

INNOVATING PAYMENT AS THE DETERMINANT OF EMOTIONAL WELLBEING: AN ACTIVITY THEORETIC PERSPECTIVE OF CONTRIBUTIONS FOR LANGUAGE TEACHER IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION

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Mostafa Nazari¹
Zahra Keshvari²

ABSTRACT: Despite the growth of research on language teachers' emotional wellbeing and professional identity construction in recent years, little research has addressed how payment plays a role in these two constructs within the literature of TESOL teacher education. In response to this gap, the present study drew on the lens of activity theory and explored the role of payment in 15 Iranian English language teachers' wellbeing and the associated implications for their professional identity construction. Data were collected from narrative frames and semi-structured interviews. The data were analyzed based on the principles of thematic analysis. Data analyses revealed three themes: (1) life quality and job commitment, (2) self-esteem and self-worth, and (3) cross-career comparison and lack of independence. Our findings imply that payment is perhaps one of the most significant yet underattended dimensions of the social turn in research on teachers and teacher education, which should receive more attention in the academe. Based on the findings, we provide implications for institutional policymakers to bring the issue of payment to the core and to the awareness of teachers so that the related interpersonal and conceptual tensions are resolved.

KEYWORDS: Payment, Language teacher wellbeing, Language teacher identity construction, Activity theory

Introduction

Payment is the amount of money paid to people for the work performed, which can be calculated based on different time frames and can be divided into three sub-categories of basic salary, bonuses, and subsidies (Bandonio et al., 2022). Payment exerts a significant influence on employee performance, a point emphatically highlighted by Bandonio et al. (2022) regarding the comparative role of payment, work facilities, and leadership style in employees'

1 Department of English and Communication, the Hong Kong Polytechnic University, Hong Kong
Iran. Email: Mostafanazari136969@gmail.com

2 Department of English Language Teaching, Tarbiat Modares University, Tehran, Iran
Email: zkeshvari1376@gmail.com

effectiveness. A careful look at the role of payment in education reveals that there is a close relationship between the amount of payment and teachers' commitment, life and work satisfaction, social status, and productivity (Barahona & Ibaceta-Quijanes, 2019). Such a focus on payment has also been discussed by Sulis et al. (2023), though in the form of economic issues, in relation to how teachers feel about their own performances, institutional effectiveness, and sociocultural issues shaping their sense-making processes.

It has been argued that payment can immensely influence teachers' professional work (e.g., Barahona & Ibaceta-Quijanes, 2019). However, how payment can play a role in teachers' wellbeing and their professional identity construction has not received adequate attention both in general education and TESOL teacher education. The significance of this line of research lies in the point that the scholarship on language teacher wellbeing and identity construction is increasingly acknowledging their conceptual and practical proximities since how teachers feel well about themselves and their work dialectically relates to their self-perceptions, as situated within the communities at which they work (see De Costa & Norton, 2017; Gregersen et al., 2021; Mercer, 2020; Herrera et al., 2022; Yazan & Lindahl, 2020). Furthermore, in their recent work, Sulis et al. (2023) hold that language teacher wellbeing and identity are closely dependent on the contextualities of teaching and argue for further scrutinizing the dimensions of their interconnection based on contextual discourses and practices. In response to this progressively-developing line of thinking and research, in this study, we innovatively draw on the theoretical perspective of activity theory and capture an academically less-attended and contextually significant component of English language teachers' emotional wellbeing and identity construction (i.e., payment).

The role of payment in teacher professionalism

Teachers' performance has a huge impact on the future of educational systems and their performance is influenced by a wide range of contextual factors (Buchanan, 2015). The particular factor of concern to this study is payment, which has been discussed to (1) rely on personal-professional variables, (2) closely relate to students' achievement outcomes, and (3) have substantial bearings for the way teachers define their institutional membership (e.g., Clabaugh, 2010; Podgursky & Springer, 2011). These characteristics have rendered payment as an issue that comes to directly and indirectly influence teachers' quality performance, connectedness to educational systems, and interpersonal relationships.

Teachers' payment is generally low in almost all countries in comparison with their level of education and working hours (Pham et al., 2020). For example, in Chile, payment for novice English teachers varies from US\$1000–1300 for 44 hours of teaching in the public school system (Barahona & Ibaceta-Quijanes, 2019). Based on a published report by the National Center for Education Statistics (2021), American teachers made a national average of about \$65,000 in the school year of 2020-2021 and in Brazil, teaching is a financially undervalued job with an average starting payment of about 400-500 euros monthly for a 40-h week, which can make teachers start looking for a second job (Ruohotie-Lyhty et al., 2021).

