 years. We believe that years of teaching experience likely do play a role in the likelihood that teachers would choose happiness as a frequent emotional experience. We discuss this further in the analysis below. We refer to the participants in our study with generic codes (i.e. T1 for Teacher 1) rather than pseudonyms because we are not focusing on how particular identities correlate with particular emotions (see Benesch 2017).

FINDINGS

Teacher accounts of caring as happy object

In exploring language teachers' micro-level accounts of happiness, we found that the (conceptual) object most often identified as sticky with happiness was teacher caring. In the two excerpts included below, the teachers describe their experience of happiness as connected to caring for students and their relationships with them. In Excerpt 1, the teacher indicated that she "love[s] giving" to her students, that this leads to feelings of happiness and fulfilment, but that it also leads to "stress" from her belief that she needs to be knowledgeable enough about what they need to be able to "give them everything that I want." Similarly, in Excerpt 2, the teacher commented that she is "happy to be a teacher...pretty much every day" but that feeling of "frustration or disappointment" can arise

“if you care about someone,” try to “focus [one’s] lessons on their needs,” and yet find that students still fail and do not work as hard as she does in attempting to meet their needs. These teachers demonstrate that they value teacher caring and that they have invested great effort in enacting this disposition through working to understand and meet their students’ needs. The positive outcomes of these efforts, such as feeling happiness when students respond, reciprocate, and do well in their studies, may be sufficient for teachers to continue turning toward this happy object and re-investing in it, despite the times when doing so leads to less desirable emotions. Their accounts suggest a belief that if they were only able to “give [students] everything” that a teacher wants to give, or perhaps if they only tried harder to understand students’ needs, then the happy object of teacher caring could be maintained.

Excerpt 1

T25: I love teaching people, I love giving, I love seeing people learning from me...being successful, getting their degrees. This makes me feel happy and fulfilled as well.... The stress that I have is to be knowledgeable enough to address their needs and to understand what they need and to be, to give them everything that I want.

Excerpt 2

T46: So basically that’s my general underlying emotion. I’m happy to be a teacher and that’s pretty much every day. So that doesn’t save me from frustration or disappointment...If you care about someone and you try and try and to fail over and over again, that’s highly frustrating. ... sometimes I’m disappointed in my students, um, basically because, um, I try to, to focus my lessons on their needs. And, um, so I asked them, what do you want? What do you need? Then I provide them with what they’ve asked for. And they do not put the equivalent amount of work from their side into it.

Similar to these two teachers’ accounts, other interviewees described happiness as deriving from “caring,” “want[ing students] to get better”, wanting them “to achieve something,” “deliver[ing] what students need,” receiving “a certain type of feedback” from students, “seeing people learning from me,” and seeing students “being successful, getting their degrees.” At the same time, the teachers’ ambivalence highlighted in the two excerpts above emerged in many other teachers’ accounts. Such “narrative[s] of disappointment” (Ahmed 2010: 7), intermingled with teachers’ accounts of happiness, included comments such as “students don’t respond the way I expected or wanted them to or hoped for,” or “they don’t do anything with” the extra work and input that a teacher provided them, or students “just don’t care” even after a teacher has impressed upon them how important their schoolwork is. Students’ lack of consistent reciprocity or reliable positive uptake of teachers’ actions—a familiar experience for teachers everywhere—contributed to the language teachers’ ambivalence associated with the happy object of teacher caring. Ahmed (2010: 6) contends that we must “explore

how ordinary attachments to the very idea of the good life are also sites of ambivalence, involving the confusion rather than separation of good and bad feelings.” These explorations, she adds, can tell us where people consider happiness to be “located” (i.e. in teacher caring that leads to student reciprocity, learning, and achievement), which kinds of people “are happier” (i.e. teachers who care, teachers who give to and help their students, teachers who meet students’ needs and help them succeed), which then can help us to understand why such attachments to happy objects frequently surface as a narrative[s] of disappointment.

