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Researching Teacher Well-Being in Protracted Crises: A Multiscalar Cultural Political Economy Perspective

CYRIL OWEN BRANDT AND MIEKE LOPES CARDOZO

Research on teacher well-being that works from a localized socioeconomic perspective tends to neglect the nestedness of teacher well-being within wider systems. Randomized controlled trials are illustrative of such decontextualized ontological and epistemological foundations. In this article, we demonstrate the benefits of a system dynamics cultural political economy–informed analysis for research on teacher well-being in protracted crises. Zooming into teacher contract and salary policies in the Democratic Republic of Congo, we compare our largely qualitative research with two randomized controlled trials. Our article yields two insights for future systemic analyses of teacher well-being in protracted crises. First, such research necessitates a methodological design that captures the multiscalar systems in which teacher well-being is embedded. Second, such research requires an exploration of cultural, political, and economic dynamics that affect teachers and establish boundaries for teacher well-being.

Introduction

Teacher well-being is an increasingly prioritized policy area (Falk et al. 2019; Viac and Fraser 2020; INEE 2021), given the assumption that higher levels of teacher well-being facilitate a more efficient administration, improved learning outcomes, and higher levels of student well-being (McCallum et al. 2017; Henderson and St. Arnold 2019). Most recently, the COVID-19 pandemic has led to numerous publications on ensuring teacher well-being during and after school closure (e.g., Shah and Diaz-Varela 2020). Well-being is mainly conceived in the form of physical, mental, and cognitive traits within a (school) community. Many teacher well-being studies predominantly focus on local-level relationships and effects, mirroring the tendency of research (and evaluations) in education in emergencies and protracted crises to "prioritize positivism, a research paradigm that values empirical, quantitative and decontextualized methods, such as Randomized Control Trials (RCTs)" (Reyes 2020, 14). Indeed, RCTs epitomize these decontextual ontological and

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epistemological foundations (Deaton and Cartwright 2017). However, factors that influence well-being extend far beyond the local level. Complex sociocultural, economic, and political aspects have a bearing on teacher well-being. While the concept of teacher well-being has only recently "traveled" (Steiner-Khamsi 2012) to conflict-affected contexts, protracted crises pose particular challenges that research needs to take seriously.

In this article, we put forward an approach that draws from work on cultural political economy (CPE; Jessop 2004; Sum and Jessop 2013; Robertson and Dale 2015). CPE "is a nascent and broad interdisciplinary theoretical current that extends the traditional concerns of political economy analysis to show how they interact with cultural processes of meaning making" (Higgins and Novelli 2020, 5). As discussed in more detail elsewhere (Lopes Cardozo and Shah 2016a), a CPE approach brings *culture* into equal footing with *political* and *economic* systems and structures, together forming a complex context that is interrelated to actions of actors nested in such systems. Societal processes can be viewed as related sets of "moments" between the cultural (discourses, languages, beliefs, values), the political (power and institutions), and the economic (practices that produce and articulate social relations; Jessop 2015; Robertson and Dale 2015).

Adding our theoretical understanding to common definitions (Acton and Glasgow 2015; Falk et al. 2019; Viac and Fraser 2020), this article understands *teacher well-being* as a teacher's perceived job satisfaction, motivation, and job challenge support affected by school-level factors and multiscalar CPE dynamics. We address the following research question: How can a CPE lens complement local-level methodologies, such as RCTs, and help to design and conduct research that allows for a holistic understanding of teacher well-being in protracted crises? We argue that a CPE perspective enables a deep understanding of the complexities inherent within and surrounding teacher well-being in crises.

For the sake of our argument, we compare evaluations of a nongovernmental organization (NGO) intervention in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) with insights from our qualitative CPE-inspired research. The evaluations used RCTs to assess the International Rescue Committee's (IRC) Learning in a Healing Classroom intervention (Wolf, Torrente, Frisoli et al. 2015; Wolf, Torrente, McCoy et al. 2015). Both studies stand out as pioneering RCTs on teachers' socioemotional well-being in conflict-affected contexts. We analyze how the evaluations address relationships between teacher well-being and the policy environment, focusing on teacher contracts and salaries, which are illustrative of the impact of policy dynamics on teacher well-being (Mendenhall et al. 2018; Falk et al. 2019). We then demonstrate how CPE-inspired qualitative research helps to analyze the impact of policy dynamics on teacher well-being. We engage with RCTs to critically investigate assumptions about the nature or functioning of the world (ontology) and the development of our knowledge

base (epistemology) that underlie methodological choices. Our research suggests limitations of local-level-focused epistemology and ontology in teacher well-being research, often driven by project evaluations and tightly linked to technical diagnoses and available interventions. This resonates with Mosse's (2004, 640) question, "What if the things that make for good policy are quite different from those that make it implementable?" Critiques from fields other than education underline that a lack of in-depth contextual knowledge can trump the insights yielded by popular research methodologies and methods (e.g., Verweijen and van Meeteren 2015), such as RCTs. We argue that there is a need to expand this understanding of well-being to acknowledge context-specific, deeply complex relationships of teachers with state and nonstate actors and dynamics.

