






Leadership skills and teacher well-being: Under the lens of Vietnamese EFL teachers

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative study explores the impacts of leaders' leadership skills on the well-being of Vietnamese English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teachers. Utilizing a grounded theory approach, semi-structured interviews were conducted with six participants selected through purposive sampling from both public and private sectors. This study is important because it addresses a significant gap in existing research by focusing on the well-being of EFL teachers in Vietnam, a context where English proficiency is increasingly prioritized but where teachers face growing pressures and challenges. Understanding how leadership skills contribute to teacher well-being can inform leadership practices and policies that enhance teacher retention, job satisfaction, and ultimately, the quality of English language education. The findings revealed a range of leadership skills and practices that positively influence teacher well-being, including fostering collaboration and teamwork, adapting to changes, respecting teachers' professional judgment, providing emotional support and fair workload distribution, promoting work-life balance, providing continuous feedback and growth opportunities, ensuring clear communication, empowering and appreciating teachers, resolving conflicts, and establishing trust.

Keywords: leadership skills, teacher well-being, Vietnamese EFL teachers, Grounded Theory

INTRODUCTION

The role of leadership is paramount in virtually every organizational context, with a substantial body of literature underscoring its direct impact on job satisfaction, motivation, and overall well-being of staff members (Al-Maaitah et al., 2021; Audenaert et al., 2017; Khan & Wajidi, 2019). Education, being a pivotal organizational context, is no exception (Guthrie & Jenkins, 2018). In particular, English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teaching demands meticulous attention due to its unique challenges such as managing diverse cultural expectations, ensuring linguistic competency, and adapting to ever-evolving pedagogical practices (Doan & Hamid, 2021). These challenges could be augmented or alleviated, depending on the leadership styles practiced by the leaders in the education sector.

In Vietnam, the EFL teaching environment is burgeoning due to the national effort to boost English proficiency and global competitiveness (Hu & McKay, 2012). This rise, however, puts Vietnamese EFL teachers under enormous pressure (Thao & Mai, 2022), highlighting the need for strong leadership that could not only enhance teachers' professional growth but also ensure their well-being. Previous studies have explored the relationship between leadership and teachers' performance in Vietnam (e.g., Maheshwari, 2022; Thanh et al., 2022); however, little is known about how leadership influences the well-being of Vietnamese EFL teachers.

This study, therefore, investigates the impacts of a leader's leadership skills on teachers' well-being, focusing particularly on Vietnamese EFL teachers. It aims to provide insights into the current leadership practices in Vietnamese EFL teaching context and to discern the types of leadership skills that are most conducive to teachers' well-being. The results of this research could contribute significantly to the advancement of EFL teaching practices in Vietnam, shaping the development of future leadership programs and thereby improving the overall quality of education in the country. Furthermore, this research may offer transferable implications for EFL teaching in similar socio-cultural contexts.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Leadership Skills and Its Roles in Teacher's Well-Being

Leadership in educational contexts is a well-researched area. A plethora of studies highlights the direct influence of leadership skills on teachers' motivation, job satisfaction, and their overall well-being. Leithwood and Sun (2012) argued that leadership significantly affects teachers' job satisfaction and their intention to stay in the profession, thus impacting their overall well-being. Additionally, the concept of transformational leadership, where leaders inspire, challenge, and support their followers, has been particularly influential in shaping teachers' perceptions of their work environment (Bogler, 2001). These studies have illuminated how leaders can affect teachers' well-being through their leadership practices. Furthermore, leaders' communication skills, ability to provide constructive feedback, empathy, and capacity for strategic thinking have all been found to play pivotal roles in promoting teachers' well-being (Spilt et al., 2011). More recent research by Van Maele and Van Houtte (2015) suggests that the perception of a supportive school leadership is instrumental in fostering teachers' trust, satisfaction, and motivation, leading to a greater sense of well-being.

Teacher's Well-Being

Teacher's well-being has been a critical focus of academic research, especially in the context of the demanding and ever-changing educational landscape. Teacher's well-being is often conceptualized as their physical, emotional, and psychological health, along with their professional satisfaction (Day & Qing, 2009). Studies show that teacher well-being is an essential prerequisite for effective teaching, influencing not only teachers' professional efficacy but also student achievement (Brackett et al., 2010). Importantly, teachers' well-being can be affected by multiple organizational factors, such as work pressure, role ambiguity, and perceived support from leadership (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2011). Specifically, the perception of positive leadership can contribute to teachers' sense of professional competence, job satisfaction, and overall well-being (Collie et al., 2012). These findings underscore the integral role leadership plays in shaping the well-being of teachers.