Payment can have substantial effects on teachers' identity construction, performance, and socio-professional status and motivation (Bandonio et al. 2022; Barahona & Ibaceta-Quijanes, 2019). For example, Toraman and Korkmaz (2022) reported that teachers in Turkey stated that their payment is too low, which can make them lose their value and prestige in society, also negatively influencing their professional identity. Moreover, Barahona and Ibaceta-Quijanes (2019) explored different factors that undermined the teaching profession in Chile. The majority of participant teachers identified low payment as the key source of low levels of satisfaction and negative emotions that undervalued their profession. Teachers declared that low payment led to a negative evaluation of the significance of their jobs, and consequently influenced their professional identity as well as occupational wellbeing. The authors also highlighted the need for more empirical attention to the role of payment in language teachers' identity construction and argued that payment is gaining increased attention in academic circles, which is what we seek in this study as well. Overall, the worldwide representation of the line of thinking and research reveals the key role of payment in different aspects of teachers' life, especially how the amount of payment can influence teachers' perceptions of the teaching career, professional wellbeing, and identity construction (see Sulis et al., 2023).

Language teacher emotional wellbeing and identity construction

A psychological construct that stems from the dynamic interplay of personal and social factors is emotional wellbeing, which not only involves happiness and satisfaction, but is also linked to how sociocultural contextualities (e.g., socioeconomic status, career stage, social recognition, and political forces) inform teachers' subjective and psychological wellbeing (Mercer, 2021; Sulis et al., 2023). Moreover, Jin et al. (2020) argued that there is a

need to have a balanced perspective toward teachers' wellbeing, so there should be an attempt not only to understand the factors that negatively influence teachers' wellbeing, but also factors that can positively boost their wellbeing and can help them flourish in their career. On a similar, conceptual note, Mercer (2018) believes that it is important to understand teacher psychology and wellbeing because "teachers themselves are valuable stakeholders in the teaching and learning process in their own right" (p. 508). Thus, considering the huge effect of teachers on student learning, one can claim that wellbeing is synergistic with better teaching as well, as has been documented in previous research (Hofstadler et al., 2020; Jin et al., 2020; Liu et al., 2017).

Ryan and Deci (2001) divided wellbeing into two hedonic and eudemonic perspectives. While the hedonic perspective focuses on happiness, emotions, satisfaction, and pleasure, the eudemonic perspective emphasizes self-actualization and the ability to elicit meaning from life (Gregersen et al., 2020; Mercer, 2021). Mercer (2021) suggested a useful perspective for having a better understanding of wellbeing both individually and socially. She used an ecological perspective on wellbeing, which highlighted how wellbeing is determined by the manner people answer to the contexts of their lives, including in-class, institutional, and sociocultural particularities.

Wellbeing has also been incidentally reported to associate with financial issues. In a study conducted by Babic et al. (2022), it was found that there is a direct relationship between teacher wellbeing and their financial status and productivity. The teachers argued that they got demotivated due to the low payment in their country. Additionally, the investigation of Japanese, American, and Austrian teachers' wellbeing by Talbot and Mercer (2018) revealed that among different factors contributing to teacher wellbeing, job contracts directly influenced them. Similarly, Gregersen et al. (2020) studied various factors that can influence teacher wellbeing across the world. Chronic pressures of financial worries and the stress made by that negatively impacted the teachers' wellbeing.

Connecting wellbeing to teacher identity construction, Zhao (2022) believes that there is a dynamic connection between wellbeing and identity in that feeling well leads to the construction of identities that can ultimately contribute to better performance. Relatedly, teachers' identity and competence are influential in determining their commitment to their job, which can be linked with their wellbeing (Authors, 2022). Moreover, how teachers perceive themselves as professionals (Barkhuizen, 2016; De Costa & Norton, 2017; Yazan & Lindahl, 2020) connects to how the sociocultural-educational factors mediate their identity

construction processes, what we explore in relation to payment and wellbeing in this study.