Our analysis brings us to two insights for future research, to inform practice and policy design, on teacher well-being in protracted crises. First, research on teacher well-being in protracted crises necessitates a methodological design that captures the multiscalar systems that affect teacher well-being. Second, such research requires an exploration of context-specific multiscalar cultural, political, and economic dynamics that (negatively) affect teachers and establish boundaries for teacher well-being. Taking inspiration from these principles can enable researchers, practitioners, policy designers, and other relevant stakeholders who care about teacher well-being to step beyond evaluations of effects at local levels toward a systems-oriented investigation of the very material and symbolic conditions under which teacher well-being and teacher agency unfolds. Our intention in this article is thus to engage in a thinking process and develop some guiding principles for future (research, policy, and practice) design to allow for more complex, multiscalar, and system-oriented understandings of the invaluable work of teachers on the front lines.

This article also brings the increasing interest in the political economy of learning (Hickey and Hossain 2019) into the nascent literature on teacher well-being in protracted crises (Falk et al. 2019). Our analysis contributes to shifting "the emphasis from a standard evaluation of education services" for conflict-affected communities "to one that examines education's wider role and political impact" and relation to conflict/peace building (Shanks 2019, 43; see also Novelli et al. 2017). Thereby, we extend ongoing critical approaches in comparative education, for example, in the realm of peace education or resilience, toward teacher well-being (Shah and Lopes Cardozo 2019; Higgins and Novelli 2020). The article unfolds as follows: we first discuss the local-level ontology of teacher well-being research. Second, we introduce our theoretical framework, followed by an outline of our study design. Subsequently, we zoom in on the two DRC-based project evaluations. In the remaining analysis, we discuss the relationships between teacher well-being and CPE dynamics, respectively. In the conclusion, we suggest guiding principles for future CPE-informed research on teacher well-being in protracted crises.

Existing Localized Framings of Teacher Well-Being

Well-being has been an increasingly popular and relevant topic in development studies (Pouw and Gilmore 2012). High costs for recruitment and training entailed by teacher turnover and absenteeism as well as low levels of teacher quality are central reasons for the growing concern about teacher well-being in the field of education policy. Key components of teacher well-being include workload, self-efficacy, individual resilience, stress and anxiety, burnout, job satisfaction, social connectedness, and social-emotional competence (Mendenhall et al. 2018; Falk et al. 2019).

Some approaches toward well-being in development studies are theoretically complex and methodologically diverse (Pouw and Gilmore 2012), and certain conceptualizations of teacher well-being in crisis contexts follow socioecological approaches (Mendenhall et al. 2018; Falk et al. 2019), as we discuss below. However, in most actual studies of teacher well-being the political and economic spheres, and the methodological toolbox to explore them, remain underdeveloped (Acton and Glasgow 2015; McCallum et al. 2017; Viac and Fraser 2020). A recent publication commissioned by the Inter-agency Network for Education in Emergencies, for example, provides insightful evidence on teacher well-being in emergencies and low-resource, crisis- and conflict-affected settings, while mirroring the dominant conceptual approach identified above (Henderson and St. Arnold 2019). Most literature on teacher well-being in protracted crises stems from project reflections or evaluations written for practitioners, which tend to favor hands-on insights over more complex political economy analyses.

However, the local-level gaze in well-being research is not exclusive to project-related literature. Acton and Glasgow's (2015) review of studies on teacher well-being in neoliberal contexts suggests no striking difference in the analyzed topics between qualitative and quantitative studies. Well-being is seen as "constructed in a collaborative process with colleagues and students" (102), and all studies focused primarily on the immediate workplace, for example, collegial relationships or power in the classroom. The evaluations we analyze fall within this "localized" understanding of teacher well-being.

Considering the school level as the locus of change is a common foundation of development projects (Selenica and Novelli 2021). School-based management or, for example, decentralization are policy frameworks to put these ideas into action and move levels of responsibility—under the banner of accountability—to the community and school scale. Shah and colleagues (2020) elaborate this argument with regard to resilience, arguing that common approaches disregard structural and root causes of conflict. They instead advocate fostering the absorptive, adaptive, and transformational capacities of resilience. Higgins and Novelli (2020) recently voiced a related critique with regard to reductive conceptual understandings of peace education. These

findings resonate with noneducational research (see Marchais, Bazuzi et al. [2020] on the concept of community and Stearns et al. [2017] on the interwoven nature of local levels with regional and national dynamics). Li (2007) characterizes policies as a form of governmentality when they claim easily applicable and measurable technical solutions by reconfiguring social relations and changing habits and customs at the community level. She argues that problems are constructed in a technical way that makes them amenable to outside interventions.

