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## **Re-thinking teachers' body awareness to support well-being and resilience practices during COVID-19\*\***

### **Summary**

In this paper, the concept of body awareness is introduced in view of supporting teachers' well-being and resilience practices, with a focus on COVID-19 pandemic. Teachers experience high rates of stress and pressure to cope with current working conditions due to COVID-19 pandemic. Depression and anxiety related to teachers' duties have been largely researched worldwide. Research is being done around well-being from different perspectives, mental health, emotional and spiritual well-being, among other research done. However, little research has been done associated with body experiences and awareness from a holistic dimension that focuses on developing well-being and resilience practices; a state of mind and body that goes beyond acquiring physical skills to develop better physical condition. Thus far, despite relevant reviews and works have been published in relation to well-being and resilience practices in education, there is a need to explore the body experience to support teachers' challenges during COVID-19 pandemic. For doing so, this work aims to review literature on the concept of well-being to elaborate, first, on the importance of supporting teachers' well-being during COVID-19 pandemic. Second, we elaborate on the concept of body awareness in education. Third, we briefly explore the concept of resilience in relation to teachers' well-being. Last, we raise some critical remarks about body experiences in

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\*\* The publication was financed by the University of Warsaw

education post COVID-19, and the need of re-thinking well-being and resilience practices in the school community to face with uncertainty.

**Keywords:** teachers, body awareness, well-being, resilience, COVID-19

## Introduction

This article addresses the concept of body awareness in education with a focus on teachers' well-being and resilience practices during COVID-19 pandemic. The aim of this article is two-folded: first, we explore the concept of well-being and more in particular teachers' well-being, and second, we elaborate on the concept of body awareness experience in education. Both concepts, well-being and body awareness are discussed as a means for supporting well-being and resilience practices to cope with uncertainty during COVID-19 times.

The concept of teacher well-being has been researched and discussed from different perspectives, for example, social, economic and mental health well-being, among other dimensions (Covell, McNeil, & Howe, 2009; Education Support Partnership, 2018; García-Carmona, Marín, & Aguayo, 2019; Health and Safety Executive, 2020a, 2020b; Montgomery & Rupp, 2005). During COVID-19 pandemic, there is a need to focus on the importance of supporting teachers' well-being due to high rates of stress and pressure that the pandemic has added to daily teachers' duties (Education Support, 2020). Against this background, exploring the concept of well-being and resilience in relation to teachers' well-being becomes central to this paper, with a focus on how body awareness may support both practices, teachers' well-being and resilience during COVID-19 pandemic. This analysis allows us to raise some critical remarks about developing well-being practices through body experiences in education that support teachers' well-being and resilience during and post COVID-19 pandemic.

Having explored research done on the topic of teachers' well-being (Covell, McNeil, & Howe, 2009; Education Support Partnership, 2018; García-Carmona, Marín, & Aguayo, 2019; Health and Safety Executive, 2020a, 2020b; Montgomery & Rupp, 2005;), we have identified a gap in research associated with body experiences and awareness from a holistic dimension that might support and sustain the development of both practices, well-being and

resilience. Despite relevant reviews and works published in relation to well-being and resilience practices in education (Beltman & Mansfield, 2018; Dewar, 2016; Masten & Powell, 2003; Oades, 2017), there is a need to explore the body experience to support teachers' challenges during COVID-19 pandemic from holistic perspectives.

In this light, first we review literature on the concept of well-being and the importance of supporting teachers' well-being during COVID-19 pandemic. Second, we focus on the concept of body awareness in education. Third, we briefly explore the concept of resilience in education, associated with teachers' well-being. In particular, body awareness is discussed as a means for supporting well-being and resilience practices to cope with teachers' stress and uncertainty during COVID-19 times. Last, we raise some critical questions about body experiences in education post COVID-19 pandemic, and the need of re-thinking well-being and resilience practices in the school community to face with uncertainty.

### Exploring the concept of well-being

To start with, we acknowledge that there are no 'universal' definitions of well-being; indeed, disciplines, cultures and traditions may define and understand well-being in different ways. However, we can come to the consensus that well-being is a key dimension of health according to the World Health Organisation. Additionally, this dimension includes a holistic understanding of health from physical, psychological, social and economic perspectives (Rath & Harter, 2010).