Several studies have examined the connection between leadership skills and EFL teachers' job satisfaction and performance in Vietnam (Hallinger et al., 2015; Maheshwari, 2022). However, these studies primarily focus on leadership styles (e.g., transformational and transactional leadership) and their effects on performance outcomes, such as teacher engagement and job satisfaction, rather than providing an in-depth exploration of teacher well-being as a multidimensional construct. Furthermore, these studies tend to adopt quantitative

approaches, offering limited insight into the nuanced, lived experiences of EFL teachers regarding how specific leadership practices influence their emotional, psychological, and professional well-being. There is also a lack of consideration of sectoral differences (public versus private) and career stages, which can significantly shape teachers' experiences of leadership and well-being. Given these limitations, there remains a significant gap in understanding how leadership skills impact EFL teachers' well-being in Vietnam, particularly from a qualitative perspective that captures the complexity and depth of their experiences. This study seeks to address these gaps by providing a grounded theory analysis of Vietnamese EFL teachers' perceptions of leadership practices and their implications for teacher well-being in both public and private sectors.

RESEARCH METHODS

Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative research approach with a Grounded Theory methodology. A qualitative study is most suitable for the research aim as it allows an in-depth exploration of EFL teachers' perceptions and experiences. This approach enables researchers to gain nuanced insights into how teachers perceive the impact of leadership skills on their well-being. Grounded Theory, developed by Tarozzi (2020), is employed due to its effectiveness in generating a theory directly grounded in the data collected. It allows the researchers to inductively develop a theoretical understanding of the relationship between leadership skills and teachers' well-being within the context of Vietnamese EFL teaching. This research methodology is especially valuable in understanding complex social phenomena where limited theoretical or empirical studies exist, such as the case with the focus area of the current study.

The theoretical framework guiding this research is rooted in the constructs of transformational leadership and teacher well-being. Transformational leadership emphasizes leaders inspiring and motivating their followers to exceed their self-interests for the greater good of the organization (Bogler, 2001). Transformational leaders are characterized by their ability to articulate a compelling vision, provide supportive leadership, foster intellectual stimulation, and display individualized consideration. Teacher well-being is conceptualized within the Job Demands-Resources Model (Xanthopoulou et al., 2007). This model posits that job demands (e.g., workload, emotional demands) can deplete teachers' energy, leading to burnout, whereas job resources (e.g., social support, feedback, job control) can reduce job demands, stimulate personal growth, and enhance well-being. The intersection of these constructs guides this exploration of how leadership skills (particularly those associated with transformational leadership) contribute to the enhancement of job resources and the reduction of job demands, ultimately impacting teachers' well-being in the Vietnamese EFL teaching context.

Participants

The participants for this study were selected using a purposive sampling method. This method was chosen as it allows the researchers to select individuals who have experienced the phenomena of interest and are able to articulate their experiences (Patton, 1990).

Six teachers in total were chosen, three from the public sector and three from the private sector in Vietnam. In Vietnam, the public and private sectors have different characteristics. Public schools, run by the government, are subject to regulations and policies from the Ministry of Education and Training. They often have a larger class size and are accessible to a broad range of students. On the other hand, private schools typically have smaller class sizes and higher tuition fees, which often enables them to have more resources and implement innovative teaching methods. Furthermore, leadership practices could vary between these sectors due to different operational models, structures, and goals, which might differently impact teachers' well-being.

From each sector, one participant was a novice teacher (having less than 5 years of experience), one was a mid-career teacher (with 5–15 years of experience), and one was a late-career teacher (with over 15 years of experience). The theoretical framework for participant selection was underpinned by the intersectionality theory (Viruell-Fuentes et al., 2012). This theory suggests that multiple social categories (like career stage and work sector in this study) intersect at the individual level to reflect multiple and intersecting experiences of advantage and disadvantage. By including teachers at different career stages and from different sectors, this study acknowledges the complexity of teachers' experiences and ensures a more comprehensive understanding of how leadership impacts teachers' well-being in Vietnamese EFL teaching context.

Semi-Structured Interviews as Data Collection Instrument

In this study, semi-structured interviews were utilized as the primary data collection instrument. This approach allowed the researchers to explore participants' experiences and perceptions in depth, offering rich, detailed insights into the impact of leadership skills on teachers' well-being. The interview guide was carefully crafted with questions aimed at capturing the participants' experiences and perceptions of leadership and its effect on their well-being.