A methodological gold standard in that regard are RCTs. Their most prolific proponents were awarded with the Prize in Economic Sciences in Memory of Alfred Nobel in 2019. Research on education policy has been a core component of their research agenda, for example, investigating incentives schemes, teacher contracts, and absenteeism (e.g., Duflo et al. 2012). RCTs are an experimental method originally from the medical sciences and increasingly used in the social sciences. They "provide evidence that the treatment caused the outcome in some individuals in that sample" (Deaton and Cartwright 2017, 56). Deaton and Cartwright (2017) address RCTs' weakness in revealing why certain effects were measured, a common critique against the lack of causal explanations of quantitative methodologies (Reyes 2020). Similarly, Wolf, Torrente, Frisoli et al. (2015, 34), authors of the RCT of teacher well-being with which this article engages, recommended that future mixed-methods research should unpack "why certain patterns of findings are observed." Deaton and Cartwright (2017, 58) further argue that "RCT results outside of a few contexts, such as program evaluation, hypothesis testing, or establishing proof of concept" might not be very meaningful. Along similar lines, Bédécarrats and colleagues (2019) criticize RCTs' disregard of political aspects of implementation. In an assessment of RCTs' potential for educational research, Castillo and Wagner (2014, 172) caution that "impact, scale-up, and sustainability are undermined when the cultural dimensions of human behavior are insufficiently understood and institutional accountability is weak." Parra (2017, 117) notes that local-level research design usually "overemphasizes the role of today . . . and treats the past as epiphenomena." Along similar lines, Pouw and Gilmore (2012, 19) highlight the temporary and spatial breadth of well-being in that it is a "state *and* a dynamic process that is incumbent on a local place but also based on aspirations and capabilities towards living well beyond a specific context." To address such shortcomings, Burde (2012) suggested to carry out RCTs within mixed-methods studies. However, as we now outline, methodology follows the underlying ontology and epistemology. Qualitative research that exclusively focuses on local-level relationships is as limited as quantitative research that follows the same approach. Therefore, again, our contention is not with RCTs, but we engage with RCTs as they are emblematic of this local-level ontology.

Moving beyond existing localized methodological design approaches, we argue for the design of "context-specific" methodological approaches,

as further detailed below. We do not disregard "the local." Rather, a multiscalar systems approach allows for an understanding of "place" as being embedded in its unique, historical/contemporary, multilevel engagement with the cultural, political, and economic multiscalar domains at work. The way a teacher experiences well-being is influenced by, and dialectically influences, her or his work and life—and this experience will be different in one village or community from the other, depending on, for instance, (1) the place-specific histories of conflict/peace, (2) the makeup of the community in terms of cultural practices and (lack of) social cohesion between people(s), (3) the geographical proximity/distance from nodal point of power (e.g., cities or political places of decision-making), (4) a teacher's (or a more collective) relation to these places/people in power and the policies following from them, (5) the access to (online or other) forms of communication, and (6) a teacher's prior education/training and (lack of) continued support networks, to name but a few relevant aspects.

A Multiscalar Systems Analytical Framework: CPE of Teacher Well-Being

Despite the dominance of rigid, experimental, and thus positivist research in education in emergencies and protracted crises (Reyes 2020), recent work has acknowledged a socioecological model to understand teacher well-being. Falk et al. (2019) identify teacher management (in particular, teacher shortages), compensation, certification, and professional development as core "national-level factors." Similarly, a recent OECD report highlights material conditions, quality standards, distribution and allocation, and career structure as key policy elements that affect an individual's well-being (Viac and Fraser 2020). The policy factors affect teachers' well-being in a variety of ways. For example, teacher shortages lead to larger class sizes, which in turn strains teachers' capacities, and low levels of job security likely negatively affect well-being (Falk et al. 2019). Another example are teachers who are placed in unpopular rural areas where they face more challenges and less support (Viac and Fraser 2020, 32). Job insecurity severely undermines individual well-being (Cazes et al. 2015, 87). In the words of Mendenhall and colleagues (2018, 35–36), for numerous teachers in crisis contexts "stress around payment also looms large."

While the socioecological model pays attention to policy (and other) factors at various levels, we believe that an understanding of the entanglements between political economy factors and teachers' identity goes beyond this "impact." Policies, which develop over decades into very country-specific modalities of governing, shape identities and affect emotions as they set boundaries to what is "normal," accepted, and desirable. We therefore approach teacher well-being through a CPE angle, which allows for a more complex and dynamic multiscalar systems understanding of teachers' lived realities. CPE

helps us to consider teacher well-being as being both constituted by and connected to cultural, economic, and political dynamics at multiple scales. This section does not aim at discussing the variety of CPE approaches but outlines key features, terms, and concepts that are relevant for our analysis of teacher well-being.[1]

The CPE of teacher well-being sets an analytical frame to investigate how politicized processes of relations of production, distribution, and exchange articulate materially and semiotically through social relations, experiences, and practices. Rooted in critical realism, CPE acknowledges that knowledge is constructed and dependent on individual perceptions, but it goes beyond social constructionism in that it also argues that knowledge and mechanisms endure independently of individuals (Sayer 2000; see Couch [2022] for a detailed discussion on critical realism and education policy critique). It posits three "overlapping domains of reality, . . . the *real*, the *actual* and the *empirical*" (Bhaskar 2008, 56). The *real* entails causal mechanisms that may or may not be activated, depending on particular conjunctures, the *actual* is the actualization of these mechanisms, and the *empirical* entails observations and experiences. While we should not mistake the empirical for the local level, RCTs and local-level approaches likely neglect real generative and causal mechanisms as RCTs focus on observable effects.