In considering what the promise of happiness from happy objects such as teacher caring *does* for teachers in language classroom contexts, we can say that it appears to motivate teachers to show care for their students’ welfare and success and to learn about what their students need. At the same time, the simultaneous disappointments and detractors from happiness point to the way in which caring teacher-student relationships are “marked by dependency” (Toshalis 2011: 27). In Toshalis’s (2011: 27) critique of what he has called the “rhetoric of care,” he observed that among teachers who sincerely and genuinely wish to help and demonstrate care to students, one often finds implicit orientations to “teacher-as-savior” tropes, such as when teachers believe that their success (and perhaps happiness) is determined by their ability to identify and meet their students’ needs. Toshalis (2011: 27) describes the caring teacher’s relationship with students as one structured by a correspondence between “the care-giver’s abundance” and “the empty [who] have the opportunity to become full.”

One effect of the asymmetrical relationships structured by such tropes or ideologies regarding normative teacher–student relationships is that if teacher caring is ignored or if it does not motivate sanctioned actions among students, then teachers often view the cared-for as accountable for ignoring or rejecting their caring actions. We see this in teachers’ accounts of feeling frustration or even anger when students appeared to ignore their efforts. One such example can be found in Excerpt 3 where T13 comments that teaching makes her “really happy” which she links to “know[ing] what students need” from a course and how she “know[s] how to deliver it” as well as the kind of language input needed to help students achieve what is required in the course. She also adds that there can also be “tons of frustration” when she conferences with a student, explains what they need to do to revise a writing assignment, but then “they don’t do anything with it.”

Excerpt 3

T13: I mean, yeah it makes me really happy to teach, it makes me really satisfied to teach, especially classes that I’ve taught many times and I feel like, yes, I know what the students need from this course. I know how to deliver it. I know the language to use to make it happen.... Along the way though there’s tons of frustration, like the person who, you know, you sit down with and you have a conference with them and you say,

“You know this is really not going to work and you gotta change this and here’s exactly how you can do it and let’s flip it over and let’s write down what you’re saying”, and then they don’t do anything with it and you’re sort of “GAAAA” so there is definitely frustration in it too.

In making the connection between teacher-as-savior tropes and expressions of teacher caring among our interviewees, we are not blaming these particular teachers for consciously wanting to assume a savior position. However, we can see a dependency orientation in teachers’ desire to know and meet students’ needs: students are cast as needing something that teachers can and should provide. When students demonstrate uptake to those provisions and succeed in their academic work, the happy object of teacher caring is maintained, and happy feelings can follow from status quo relationships and interactions between teachers and students. We can see how these relationships, structured around students’ compliance with the teacher and institutional expectations regarding how academic success is determined or measured, put enormous responsibility on teachers to bring about these outcomes. As teachers align with the happy object of teacher caring, this often leads to an intensification of emotional labor (Miller and Gkonou 2018; Pereira 2018) as they work ever harder to secure the “right” kinds of responses from their students. This labor, in turn, can contribute to teacher burnout and stress (Acheson and Nelson 2020; Loh and Liew 2016; Pereira 2018).

Importantly, language teachers do not assume the role of classroom savior in a social vacuum. Teacher responsibility for creating caring relationships to promote student learning is explicitly advocated in much of the teacher caring research from the past several decades (Noddings 1988, 2003, 2013), as we noted earlier. In comparing the language teachers’ micro-level accounts of happiness to the scholarly discourses of teacher caring, we agree with Jeholm and Bissenbakker (2019: 486) who contend that “our ideas and ideals of happiness are seldom our ‘own.’ Often, they constitute implicit demands put on us.” The happy object of teacher caring “arrives in classrooms with accumulated affective values” (Naraian and Khoja-Moolji 2016: 1141) long before any individual teacher or student inhabits those classroom spaces. Zembylas (2011: 152) reminds researchers to “historicize the ways in which emotions are constituted” along with “their organization into discourse and technologies of power, and their importance as a site of social and spatial control through surveillance and self-policing.” This perspective points to the need to understand that teachers’ “personal” feelings of happiness and frustration, among other emotions, are part of macro-level discourses related to teacher caring in terms of student achievement. While the ambivalence that emerged in teachers’ accounts related to the happy object of teacher caring was cast as part of their relationships with students in their own classrooms, we found that teachers also frequently commented on the unhappy effects of institutional policies and structures located outside of classroom spaces. We discuss this further in the following section.

