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CHOICE, VOICE, AND REJOICE: EXPLORING THE ROLE OF APPRECIATIVE  
INQUIRY ON PRE-SERVICE TEACHER WELLBEING

by  
Fareen Angel Merchant

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Master of Arts in  
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Sharjah, United Arab Emirates

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## **Declaration of Authorship**

I declare that this (project/thesis/dissertation) is my own work and, to the best of my knowledge and belief, it does not contain material published or written by a third party, except where permission has been obtained and/or appropriately cited through full and accurate referencing.

Signature: Fareen Angel Merchant

Date: 25/5/2022

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## **Dedication**

This thesis is dedicated to my parents, who will probably never read it, but offer me constant support, nonetheless.

## Abstract

In the practice of teacher education, perhaps the most common way to address an issue is “this is what’s wrong, let’s fix it.” Recent trends in teacher wellbeing, however, provide us with a novel way of problem solving, where we adopt the attitude of “this is what’s going well, how can we make it better?” This paper explores this alternative method by discussing Appreciative Inquiry (AI): a positive, strengths-based approach that helps identify and capitalize on the strengths in any given situation. The AI approach can be used for the development and enhancement of teachers in all stages of their career. This study centers on the use of AI and its effect on the wellbeing of pre-service teachers. This population is especially susceptible to particular stressors and strains as they transition from the role of student to that of teacher. To overcome this, the study implemented the AI method and grouped together the use of signature strengths and peer mentoring. The participants consisted of 15 master’s degree candidates enrolled in a teaching methods course at the American University of Sharjah (UAE). These students responded to the values in action (VIA) signature strengths survey and were paired up with those who had a similar set of strengths. The peers were asked to observe each other teach and provide strengths-based feedback following AI guidelines. The data were coded thematically to reveal the effects of the approach on the participants’ wellbeing. Results suggest that AI paired with awareness of signature strengths, helped the participants become more empowered, agentic, and as a result, joyful. This study offers insight into the AI method and demonstrates an innovative approach to help enhance pre-service teacher wellbeing.

*Keywords:* Appreciative Inquiry (AI), pre-service teachers, empowerment, agency, achievement, signature strengths, wellbeing

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## **Chapter 1. Introduction**

Language teachers' pursuit of wellbeing is neither self-seeking nor conceited. As service-oriented professionals, teachers may feel the urge to self-sacrifice in the name of commitment which may lead to a decrease in feelings of wellbeing (Mercer and Gregersen, 2020). Yet, research suggests that teachers who are in a good place mentally and emotionally will experience a broadening of their thought-action repertoires and actually be more creative (Fredrickson, 2012). Aside from the advantages for teachers themselves of experiencing wellbeing, learners too reap the benefits of happy teachers. Infectious positive energy exuded by teachers helps motivate learners - and the cycle of positivity continues through reciprocal processes of emotional contagion (Gregersen and Khateeb, 2022; Moskowitz and Dewaele, 2021).

There are various determinants of wellbeing which emerge from the dynamic interaction of personal as well as social and contextual factors (Mercer, 2020). In this paper, the focus is on personal determinants for achieving and maintaining wellbeing among pre-service English as a Second Language (ESL) teachers. This population is especially vulnerable to feelings of stress and demotivation due to the transition from student to teacher. Pre-service teachers contend with challenges to their identity, insecurities, dissonance in expectations, and feelings of restricted agency (e.g., Buchanan et al., 2013; Pietsch and Williamson, 2010; Schaefer, 2013) all of which contribute to higher rates of attrition (Barnes, 2018). In this study, I report on an Appreciative Inquiry (AI) approach to strengthening pre-service teacher wellbeing with a focus on strength-building feedback.

### **1.1 Statement of the Problem**

Teaching can be described as a profession that involves high “emotional labor” and the elevated levels of stress that accompany it (Chang, 2009). If unchecked, these issues can lead to

mental health problems, job dissatisfaction, and as a result, teachers may leave the profession entirely (Vesely et al., 2014). Pre-service teachers are teachers who are part of a teacher training program, also known as student-teachers (Frykholm, 1997). There is a vast amount of literature that suggests pre-service teachers face large amounts of stress, and as a result often leave the profession (e.g. Vesely, 2014; Falk, 2014; Giambo and Szecsi, 2006). One such study explored pre-service teachers and the source of their stress. Findings show that stress arose from these teacher's sense of self, and low self-efficacy (Klassen, et al., 2013). The same study found the solution to be positive wellbeing interventions, and Emotional Intelligence strategies.

Furthermore, the assumption that teachers can successfully manage stress without external support has been challenged (Austin et al., 2005; Parker et al., 2009). New movements that emphasize school based mental health for teachers and students (Leschied et al., 2013), is fortunately a new focus, albeit overdue. While there is awareness of the need to enhance teacher wellbeing, there is a lack of empirically applied programs to tackle the issue. One attempt by Vesely et al., (2014) involved examining preliminary effects of emotional intelligence (EI) training among pre-service teachers. She found a slight improvement in teacher efficacy and resilience, however, there was an overall lack of statistical significance. Research calls for more empirically applicable training programs to focus on the topic of teacher wellbeing.

One such approach in teacher training is Appreciative Inquiry, which has seen much success in organizational change, and more importantly in professional wellbeing. Appreciative Inquiry (AI) is a positive strengths-based approach to any situation (Brooks, 2015). In a study conducted by Dematteo and Reeves (2011), the use of AI was employed in a number of interprofessional education (IPE) sessions within health care organizations. Results exhibit organization-wide success of AI. Several participants commented on the enthusiasm and drive

AI engendered. Participants felt that AI in the workplace helped enhance their working lives and professional relationships. The positive outcomes of AI were further explored by Brooks (2015) in his study which focused on secondary school teacher wellbeing. Findings of the study support the application of AI to promote positive teacher wellbeing. The paper highlights notable caveats to the use of AI in schools and calls for more research on the theory coupled with teacher-wellbeing.