Recognizing that "orthodox political economy tends to offer impoverished accounts of how subjects and subjectivities are formed" (Jessop 2004, 3), CPE understands meaning-making processes as constitutive elements and contingent factors in the actions of teachers. The "cultural" is not additive to political economy, since all three dimensions are tightly interwoven and interdependent. In Jessop's understanding CPE "stresses the semiotic nature of all social relations" (2009, 337). Higgins and Novelli, for example, apply CPE to analyze a peace education curriculum in Sierra Leone as a "discursive selectivity," meaning a privileged framing of the needs of teachers and others that gains dominance over other ways of understanding the world due to its institutional adoption and promotion. Robertson and Dale (2015) emphasize that CPE also encompasses "social practices, experiences, feelings, and forms of reflexivity." In this article, we will pay particular attention to "categories, classifications and frameworks for action which shape the possibilities for reflexivity and social practices" (154).

CPE is a pertinent analytical critique toward local-level ontologies, as it is concerned with dynamics at the state and international level, as visible in the critique of neoliberalism and globalized education policies (Jessop 2009; Robertson and Dale 2015). Robertson and Dale (2015) translate CPE into a critical CPE of education (CCPEE) approach. They connect the circumstances

[1] On the variety of CPE approaches, see Fairclough et al. (2002), Jessop (2009), Sum and Jessop (2013), and Robertson and Dale (2015).

in which education takes place to the ambiguous relationship between policy and practice, the politics of education, and the consequences of educational practices, policies, and politics. This move beyond a "flat" or instrumental design of research, which is rooted in critical realism's layered ontology, facilitates a multiscalar systemic perspective to understanding teacher well-being.

CPE-Inspired Methodological Considerations and Implications

The primary data we present in this article do not stem from one "study." They are the fruit of Cyril Brandt's 9 years of research in various Congolese provinces. Mieke Lopes Cardozo brings in both theoretical and comparative empirical understanding in the field of education in conflict-affected contexts and, between 2013 and 2017, supervised the research by Brandt. Brandt carried out fieldwork over 15 months between 2013 and 2018 in the Congolese capital, Kinshasa; urban and rural Tshopo province; and various urban and rural parts of the conflict-affected province Haut-Katanga. He further led the design and analysis of studies conducted by Congolese and European colleagues in the conflict-affected provinces of Tanganyika, South Kivu, North Kivu, Kasai, and Ituri between 2019 and 2021. Research has largely been qualitative in nature. He conducted 863 semistructured interviews (including a number of focus groups) with representatives of most relevant educational stakeholders—among them 263 interviews with teachers—which yielded most of the data.[2] It would not have been possible to understand data from interviews at the school level without comparing interviews from various other sites and without spending a long time in administrative offices, meetings, and provincial and national ministries of education. In line with CPE, we connect findings at the school level to dynamics of political economy and patterns of contested public authority, at the subprovincial, provincial, national, international level, where as scholar-practitioners we serve in various international advisory and research roles in the field of education in emergencies. The research is thus multisited and multiscalar in nature, which also addresses the main critique against purely local-level research projects. This material allows us to "study up" (Foley 1977, 321) and trace "the phenomenon of interest . . . across sites and scales" (Bartlett and Vavrus 2017, 6), to unpack how people "interact with social, economic and political microprocesses, macrostructures and regimes in their quest for well-being" (Pouw and Gilmore 2012, 22).

We also engaged in a conversation with the leader of IRC's project team to discuss our understanding and critique of IRC's project. Our empirical material further consists of legal texts; government, civil society, and donor reports; quantitative data on teacher contracts and salaries; as well as spatial data on the impact of a payment reform on teacher well-being. We also draw

[2] Education stakeholders were mainly (head) teachers, government and faith-based educational administration staff, and NGO/donor representatives.

on secondary sources that provide insightful case studies. There is an element of participant observation, as Brandt has participated in various meetings and forums on educational politics in the DRC, is a member of the Congolese teacher union social media platforms, and has engaged with policy-making processes as a consultant. Therefore, on the one hand, each single research project applied a clearly outlined methodology: data collection, transcription and coding of interviews with the help of qualitative data analysis software, and collection and analysis of supplementary quantitative material and other documentation.[3] We applied focused and open coding in our qualitative data analysis. Regarding focused coding, we followed the idea of "sensitizing concepts" (Bowen 2006), which means that theory and hypotheses guided coding and analysis. Open coding implied that we kept an eye open for emerging and unexpected findings. On the other hand, a less structured flow of knowledge production took place between different research projects and between research projects and Brandt's outlined engagement with the education sector in the DRC. Mirroring findings by other work on teacher well-being in crisis and noncrisis contexts (Mendenhall et al. 2018; Falk et al. 2019; Viac and Fraser 2020), data analysis increasingly identified teacher contracts and salaries as a policy bottleneck, a core site of teachers' contestations, and a generative force of new forms of teacher contractual status and social reputation.