Teacher accounts of macro-level pressures

Beyond dispreferred student uptake to teacher caring in their efforts to help students succeed, the language teachers also associated rather ambiguous macro-level structures as contributing to their unhappy emotions. They talked about how these phenomena affected their emotional lives negatively and generally treated them as beyond their ability to control. A number of the Gymnasium teachers in Germany described these larger entities as “the system.” One teacher expressed her frustration with a system which “doesn’t adapt to the being [of a student]” and which can “break people” but which teachers still have to make sure that the student “fits into” (see Excerpt 4). Another teacher acknowledged that she is “part of the system that causes a lot of anxiety” for students, something which she “really disliked.” Yet another described “the system” as “entrap[ping]” students in a situation in which they can’t succeed because of testing pressures. Teachers working in university contexts often commented on the unhappy effects of the “bureaucracy,” the “organization” of the university or their department, the “larger arena,” the “structure,” the “administration,” and the gap between how these impersonalized entities construed their work and how the teachers understood their work as well as a sense that their work was not appreciated or understood. We see this in T46’s comments in Excerpt 5 below in which she comments on how the “negative things” in her work are often “external,” cases in which the “bureaucracy” or “other people” do not understand what teachers do.

Excerpt 4

T33: Um, I do become frustrated when I, and this is just the negative feeling that I have because the system sometimes breaks people or doesn’t fit people. And I become frustrated because the system doesn’t adapt to the being, but we have to make sure that the being fits into the system. And I really don’t like that.

Excerpt 5

T46: Negative things um they don’t dominate, but they are very often external, not that they don’t have a, not not necessarily have anything to do with the teaching, but with the system, amount of hours, you know, bureaucracy, uh other people maybe not understanding what we are doing in a way, and uh then I have a hard time sort of trying to tell all the things that I experience, how in what situation, and why, and I don’t want to be interpreted as difficult and uh, but I’m in a way a fighter, uh I would like more people to understand about our roles.

Even as teachers cast these top-down structures as impersonal forces or external powers, these entities must still be understood as emotionalized attachments that are structured into the happy object of teacher caring. In fact, these institutional systems depend on teacher caring¹. When teachers feel that they are over-worked, under-appreciated, under-paid, and/or forced to practice policies that they do not believe in, they are likely to contend with feelings of

frustration, disillusionment, disappointment and/or anger as teachers. Even so, teachers still care about their students and often fault themselves for not caring enough in the face of these pressures. One Gymnasium teacher, who lamented the “conditioning” her students were going through, and the ways “the system,” was imprinted on their curriculum and testing requirements, which leave her students “stressed and fearful,” commented that she “tried to make jokes” with them to ameliorate such effects (Excerpt 6). This is her attempt to show caring and sensitivity to her students and to make these institutional demands more palatable to her students, even as she remains very much within the system, which she acknowledges. That said, she does not cast herself as working against the system even though she dislikes it.

Excerpt 6

T34: sometimes I dislike watching... The classical conditioning they're going through. So, um, that's a part of my job that I disliked because I'm part of the system that also causes a lot of anxiety. And, and all kinds of things. Whenever I test students, I really disliked seeing them being stressed and fearful and all of that. So, I tried to make jokes and you know.

Somewhat similarly, T46 in Excerpt 5 above described herself as “in a way a fighter” who wants “external” authorities to understand teachers’ roles better, but at the same time notes that she does not “want to be interpreted as difficult.”

We did not ask teachers whether they had sought to change aspects of the “system” nor did we ask them whether they had developed any social justice initiatives that might challenge aspects of the “bureaucracy” that they found so troubling. As such, the fact that they did not supply accounts of resisting what they might regard as inequitable norms or of developing coalitions with colleagues to challenge particular components of the “systems” that they dislike does not mean that they were unconcerned about social justice issues or that they were not involved in such efforts. Indeed, their comments included above demonstrate awareness of unequal power relations and sensitivity to the effects of such structures on themselves and their students. Even so, the absence of any accounts of resistance to hegemonic systems in the interviews is noteworthy. We found no accounts of either happiness or unhappiness associated with intentional efforts to challenge inequities ([Jackson and Bingham 2018](#); [Zembylas 2020](#)).