It is clear from existing research that teacher wellbeing is a pressing concern. While there have been efforts to tackle the issue, there is still a dearth of successfully applied programs to induce change. The implementation of AI programs has demonstrated much improvement in organizational change, and some improvement in teacher wellbeing. Yet, there has been little research incorporating AI in pre-service educator wellbeing.

## **1.2 Significance of the Research**

Teaching is seen as one of the most important occupations in our society, given the crucial role an educator has on a student's learning and the preparation for life (McIntyre and Battle, 1998). However, despite the cognizance of teachers' importance, the detrimental impacts of teacher stress are negatively impacting schools and education systems at large. Due to an overwhelming rise of anxiety and dissatisfaction among teachers, there have been some studies exploring the improvement of wellbeing. Turner and Theilking (2019) found a monumental difference in teacher attitudes and mental health when positive psychology strategies were used. Their paper concludes the affirmative effects of positive psychology on teacher wellbeing, teaching practice, and student learning. Additionally, in a paper titled, "Pupil wellbeing – Teacher wellbeing: Two sides of the same coin," the author contends that teacher wellbeing not only affects the educators themselves, but all the stakeholders involved in the learning

environment (Roffey, 2012). Furthermore, there is more evidence within the research to suggest the wellbeing of one agent (i.e., student, teacher, heads of departments etc.) correlates with and affects the wellbeing of all (Blum and Libbey, 2004; Plagens, 2011). Therefore, it is clear that since teacher wellbeing plays such a major role in the learning process, research in the area is essential for overall school success.

Furthermore, recent research confirms that pre-service teachers experience a large amount of anxiety and stress (Vesely et al., 2014). These teachers are new to the field and have recently transitioned from the role of a student to that of a teacher. As these fresh and inexperienced teachers explore this new terrain, emotions such as anxiety, strain, pressure, and worry are common (Tebben et al., 2021). Over 20 percent of educators leave teaching within their first three years, and almost 50 percent within the first five years (House of Commons, 2004, as stated in Roffey, 2012). These statistics are linked with increasing dissatisfaction of teachers around the world. Subsequently, many articles call for research on this subject, with many revealing the importance of giving a voice to teachers, creating a safe space, and promoting autonomy in the classroom. More importantly, the application of AI methods in the field of education have already proven effective in some situations.

The aim of this paper is to address the impending gap in research surrounding teacher wellbeing, using AI as a guiding force. This study revolves around preservice teachers delivering positive strengths-based feedback to their peers and exploring the effect that has on their wellbeing. This study aims to answer the following research question:

1. Do pre-service teachers who receive Appreciative Inquiry feedback on their classroom practices develop a stronger sense of wellbeing?

Furthermore, the study addresses the below secondary research question:

2. When paired according to shared signature strengths, do pre-service teachers develop a stronger sense of wellbeing?

### **1.3 Overview of Thesis Chapters**

The first chapter addressed the inherent purpose of the current study and outlined the research questions. The remainder of the study is organized as follows: Chapter Two reviews key conceptualizations in AI research such as definitions and implications, attributed benefits to teaching and learning, and the findings of some AI studies. In addition, the chapter explores the topics of teacher wellbeing and empowerment. Lastly there is a discussion of the concept of signature strengths, and the effect it can have on teaching. Chapter Three outlines the methodology of the research and presents a detailed account of the procedures undertaken, along with the data collection tools utilized for the purpose of this study. Chapter Four presents a summary and analysis of the findings obtained. Lastly, Chapter Five concludes the present study in terms of accentuating key findings, implications, and limitations, followed by final concluding remarks.



## **Chapter 2. Literature Review**

In the following chapter, significant key concepts relevant to the research question will be discussed. This sub-section aims to consolidate literature which defines AI and the way it has been used to increase overall positive wellbeing. Additionally, the section provides an account of teacher wellbeing and the overwhelming evidence for the importance of it in educational contexts. Next, the concept of signature strengths will be explored in an effort to depict a richer comprehension of the notion in relation to teaching. Finally, a deficiency in the literature surrounding AI and signature strengths in the field of education will be established, and an attempt to enrich that discussion will be suggested.

### **2.1 A Closer Look at Appreciative Inquiry (AI)**

#### **2.1.1 Historical background**

Long before the inception of AI, in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, the school of thought known as Scientific Management or “Taylorism” rose to fame and was applied in numerous business organizations. The principle of this method centered around breaking tasks down into smaller ones and eliminating any waste in order to reach the optimum efficiency (Moore, 2022). The focus was placed on the tasks being done, instead of the humans doing them. Frederick Taylor (1919) founder of scientific management clarifies the premise of the concept by emphasizing the fact that this management process requires no initiative, ideas, or questioning from the employees. Scientific management simply requires that the task get done (as cited in Moore, 2022). While this organizational culture has become less popular overtime, other deficit centered practices still remain deeply embedded across many institutions (Cooperrider and Srivastva, 1987 as cited in Moore, 2022).

Appreciative Inquiry (AI) emerged in the 1980’s as a reactionary method to these fault-based approaches. The foundation of AI is based on the simple fact that a positive outcome can

be attained through approaches that affirm and accelerate learning (Cooperrider et al., 2008, as cited in Kaplan, 2014). AI centers on what is going well and then capitalizes on that to improve the situation and achieve successful results. A comparison between an AI approach vs a general more traditional problem-solving approach is depicted in the figure below. Figure 1 demonstrates a comparison between traditional problem-solving approaches and AI.