Dewar (2016) elaborates on the term 'well-being' by analysing the roots of 'well' (as an adjective) and the connection to the feeling of being well in "a life giving, affirming, and nurturing manner" (p. 58). In Dewar's (2016) words,

[...] the adjective "well" offers a profound figurative understanding of being. To "understand" is to stand beneath, to get under the surface and explore the depths of something, and it is this notion of depth that the etymology of "well" poetically describes. Recorded in the eighth century, *w?lum* or, "well," originally referred to a hole in the ground from which water sprang forth. Almost 400 years later, however, in 1225ce, St. Mark used "well" figuratively to describe a person's presence, the well-like depth pervading a person's being. The poetization of the well as a way of being expresses the possibility of vitality pouring forth from us, like water, as if tapped from a deep inner source. (p. 58)

In addition, the author expands on the genealogical roots of the other part of the term as 'human being' (and care) and relates it to the concept of education. In this light, Dewar (2016) describes an interesting link among education, care and the possibilities for being in that relation, and explains that the "ontologically educative process is poetically expressed as well-being, a way of being marked by a heightened sense of meaning that arises with a deep care for our own possibility to be in light of our temporality" (p. 59). Accordingly, we can say that education is possible under conditions that promote well-being and care of/for others and ourselves, with a focus on a holistic view of the concept of care that fulfils the potential of all humans.

Following White, Slep and Murray's (2017) argument of a holistic approach to the concept of well-being, we agree that

[w]e have an unprecedented opportunity in human history to create educational systems that lead to full spectrum flourishing, that is, the development of our highest and best potentials in human, societal, economic, technical, ecological, and spiritual ways. We have never had more knowledge and resources for the fulfilment of academic achievement and for realizing the life skills for attaining overall well-being. "Education is not preparation for life," said the great thinker John Dewey, "education is life itself." (pp. v-vi)

In this paper, therefore, we understand well-being as a holistic state of health and autonomy that includes different dimensions, such as physical, psychological, and social perspectives and metacognition processes (Dewar, 2016; Rath & Harter, 2010). Therefore, well-being is not just a subjective state of mind, perceptions and/or beliefs (Michalos, 2017). In this sense, we must reflect on the challenge of developing holistic practices in education that includes thinking education as life itself, and hence, we must not only think at improving the curriculum, content or skills in education, but also consider, seriously, well-being resources that allow all education actors, the teachers, the students and the family to care from one another, to care for education and life itself.

In agreement with Oades (2017) "a fundamental challenge of well-being interventions is that are delivered to human agents, and therefore have to navigate the fact that humans make their own decisions and will try to make sense of what they receive, in contrast to a plant receiving fertilizer" (p. 172). So far, developing comprehensive and self-regulated practices that teachers can control and make use of them in their own time is a strategy that we encouraged with this paper and reflection, to support and sustain well-being practices at teachers' own pace and time.

## **The importance of supporting teachers' well-being during COVID-19 pandemic**

The well-being of teachers has been a concern in the last years due to high rates of stress reports worldwide due to workload and lack of resources (Covell, McNeil & Howe, 2009; Education Support Partnership, 2018; García-Carmona, Marín & Aguayo, 2019; Health and Safety Executive, 2020a, 2020b; Montgomery & Rupp, 2005). "According to the UK's Health and Safety Executive, teaching staff and education professionals report the highest rates of work-related stress, depression and anxiety in Britain" (Health and Safety Executive, 2020a, p. 4).

In the same report of the Health and Safety Executive (2020a) it is said that, the rate of "self-reported work-related stress, depression or anxiety has increased in recent years. Working days lost per worker due to self-reported work-related stress, depression or anxiety shows no clear trend. Workload, lack of support, violence, threats or bullying and changes at work are estimated to be the main causes of work-related stress, depression or anxiety based on 2009/10-2011/12 LFS data" (p. 4). Indeed, teachers' well-being reports show the complexity of relations that shape the well-being experience under work-related stress, for example, the lack of work-life balance.