In noting this absence of activist accounts (e.g. [Benesch 2020a](#)) in teacher interviews, we are not advocating for teachers to be unhappy (see also [Zembylas 2020](#)). However, as researchers and teacher educators, we need to adopt a critical perspective in exploring how relationships of dependency between students and teachers can be constructed through institutional norms regarding student achievement as we promote the happy object of teacher caring. We also need to consider how teacher caring can be used as a way to absolve oneself of pushing

deeper or of trying to understand more fully how teachers' positioning in structures of schooling can be mobilized to address inequities and to create more just arrangements. As Toshalis (2011: 19) contends, "the rhetoric of care expressed as 'we care for those that need our help' is unlikely to develop into 'we care for others by interrogating and dismantling injustice and holding ourselves accountable to achieve results'."

Furthermore, in examining how teachers turn toward the happy object of teacher caring, we find Moore and Clarke's (2016: 674) reference to the "allure of normalcy" useful. They note that for many teachers, "it is as if 'the very pleasures of being inside a relation [have] become sustaining regardless of the content of the relation'" (Berlant 2011, 2; cited in Moore and Clarke, 2016: 669). It is possible that as the teachers in our study gained years of teaching experience, they became more adept at learning how to inhabit their institutionally defined roles and to accept institutional norms regarding student achievement and their role in promoting those norms as "normal." In this way, they might have found that they experienced feelings of comfort or happiness more readily than when they were still novice teachers. Moore and Clarke (2016: 670) further argue that the "kind of love which draws many teachers into the profession...[often] refocuses itself on somebody else's notion of achievement and success within it." It seems that the happy object of teacher caring can structure teachers' desire to help their students, often with the goal of making the world a better place, alongside institutional notions of achievement and success. In this way, the happy object of teacher caring can be recognized as discursively constructed with normative outcomes. As teachers turn toward and invest in this happy object, they bear responsibility for its "happy" outcomes, which often motivates their ongoing efforts to care enough and to learn about and meet all of their students' needs. When those goals are not met, caring can turn into feelings of guilt or frustration, or even anger. These contradictory emotions may be viewed by language teachers as "professionally justified" in their efforts to care enough, but at the same time these efforts help "to reify dominant discourses of teacher caring" and can lead to teachers' increased emotional labor (Pereira 2018: 500) For this reason, we argue that we need to always keep a critical eye on what happy objects *do* to and for teachers.

DISCUSSION

Guided by our research questions, we learned that when the language teacher interviewees in our study explicitly commented on feeling happy or experiencing happiness, they most frequently associated that emotion with teacher caring. We found that they frequently linked unhappy emotions to teacher caring as well, pointing to the complexity and normative character of this happy object. As we argue in this article, teacher caring has become linked to particular student outcomes, and because of this linkage, teachers are motivated

to identify student needs and to assist students to be successful according to institutional norms and measures of achievement. When students are successful and respond to teachers' efforts, teachers find it easy to feel happy. However, in scrutinizing what happy objects *do* to and for language teachers, we note that turning toward, valuing, and investing in happy objects often can serve to maintain normative classroom relationships and to dissuade teachers from undertaking “unhappy” practices such as those oriented to social justice concerns (Naraian and Khoja-Moolji 2016; Jackson and Bingham 2018; Zembylas 2020; Benesch 2020b). Benesch (2017: 29) has argued that “those who embrace mainstream expectations are rewarded for holding sanctioned sticky objects close to them, while those who turn their bodies away may find themselves shunned, punished or ridiculed”. Likewise, Jackson and Bingham (2018: 218) argue that teacher and student happiness can serve “unjust relations in education” if teachers avoid addressing difficult topics such as racial injustice, oppression or violence to avoid unhappy feelings in the classroom by confronting such challenging issues. Furthermore, an emphasis on happiness might pathologize the ongoing emotional labor that is part of all teachers' work, even that of highly experienced teachers (Gkonou and Miller 2021). If teachers are disappointed by the effects of their investment in happy objects, they may experience anxiety and self-doubt about their capacity to become successful teachers. It is important for the novice as well as experienced teachers to recognize how emotions are shaped by social norms and are contingent on complex assemblages of situations, expectations, and structured relationships rather than solely individual reactions to external stimuli.