Along these lines, Authors (2022) investigated the nexus between Iranian English language teachers' wellbeing and professional identity construction through the lens of self-determination theory. The findings suggested that teachers experienced both positive and negative emotions that influenced their identities, which indicated the close relationship between their wellbeing and identity construction. In another study, Herrera and Martínez-Alba (2022) examined teachers' responses to emotions, wellbeing, and professional identity development in Poland. The study findings revealed that teachers' reactions toward receiving teacher preparation in emotions and wellbeing in their language teacher preparation programs were positive. Taken together, this body of knowledge shows how teacher wellbeing and identity construction interconnect to shape teachers' professional performances and growth as mediated by the sociocultural and educational factors that define their work.

Conceptual framework: Activity theory

Activity theory (AT) was originally proposed by Vygotsky (1978) and later developed by Leont'ev (1978). Engestrom (1987) defined AT as an activity system focusing on both individual and collective aspects of an activity that comprises six key components: *Subjects*, referring to an individual or a group of people who are engaged in an activity (e.g., teachers), *objects*, the final goal or outcome of an activity (e.g., improving the effectiveness of teaching), *tools*, anything that helps individuals achieve their goals or facilitate their tasks (e.g., textbooks), *community*, a social context in which people interact with each other (e.g., class or school), *division of labor*, dealing with responsibilities which people in an organization have in common (e.g., teaching languages), and finally *rules*, referring to any norms or rules of an organization (e.g., being on time) which members of that setting are supposed to follow (Hen & Lee, 2013). In addition to serving their unique and distinct function, components interact with each other.

Several studies have adopted AT to explore language teachers' professionalism, including their identity construction and their wellbeing (e.g., Authors, 2022; Ebadijalal & Moradkhani, 2022; Karimi & Mofidi, 2019). For example, Ebadijalal and Moradkhani (2022) found that learners, colleagues, institutional authorities, institutional rules and regulations, workload, and the status of English language teachers were key factors influencing Iranian teachers' wellbeing. Furthermore, Karimi and Mofidi (2019) investigated the contributions of

personal, sociocultural, historical, and materialistic factors in two Iranian language teachers' identity development. Drawing data from face-to-face interviews, class observations, and teachers' Instagram pages, the authors found how the teachers' past personal experiences, as learners and teachers, contributed to their individual identity. Moreover, the role of the community of friends/colleagues, society, future-oriented ideals, emotional tensions, and conflicts as contributing factors to the teachers' identity construction was highlighted.

Purpose of the study

Although recent research has used AT to explore language teachers' wellbeing (e.g., Ebadijalal & Moradkhani, 2022), what has not been fully addressed is how the professional characteristics that play a key role in teachers' professionalism could mediate their sense-making processes and identity construction. In this regard, the present study attempts to activity theoretically examine the role of payment, as a significant and under-researched constituent of teachers' professional practice, in Iranian English language teachers' wellbeing and identity construction. What makes AT an appropriate theoretical stance for such a purpose is that both wellbeing and identity are tied to personal and socio-educational particularities in hedonic-eudemonic (see Mercer, 2021; Sulis et al., 2023) and socio-personally constructed self-perceptions (see Barkhuizen, 2016; Cross, 2020; Yazan & Lindahl, 2020). Relatedly, AT also focuses on both the individual and the system and how they dialectically influence each other (Engestrom, 2015), especially here in relation to how an institutional decision (i.e., payment) connects to the sociocultural particularities and influences teachers' personal feelings and self-perceptions (i.e., wellbeing and identity). In particular, the six components of AT facilitate capturing the nexus between payment and wellbeing/identity because they (1) lie in the interface between organizational and personal contextualities and (2) resonate with the professional characteristics of wellbeing as Sulis et al. (2023) mention. However, how payment manifests through those components, how it plays a role in teachers' wellbeing and ultimately identity construction, and what the details of such a contribution could be, are issues that merit attention. In this regard, such an inquiry is worth attention because it not only moves the body of knowledge several steps forward, but also enables teacher educators and institutional policymakers to better understand how a decision (i.e., payment) comes to significantly define teachers' wellbeing and professional identity

construction as committed members. We seek to explore this purpose by addressing the following questions:

1. How does payment contribute to Iranian English language teachers' emotional wellbeing as situated in the activity system of a school?
2. How does such a contribution play a role in the teachers' professional identity construction?