Following from the above, it is worth mentioning that on top of common work-related stress, the pandemic has increased teachers' duties in a number of ways, for example, the need of becoming familiar to Information and Communication Technologies (ICT), adapting face-to-face teaching to online lessons, updating their teaching methodologies, among other matters, e.g., dealing with personal issues associated with the pandemic. Moreover, Glazzard and Anthea (2019) mention that

[t]he problem of teacher stress is pervasive. It is evident across all sectors of education and across countries (Gray et al., 2017) and results in burnout and lower job satisfaction. Teachers are consistently reported to experience an increased risk of developing mental ill health. (Stansfeld et al., 2011; Kidger et al., 2016) (p. 11)

As mentioned before, this concern has increased due to COVID-19 pandemic and the new challenges that teachers are facing, to support the students' learning, the family relations, and their own continuing development to online teaching training (Education Support, 2020). In this light, teachers and families' relationships have a new incidence in the teaching and learning

relationship. Teachers are ‘entering the children and families’ home’ daily through online and live sessions. On the one hand, this can be positive to strengthen participatory relations between the family and the school. On the other hand, these relationships can add a new factor of stress to teachers’ responsibilities. For instance, “unrealistic parental expectations for their child/children which could lead to excessive pressure on staff; the frequency of emails from parents and an expectation for an instant response; and parents raising concerns or complaints inappropriately” (Health and Safety Executive, 2020a, p. 5).

According to the report’s results, “a positive working environment is a predictor of staff well-being. Creating such an environment is one of the main ways in which we can improve well-being and enhance retention” (Health and Safety Executive, 2020a, p. 9). However, during COVID-19 pandemic the working environment for many teachers is now located at their own homes. Hence, it is more difficult to organise a routine for work within an established schedule and have some time for leisure. The work and the home environment are united, and hence, there is a need to encourage self-regulated well-being practices that help teachers having some time in their own, for their personal, emotional care and mental health.

Unexpectedly, teachers have been required to reinvent their ways of teaching, to engage with the students and their families in new ways, and to assess students against the new reality with an increase of workload. Teachers are increasingly expected to support students, academically and emotionally, and to face with uncertainty as result of the pandemic. An uncertainty that teachers are living themselves and do not really know how to cope with it. All these factors have had an impact on teacher stress. According to the Teacher Wellbeing Index 2020, elaborated by Education Support (2020):

Education professionals displayed much higher levels of depression (32%) than the general population (19%) (ONS, 2020a). They also reported large increases in symptoms such as:

- difficulty concentrating;
- insomnia;
- tearfulness.

These symptoms may become associated with clinically diagnosed mental health conditions, including depression, over time. (p. 6)

Against this background, there is a need to rethink and explore ways of increasing teachers’ well-being opportunities, through accessible and self-regulated practices that allow teachers to develop a well-being and resilience

culture. These practices do not deny the essential measures that need to be implemented at policy and decision-making levels in education, to secure better working conditions to teachers; however, that focus on policies exceeds the objective of this paper.

## **Defining body awareness in education**

In this section, we explore ways of understanding the concept of body awareness. Authors from different backgrounds and disciplines have elaborated about body and body awareness across history. Various studies have developed research that linked body awareness with the development of motor skills since early stages of life (Gallahue, Ozmun, & Goodway, 2006). In addition, a significant number of research around the concept of body and body awareness have contributed to understand the relevance of thinking the body from psychology, health and experimental sciences (Astin et al., 2003; Bechara & Naqvi, 2004; Carruthers, 2008; Daubenmier, 2005; Ernst & Canter, 2003; Haugstad et al., 2006; Kolt & McConville, 2000; Kerr, 2002; Naqvi et al., 2006; Mehling et al., 2009; Varela et al., 1991).

Furthermore, the body has been researched from anthropological and philosophical perspectives, and has been thought from 'consciousness' approaches to develop autonomy and metacognition processes, as well as it has been related to the concept of 'embodiment' as the experience of one's own body, movement and body expression (Alexander, 1998; Feldenkrais, 1985; Foucault, 2010; Le Breton, 2002, 2006; Mauss, 1934/2002; Merleau-Ponty, 1994). In agreement with this line of research, we engage with the concept of body awareness that connects the body the experience with consciously 'being' in one's own body.