Figure 1: *Comparison of AI and Traditional Problem-Solving Approaches (Moore, 2022)*

### 2.1.2 The AI framework

The AI process aims to improve situations by discovering existing strengths and focusing on positive potential. The main focus of attention is on the best of what is going on right now and the best of what can happen in the future (Whitney and Trosten- Bloom, 2003). This is in contrast to other approaches that place the focus on weaknesses in order to instigate change. The AI method is reflected in a cycle offering a basic framework for

its use. The cycle starts with *Discover*, where assets and strengths are identified; *Dream*, where the ideal wanting to be reached is established; *Design*, figuring out how the ideal can be reached; and *deliver*, working on how to sustain and empower the point reached (He, 2013). The 4-D cycle is depicted below in figure 2.

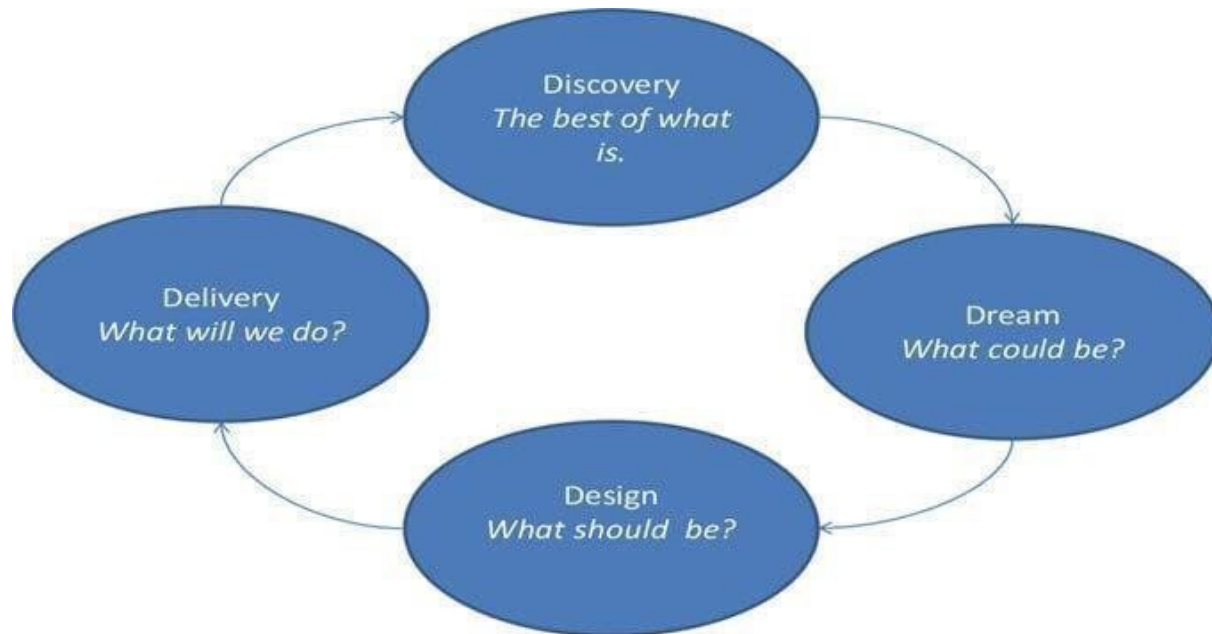


Figure 2: *The AI 4-D Cycle (Moore, 2022)*

While AI has seen growing support within the corporate world, there seems to be a lack of discussion about the framework in relation to educational institutions (He, 2013). Numerous AI studies in classroom and higher education contexts have been conducted and proven successful (e.g. Knight et al., 2006; Carnell 2007). The process of AI has also been applied in schools to foster and empower student-teacher relationships (Calabrese et al., 2007).

### **2.1.3 AI in education**

The process of Appreciative Inquiry has been used successfully in some education contexts. He (2013) applied the AI framework in a graduate-level teacher education course to help pre-service

teachers develop better interaction with culturally diverse student populations. Results of the study show the teacher participants positively reflected on their own learning experiences and discovered students' strengths and community assets. The study also demonstrated the extent to which preservice teachers enhanced their cultural competencies and illustrated their development as teachers (He, 2013).

In another article, the AI approach was used to develop better content for a business education course. The study concludes that through the use of AI, a more autonomous course curriculum was developed which worked towards empowering both the students and the teachers involved (Conklin and Hartman, 2013). AI has also been successfully used in the field of medical education. Sandars et al. (2017) convey the effective use of AI in enhancing educational and teaching strategies for medical students. In his paper, he emphasizes specifically the benefits of AI in helping teachers and students in classroom settings. These benefits can be crossed over into any educational setting and can help educators improve their teaching styles in the classroom.

While there is a large amount of literature on the effective use of AI in organizations, including educational institutions, there seems to be a dearth surrounding the use of AI in relation to positive wellbeing. However, one such study was conducted in a school in Scotland, where the AI approach was applied in order to enhance students' wellbeing. The study found that AI was an effective method in yielding positive outcomes with regards to improving mental health (Seaton, 2021). With the present lack of research associating AI with the improvement of teacher wellbeing, this paper heeds the call for more on the topic and attempts to fill that gap.