Questions focused on participants' views on the leadership practices in their respective schools, how they perceive these practices to influence their work, and their feelings about their overall well-being. For instance, questions such as "Can you describe the leadership style in your school?", "In what ways do you believe your leader's approach impacts your job satisfaction and stress levels?", and "How do you think leadership in your school contributes to your overall well-being?" were included.

The interviews were conducted in Vietnamese to ensure that the participants were able to express their thoughts and feelings as accurately and comfortably as possible. This language choice was crucial for ensuring that participants could share deep thoughts and nuanced experiences without language constraints. All interviews were conducted between July and August 2023. Ideal conditions were created for the interviews. They were conducted in a quiet, neutral location where participants would feel comfortable sharing their experiences. Specifically, interviews took place in private meeting rooms at participants' respective schools or at quiet cafés in Can Tho City, based on participants' preferences and convenience.

Each interview was scheduled to last approximately one hour, though participants were informed that they could take as much time as they needed. To ensure reliability and validity in this study, several strategies were adopted. Firstly, the interview guide was reviewed by a panel of experts to ensure that the questions accurately captured the phenomena of interest. Secondly, all interviews were conducted by the same researcher to maintain consistency. Thirdly, the interviews were recorded and transcribed in verbatim to ensure the accuracy of data. Moreover, member checking was used to enhance the credibility of the findings. Participants were given the opportunity to review the transcripts of their interviews to confirm the accuracy of their responses. By adopting these rigorous strategies, this study ensures that the collected data are both reliable and valid, offering robust insights into the impacts of a leader's leadership skills on teachers' well-being from the perspective of Vietnamese EFL teachers.

Data Analysis

The data analysis in this study adheres to the principles and procedures of Grounded Theory as proposed by Birks and Mills (2015). This approach, chosen for its emphasis on building theory from data, is particularly suitable for our study aiming to understand the impacts of a leader's leadership skills on teachers' well-being from the perspective of Vietnamese EFL teachers.

The analysis began with open coding, where each interview transcript was scrutinized line by line to identify significant phrases or sentences relevant to the research objectives. Initial codes were assigned to these

segments of data to describe their content. This process involved constant comparison of data segments and codes, and the coding scheme was continuously refined as new data were coded and compared. Following open coding, the next stage was axial coding, which involved organizing the initial codes into broader categories based on their relationships. During this stage, the constant comparison method was used to examine the data and codes, identify patterns and relationships, and develop more abstract categories. The final stage was selective coding, which entailed integrating and refining the categories to construct a grounded theory. This involved the identification of a core category that represented the main theme of the research, around which other categories were related and organized.

The primary researcher took the lead role in the entire data analysis process, including coding, categorizing, and theory development. The researcher manually coded the transcripts to organize and manage the data effectively. During open coding, the researcher independently coded each transcript without prior categories to ensure the codes were grounded in the data. Afterward, the researcher engaged in axial coding by examining connections between codes and grouping them into categories. Selective coding was conducted to integrate these categories around a central theme that emerged from the data. Throughout each phase of coding, the researcher documented decisions, analytic insights, and reflections in memos.

Throughout the data analysis process, memos were written to record insights, reflections, and decisions made. These memos were instrumental in the development of the grounded theory as they helped to trace the analytic journey and to ensure the rigor and transparency of the analysis.

To enhance the trustworthiness of the findings, the peer debriefing technique was employed. This involved discussing the coding and emerging theory with colleagues who were familiar with Grounded Theory but not directly involved in the study. Their feedback helped to challenge and refine the analysis, increasing its credibility. Additionally, to reduce potential researcher bias, an independent second researcher reviewed a sample of the coded data. The discrepancies were discussed collaboratively until consensus was reached. This collaborative process strengthened the consistency and reliability of the coding. Through these meticulous and systematic procedures, the analysis was grounded in the data, providing an in-depth understanding of the impacts of leadership skills on teachers' well-being in the Vietnamese EFL teaching context.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

Through the analysis of the participants' narratives, several themes emerged which illustrate the range of ways that leaders' leadership skills impact English teachers' well-being.

Creating a Collaborative and Supportive Environment

Open communication and teamwork are fundamental aspects of a healthy working environment, especially in education (n=6). Meg mentioned, "*Our leader always encourages open communication and cooperation. This sense of teamwork reduces feelings of isolation and boosts our morale.*" Queen added, "*Our leader regularly organizes team-building activities which strengthen our bond and create a positive atmosphere in the workplace.*" As noted by Meg and Queen, their leaders' efforts in encouraging open communication, cooperation, and regular team-building activities have made significant positive impacts on their morale and workplace atmosphere.