Our approach aligns with emerging thinking in the field of education in emergencies and displacement of the need to understand the complexities of education (actors and processes) as being part of a (eco)system (Flemming et al. 2021). From this perspective, the well-being of teachers in protracted crises forms part of a highly dynamic, multidimensional, constantly evolving, and inherently interconnected web of discourses, actions, and processes, which requires an equally dynamic and iterative design for research, policy, and practice.

Findings: Moving beyond Localized Epistemologies

Our aim is not a comprehensive analysis of how policy dynamics affect teacher well-being in the DRC. Instead, we draw on a synthesis of Brandt's fieldwork data to complexify some findings and recommendations as presented in selected RCTs. Again, our objective is not a methodological critique but rather an assessment of the limitations of knowledge produced via the nexus between school-level projects and evaluations. The RCT under study exemplifies a local-level ontology. We are conscious that RCTs can be embedded in more critical and multiscalar research designs and that qualitative research can be equally limited to the local level. We compare the project evaluations with our CPE-inspired research. Our goal is to demonstrate how a

[3] See Brandt (2014, 2017, 2018) and Brandt and De Herdt (2020) for more details on each study.

CPE perspective goes beyond a localized epistemology and enables more holistic analyses of teacher well-being. The first part introduces the evaluations. Second, we zoom into the impact of salary policy on teacher well-being.

Evaluations of Learning in a Healing Classroom in the DRC

The IRC's Learning in a Healing Classroom intervention builds on more than 30 years of experience and has been implemented in over 20 countries to enable children to learn in safe and predictable spaces. In the DRC the intervention consisted of two components: a curriculum that integrates socioemotional learning principles into reading and math instruction and teacher professional development through initial training and continuous teacher learning circles. Learning in a Healing Classroom was part of USAID's Opportunities for Equitable Access to Quality Basic Education project. The intervention and evaluations took place in six educational subdivisions in the province of Haut-Katanga. To allow researchers to conduct cluster-randomized trials with a wait list control design, the intervention was assigned randomly to school clusters.

The RCTs understand teacher well-being via the following concepts: motivation, burnout, and job dissatisfaction. Wolf, Torrente, Frisoli et al. (2015) present the preliminary result from their RCT that Learning in a Healing Classroom does not significantly influence teachers' well-being. They highlight two noteworthy findings: first, the intervention lowers female teachers' levels of job satisfaction, possibly because cultural norms discouraged them from voicing their opinions in teacher learning circles. Second, the motivation of female and male teachers with the fewest years of experience increased. While these teachers had the lowest levels of motivation at baseline, this finding suggests that teachers with little experience benefit most from exchanges with more experienced colleagues.

In a second study, Wolf, Torrente, McCoy et al. (2015) went beyond an assessment of the intervention toward a risk assessment. The authors use an RCT to measure how various risks predict well-being. Five areas of risk constitute the "cumulative risk index" (727): household hardship, health and well-being, social isolation, objective working conditions, and subjective work. Teacher income is part of the "objective working conditions" (717). The authors operationalized teacher income through the following items: "the amount of time spent traveling to work," "how often gets paid late," "if the teacher's position is temporary as opposed to permanent," "if the teacher has a [un]paid job outside of school in the past year," "whether the salary is low (less than USD 49) or high (more than USD 49)." Answer options were in a binary format (yes/no, below/under, etc.). The authors find that cumulative risk is associated with lower motivation and higher burnout. This effect is moderated by years of schooling and experience. Less experienced teachers risk higher levels of burnout. The study further addresses teacher salaries through a

recommendation: increasing the level and timeliness of teacher salaries, considered "straightforward and a direct lever of change that policies can target" (737). Additionally, both studies present a metalegitimization of their policy recommendations by representing Congolese policy makers at the time of the study as willing and able to improve teacher well-being (Wolf, Torrente, Frisoli et al. 2015, 27; Wolf, Torrente, McCoy et al. 2015, 737).