## **2.2 Positive Teacher Wellbeing and Empowerment**

### **2.2.1 Teacher wellbeing**

There has been a growing interest in the topic of teacher wellbeing within language education (e.g., Gregersen and Mercer, 2020; Jin et al., 2021). However, it is important to

note that although the topic received a boost in attention as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, it is a topic that has enduring relevance. In general education, work on wellbeing was preceded by the related study of burnout and stress which has been ongoing for many years (e.g., Skaalvik and Skaalvik, 2020). A focus on the flipside, in other words, looking at what is needed to help language educators flourish in their professional roles, has come along more recently together with work in positive psychology (e.g., MacIntyre et al., 2016).

In education more broadly, it has long been acknowledged that teachers who have higher levels of wellbeing, lower levels of stress, and effective coping strategies are less likely to leave the profession (Judge and Bono, 2001) and more likely to be better teachers, leading also to higher learner achievement (Roffey, 2012). Language education has been slow to recognize the critical importance of teacher wellbeing for effective educational practice. The growing body of works provide testimony to the recognition that teacher wellbeing is the foundation of good practice and understanding. This theoretically, empirically, and practically is a matter of great urgency, not only for a time of crisis but for teachers in their daily lives now and in the future. Wellbeing is simply a core ingredient of what makes good teaching and contributes to effective learning conditions at any and all times.

In order for progress, scholars working on wellbeing need to reflect on their understandings of the term to ensure clarity and consistency. There is a basic distinction between hedonic and eudemonic perspectives on wellbeing (Peterson, 2006; Ryan and Deci, 2001). This paper takes a more eudemonic view inspired by the work of Seligman (Seligman, 2002) following the notion of PERMA+health (Butler and Kern, 2016). In the PERMA acronym, P stands for positive emotions; E for engagement; R for relationships; M for meaning; and A for accomplishment; with physical health added (i.e., +health) to later models to emphasize the close

interconnections between physical and mental health. This paper works with this model as it better represents the multifaceted contributions to wellbeing, especially given its inclusion of the social element of relationships. Wellbeing is subjective and is often positioned as something personal and internal, but it is important to recognize the strong social nature of wellbeing and the role played by objective contextual factors and structures.

### **2.2.2 Teacher empowerment**

Research on the concept of teacher empowerment materialized in the late 1980's. Short et al. (1994) define teacher engagement as "a process where school participants develop the competence to take charge of their own growth and resolve their own problems" (p. 38). Furthermore, Short and Rinehart (1992) define six facets of teacher empowerment: self-efficacy, status, professional growth, decision making, autonomy, and impact. Educators often experience a lack of these aspects when teaching, and as a result are often unempowered (Ritter, 2019).

The literature supports the claim that if teachers feel empowered within the classroom, a more successful outcome for both teachers and students will be reached (Yin et al., 2013). The relationship between collective teacher efficacy and teacher empowerment was explored by Baleghizadeh and Goldouz (2016). Through questionnaires and interviews, a positive connection was established between teacher efficacy and empowerment. Educators felt confident in achieving the desired outcomes in their classrooms when they felt empowered (Baleghizadeh and Goldouz, 2016).

Another assumption of teacher empowerment suggests that teachers are autonomous elements of the system and perform at their best only when they feel empowered, and intrinsically satisfied (Lee and Nie, 2014). Moreover, Yin et al. (2012) claim that teachers' trusting their colleagues and management yielded a more empowered feeling in the classroom, and as

a result, improved efficacy. As the research suggests, teacher empowerment is a concept that holds significant repercussions within institutions and can make massive contributions to the academic environment as a whole. In addition, teaching is already seen as one of the most stressful occupations and with the Covid-19 pandemic a new list of stressors has been added (Gregersen et al., 2021). Therefore, the importance of research surrounding the ways to enhance teacher empowerment has become essential now more than ever, in order to create fruitful teaching and learning environments.

## **2.3 Understanding Signature Strengths**

### **2.3.1 Defining signature strengths**

An important mentoring element when it comes to pre-service teachers, is pairing them with individuals based on their signature strengths to enhance their personal and professional connections (Abell et al., 1995). Signature strengths are the defining virtues that a person possesses, celebrates, and often exhibits (Seligman, 2002). Capitalizing on one's areas of strength is likely to lead to greater success than investing comparable time and effort to remediate areas of weakness (Clifton and Harter, 2003; Gregersen and MacIntyre, 2014). As pre-service teachers experience more fulfillment by drawing upon their signature strengths, they likely will suffer fewer problems when challenges appear in their professional journey (Gregersen and MacIntyre, 2018; Peterson et al., 2006). The development and enhancing of character strengths diminish the likelihood of negative effects and the strengths themselves promote flourishing and healthy positive development over one's lifetime (Lomas et al., 2014).

Park et al, (2004) describe six headings under which are subsumed 24 discrete strengths in their Virtues in Action (VIA) classification of strengths. The headings include wisdom, courage, love, justice, temperance, and spirituality, and are organized under categories such as

appreciating beauty, bravery, creativity, curiosity, fairness, gratitude, humor, kindness, learning, love, perspective, spirituality, teamwork, and zest (Peterson and Seligman, 2004).

### **2.3.2 Signature strengths in educational contexts**

There is much research that contends the effectiveness of knowing and using one's signature strengths within an educational context. A 2015 study explored teaching more effectively using the 24-character strengths (Brunzell et al., 2015). Understanding signature strengths was incorporated into teaching styles, and it was used to help students capitalize on their own strengths. Results show that students were able to use these strengths to work better with each other, and also produce better quality work. Another study used signature strengths to address the improvement of interpersonal relationships and cohesion in the classroom (Quinlan et al., 2014). The results concluded that students who had knowledge of their strengths scored significantly higher on class cohesion and lower on class friction as opposed to students who were unaware (Quinlan et al., 2014).