When it comes to education, different dimensions of the body play a role in the pedagogical relation, e.g., expression, non-verbal communication. However, in this paper, the aim is to focus on the relation among the (teacher) body, the world, and the pedagogical relation with the students (Behares & Rodríguez, 2008; Gallo, 2017; Martínez Álvarez, 2013; Tur Porres & Ires Correa, 2020a, 2020b). Likewise, Toivanen and Kaasinen (2016) on body awareness

we use the term "body awareness" to describe the situation when the teacher becomes aware of the embodied part of an interaction (...) The concept "body" we understand as the division into "living body" and "lived body" (Thompson, 2007, pp. 235–237). Our living as

a human being occurs through our bodies and in our bodies (e.g., organ functions, the sensations, experiences, physical acts). Bodily knowing also involves knowing in and through our bodies (see e.g., Parviainen, 2006; Rouhiainen, 2007; Thompson, 2007). There are different points of view of what bodily knowledge is, but we can find a large body of research data supporting the belief that embodiment is the basis for consciousness, cognition, and learning (see e.g., Johnson, 2008; Thompson, 2007). (p. 126)

Moreover, we agree with Mehling et al. (2011) that

Body awareness involves an attentional focus on and awareness of internal body sensations... is the subjective, phenomenological aspect of proprioception and interoception that enters conscious awareness, and is modifiable by mental processes including attention, interpretation, appraisal, beliefs, memories, conditioning, attitudes and affect. (p. 1)

Against this background, we elaborate on a working definition of body awareness that considers Alexander's work (Alexander, 1998; Ernst, & Canter, 2003) as point of departure. In this light, body awareness implies a conscious perception and direct attention to the body in view of personal transformation (Tur Porres, & Ires Correa, 2020b). Furthermore, this notion is understood as ways of doing and being in the world, ways of communicating with ourselves and with others (Le Breton, 2002, 2006). Thus, we understand body awareness as a meaningful self-education, self-regulation, and metacognition process (Feldenkrais, 1985; Kolt & McConville, 2000). Acquiring these competences shall benefit teachers to construct their own continuing development pathway. Accordingly, body awareness shall enable teachers to holistically understand education and better support the teaching and learning experience with students (Tur Porres & Ires Correa, 2020a).

### **Teachers' resilience: what for?**

In this article, we understand resilience as a dynamic concept of resistance, of the ability to recover from life's adversities and to transform that situation in an opportunity despite the difficulties (Beltman, & Mansfield, 2018; Cyrulnik, 2003a, 2003b, 2007; Masten, & Powell, 2003; Wosnitza et al., 2018). In this sense, resilience is a complex process that allows a person to face and overcome adversities and conflicts and to keep the integrity despite the difficulties.

Within education, there is a need to discuss the concept of resilience as a multidimensional factor that does not only refer to social and emotional



practices of resistance and recovery among teachers and students, but also, from a teacher's perspective, resilience might have an impact on teachers' commitments and effectiveness towards education, as well as on their own' professional identity (Gu & Day, 2007).

In agreement with Rickinson (2011)

within education, there is an increasing recognition that the nature of teaching and learning and the contexts in which this takes place demands what we might call 'everyday resilience'; that the capacity to be resilient is an important factor in teaching and teacher effectiveness over time; and that resilience can be developed. It is certainly not simply a personal trait. The social environment is important and resilience can be fostered or diminished through the environment (for example, leadership interventions in establishing and nurturing structures and cultures). (p. 5)

As previously elaborated, teachers' high levels of stress have been reported in research across countries (Covell et al., 2009; García-Carmona et al., 2019; Education Support Partnership, 2018; Health and Safety Executive, 2020a, 2020b; Montgomery & Rupp, 2005). This alert is a warning for states across the globe to find actions that promote teachers' well-being and improve their working conditions. In this sense, building well-being and resilience pathways among teachers is a relevant means of self-regulation that might help reducing a portion of stress levels associated with the profession.