Vietnamese culture highly values collectivism and harmony, emphasizing group achievements over individual success (Truong et al., 2017). This cultural norm, coupled with the inherently collaborative nature of teaching, underscores the importance of teamwork among teachers. It is also crucial to note that teaching can be a demanding profession, potentially leading to feelings of isolation and burnout (Hogan & White, 2021). The

sense of belonging to a team can help mitigate these negative effects, contributing to enhanced well-being among teachers (Wann et al., 2017).

The education system in Vietnam, both public and private, has experienced significant transformations in recent years (Bodewig et al., 2014). English language teaching has gained considerable importance, leading to increasing demands and responsibilities for English teachers. In this evolving scenario, effective communication becomes critical in ensuring teachers are well-informed and feel supported in their roles (Clutterbuck & Hirst, 2002; Syarif et al., 2020).

Furthermore, the hierarchical nature of Vietnamese society places a significant emphasis on respect for authority (Truong & Hallinger, 2017). In such a context, a leader who encourages open communication can break down barriers, empowering teachers to voice their ideas and concerns freely. This approach can foster a more democratic and inclusive work environment, leading to improved job satisfaction and well-being among teachers.

Lastly, team-building activities, as Queen mentioned, are a proactive approach to fostering a supportive and cohesive work environment (Fapohunda, 2013). Such activities not only strengthen interpersonal relationships but also facilitate better understanding and collaboration among teachers (Pollack & Matous, 2019). Given the diversity in teachers' experiences and teaching styles – from novices to mid-career and late-career teachers – these activities can enhance mutual learning and respect, further reinforcing the team spirit.

Promoting Flexibility and Adaptability

The ability of leaders to adapt to changing circumstances, particularly with respect to curriculum modifications and the introduction of new technologies, emerged as a significant theme in this study (n=6). Freddy emphasized, *“Our leader’s adaptability to curriculum modifications or new technology helps us adapt smoothly, reducing our stress levels.”* Loco noted, *“Whenever there are changes in the school policies or teaching modules, our leader makes sure to guide us effectively through them.”* These participants underscored the positive impact that a leader’s adaptability can have on the well-being of English teachers.

The education sector globally is characterized by a state of constant evolution, and this is no less true in Vietnam (London, 2010). With the country’s increasing integration into the global economy and the emphasis on improving English proficiency among its population, the teaching curriculum and methods are frequently updated to align with international standards and best practices (Tran et al., 2020). Therefore, adaptability becomes a vital leadership skill in this dynamic context (Niemeyer-Rens et al., 2022). Leaders who embrace changes in curriculum and technology, and who effectively guide their teachers through these transitions, can significantly reduce stress levels among the teaching staff. Leaders can do this by providing necessary training, resources, and emotional support to help teachers adjust to the new practices. Given the diverse experience levels of the teachers involved in the study – from novice to late-career – it is important that leaders are sensitive to varying comfort levels with changes, especially those related to technology (Jacobs et al., 2014).

Moreover, Vietnam has been experiencing a digital transformation in its education sector (Giang et al., 2021), accelerated by the global pandemic. This shift requires leaders and teachers to be adaptable and tech-savvy, as teaching and learning increasingly move to online platforms. A leader who can navigate these changes smoothly can enhance teachers’ confidence in using new technologies, thereby improving their performance and well-being.

Furthermore, changes in school policies or teaching modules can be a source of anxiety for teachers, who may already feel overwhelmed by their daily teaching responsibilities (Hargreaves, 2004; Thao & Mai, 2022). In this context, a leader’s role in providing clear guidance during these transitions is crucial in maintaining the stability and continuity of the teaching process (Pedroso et al., 2021).

Encouraging Decision-making and Autonomy

A significant theme that emerged from this study is the respect leaders have for teachers' professional judgment (n=5). Richard commented, *"Our leader respects our professional judgment, which makes us feel trusted and motivates us to perform our best."* Meg agreed, *"Having a voice in decisions that impact our work makes us feel valued."* As highlighted by Richard and Meg, a leader who values and respects teachers' professional opinions can create an environment where teachers feel trusted and motivated, which can have a positive impact on their well-being.