Teacher Well-Being in Relation to Salary Policy and Practice

A common difference in teachers' employment conditions is between contractual teachers and teachers hired as civil servants, which implies higher salaries, allowances, greater job security, and better chances for professional development. In the DRC, all teachers are de jure civil servants. However, over the last decades, various de facto teacher categories have emerged and have become normalized and institutionalized. From a temporary phenomenon caused by a bankrupt state invaded by neighboring countries (until 2003), they have been reconfigured within "postconflict reconstruction" environments, resurging authoritarianism, and the first peaceful transfer of presidential power in Congolese history in 2019. A broad distinction exists between three types of teachers: first, teachers who are registered with the relevant government authorities and whose names appear on the government payroll (*paid teachers*); second, teachers who are registered with the relevant government authorities but who do not feature on the government payroll lists because of budgetary, administrative, or rent-seeking issues (*registered nonpaid teachers*); third, teachers who appear on the school's internal documents and who are known to the subprovincial administration but who are yet to be registered officially with the government or whose names disappeared from payroll after they changed schools (*nonregistered teachers*). We might add "fictitious teachers"—who only exist on paper and payroll for rent-seeking purposes—as a fourth category, although no teacher falls within this category.

The challenge of registering and paying all teachers who are working, and only those who are working and not the fictitious ones, has remained an unsolved bottleneck for decades. New attempts to register and pay all teachers have resurged at critical moments in Congolese history. In the midst of structural adjustment programs in 1979, President Mobutu—then founding father of the country's only authorized party—stated that "we're going to wipe out the imaginary schools and the fake teachers who exist only on paper" (Lewis 1979). Thus was born the attempt to centralize teacher registration and payments. Before, only the faith-based organizations, in charge of most public schools in the DRC, and local government offices had more or less precise data on the number of teachers. The Department for Teacher Payments within the Ministry of Education (French: SECOPE, Service du Contrôle et de la Paie des Enseignants) was created in 1984–85. At first a frightening force that closed nonviable schools and fired thousands of teachers in response

to the World Bank and International Monetary Fund's condition of slimming down the public payroll, SECOPE—similar to all of the country's public services—became increasingly unable to control teacher registrations because of political turmoil and the fact that large parts of the Congolese territory were in the hands of Ugandan and Rwandan troops (1998–2003). Because of impending state bankruptcy and hyperinflation, the state was unable to pay teacher salaries from 1992 onward. Thus emerged various types of school fees, mainly to substitute for teacher salaries. From a funding and governance point of view, teachers turned from civil servants to "parents' teachers." This new de facto category of teachers, born out of the political economy of crisis and conflict, had long-term impacts on teachers' relationships, practices, and experiences—what is subsumed under the very broad term "cultural" in CPE.

Permanent negotiations around school fees have caused tensions between teachers and parents and weakened teachers' capacity to treat students effectively and fairly (for a discussion of the recent free primary education reform, see below). Many students pay irregularly or incompletely, and teachers might expel them (temporarily).[4] Parents and teachers have often become opponents, and teachers complain that the fees take away their dignity. A form of accountability emerged that undermined teachers' professionalism: as a reciprocal action in return for their payments, parents hold teachers accountable to ensure that children pass exams. Furthermore, since every child pays, teachers might accept high numbers of students in their classes, leading to high student-teacher ratios, increasing teachers' stress and reducing opportunities for quality education. In areas of violent conflict parents' economic livelihoods can be particularly depleted, disabling them from supporting teachers financially, and teachers face a relatively high risk of blackmail and robbery because of their monthly salaries, making them lose a part of their already low income (Marchais, Gupta et al. 2020). School fees also alter the relationship between headteachers and teachers, as headteachers struggle to manage teachers who receive no formal government salary. Furthermore, schools must cede parts of the collected fees to the administration, which can be toxic for teacher-administration relations. Finally, school fees incite schools to compete for students. Politicians delivering to their electorates by facilitating massive unplanned expansion of primary and secondary schools has exacerbated this trend. All of the above is exemplary of policy dynamics influencing teacher well-being. These dynamics reach from the local to the national level, and international donors are also entangled through their attempts at abolishing school fees. Teachers have some agency to navigate these spheres, but the policy landscape and disinterest and inability of the political elites to sustainably fund teacher salaries seriously restricts their room for maneuver.

[4] The study discusses the time before the contested announcement of the free primary schooling policy in August 2019.

Gradually, from 2004 onward, in the era of postconflict reconstruction, more and more teachers were added to the payroll. However, receiving a salary in the DRC requires formal teacher registration, which is often not an administrative formality but a socially negotiated process, marked by insecurities, dependencies, multiscalar interactions, and costs (bribes). Another effect of administrative misconduct and technical shortcomings in the DRC has been the sudden omission of teachers from the payroll for indefinite periods of time. Teachers attempt to be added to the payroll in order to receive a regular monthly salary. The category a teacher belongs to—paid, registered but nonpaid, or nonregistered—has been inscribed into her relationships to parents, students, and colleagues and is a crucial force that affects teachers' well-being.