In this paper, therefore, we suggest connecting well-being and resilience from holistic health perspectives, as a process that can be supported and learned to sustain teachers' personal and professional development. According to Burns and Weinberg (2017) "together, well-being and resilience are viewed as interactive components that both operate to ensure optimal psychological functioning and a key feature of both well-being and resilience is access to social support and relationships" (p. 19). This link helps us re-thinking the need of creating resilience opportunities that support teachers in their search for well-being, through self-regulated practices, e.g., body awareness techniques.

To gain a holistic understanding of well-being and the relation with the body, it is worth mentioning that

Emotion is inseparable from the body in which it is felt, and emotion is also the basis for our engagement with the world. Social understanding in the sense of empathic connection, as well as understanding how others feel, what they mean not only by what they say in context, as we have seen, but by their facial expressions, their 'body language' and tone of voice. (McGilchrist, 2019, p. 66)

Against this background, creating the conditions to support resilience practices might enable teachers to face with current COVID-19 adversities and to gain ‘certain’ control of the situation to overcome hard times, with resources at their’s disposal. In this sense, we understand resilience as potentiality, a transformative resource that might help us gaining some self-control over everyday adversities, becoming active subjects in the translation of difficulties to well-being practices.

### **Discussion: how can body awareness support teachers’ well-being and resilience?**

In face-to-face contexts the body ‘communicates’, and the teacher and students learn to ‘read’ the body and the world of social interactions, to develop safe practices and relations. However, the uncertainty of developing teaching and learning encounters without ‘physical presence’ and mediated by video calls and conferences might prevent teachers to develop safe and secure social pedagogical relations and interactions with students. In this light, we consider that putting into practice body awareness techniques may help to care for oneself and others and to know their limits and best ways and times to relate with others.

Moreover, in COVID-19 pandemic’ times, teachers are connected all day long in front of the computer. Consequently, there is a need to have a time and space of their own, to be conscious of their body postures and experience, their tone of voice and ways of communicating with others (the students, the family, and the community). Thus, body awareness is not an issue of occupational health and body hygiene to be more ‘productive’ at work, rather it is a matter of personal and collective care. It is a time to connect with emotions, to create resilience moments that help teachers facing with adversity and developing a sense of holistic well-being, physically and emotionally.

According to research done by the Anna Freud Centre for Children and Families (n.d.),

In addition to having a positive impact on colleagues and pupils, staff wellbeing can improve performance and job satisfaction, which can lead to reduced staff turnover. It can also help to reduce absence (both short and long term), increase productivity and promote staff engagement. (paragraph 4)

Within the search for support and well-being practices, if we focus on the inner observation of our body posture, this might become a starting point to connect with ourselves within a continuous process of well-being practices' development through body awareness. In agreement with Alexander (1998), self-observation starts with listening, with all our senses, the way we feel in relation to our body, our movements and orientation. It also includes learning to manage our time; the time spent in work-related tasks against the time dedicated for oneself. Alexander (1998) techniques to motivate body awareness are not time demanding but they ask for 'conscious' time in connection with the body, e.g., how am I sitting down in front of the computer? Do I feel any pain, for example, back pain? How can I improve my body posture? These are questions that direct our attention to our body in a conscious way. Attention seems to be central to develop body awareness further (Kodish, 2004). Following these questions, we need to put into practice ways of improving our body posture.

Furthermore, as elaborated by Jain, Janssen and DeCelle (2004) with regards to Fredrick Matthias Alexander (1984) technique (which is different from Gerda Alexander's technique (1998) though they both focus to a certain extent on body conscious and awareness):

Alexander stressed the importance of inhibition to alter routine movement. He postulated that by stopping a movement from occurring, one could reset the action and redirect motion to function more naturally. Over time, these movements become second nature. The result may include an array of different results, including improvement of movement, posture, or voice quality, and even a decrease of pain. Alexander believed the dynamic relationship between the head, neck, and spine was crucial to a person's overall well-being. (p. 815)

In different opportunities (before the pandemic), we had implemented workshops with teachers and students in Uruguay and Ecuador, inviting participants to try different self-observation techniques that included acknowledging their body posture with a holistic sense of 'being with/in their bodies' in comfortable ways. These activities allowed participants to become aware of their bodies in the space and time and the limits with the outside world and reduce the work-related stress, depression, and anxiety.