While we have no desire to promote or glorify unhappy emotions simply because they are often associated with work to uphold social justice and activism in education (see also Moore and Clarke 2016), we agree with Zembylas (2020) and Pereira (2018) who have argued that teacher happiness, by itself, should not be treated as an end-point or as the goal of teacher development or teacher training. Experiencing happiness does not automatically indicate that language teachers are supporting inequitable power structures or unjust educational practices nor does feeling frustration always signal individual failure. Rather than believing that teachers must overcome unhappy feelings, in all cases, to regard themselves as successful, we argue that teachers should learn to reflect on them as “feelings of structure” (Ahmed in Schmitz and Ahmed 2014: 100). That is, given the discursively constructed configurations of emotions, teachers can learn to explore how their personal, embodied emotional experiences are entangled in the structures and spaces in which they work as well as the discourses that assign meaning to particular configurations of students and teachers and teacher dispositions. As we have discussed elsewhere (Gkonou and Miller, 2021), this kind of exploration often is most productive when conducted with colleagues as it can foster collaboration, solidarity, and positive group dynamics. We hope to see this kind of reflection and reflexivity nurtured in language teacher education programs as well.

CONCLUSION

In this article, we explored how language teachers represented their feelings of happiness in their micro-level accounts about teacher caring that were collected via in-depth interviews with teachers across four national contexts. In taking account of macro-level discourses of teacher caring, we came to understand more clearly how teacher caring constitutes a sticky or happy object for our study participants. As language teachers develop a greater awareness of how social, cultural, institutional, and political factors can be structured in and through sticky objects, including the happy objects that they value and turn toward, we believe they can come to see emotions as ethical concerns. Emotions—including difficult or unpleasant emotions such as unhappiness—can be treated as resources for reflection and ethical agency (Infinito 2003), which, in turn, can motivate teachers to collaborate with others in working for more just institutional practices (Benesch 2020a).

Like all studies, ours is not without limitations. Our dataset was produced through one-off interviews with teachers and we believe that a longitudinal design or a combination of research interviews and lesson observations could further enrich our findings. Such designs would respectively enable us to explore emotions such as happiness across different time intervals and to observe the manifestations of emotions in actual practice. In addition, although we were pleased to come across such interesting and unsolicited accounts of happiness in the data, we would have approached the research design and interview questions differently if we were to concentrate on language teacher happiness from the outset. For example, we would have asked questions focusing explicitly on what makes teachers happy and unhappy in their work environment, what obstacles to happiness they identify, and how they treat these emotions. Although this study never intended to compare the responses of teachers from different national settings, if we had focused on particular policies or practices, it is possible that context-specific differences would have emerged in the language teachers' interview accounts. Future studies may find it useful to adopt such an approach. It should also be noted that the interviews took place before the global pandemic disrupted traditional teaching practices and required language teachers to adapt to online instruction. As research has shown (MacIntyre et al. 2020; Jelińska and Paradowski 2021), this abrupt switch to distanced learning has taken its toll on the emotional lives of language teachers. We recognize that the same teachers may have responded much differently to the emotion-word selection task had we conducted interviews with them in 2020 or 2021. Further research could look at specific emotions and coping among language teachers during the pandemic, what sticky objects they associate with them, and what these objects do to and for teachers.

END NOTE

1 We appreciate one anonymous reviewer's comments that made this point.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We want to thank Dr. Anne Golden for arranging and participating in the seven interviews conducted at the University of Oslo. We also want to thank Drs. Christiane Bongartz and Jan Springob from the University of Cologne for facilitating contacts with language teachers in Germany. Above all, we are deeply grateful to all of the teachers who agreed to be interviewed and for their willingness to talk about their emotional experiences as language teachers. We have learned so much from them.