The traditional education system in Vietnam is quite hierarchical, and teachers have often been expected to follow prescribed teaching methods and curricula without much autonomy (Nguyen & Walkinshaw, 2018). However, in recent years, there has been a growing recognition of the importance of teacher autonomy and the benefits of a more inclusive and democratic approach to decision-making in schools (Thao & Mai, 2022). This shift aligns with broader global trends in education and reflects the evolving teaching landscape in Vietnam, particularly with respect to English language teaching.

Respecting teachers' professional judgment is crucial in this context (Phan & Locke, 2016). Teachers, with their direct interaction with students and their practical understanding of pedagogical methods, are well-placed to make informed decisions about teaching practices. Leaders who acknowledge this expertise and involve teachers in decision-making processes can foster a sense of empowerment among teachers. This respect can make teachers feel valued, as Meg highlighted, enhancing job satisfaction and well-being.

Moreover, given the diversity in teaching experiences among the participants, from novices to late-career professionals, leaders' respect for individual professional judgment can also promote mutual respect and learning among teachers themselves (Hargreaves, 2007; Twyford & Le Fevre, 2019). This can further contribute to a positive work culture and enhanced well-being among teachers. In addition, a leader who trusts and respects teachers' professional judgment demonstrates a form of transformative leadership (Carrington et al., 2024; Gillespie & Mann, 2004). This style of leadership is becoming increasingly relevant in Vietnam's rapidly changing educational landscape (Hai et al., 2021). The ability of leaders to nurture autonomy and professional growth among teachers can also support innovation and creativity in teaching, which is essential for teaching English effectively in a globalized context.

Providing Emotional Support and Managing Workload

Empathy and workload management, as crucial aspects of leadership, emerged as significant themes in this study (n=5). Queen explained, *"Our leader listens to our concerns empathetically and ensures work distribution is fair. This creates a safe space for us and helps prevent burnout."* Theo added, *"Our leader is always there to provide moral support during tough times and help manage our work effectively."* Queen and Theo's insights reveal how a leader's empathetic understanding of their concerns and effective workload management can create a safe work environment and help prevent teacher burnout.

Vietnam's educational sector, especially English language teaching, has been experiencing heightened pressure due to increasing demands and standards (Nguyen, 2017). Teachers often face heavy workloads, which can lead to burnout if not effectively managed (Hogan & White, 2021). An empathetic leader who understands and acknowledges these pressures can play a significant role in managing teacher workload and stress. Empathy, being attentive to the needs and feelings of others, is a fundamental part of Vietnamese culture (Huyen et al., 2021). In the educational setting, a leader who is empathetic can create an environment where teachers feel heard and supported (Kock et al., 2019). As Queen mentions, this can help foster a safe space for teachers to share their concerns and challenges.

In the context of workload management, leaders can help ensure a fair distribution of work and provide resources to handle heavy workloads (Printy et al., 2009). This is particularly important in a diverse work environment that includes novice, mid-career, and late-career teachers, who may have different levels of workload tolerance and capability. An understanding leader can also assist in managing the work-life balance of teachers, which is crucial for their overall well-being.

Moreover, Theo's comment highlights the importance of leaders' moral support during challenging times. In the dynamic and sometimes challenging field of education, teachers can experience stress and anxiety. A leader's moral support can provide a much-needed boost for teachers and help them navigate these difficult periods (Gurr & Drydale, 2020). In the Vietnamese context, where respect for authority and collective harmony are valued, leaders who demonstrate empathy and effectively manage workloads can contribute to a positive and supportive work culture (Truong et al., 2017). Such an environment can help enhance job satisfaction and overall well-being among teachers.

Acknowledging the Importance of Work–Life Integration

Leaders' recognition of the need for work-life balance was identified as a positive factor (n=4). Loco pointed out, *“Our leader understands the need for a balance between work and personal life, reducing stress and improving life satisfaction.”* Freddy echoed this sentiment, *“Our leader encourages us to take time for our personal life, which helps to maintain our mental health.”* According to Loco and Freddy, leaders who understand the importance of balancing work demands with personal life can significantly contribute to reducing stress and improving overall life satisfaction and mental health among teachers.

Vietnam's educational system, particularly for English language teachers, is marked by high demands and expectations, often resulting in long working hours (Nguyen, 2017). While dedication to teaching is admired and appreciated, it is essential to remember that teachers, like all individuals, need time and space to cater to their personal lives and well-being (McKay & Barton, 2018). A leader who acknowledges this and encourages a healthy work-life balance can significantly impact teachers' stress levels, job satisfaction, and overall mental health.