This chapter introduced the notions of AI approaches, teacher empowerment and signature strengths. Although this research is vast, there is an absence of information available on their combined use in order to develop a stronger sense of wellbeing. The above chapters also posit the need for teachers to feel empowered, as it leads overall improvement in teaching and learning.



## **Chapter 3. Methodology**

The following chapter outlines the methodology that was used for this research. Initially, the context of this study and the intended purpose is briefly discussed. This is followed by an account of the procedures taken for collecting the data. Lastly, a description of the participants, and data collection tools is provided.

### **3.1 Study Overview**

Appreciative Inquiry has been proven as an effective method time and again across different organizations. However, while the use of AI in education has yielded positive outcomes for both teachers and students, there still seems to be a lack of its application across school settings. Furthermore, the concept of teacher wellbeing is advocated as a key factor in effective teaching and the progression of learners' academic and personal growth. Chapter 2 provides an overview of several AI studies that confirm its capability to improve wellbeing. Yet, there are few studies that explore the use of AI specifically with pre-service teacher wellbeing.

Additionally, research suggests that teachers' understandings of their own signature strengths are likely to empower teachers in classroom settings. This study aims to investigate the scope to which AI can affect teacher wellbeing. In addition, the research aims to understand the effect that teachers' knowledge of their own signature strengths will have on their wellbeing. In addition to our primary research questions, some secondary questions that guided the research were the following:

- 1) What were pre-service teacher responses to an AI approach to feedback on their teaching simulations?
- 2) In what ways did the AI approach appear to affect their wellbeing?

### **3.2 Procedures**

### **3.2.1 Participants**

Fifteen master's degree candidates enrolled in a language teaching methods course in a Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) program at a small international university in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) participated in the study. Table 1 provides the pseudonyms and demographic information for each participant.

**Table 1***Participant pseudonyms and demographic information*

Pseudonym	Country of Origin	Undergraduate degree	Age
Allie	Bahrain	English Language	27
Annie	Sudan	English Language and Literature	23
Abigail	India	English Language	24
Angel	Canada/India	Mass Communication	22
Bu	Bahrain	Engineering	24
Dana	USA	Physics	56
Erin	USA	Elementary Education	28
Judy	USA	Anthropology and Linguistics	46
Kyle	Kuwait	English Language and Literature	23
Lila	USA	Political Science	24
Nina	UAE	English Language and Literature	21
Noreen	Lebanon	English Language	25
Omar	Nigeria	English Language Education	Not disclosed
Renee	Oman	English Language	28
Tina	Bangladesh	English Language and Literature	25

### 3.2.2 Procedure of study

Participants began by taking the free online version of the Virtues in Action (VIA) Survey ([www.via.org](http://www.via.org)) developed by Park and Peterson (2006) to discover their top five signature strengths, which permitted them to be placed in five dyads and one triad of “trusted peers” who shared at least two, and in several cases, three, of their signature strengths. Next, each participant chose three focal points to receive peer and mentor feedback (e.g., engaging learners in interaction, classroom management, learner autonomy, etc.), prepared a lesson plan, and then “taught” it in a synchronous online class. They spent the rest of the class as “learners” on a method assigned by the course professor. The peer(s) and mentor (e.g., course professor) acted as observers and took careful notes on the areas of competences pre-selected by the participant.

The essential guiding principle during this activity was that observers focus only on the positive aspects of the participant’s teaching and from that, provide written structured feedback from an appreciative perspective. Using this positive feedback, the peer(s) and mentor reflected on how to build on these strengths as well as the shared strengths discovered through the VIA survey. Finally, drawing on the AI feedback, participants wrote a personal reflection on the feedback, their teaching experience, and concrete suggestions for future growth building on their strengths. The qualitative data collected via the AI feedback on the simulation observations as well as the personal reflections of the participants were the dataset drawn upon in this study.

The set of qualitative data of the 15 respondents—with a corpus size of 11,601 words—consisted of reflections written after participating in the appreciative inquiry process and was analyzed through the data management software Atlas.ti. Line-by-line coding was carried out in order to identify overriding themes under which I created codes and grouped the data. After I coded the data inductively during the first wave, the codes were analyzed, and decisions were

made about which codes to omit, combine, or maintain. Subsequently, second and third waves of more focused inductive coding were performed. Once the codes were created, code groups were formed, which were then placed under each relevant theme.

## **Chapter 4. Findings and Analysis of Data**

Participants' narratives from the three data sources were analyzed and resulted in three main themes which reveal the key effects of the approach on the participants' wellbeing from their self-reported data: "self-confidence," "authenticity," and "community involvement." Each theme will be discussed in turn. Data extracts, with respective pseudonyms cited (See Table 1 above), are included to illustrate the themes and issues raised in the data.

### **4.1 Self-confidence (choice)**

Self-confidence is the first theme. It refers to the ways in which the pre-service teachers experienced the AI approach as strengthening their faith in themselves as language teachers, which in turn will boost their wellbeing as we know from extensive research linking self-efficacy and wellbeing among teachers (e.g., Skaalvik and Skaalvik, 2015).

One of the explicit goals at the heart of the implementation of AI was to encourage and support pre-service teachers in their journey toward becoming competent language educators; thus, it is unsurprising that one of the largest codes was self-confidence. This theme appeared in every one of the 15 participants' reflections with two participants referencing it four times. The feelings of self-confidence experienced by Erin made her question why AI is not always the norm for feedback provision: "As one who is motivated by encouragement, the AI process almost brought me to tears. It makes so much sense that an observation followed by kudos rather than criticism would boost the confidence of a teacher—why wouldn't this be common practice [in teaching]?" Abigail also reported how the AI approach boosted her confidence helping her to feel more empowered to take action:

This method of feedback while unconventional (for me at least), feels very helpful in that it really helps build confidence and deal with the ever-mounting stress that society puts

on individuals, especially teachers. Giving aspiring teachers that initial boost in confidence needed to start teaching.