REFERENCES

- Acheson, K.** and **R. Nelson.** 2020. ‘Utilising the emotional labour scale to analyse the form and extent of emotional labour among foreign language teachers in the US public school system’ in **C. Gkonou, J.-M. Dewaele, and J. King** (eds), *The Emotional Rollercoaster of Language Teaching*. Multilingual Matters.
- Acker, S.** 1995. ‘Carry on caring: The work of women teachers,’ *British Journal of Sociology of Education* 16: 21–36.
- Ahmed, S.** 2004. *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*. Edinburgh University Press.
- Ahmed, S.** 2010. *The Promise of Happiness*. Duke University Press.
- Benesch, S.** 2012. *Considering Emotions in Critical English Language Teaching: Theories and Praxis*. Routledge.
- Benesch, S.** 2017. *Emotions and English Language Teaching: Exploring Teachers’ Emotion Labor*. Taylor & Francis.
- Benesch, S.** 2020a. ‘Emotions and activism: English language teachers’ emotion labor as responses to institutional power,’ *Critical Inquiry in Language Studies* 17: 26–41.
- Benesch, S.** 2020b. ‘Theorising emotions from a critical perspective: English language teachers’ emotions labour when responding to student writing,’ in **C. Gkonou, J.-M. Dewaele, and J. King** (eds): *The Emotional Rollercoaster of Language Teaching*. Multilingual Matters.
- Berlant, L.** 2011. *Cruel Optimism*. Duke University Press.
- Brierton, K.** and **C. Gkonou.** forthcoming. *Cultivating teacher wellbeing*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Brinkmann, S.** and **S. Kvale.** 2015. *Interviews: Learning the Craft of Qualitative Research Interviewing* (3rd ed.) Sage Publications.
- Burkitt, I.** 2014. *Emotions and Social Relations*. Sage Publications.
- Creswell, J. W.** 2014. *Research Design: Qualitative, Quantitative, and Mixed Methods a Approaches* (4th ed.). Sage Publications.
- De Costa, P. I., H. Rawal, and W Li.** 2018. ‘L2 teachers’ emotions: a sociopolitical and ideological perspective,’ in **J. Martínez Agudo** (ed): *Emotions in Second Language Teaching*. Springer.
- Dewaele, J.-M.** and **P. D. MacIntyre.** 2016. ‘Foreign language enjoyment and foreign language classroom anxiety. The right and left feet of FL learning,’ in **P. D. MacIntyre, T. Gregersen, and S. Mercer** (eds): *Positive Psychology in SLA*. Multilingual Matters.
- Elkhafafi, H.** 2005. ‘Listening comprehension and anxiety in the Arabic language classroom,’ *The Modern Language Journal* 89: 206–20.
- Furrer, C. J., E. A. Skinner, and J. R. Pitzer.** 2014. ‘The influence of teacher and peer relationships on students’ classroom engagement and everyday motivational resilience,’ *National Society for the Study of Education* 113: 101–23.
- C. Gkonou, M. Daubney, and J.-M. Dewaele (eds.)**. 2017. *New Insights into Language Anxiety: Theory, Research and Educational Implications*. Bristol: Multilingual Matters.
- C. Gkonou, J.-M. Dewaele, and J. King (eds.)**. 2020. *The Emotional Rollercoaster of Language Teaching*. Bristol: Multilingual Matters.
- Gkonou, C.** and **E. R. Miller.** 2021. ‘An exploration of language teacher reflection, emotion labor and emotional capital,’ *TESOL Quarterly* 55: 134–55.
- Hargreaves, A.** 2000. ‘Mixed emotions: teachers’ perceptions of their interactions with students,’ *Teaching and Teacher Education* 16: 811–26.
- Horwitz, E. K.** 2001. ‘Language anxiety and achievement,’ *Annual Review of Applied Linguistics* 21: 112–26.