As Loco and Freddy's comments suggest, teachers value leaders who promote a healthy work-life balance. This could include encouraging teachers to take time off when needed, being understanding about family or personal commitments, and ensuring that work demands do not consistently infringe upon personal time (Bell et al., 2012). These practices align with the global shift towards prioritizing employee well-being and can have a profound impact on teachers' job satisfaction and mental health (Guest, 2017).

In the Vietnamese context, the traditional culture places a significant emphasis on hard work (Hitchcock & Wesner, 2009), often at the expense of personal time and well-being. However, with growing awareness about the importance of mental health and the dangers of burnout, there is a need for a shift in this mindset, especially within the demanding field of education. Leaders who advocate for work-life balance can pave the way for this change and contribute to a healthier, more balanced lifestyle for teachers. Furthermore, promoting a balanced lifestyle is beneficial for the teaching profession as a whole (Hepburn et al., 2021). A teacher who is mentally and physically healthy can perform better in their roles, be more engaged with their students, and contribute more positively to the learning environment.

Offering Continuous Feedback and Professional Development Opportunities

The theme of ongoing feedback and growth opportunities provided by leaders has emerged as a significant contributor to teachers' well-being (n=3). Theo reported, *“Constructive feedback and support for professional development from our leader promote a learning culture, enhancing our sense of fulfillment.”* Richard

mentioned, *“Our leader prioritizes our professional growth, offering regular training and development opportunities.”* According to Theo and Richard, leaders who offer constructive feedback and promote professional development foster a learning culture, which enhances teachers’ sense of fulfillment and job satisfaction.

Vietnam’s educational sector has been going through substantial transformation and improvement in the past decades (Vinh & Hanh, 2022). The shift towards learner-centered pedagogies, incorporation of technology, and the drive for global competitiveness are necessitating continuous professional development among teachers, especially those involved in teaching English as a foreign language (Bodewig et al., 2014). In such a context, leaders who prioritize and support the professional growth of their teachers play a pivotal role in enhancing teachers’ job satisfaction and overall well-being. Theo’s insight emphasizes the importance of constructive feedback in promoting a culture of learning. In an educational setting, constructive feedback, when given properly, can be a powerful tool for learning and improvement (Goleman, 2017). It not only helps teachers to identify their strengths and areas of improvement but also affirms their efforts and accomplishments, leading to a sense of fulfillment.

Furthermore, Richard’s comment underscores the importance of professional development opportunities. Regular training and development opportunities can significantly enhance teachers’ competency and confidence in their profession (Khan & Abdullah, 2019). This is particularly relevant in the field of English language teaching, where pedagogical trends and methods are constantly evolving. Teachers who are provided with opportunities to keep their skills up-to-date feel valued and invested in, leading to improved job satisfaction and well-being. In the Vietnamese context, where the value of education and self-improvement is deeply embedded in the culture (Doan, 2005; Nguyen & Tran, 2018), leaders who promote continuous feedback and professional growth contribute to an environment of learning and progress. This aligns with the country’s goal of improving the quality of education and fits with the cultural emphasis on lifelong learning (Hossain, 2016).

Maintaining Clear Communication

The importance of clear and transparent communication from leaders was another significant theme that emerged from the study (n=3). Meg noted, *“Clear instructions and feedback from our leader reduce confusion and foster a sense of security.”* Thor added, *“Our leader always keeps us updated about the school’s plans and policies, which helps us stay focused and relaxed.”* According to Meg and Thor, leaders who communicate their instructions, feedback, plans, and policies in a clear and transparent manner can significantly reduce confusion, foster a sense of security, and help teachers stay focused and relaxed.

Vietnam, like many Asian cultures, has traditionally had a high-context communication style, where much is left unsaid and understood through context, non-verbal cues, and shared understanding (Quynh, 2021). However, in an educational setting, particularly in the diverse and dynamic field of teaching English as a foreign language, such an implicit communication style may lead to confusion and misunderstandings (Hu et al., 2016). In this context, Meg’s comment on the importance of clear instructions and feedback highlights the role of leaders in ensuring clarity in communication. Clear instructions from leaders can minimize ambiguity, reduce the potential for errors, and increase efficiency in the teaching process (Gioia et al., 2012). Similarly, clear and specific feedback can help teachers better understand their strengths and areas for improvement, fostering a sense of security and competence.