Additionally, Tina and Judy, respectively, mentioned the following: “My professor and peer’s positive feedback not only boosted my confidence but also made me realize what my strengths are in teaching and how I can build on them for my future growth” and “when I actually delivered the lesson, it was the most enjoyable and confidence-building that I have experienced. “It was not only in the actual delivery that teachers experienced increased confidence, but it was also seen in the planning stages, as seen in this comment from Judy: “The feedback I have gotten only further highlights how far I have come when dealing with content material and the way in which I prepare for a simulation. I am happy that it left me with more confidence than I had before I started the simulation.”

Erin and Kyle also remarked about their burgeoning self-confidence, comparing their previous feelings of inhibition and negative affect with a growing sense of self-awareness in the context of an AI approach. AI opened teachers’ eyes to the blind spots that they had about their own valuable self-worth and inner hidden strengths, which as a result of being revealed, strengthened their self-confidence. Erin said, “The AI process is an empowering way to transform the typically nerve-wracking observation into a growth experience that the teacher can look forward to experiencing.” Similarly, Kyle commented, “Overall, the simulation was truly an experience that shaped new qualities in myself that I previously doubted, and I find that this simulation is my first true step towards becoming a language teacher.” Judy echoed Kyle’s sentiments: “One of the powerful aspects of this process: it brings out that which is hidden to us and gives us the opportunity to add those overlooked abilities to our toolkit.” Concurring, Tina

claimed that the AI feedback she received focused her attention on “positive things that [she] might have done unintentionally.”

Of the commentaries concerning supportive emotion, the overriding feelings of positivity expressed by participants seemed to spring from their receipt of feedback that they had not expected or that of which they had been previously unaware.

What I found most surprising, upon receiving feedback from my observers, were the aspects of my teaching that they [my peers] felt I did right that I had not planned nor consciously thought about (Judy).

Other participants remarked upon the positivity found in their observers’ feedback, as shared by Nina: “Kyle was very thorough in his feedback and the positivity of his every sentence regarding my method and the way the class played out gave me a better understanding of how well I did even though I doubted how effective my method might have been.” Likewise, Tina was pleased with the positivity of the appreciative feedback she received because it “made me understand how interactive and energetic I can come across when teaching.”

Lastly, rather than looking retrospectively, Lila talked about continuing to reap the confidence-building benefits of AI in the future: “I will try and continue to integrate appreciative inquiry within myself. I have a tendency of being quite hard on myself, however if I can manage to start out with positive feedback before correcting myself then I may have a better overall psychological relationship with my personal feedback.” Erin, Kyle, Tina, and Lila all recognized strengths they could not see before, and this new self-knowledge aided in boosting their self-confidence.

While evidence suggests that pre-service teachers’ growing self-awareness was a *precursor* to their improved confidence, the data also indicates that this rise in confidence



*produced* added benefits. Among these benefits are an enhanced sense of agency—a concept which all 15 participants commented upon in one way or another. Agency refers to feelings of competence to take action and a willingness to take responsibility for actions (Williams et al., 2015). In terms of personal agency, pre-service teachers commented on the ways in which AI expanded their perspectives on their ability to influence their classroom environment through actively taking positive initiatives. Interestingly, many focused on the affective dimension of their craft. A case in point is Allie who said, “I make sure that my activities have the ability to provide students a supportive spoken atmosphere; they should be engaging, authentic, and motivating speaking opportunities for my students.” Annie also drew attention to the power of the AI approach to recognize individuality and allow pre-service teachers to be authentically empowered to teach as they feel they can and should:

It helps them [teachers] find and hone their strengths in order to...know what to play into rather than forcing themselves into a mold that does not fit them to start. I personally believe that having teachers excel and specialize (while maintaining an acceptable general level) would make better teachers than having all of them abide by a single standard procedure.

#### **4.2 Authenticity (voice)**

Authenticity is the second of the three themes encountered in the data. The analysis revealed data that referenced the importance of being able to teach in genuine ways concentrating on areas that reflect each pre-service teacher’s unique expression and character, rather than having to adhere to externally imposed one-size-fits-all notions of effective practice. Within this category, the dimensions of genuineness and teacher-learner rapport emerged as central determinants for their wellbeing.

The notion of authenticity was central to the pre-service teachers' responses about the benefits of an AI approach for all of the participants (n = 15). Each pre-service teacher felt recognized and acknowledged for their personal strengths and their own unique ways of approaching teaching. Allie expressed this sentiment well when she stated, "I believe that teachers are unique in their own way, however, being an authentic teacher—being themselves— is something that all of us must acquire in order to admire our job." Lila echoed those sentiments: "I believe when teaching, I should continue to rely on my strengths in creating relationships, fostering curiosity, and trusting my gut in the classroom." AI not only allowed pre-service teachers to be authentic in their teaching but also celebrated their diversity and individuality.

A striking element that arose in pre-service teachers' interaction with the notion of authenticity during the AI process is that rather than discussing it only in reference to themselves, their tendency was also to see it as something they desired to provide to their own learners. For example, Allie sees her future this way: "As a teacher, I'll provide opportunities for my students to share their fears, dreams, and love through sharing my own, which will make students feel comfortable and heard." Similarly, Lila projected, "I believe when teaching, I should continue to rely on my strengths in creating relationships, fostering curiosity, and trusting my gut in the classroom."