- Infinito, J.** 2003. 'Ethical self-formation: a look at the later Foucault,' *Educational Theory* 53: 155–71.
- Isenbarger, L.** and **M. Zembylas.** 2006. 'The emotional labour of caring in teaching,' *Teaching and Teacher Education* 22: 120–34.
- Jackson, L.** and **C. Bingham.** 2018. 'Reconsidering happiness in the context of social justice education,' *Interchange* 49: 217–29.
- Jeholm, S.** and **M. Bissenbakker.** 2019. 'Documenting attachment,' *Nordic Journal of Migration Research* 9: 480–96.
- Jelińska, M.** and **M. B. Paradowski.** 2021. 'Teachers' perception of student coping with emergency remote instruction during the COVID-19 pandemic: The relative impact of educator demographics and professional adaptation and adjustment,' *Frontiers in Psychology.* Early online view.
- Kumaravadivelu, B.** 2012. *Language Teacher Education for a Global Society: A Modular Model for Knowing, Analyzing, Recognizing, Doing, and Seeing.* Routledge.
- Li, C., J.-M. Dewaele,** and **Y. Hu.** 2021. 'Foreign language learning boredom: conceptualization and measurement,' *Applied Linguistics Review.* Early online view.
- Loh, C. E.** and **W. M. Liew.** 2016. 'Voices from the ground: The emotional labour of English teachers' work,' *Teaching and Teacher Education* 55: 267–78.
- MacIntyre, P. D., T. Gregersen,** and **S. Mercer.** 2020. 'Language teachers' coping strategies during the Covid-19 conversion to online teaching: correlations with stress, wellbeing and negative emotions,' *System* 94: 1–13.
- Mann, S.** 2016. *The Research Interview: Reflective Practice and Reflexivity in Research Processes.* Palgrave Macmillan.
- Mercer, S.** and **T. Gregersen.** 2020. *Teacher Wellbeing.* Oxford University Press.
- Miller, E. R.** and **C. Gkonou.** 2018. 'Language teacher agency, emotion labor and emotional rewards in tertiary-level English language classes,' *System* 79: 49–59.
- Moore, A.** and **M. Clarke.** 2016. "'Cruel optimism": teacher attachment to professionalism in an era of performativity,' *Journal of Education Policy* 31: 666–77.
- Naraian, S.** and **S. Khoja-Moolji.** 2016. 'Happy places, horrible times, and scary learners: Affective performances and sticky objects in inclusive classrooms,' *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education* 29: 1131–47.
- Noddings, N.** 1988. 'An ethic of caring and its implications for instructional arrangements,' *American Journal of Education* 96: 215–30.
- Noddings, N.** 2003. *Happiness and Education.* Cambridge University Press.
- Noddings, N.** 2013. *Caring: A Relational Approach to Ethics and Moral Education.* University of California Press.
- Pereira, A. J.** 2018. 'Caring to teach: exploring the affective economies of English teachers in Singapore,' *Chinese Journal of Applied Linguistics* 41: 488–505.
- Pullen, A.** and **R. Simpson.** 2009. 'Managing difference in feminized work: Men, otherness and social practice,' *Human Relations* 62: 561–87.
- Schmitz, S.** and **S. Ahmed.** 2014. 'Affect/Emotion: orientation matters a conversation between sigrid schmitz and sara ahmed,' *FZG–Freiburger Zeitschrift für GeschlechterStudien* 20: 13–4.
- Teimouri, Y.** 2018. 'Differential roles of shame and guilt in L2 learning: How bad is bad?,' *The Modern Language Journal* 102: 632–52.
- Toshalis, E.** 2011. 'The rhetoric of care: preservice teacher discourses that depoliticize, deflect, and deceive,' *The Urban Review* 44: 1–35.
- Zembylas, M.** 2005. *Teaching with Emotion: A Postmodern Enactment.* Information Age Publishing.
- Zembylas, M.** 2007. 'Emotional capital and education: theoretical insights from Bourdieu,' *British Journal of Educational Studies* 55: 443–63.
- Zembylas, M.** 2011. 'Investigating the emotional geographies of exclusion at a multicultural school,' *Emotion, Space and Society* 4: 151–9.
- Zembylas, M.** 2020. '(Un) happiness and social justice education: ethical, political and pedagogic lessons,' *Ethics and Education* 15: 18–32.
- M. Zembylas** and **P. A. Schutz (ed.).** 2016. *Methodological Advances in Research on Emotion and Education.* Springer.

NOTES ON CONTRIBUTOR

Elizabeth R. Miller is Professor of Applied Linguistics in the Department of English at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte where she is Associate Chair and Director of Undergraduate Programs. Her current research focuses on language teacher identity, agency and emotions.

Christina Gkonou is an Associate Professor of TESOL in the Department of Language and Linguistics at the University of Essex, UK. She leads the MA TESOL program and a number of modules focusing on language teacher education and the psychology of language learning and teaching. Her research areas include language learner and teacher emotions, and language teacher wellbeing.