Actions by national and international actors also have a bearing on teachers' employment status and thereby well-being. Achieving meaningful policy change in protracted crises is all but linear. After a decade of hyperinflation, looting, political standstill, and transnational wars on Congolese territory, Joseph Kabila became president in 2001. He immediately signaled his willingness to reform and reengaged with international donors, and his government facilitated what can today be seen as classical steps of joining the international education community: national education review, (World Bank) funded educational reconstruction programs, joining the Global Partnership for Education in 2012. However, reform failure, increasing authoritarianism, and persistent armed conflicts soon overshadowed Kabila's proclaimed willingness to change. While reform enthusiasm was still present in donor circles around 2011–13 (pers. comm. with former IRC staff member, November 12, 2019), fierce critiques already highlighted "hidden agendas of these protagonists, who mutated into reform avatars" (Trefon 2011, x). SECOPE, the Congolese ministerial department in charge of teacher salaries, has withstood meaningful administrative reform and still engages in various predatory practices, and donors have been unable to find levers of change. Consequently, the number of nonpaid teachers still amounted to almost 140,000 in 2018. Various international actors contributed to funding teacher salaries under the condition that the Congolese government establishes a complete and reliable payroll—a condition with which it has not complied, but funds were disbursed, nonetheless. Government actors circumvented crucial changes while embarking on key policies without donor and civil society consultations. Most notable were the *bancarisation* and *gratuité* reforms, both related to teacher salaries.

First, the *bancarisation* reform took off around 2012. *Bancarisation* means replacing human intermediaries, who disbursed teacher salaries, with bank accounts. The reform had no immediate impact on nonpaid teachers, while it significantly affected paid teachers. In short, the reform has had spatially differentiated impact, addressing major grievances of urban teachers while negatively affecting rural teachers because of the large distances they have to

travel (Brandt and De Herdt 2020). Because of insecurity while traveling from homes to banks or other payment points, some teachers face temporary difficulties obtaining their salaries (Brandt and De Herdt 2020). Second, after a first attempt of ill-implemented *gratuité* (free primary education) in 2010, in August 2019 President Tshisekedi announced immediate *gratuité*. While parents' contributions were indeed abolished, and about 150,00 teachers were added to the payroll (CONEPT 2021), registering all teachers remains a prerequisite for real *gratuité*. The process of adding teachers to the payroll has opened up massive opportunities for patronage-related payroll fraud, highlighting that the education payroll also serves political purposes. Such dynamics cause negative repercussions for teachers on the ground: less overall budget dedicated to teachers, less paid teachers hence higher average student-teacher ratios per classroom, and a lower budget for non-salary-related payments. Moreover, while more teachers are now on the payroll, it appears that the tensions between paid teachers and the remaining nonpaid teachers, and parents and nonpaid teachers, have intensified (Marchais, Gupta et al. 2020).

The mere finding in an RCT that salaries can be an important factor in raising levels of teacher well-being by no means implies a viable policy recommendation. Welmond (2002, 65) criticizes similar dynamics at play in Benin: "Policy analyses based on purely technical evaluations, without an understanding of the pact between the state and the teacher, will generally lead to well-worn recommendations that have already proven their uselessness."

In this section we offered a complementary approach. We illustrated how a CPE-informed methodology enables us to unpack underlying mechanisms, historical roots, and agential factors that RCTs and local-level approaches are often overlooking (Bédécarrats et al. 2019). We have paid attention to de facto categories of teachers, which have emerged and been reconfigured over the last decades. Teachers' de facto contractual and payment status has been shaped by colonial modes of governance (via faith-based organizations), the attempt of a collapsing authoritarian state to secure international funding, economic breakdown, crisis, conflict, international agendas of postconflict reconstruction, and high levels of corruption and patronage in the Congolese public sector (Gould 1980; Moshonas 2019).

What are then the main takeaways with regard to teacher well-being? First, webs of conflictual relationships, which depend on each teacher's vantage point—largely influenced by registration and payment categories—in an environment of low and unequally allocated resources can hamper well-being in the form of stress, job dissatisfaction, demotivation, uncertainty, and mistrust. Second, poorly planned and implemented policy change can deteriorate teacher well-being. It does so by marginalizing teachers from decision-making processes. Moreover, policy change often merely relocates existing and nested conflictual relationships instead of fundamentally altering them. Third, the politics of education in the protracted crisis of the DRC leave little

space for teachers' felt sense of professional recognition—negatively affecting their well-being.

Conclusion: Key Principles and Future Areas for Research on Teacher Well-Being in Protracted Crises

While our data are DRC specific, and particular dynamics play out differently in other contexts, our findings are illustrative of the deep entanglements among cultural, political, and economic factors at multiple scales and their potential impact on teacher well-being. Research on teacher well-being (in protracted crises) that works from a localized socioeconomic perspective tends to neglect teacher well-being as being nested within wider systems, detaching it from national and global cultural political economies. The dominant ontology and epistemology of well-being research prioritizes the local over the multiscalar, the measurable over the interpretive, and the restorative over the transformational. We demonstrate how a CPE approach enables a more complete understanding of teacher well-being as being situated within complex and multilevel system dynamics.