Method

Context and participants

In this section, we present the research setting in light of AT and its components to better illuminate the role of payment in Iranian teachers' wellbeing and identity construction. Data for this study were collected in a private English language school in Iran, which held both general and extra curriculum English courses such as free discussion or advanced grammar communities. The institute held courses for almost all proficiency levels from elementary to advanced. Students were placed in their suitable levels based on the initial oral interview done by the manager. Furthermore, students' progression was determined by taking an achievement test, designed by the supervisor, at the end of each term and obtaining the acceptable score. Following the strict rules of the institute, teachers were not allowed neither to design the test themselves nor change the syllabus such as working on extra materials that were not included in the syllabus.

Additionally, students were supposed to pay all the tuition before the very first session, otherwise they were prohibited to enter the class by the institute staff, which caused dissatisfaction both among students and teachers. Besides, teachers were paid at the end of each term after entering the students' final score in the school list and handing the list to the reception, which is usually a long process and causes late payment. Moreover, teachers were supposed to be on time for their classes, and if they were late more than twice, they were punished by a small amount of decrease in their payment. Our focal teachers (all EFL teachers) frequently complained that learners sometimes missed the important parts of the class such as grammar just because of delays in paying tuition which could disturb the discipline of the class and decrease the useful time of the class due to repeating the same materials over and over for those who missed the class. It should also be mentioned that teachers working in the private language institutes of Iran do not usually receive a high

payment. For example, in the April of 2023 and given that a dollar is now around 50000 tomans in Iran, these teachers receive one or at most two dollars for a 1.5 hours class, a point that could clearly have reverberating bearings for their wellbeing and identity construction, yet the levels of such a bearing is open to exploration.

Participants for this study were 15 teachers (see Table 1), twelve females and three males, who were selected conveniently as they all worked in the same institute under the same conditions, in the same city, and had similar experiences regarding payment. The focal teachers had the experience of teaching all three sections of children, teenagers, and adults. Teachers did not have any formal written contracts and worked temporarily as part-time members. Indeed, this issue is common in the private language schools of Iran because these schools do not want to pay perks (e.g., insurance) to the teachers and teachers know that they have to stay in this sector as not all teachers get secured job positions in state schools. This point has put many teachers in a vulnerable position to succumb to many of the policies that the private schools may preferably enact. The criteria for teachers' payment were hours of working, degree, and years of experience, which was commonly a site of complaint among the teachers as they were not satisfied with the payment system and condition. These issues motivated us to surmise that payment could play a contributing role in the teachers' wellbeing and professional identity construction, which led to the conduction of the present study in using narrative frames (NF) and semi-structured interviews as instruments for data collection. We should also note that before the data collection, the teachers' approval for participation was obtained in order to meet ethical considerations.

Table 1

Demographic Information of Participants

Participants	gender	age	years of teaching experience	working hours (weekly)
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T ₁	F	30	10	56
T ₂	F	27	8	50
T ₃	F	26	7	35
T ₄	F	24	5	40
T ₅	F	26	8	55
T ₆	F	24	6	20
T ₇	F	29	9	24
T ₈	F	25	6	38
T ₉	F	23	4	45
T ₁₀	F	25	6	36
T ₁₁	F	24	5	30
T ₁₂	F	28	9	50
T ₁₃	M	24	5	40
T ₁₄	M	24	5	34
T ₁₅	M	24	4	40

Design and data collection

As we focused on a particular school for the purposes of the present study, a qualitative case study (Stake, 1995) design was employed. By using the case study, participants were given an opportunity to tell their stories and provide a more vivid picture of their emotions and concerns about the role of money in different aspects of their personal and professional lives, which here involved their wellbeing and identity construction. The data were collected in two stages comprising a NF and an oral interview, which could effectively capture the socio-historicity of the teachers' wellbeing/identity construction in light of the activity system of the school in particular and of the Iranian language educational system in general.

In the first stage of data collection, a NF was used. NFs, suggested by Barkhuizen and Wette (2008) as a tool to study teachers' experiences, comprise a series of written prompts that scaffold eliciting participants' experiences and also facilitate understanding teachers' self-perceptions and identity better through sharing experiences and memories (Kayi-Aydar, 2021). The NF for the study (Appendix A) was designed in line with AT and in accordance with teachers' wellbeing and professional identity construction along with the emphasis on

the role of payment. The frame included two sections, each addressing the teachers' positive and negative experiences in which payment played a key role. Participants were asked to talk about their most negative and positive experiences in relation to the role of money in their emotions, how these events influenced their emotions as a teacher (*subject*), the reason for mentioning these narratives, and finally how these experiences negatively or positively influenced their perception, purposes, and also wellbeing as a teacher. These narratives could range from memories related to their workplace and the problems they had with the rules related to payment (*rules*), colleagues and institute staff (*community and division of labour*), and the social, personal, and professional consequences (*object*). This stage was done orally via phone calls in Persian (L1) so that participants could share their experiences easier and it lasted on average 15 minutes per teacher (in total 10146 words).