On the other hand, Thor’s observation emphasizes the importance of transparency in communication, particularly concerning the school’s plans and policies. Transparent communication helps in fostering trust (Lee & Li, 2021), as it demonstrates the leader’s respect for the teachers’ roles in the school. By keeping teachers informed about the school’s plans and policies, leaders can help them feel included and valued, leading to increased focus, relaxation, and overall well-being. In the Vietnamese context, with its rapid

educational reforms and high-stakes English language teaching (Thao & Mai, 2022), clear and transparent communication becomes even more crucial. It can help teachers navigate changes more effectively, align their teaching practices with the school's vision, and reduce stress related to uncertainty and confusion.

Facilitating Empowerment and Recognition

The theme of empowerment and recognition of teachers' efforts by leaders emerged as a significant factor affecting teachers' well-being (n=3). Thor stated, "*Feeling empowered to make decisions and receiving recognition for accomplishments boosts our self-esteem and job satisfaction.*" Queen reinforced this point, saying, "*Our leader regularly acknowledges our hard work and appreciates our efforts, which motivates us to do better.*" Thor and Queen's comments suggest that leaders who empower their teachers to make decisions and acknowledge their hard work can significantly boost teachers' self-esteem, job satisfaction, and motivation.

In Vietnam, as in many other Confucian-influenced societies, there is traditionally a high power distance in educational settings, with leaders and teachers often positioned in clearly defined roles and hierarchy (Thao, 2017). However, in recent years, there has been a shift towards more participative and democratic leadership styles, particularly in educational institutions that aspire to foster creativity, critical thinking, and independence among teachers (Tang, 2019). Thor's comment about feeling empowered to make decisions is indicative of this shift. When teachers are trusted and empowered to make decisions about their teaching methods, classroom management, and curricular adaptations, it provides them with a sense of autonomy and responsibility, fostering a stronger engagement with their work (Mai & Thao, 2022). Empowerment of teachers is not only a mark of respect for their professional competence but also contributes to a sense of ownership and pride in their work, which can enhance self-esteem and job satisfaction.

Queen's observation further highlights the importance of recognition and appreciation in promoting teacher well-being. In the fast-paced, high-stakes world of English language teaching, teachers often invest significant time, energy, and emotion into their work (Nguyen, 2017). Acknowledging their hard work, appreciating their efforts, and celebrating their successes can provide a powerful motivation, fostering a sense of accomplishment and satisfaction. In the Vietnamese context, where respect for teachers is deeply ingrained in society, leaders who regularly recognize and appreciate their teachers' efforts can contribute significantly to creating a positive and motivating work culture (Mai & Hall, 2017). Such a culture can reduce the risk of burnout, boost morale, and enhance the overall well-being of teachers.

Effective Conflict Resolution and Fostering Trust

The participants in this study emphasized the value of a harmonious work environment, the effective resolution of conflicts, and the establishment of trustful and respectful relationships with leaders (n=3). Freddy shared, "*Our leader's ability to promptly address conflicts, combined with a trustful and respectful relationship, creates a harmonious work environment that reduces stress.*" Loco added, "*Our leader fosters an environment of trust and mutual respect which positively affects our morale and overall well-being.*" Freddy and Loco's observations underline how a leader's ability to foster such conditions can significantly reduce stress and positively affect the morale and overall well-being of teachers.

In the Vietnamese context, maintaining harmony, or "*hòa hợp*," is deeply ingrained in the societal norms, reflecting the influence of Confucian and Buddhist philosophies (Vuong et al., 2018). Harmony is particularly valued in workplace settings, including schools, where it is seen as crucial for ensuring a smooth, productive, and positive environment (Zhang & Wei, 2017). Freddy's comment on a leader's ability to promptly address conflicts is closely tied to this cultural emphasis on harmony. When conflicts are resolved effectively and promptly, it helps maintain a supportive, cooperative, and peaceful work environment, reducing stress and promoting well-being among teachers (Yukl, 2012). Furthermore, trust and respect are also paramount in

Vietnamese work culture (Tran, 2019). These are rooted in the traditional respect for authority, but also reflect contemporary shifts towards more participative and democratic leadership styles.

Loco's statement underscores the importance of leaders fostering an environment of trust and mutual respect. When teachers feel trusted and respected by their leaders, they are likely to experience higher job satisfaction, feel more valued and motivated, and have a higher sense of professional self-worth, all of which can positively impact their overall well-being (Ghamrawi, 2011). This focus on trust and respect is particularly relevant in the context of EFL teaching in Vietnam, where teachers often navigate multiple challenges, such as managing diverse classrooms, keeping up with rapid curriculum changes, and meeting high-stakes performance expectations (Yao et al., 2022). In such a context, leaders who build trusting relationships and show respect for their teachers can create a supportive environment that enhances teacher morale and well-being.