The findings of our research point to four areas for further research: first, the relationship between teacher agency and well-being. It is important that teachers' potential activities are "based on structural and institutional conditions, that can reinforce the motivations, actions or strategies of particular individuals, and work against others; creating both opportunities and constraints for specific courses of action" (Lopes Cardozo and Shah 2016b, 333). Doing so would allow researchers, practitioners, and policy designers alike to better understand the interplay between structural and agential factors in teachers' lives, work, and well-being in protracted crises. Second, further research is needed on the impact of violent conflict on teacher well-being. While great efforts have been made in mapping attacks against teachers (GCPEA 2020), protracted violent dynamics present much wider challenges (and opportunities) for teachers (Marchais, Gupta et al. 2020; Pherali et al. 2020). Third, given the COVID-19 pandemic and its implications for teachers worldwide, we also see relevance for further research to explore how the impacts of this pandemic add to the already complex and challenging nature of the work and well-being of teachers living in areas of protracted (violent) crises. Finally, to gain further understanding of the dynamics and complex systems at play in the lives of teachers in the DRC and other conflict-affected areas, we also see value in engaging with insights and debates across and beyond disciplinary boundaries when researching teacher well-being, including study areas such as ecosystems, inclusive development, regenerative design, child protection, social work, psychology, mental and public health, and so forth.

We conclude our article by outlining two principles we deem important for the design of research methodologies on teacher well-being in protracted (violent) crises. The first principle claims that research on teacher well-being

in protracted crises necessitates a methodological design that captures the multiscalar systems in which teacher well-being is embedded. Novelli and Lopes Cardozo (2008, 483) caution against "methodological nationalism" in research on education in conflict-affected contexts, recognizing "a range of social forces and agents that operate below, around, above and beyond the nation state." We demonstrated that teachers are directly and indirectly nested within webs of potentially conflictual relationships, extending well beyond the local and community level. Drawing from these insights, we add our concern about methodological localism. In line with arguments made by colleagues about the usefulness of ecological conceptions of transformative resilience, to understand possibilities for change (Shah and Lopes Cardozo 2019) we also see a need to research the notion of well-being as an integral part of a broader living system. While some research on teacher well-being uses ecological approaches as a theoretical framework, we see more potential for this approach to then also inform the contextual analysis and research design of research on teacher well-being. We argue how a CPE perspective, combined with a multiscalar systems-oriented methodology, can help to view a teacher's individual experiences of well-being as inherently connected to the well-being and regeneration of the larger community and society this teacher belongs to.

The second principle argues that research on teacher well-being in protracted crises requires an exploration of cultural, political, and economic dynamics that affect teachers and establish boundaries for teacher well-being. Preparing and carrying out interventions often necessitates a simplification of local dynamics (Li 2007). Indeed, "the moment of education politics" and "the moment of the politics of education" (Robertson and Dale 2015, 163) in protracted crises often provide limited space for ambitious policy making. Yet our data illustrate how education systems reinforce dominant economic, political, and cultural dynamics—such as payroll fraud. It is crucial to recognize that well-being is "necessarily a political concept" (Pouw and Gilmore 2012, 20). What we call "boundaries for teacher well-being" are "global relationships, historically embedded processes and the politics and power involved in establishing and maintaining well-being" (20). Presenting complex and contested policies as easily implemented is then based on a truncated image of a caring, willful, and able state and international community. The field of comparative education has "power" to provide policy relevant "expertise" (Dale 2015, 341), and any advice should be carefully thought through and embedded in an understanding of CPE dynamics. These insights are necessarily context specific, as conflict and crisis have the potential to provide opportunities for (educational) systemic change. Why and to what extent this is indeed the case is deeply dependent on the uniqueness of a certain context, as well as its nestedness into larger and multiscalar cultural, political, and economic systems of influence.

As highlighted in the introduction, we hope that these principles can enable researchers, practitioners, policy designers, and other relevant

stakeholders who care about teacher well-being to step beyond evaluations of effects at local levels toward a systems-oriented investigation of the very material and symbolic conditions under which teacher well-being and teacher agency unfold. We would like to close the article with a reflection based on a fruitful conversation with Sharon Wolf, the first author of the two papers based on RCT studies we have been engaging with: we acknowledge that our article leaves open some questions regarding the operationalization of research, or research-informed policy and practice design, that seek to consider the outlined principles. Viewing our work as an iterative, ongoing process of theorization and engagement with the real, actual, and empirical realms of data collection and analysis, we welcome colleague researchers, educators, policy designers, and other practitioners to engage with and build on our current work (and we are keen to engage in conversations). So, rather than a mere critique of our respected colleagues' work using RCTs in their efforts to support education in emergencies, we have aimed in this article to engage in a thinking process and develop some guiding principles for future (research, policy, and practice) design to allow for more complex, multiscalar, and system-oriented understandings of the invaluable work of teachers on the front lines.

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