The second stage involved an in-depth semi-structured interview. Interviews are one of the most beneficial and practical instruments in explaining phenomena and experiences from the teachers' view (Mann, 2016), which could help us better understand how payment contributes to their wellbeing and identity construction. Questions of this part were designed to address specifically the role payment played in teachers' wellbeing and how such a contribution influenced their professional identity construction. Accordingly, five questions (Appendix B) were asked from teachers addressing the components of AT: 1) the financial condition of Iranian language schools like the paying system and regulations and whether their payment satisfied them as a teacher (*rules*), 2) the effect of payment on teachers' professional work relative to other school members (*division of labor*), 3) the role of payment in teachers' wellbeing, 4) The role of payment in teachers' emotions and perceptions (*subject*), and finally 5) the role of payment in their professional and social lives as a teacher (*community and object*). Each interview lasted for approximately 40 minutes and was conducted orally via phone calls. Teachers' answers were audio-recorded and later transcribed to be analyzed (in total 52333 words). Teachers' names were omitted and replaced by numbers during transcription due to ethical reasons such as privacy. All interviews were done in Persian (L1).

Data analysis

To analyze the data, we used the guidelines of thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), which includes the stages of familiarity with data, initial codes, developing themes, reviewing themes, defining themes, and writing the report. In this regard, the whole dataset

(15 narratives and 15 interviews) was first translated into English for the ease of analysis and reporting; the second researcher translated the data into English. We then engaged in familiarizing ourselves with the data so that the initial codes could be developed. In this process, the contents from each data source were inductively coded after getting a full understanding of how payment played a role in the narratives shared by the teachers relative to their wellbeing and identity construction. For example, when the teachers referred to how payment influenced the quality of their life as a teacher and their ability to show commitment, this was coded as “payment as a determinant of life quality and professional commitment”. In this coding stage, we kept in mind the AT and how the teachers’ experiences related to the sociocultural and educational factors, and how different participants played a role in their professional sense-making.

After this stage and developing around 70 codes, we proceeded to developing themes. We first reviewed the codes so that a more trustworthy account of the codes could be available and we face fewer problems in developing the themes. It must be mentioned that the data were initially coded by the second author and then they were checked with the first author in an iterative process of refining the codes. Then, we iteratively and comparatively analyzed the codes and excluded those which were less frequent and less defining regarding the role of payment in the teachers’ hedonic-eudemonic senses and self-perceptions (i.e., wellbeing and identity construction). Then, we collaboratively reviewed the themes and defined them based on peer discussion. This constant-comparative process and peer discussion then led to finalizing three themes as defining the role of payment in Iranian English language teachers’ wellbeing and professional identity construction as embedded in the activity system of the school: life quality and job commitment, self-esteem and self-worth, and cross-career comparison and lack of independence. The procedure of data analysis has been shown in Figure 1.

Insert Figure 1 here

Findings

Life quality and job commitment

Life quality and job commitment were two recurrent and salient themes of the teachers’ wellbeing and identity construction. Teachers frequently reported that money could highly influence and alter the quality of their life and commitment to their job. All of the

teachers reported that low payment could be a key factor increasing their concern about the future and negatively influencing their life quality. For example, T1 stated how payment features prominently in her life in making the ends meet: “my payment is not satisfactory for me. This low payment affects the convenience of my life. I cannot have enough entertainment and fun because they are all beyond my budget, and I cannot afford them. Low payment has reduced the welfare and wellbeing of my life” (Interview). Regarding commuting and health issues, T2 reported how low payment had made her choose alternative routes of making money, which came to negatively influence the quality of her life:

I can never buy a personal car for myself with this low payment. I always have to commute by public transportation which is really time taking and demanding. In the first months of starting teaching, I worked a lot to compensate for my low salary, but it did not work well. I got mentally and physically sick due to the heavy workload. If my salary were higher, I could enjoy my life more. But, right now, I am about to get depressed. (NF).