Participants specifically mentioned tapping their personal strengths when discussing their authenticity. Because strengths are a part of an individual's true self, the connection between one's strengths and one's authenticity is tight. For example, two of Tina's strengths were judgment and fairness, which she believed are interconnected. She commented:

As a teacher, my ultimate aim will be to provide the best learning environment for all of my learners and take measures to accommodate the different needs and expectations of each learner...my strengths in judgement and fairness should be put to work when differentiating instruction according to learner needs. While I do always try to vary the kind of activities...I did not think about building on my judgement and fairness skills to differentiate instruction in my lesson. Thus, Nina's feedback is a great help as it gives me possible directions on how to focus on my strengths and use them in developing as a teacher.

Similarly, one of Lila's strengths was love and the AI process provided feedback that reinforced its use in teaching: "Dana pointed out that I utilized relationship building techniques throughout my lesson. I agree. I was quite intentional about this as I see it as a strength within myself. This speaks to my character's strength of love."

The positive emotion that permeated the theme of confidence also infused participants' celebration of authenticity. Nina commented about her desire to maintain a fun spirit in her classroom because she "personally find[s] boring...just teaching from the book or text." Being permitted to spread this "fun spirit" was an exercise of her authenticity and led to her feeling "happy." Likewise, Judy "was very happy that [her] lighthearted and supportive nature"—an expression of her authentic self—"appeared to have contributed to learner enjoyment, motivation and success during the lesson."

#### **4.3 Community Belonging (rejoice)**

Participants in the AI process expressed appreciation for a variety of elements, including the social bonds that the approach created (n = 11). This sense of gratitude along with the relationships that were forged strengthened pre-service teachers' wellbeing. In communicating

gratitude towards her fellow participants and the fun they had, Kyle enthused, “They brought out their best supporting selves when roleplaying as my learners. I highly appreciate the fun and enthusiastic spirits they put into making the lesson a good learning experience for everyone.” The element of “fun” was also remarked upon by Erin: “The classroom culture that has already been established made it easy to learn in a lighthearted and silly way. I grew in confidence as students responded with understanding—and it was so much fun.” The same theme of gratitude for sharing the experience was echoed by Nina:

By nurturing such strengths, I believe teaching...can improve with time. To add on, the experience of having a partner that shared the same values and strengths with me felt comforting. I felt like I had someone who had a similar vision as me that saw things in a similar way but could also offer a perspective different from mine.

The social dimension of AI extended beyond the notion of gratitude to the benefit of having learned from each other: Dana remarked, “I felt totally defeated and incredibly stressed and I seriously considered giving up entirely. But then I asked myself, ‘What did my classmates do that was successful? How did they use technology to their advantage?’”

Just as positive emotions resulted from participants’ growing confidence and sense of authenticity, they also arose in response to the community spirit that grew among the pre-service teachers as the AI process played out. For Judy, “the most beautiful parts of the appreciative inquiry process was how the wonderful qualities and strengths of [her] observers were reflected in their feedback.” In other words, while Judy’s observers were extolling the strengths of her teaching, Judy was reciprocating the accolades and being wondered by it. Positive emotions as a result of social bonds occurred also with Tina, who commented about the pleasure she received when her observers “appreciated the interaction between [her] and [her] learners.”

## **Chapter 5. Discussion, Limitations, and Conclusion**

### **5.1 Discussion of findings**

The data demonstrates that pre-service language teachers' wellbeing is affected by their perceptions of their own professional confidence, authenticity, and relationships—perceptions which are shaped by others' evaluation of their craft using supportive feedback. In this study, I explored the process of AI, a strengths-based, positive approach to feedback, which helps educators become aware and conscious of their strengths, empowers them in their individuality, and inspires them to seek positive growth in themselves and others in their community. Rather than perceiving teachers as entities that need “fixing” or molding into a fixed preconceived format of “the good teacher,” AI distinguishes itself from other types of feedback by concentrating on the worthiest of what is, empowering individuals, and employing these strengths as a springboard to construct future opportunities of growth.

The pre-service teachers in this study who received AI feedback on the classroom practices that integrate their signature strengths developed a stronger sense of confidence, authenticity, and social community—all of which helped them feel more empowered as language teachers. Further, this activity also gave pre-service teachers a more positive future vision of their professional lives and classrooms, and thus contributed to a higher sense of wellbeing—not only in this class but potentially also for their future careers.

The findings demonstrate that using an AI lens to provide positive, constructive, collaborative feedback on teachers' classroom performance is indeed inspiring and positive for their wellbeing. Three key elements were identified upon which this approach had a positive effect, and which will enhance pre-service teachers' wellbeing via confidence, authenticity, and community.

One key insight concerned self-confidence and the self-awareness that must precede it. Especially for pre-service teachers, threats to their self-efficacy and identities as they begin to establish their own ways of teaching are considerable (Barnes, 2018). Enabling them to see their own strengths and uniqueness is empowering and boosts their confidence. In turn, teachers who feel confident are also known to be more likely to experiment and try out creative new ways of teaching (Fredrickson, 2001). Interestingly, a number of participants commented on how they had been unaware of their strengths and how empowering it was to gain this self-awareness. As education systems often focus on deficits and ways of improving, it is quite possible that educators have rarely had their attention drawn explicitly to what they do well. In addition, witnessing the strengths of others also helps teachers to broaden their notions of what constitutes “good teaching” and helps boost their confidence to try out diverse ways of approaching their craft.