CONCLUSION

This study set out to examine the impacts of a leader's leadership skills on teachers' well-being, focusing specifically on Vietnamese English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teachers' perspectives. The findings presented here provide valuable insights into the significance of effective leadership in fostering a positive and supportive environment, thereby enhancing teachers' well-being. In light of the data derived from the interviews, several key leadership skills were highlighted as contributing to teachers' well-being, including fostering collaboration and teamwork, being adaptable and flexible in changing circumstances, respecting teachers' professional judgment, empathizing with teachers and managing workload, recognizing the need for work-life balance, providing continuous feedback and opportunities for growth, communicating clearly and transparently, empowering teachers and acknowledging their hard work, and maintaining a harmonious work environment through effective conflict resolution and building trusting relationships. These findings resonate with the wider literature on leadership and well-being and extend our understanding in the specific context of EFL teaching in Vietnam. The results underscore the multifaceted role of leaders and the diverse set of skills they need to foster to support teachers' well-being. Moreover, it is crucial to acknowledge that these leadership practices do not operate in isolation. Instead, they often interact and reinforce each other in a dynamic manner, creating an ecosystem of support for teachers. For instance, effective communication helps build trust, which in turn fosters collaboration and teamwork. Similarly, recognition of effort can empower teachers, boosting their morale and job satisfaction, which can then promote a harmonious work environment.

Implications

This study has significant implications for multiple stakeholders within the educational sector, particularly in the context of EFL teaching in Vietnam. The findings underscore the importance of various leadership skills in fostering teacher well-being. Leaders and administrators could use this information to identify their current strengths and areas for development, focusing specifically on skills such as promoting collaboration, being adaptable, respecting teachers' professional judgment, providing emotional support and managing workload, among others. This could inform the development and implementation of professional development programs aimed at enhancing leadership skills. Besides, the results may offer teachers a clearer understanding of the factors that contribute to their well-being and, therefore, help them advocate for their needs more effectively. Recognizing the role of leadership in their well-being could also enable teachers to seek out professional environments that prioritize these skills. At a broader level, the findings could inform the policies related to teacher well-being, leadership practices, and professional development in the educational sector. Policymakers could use the information to frame policies that ensure school leaders are equipped with the necessary skills to support teacher well-being. Additionally, the results highlight specific areas of focus for leadership training programs, such as fostering collaboration and teamwork, managing workload effectively, and maintaining a harmonious work environment. This information can be used to refine existing training

programs or develop new ones that specifically target these skills. Finally, although indirectly, students also stand to benefit from the implications of this study. When teachers experience high levels of well-being, they are likely to be more engaged, motivated, and effective in their teaching roles, which can lead to enhanced learning experiences and outcomes for students.

Limitations and Recommendations for Further Research

While the study presents significant insights into the interplay between leadership skills and teachers' well-being, there are certain limitations that warrant discussion. First, it is important to highlight that the study's geographical context is specific to Vietnam. While this localization enables a nuanced understanding of the socio-cultural dimensions within the Vietnamese context, extrapolating these findings to different cultural or geographical settings might not be directly feasible. Additionally, the focus of this study has been particularly on English teachers. While this specific focus provides in-depth data, it is also possible that teachers of different subjects might have varying experiences related to their well-being, owing to unique challenges and demands posed by different subjects. Furthermore, the study primarily relied on the participants' self-reported experiences and perceptions. Although this method facilitates a capture of individual perspectives, the responses could be influenced by various factors including social desirability bias, recall bias, or subjective interpretations of experiences.

Despite these limitations, this research presents a roadmap for future studies. For instance, conducting cross-cultural studies in different geographical regions can help compare and contrast the findings, thereby providing a more comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon. Additionally, future research can aim to broaden the scope of the study by involving teachers from diverse subject domains, thereby examining the generalizability of the findings. It would also be beneficial for future studies to incorporate a triangulation of data to ensure enhanced reliability and validity of the findings. This could involve a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods such as surveys, observations, or even examination of objective data related to teachers' well-being and performance. Lastly, it would be valuable to conduct longitudinal studies, tracking teachers over a period of time to observe the long-term impact of leadership skills and practices on their well-being. These recommendations for future research are aimed at a continuous enhancement of our understanding of the critical role that leadership plays in fostering teacher well-being. They seek to strengthen the evidence base that is crucial for informing policy-making and practices in the field of education.

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