Low payment was seen as a major factor influencing teachers’ quality of relationship with other people such as their friends, family, and even institution staff relative to their professional commitment, as T5 shared regarding how excessive working hours negatively influenced her social life and wellbeing at a familial level:

I remember that I had to work from morning till night in order to meet the needs of my life. At first, it influenced my relationship with my family. I came back home totally exhausted. I just wanted to lie on the sofa and relax. I did not want anyone to speak with me. I could not have a friendly relationship with my family. I was not in the mood to even watch TV with my family and spend time with them. Working a lot stopped hanging out with my friends, too. I did not have any entertainment for myself. (T5, Interview).

Moreover, T7 declared that she reduced her relationship with friends, health-related activities such as joining a sports club, and recreational activities while traveling due to heavy workload and low payment: “I couldn’t go out with my intimate friends, go to the gym, and even do some simple activities on travel because the money paid by the institute was not

sufficient. Actually, I am getting frustrated about my job and life because I do not have any fun in my life.” (Interview). In some cases, payment was also argued to play a major role in teachers’ professional and organizational commitment and their capacities to teach to their best. Many teachers declared that they wanted to show their best in their classes but sometimes it was really impossible, as T8 shared about how low payment has made her refrain from fulfilling her professional responsibilities as also influencing her level of satisfaction:

Undoubtedly, low payment can influence my efficacy in teaching. I always try to show my best, but the reality is that sometimes it is not possible. Nowadays, the time and energy that I spend on my classes are based on my payment. I do not write a lesson plan before my classes because the payment is not satisfactory, so, instead of spending time on lesson planning, I prefer to take other classes to gain more money. Sadly, it reduced my satisfaction with my job and more importantly with myself as a teacher. (Interview)

This experience suggests that payment could easily alter teachers’ job commitment and their perception of their jobs. Receiving a low salary, she started to lose her commitment and efficacy, consequently, this low commitment made her feel sad and disappointed about teaching. Thus, it seems that payment can influence teachers’ sense of satisfaction, confidence, and value which subsequently can influence teachers’ commitment by providing a positive social face and prestige to them as teachers and giving them the expected respect that what they do is appreciated by others and boosts their professional identity.

Self-esteem and self-worth

Payment also influenced teachers’ self-esteem and self-worth. In many instances, teachers mentioned that lack of money reduced their self-esteem and altered their sense of being valued as a teacher playing a significant role in students’ academic life. T13’s narratives revealed that his wellbeing is highly influenced by his self-esteem and institute support. When they are supported by their students, the supervisor, and the manager, they feel more valued and esteemed: “I remember the day my class was observed by the manager and the supervisor. They were highly satisfied with my performance and raised my payment after that term. It gave me a feeling of being appreciated and important. I was happy that they could see my attempts as a teacher.” (NF). His self-esteem was increased by the supervisor and the

manager by paying more money and attention. This experience reveals that self-esteem is highly correlated with wellbeing that is provided by good payment and others' support.

T8 also shared how low and late payment due to the rules of the institute resulted in her lack of self-esteem and negatively influenced her wellbeing: "Right now, I am working in two institutes. Based on the rules, payment is done after finishing each term. My term was finished, but they had forgotten to pay me. I really needed that money for paying my bank loan. I had to send them a message to remind them of my payment. It really hurt my feeling and self-esteem. I felt humiliated." Late payment and low wellbeing were two contributing factors that negatively influenced her self-esteem. This issue decreased her confidence and made her feel humiliated.

Low payment could negatively influence not only teachers' self-esteem but also their sense of being worthwhile as a human and particularly as a teacher. Most teachers (N= 13) reported that they were devalued and un-respected by the institute staff such as managers by being paid low, and this could negatively influence their identity development as teachers who spent their time and energy on teaching. T12 explained this point in a sad narrative about how she views herself as a worthless person when compared to other jobs or even when she has to discuss the payment with the institutional managers:

Sometimes, I view myself as a useless and worthless person in the society when I compare myself as a teacher to other people having socially-lower jobs but financially higher such as make-up artists or servers. This makes me dissatisfied with myself, my career, and my major. When I have to talk with the managers about my payment, I think that I am nothing after three years of working for them. (Interview).