Another related core element of growth centered on authenticity. Rather than having to adhere to an externally imposed one-size-fits-all notion of good teaching, AI allows all the participants to see strengths and positivity in diversity within themselves and their peers. This enabled teachers to feel comfortable and confident in teaching in a style which reflected their personal strengths and enabled their voice and perspective as an educator to shine. Naturally, teaching to one’s strengths does not preclude “style stretching” (e.g., pushing their instructional comfort zones) when teachers are encouraged to try alternative ways of teaching and experiment with diverse pedagogies. Thus, this moment to be authentic and see individuality as strength opens the potential for future growth and “style stretching” and offers a healthy boost to their professional wellbeing.

Participants also provided evidence of a growing sense of agency that grew from their greater self-confidence and authenticity. With agency, the pre-service teachers understood that they can act and have control over their actions (Williams et al., 2015, p. 121) in their work-related practices and decision-making (Mercer and Gregersen, 2020). Williams et al. (2015) suggest that teachers need to know three important things: that their behavior makes a difference; that they have the capability to achieve their goals; and that they control their attributions for past successes and failures. Confidence, agency, and autonomy are necessary ingredients for teachers to achieve this knowledge which will augment their positive wellbeing in preparation for their professional roles and responsibilities.

Hence, confidence and authenticity are among the most significant factors of wellbeing given that being authentic goes beyond being a precursor or requisite—it actually comprises the nucleus or quintessence of wellbeing (Wood et al., 2008). For example, highly engaged personnel are inclined to be happier and more productive (Leroy et al., 2013; Rich et al., 2010). When people behave with authenticity at their workplaces—that is, behaving as they wish—they experience more autonomous enthusiasm for work-related tasks, increasing the probability that they demonstrate personal engagement in those activities (Meyer and Gagné, 2008). Thus, individuals who are authentically dedicated to their work tend to be meaningfully engaged rather than operating on the assumption that their work dictates their behavior (Ariza-Montes et al., 2015). In sum, authenticity fosters wellbeing by instilling in people a clear and concise sense of themselves; however, a lack of authenticity exacerbates dissatisfaction as people are compelled to act counter to their deepest aspirations and values.

The final core element strengthened by this approach was the value of community and social connections within the group. Research has shown how important positive relationships

are in the workplace for staff wellbeing and also workplace engagement (Cameron and Casa, 2004). Especially in the context of peer feedback and observations, it is vitally important that an atmosphere of trust and respect is developed so that the teachers are willing to take risks and try out new methods or approaches in front of colleagues.

In sum, it is interesting to note that the three core components that emerged as positive effects of this approach map onto self-determination theory (SDT) (Ryan and Deci, 2019). SDT posits that people have three needs which must be met in order to boost their wellbeing and motivation: a sense of competence, a sense of autonomy, and a sense of relatedness. The AI approach appears to have met all these needs by boosting participants' confidence, enabling them to be their authentic selves as (future) educators, and feeling safe and positively supported within a trusting and caring group of peers; all of which contributed positively to their wellbeing. With this sense of empowerment and a greater awareness of the values of identifying and building on strengths, these educators are in a strong position to not only survive their teacher education program but begin the teaching profession with a sense of positivity. This experience will, hopefully, also reduce the risk of attrition and a set of attitudes which could support them and their learners throughout their professional lives.

## **5.2 Limitations**

While this study yielded rich and positive results, there were some limitations present, the main one being the fact that the entire study took place online due to Covid-19. All the live teaching sessions that the participants took part in, took place via an online platform. This may have affected the participants' ability to teach as authentically as possible since it was being done in a virtual classroom. It could also have affected the peer observers' feedback, as once again, the session was being taught online. Nonetheless, during the time of this study, most schools had



shifted to an online platform due to Covid-19, and so this did not seem to hinder the teaching process, as it reflected the reality of teaching at the time.

### **5.3 Conclusion**

Pre-service teachers' wellbeing faces a number of threats during the turbulent period of transition from being a student to becoming a teacher as they reevaluate their beliefs, identities, and sense of competence. High rates of attrition for early career teachers (Barnes, 2018) attest to the high levels of stress they are exposed to and the difficulties they may have in finding ways to cope and feel positive in their new professional roles. This study reported on an approach to pre-service teacher feedback in the context of teaching practice which is inspired by positive psychology and appreciative inquiry (Darling-Hammond, 2013; Gregersen and Mercer, forthcoming; He, 2013). Based on a four-stage model of feedback, AI focuses on what teachers can do, their strengths, and areas of competence, rather than positioning them as deficient and in need of constant improvement.

The data showed that this approach boosted our participants' confidence, their sense of efficacy as educators, their feeling of community among peers, their identities in authentic, personally meaningful ways, and their sense of optimism looking to their future careers. Such psychological resources are key determinants of wellbeing (Luthans et al., 2013) and can be used as buffers to protect against stress. An AI approach, thus, not only empowers these pre-service teachers and strengthens their wellbeing in the present, but it also equips them with a lens for viewing their own professional development and the growth of their learners in the future. AI centers on strength, positivity, and support—key ingredients for a climate conducive to supporting and boosting teacher wellbeing.

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## **Vita**

Angel Merchant was born in 1998 in Mississauga, Canada. She moved to the UAE shortly afterwards and completed high school in 2016. She went on to graduate Magna Cum Laude with a bachelor's in Mass Communication.

Ms. Merchant worked as a journalist for prominent organizations such as Gulf News and CurlyTales, before deciding to pursue a career in teaching. In 2020, she began her master's program in TESOL (Teaching English to Speakers of Other languages) at the American University of Sharjah (AUS). She also worked as a Graduate Research Assistant at AUS, where she took part in publishing her research in various book chapters and conferences.

Ms. Merchant has also been nominated for multiple research excellence awards by AUS and external organizations. She has also recently won a national award for a paper relating to fake engagement in the classroom. She currently teaches at a private school in Dubai and remains an avid researcher and passionate educator.