Also, these practices avoided fragmenting the body experience to mechanical routines, instead it introduced a self-perception of the body in a holistic way and becoming conscious of different ways of doing and being in the world and communicating with themselves and others. These practices

have proved to improve the verbal and non-verbal communication, the relation with others, their physical and emotional experience towards their continuing personal and social development (Ires & Tur, 2016; Tur Porres & Ires Correa, 2020b).

Following from the above, we consider that engaging with similar experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic might be useful to cope with stress caused by new teaching conditions and relationships. This work is a first approach and invitation to engage with body techniques that conduct to body awareness' experiences as self-regulated practices, to cope with the pandemic with resources at teachers' hand. Still, this exploration is at a theoretical level of reflection and translation, from face-to-face techniques towards online environments. Thus, we do not engage at this stage with results of practices, rather we focus on the discussion of strengths and opportunities that can be considered with reconnecting the 'being' with our body whilst exploring new ways of awareness with one-self, that might also have an impact on the way we relate to others in meaningful ways. In this light, in the next section, rather than concluding with definite results of a specific experience, we invite to continuing the reflection on the need of introducing the body in teachers' daily activities and routines, to support and sustain their well-being and resilience practices to cope with the pandemic and work-related stress.

### **Concluding remarks**

In this paper, we have elaborated on the importance of supporting teachers' well-being and resilience practices through body awareness. It has been discussed that this self-education and self-regulation competence may also have an impact on teachers' perceptions about challenges during COVID-19 pandemic and possibilities of transformation. This potentiality is seen with a focus on a self-knowledge and self-education approach. In this sense, this transformation potentiality is linked with our understanding of resilience to gain some self-control over everyday adversities, and to become active subjects in our search for well-being. In agreement with Anttila (2015) quoted in Toivanen and Kaasinen (2016, p. 126) "that shifting focus between the personal and the shared (inner and outer) body experiences and body expressions is difficult at first but it becomes easier with active practice" (Anttila, 2015, p. 376). For this reason, there is a need to create opportunities for teachers to experience

individual and collective body awareness' practices that support their well-being. This can be motivated within the school community and school leaders to promote time and spaces for personal encounters that help teachers overcoming with adversities during COVID-19 pandemic and reconnecting with their own body (at home or at school or other educational institutions).

So far, connecting the body with education means caring for a holistic view of the teaching and learning process, not simply related to delivery of the curriculum, instead it engages with the experience of communicating with others in a safe and supportive place and time. During the COVID-19 pandemic the levels of anxiety and stress of teachers, students and families have increased. Teaching and learning expectations must adapt to the new reality; to learn new ways of understanding the body based on virtual pedagogical relations. This is a challenging task, but teachers may integrate body awareness practices in the teaching and learning process; gain understanding of their own 'body awareness' in this new shared virtual space, and 'wake up' to a process of metacognition, of 'thinking about thinking their own bodies'. Introducing the concept and appraisal of self-perception techniques and self-regulated practices might increase opportunities for metacognition ('thinking about the body'); a commitment within the teaching and learning process that seeks to address new ways of relating, and new (virtual) spaces of constructing sensitive pedagogical relationships to cope with current adversities. Thus, body awareness is not simply related to 'exercising' the body in class, on the contrary, it is about a metacognition approach of thinking one's own body and 'being' present at the event of teaching and learning. For this reason, we understand that well-being and resilience can be improved from the conscious body, when both body awareness and resilience go through a vital construction process together.

Creating opportunities for giving the body a place in the teacher and learning process, might help teachers to experience individual and collective body awareness' practices that support their well-being and resilience, and to engage with ways of doing and saying at class that are safe and comfortable to interact in virtual mediated pedagogical relations.

To sum up, we would like to close this paper with an opening question to stimulate further (post-pandemic) critical debates: Can teachers care/educate others without caring for themselves? This is a controversial question that can be responded at different levels and dimensions, that is, at a personal, social and policy dimension. We just want to raise this provocative question at this closing point, to stimulate further debates on resilience and teachers'

well-being in education from alternative and holistic perspectives, e.g., body awareness practices: an encounter with the inner and outer body.

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