This negative incident influenced her identity as a teacher that her job was not socially and financially respected by others in comparison to other careers; in addition, her 3 years of experience was ignored. This sense of being unappreciated and ignored also questioned her identity as a professional teacher. T4 also disclosed that low payment, identity, and feeling of being worthless are interrelated with each other: "my payment is part of identity, and when payment is low it is a sign of failure to me. It decreases my self-confidence and increases frustration and worthlessness. When I am paid well, I think that I am misused as a teacher."

(Interview). Additionally, T7 reported how she viewed teaching as a worthless job when facing the manager's bad promise:

According to the rules of the institute, when the number of students in a class goes higher than 10, the institute is supposed to pay more. But, after teaching 25 teenagers and spending a lot of energy, the manager told me that he could not pay me more. At that moment, I thought how worthless my presence and my career as a teacher were. With this money, I cannot even go to the grocery store for buying simple things.” (NF).

This experience changed her self-conception as a teacher and by not being paid well, she evaluated her job and her presence as a worthless person. This low payment influenced both her wellbeing and identity as a teacher.

Cross-career comparison and lack of independence

Cross-career comparison and lack of independence were also two other themes that were key to the teachers' conceptions of payment in relation to wellbeing. In many cases (N=12), it was found that teachers' wellbeing was significantly influenced by peer and cross-career comparisons. Teachers' wellbeing was reduced especially when they believed that their career was not as valued as other careers such as servers or salespeople which needed less expertise, education, and energy. This comparison was not only with other careers, but also with their colleagues or institute staff in different departments or different institutes.

As T1 stated: “when I compare myself as a teacher with people having different careers such as bankers, engineers, or even with some teachers in other areas, I see that with almost the same working hours, they earn more money than me, which leads to my frustration and disappointment. Sometimes I think that maybe I have chosen the wrong way.” She also added: “this low payment prevents me from doing simple things such as buying a laptop that is needed for my job.” (Interview). This narrative reveals how payment could be a criterion for comparing people with each other and how this comparison could influence their wellbeing. Moreover, this comparison could generate disappointment in teachers because they could not meet their needs as other people in other careers could. She even doubted her situation and her choice of becoming a teacher which could add to her disappointment. Moreover, T10 believed that teaching is not a money-making job in comparison with other jobs that are even socially lower, which led to his disappointment:

As teachers, we need more education. We also need to work even more before our classes to have a good plan and syllabus in the class and work after classes to evaluate and check the activities and events happening in the classes. But in other careers, working hours are just limited to employees' presence in their workplace. Comparing my payment with the amount of time spent at university, I get disappointed. (Interview).

So, both T1 and T10 had the same disappointment and dissatisfaction while comparing teaching with other careers, which influenced their wellbeing negatively. Another way by which teachers' perception of their job was influenced was the lack of independence that low payment caused. Indeed, the teachers viewed the less-profitable nature of teaching in light of other careers' higher profit, which positioned them in a state of feeling dependent as teachers. Almost all teachers (N = 14) stated that good and low payment are signs of independence and lack of independence, respectively. This lack of independence could question their professional identity development and devalue their social face. For instance, T6 reported: "I remember that due to low payment, I could not pay my university tuition. This experience gave me a sense of dependence on the family and made me feel useless and frustrated." (Interview). This incident influenced her perception of herself and took her independence by making her feel frustrated or unproductive as a teacher.

T14 believed that payment can provide not only financial independence but also social and personal independence, which could give him motivation to even work better to gain more independence: "payment has always been important to me. The more I gain, the more independent I become in my family. Good payment can give me this level of independence. So, I get more motivated and teach better." (Interview). So, a high salary was considered as a source of independence that could consequently improve his teaching quality. Additionally, T10 believed that independence, self-confidence, and the sense of being powerful as a teacher first and then a human are interconnected: "when I see that my career can provide my needs, I get more independent from my family, and I get more power and self-confidence. All of these factors give me a sense of value as a teacher." (Interview). Effective identity development could be inferred as an important outcome of being financially independent as a result of acceptable payment which influenced him.

Discussion

The data reported above show the strong influence of payment on the focal teachers' wellbeing and identity construction. In this regard, it was found that payment is determining in the teachers' wellbeing not just as teachers but as social individuals as well. This finding aligns with the earlier scholarship regarding the important role of payment in teachers' socio-educational life (e.g., Bandonio et al. 2022; Barahona & Ibaceta-Quijanes, 2019). The reason for this finding may be that because inasmuch as payment is an institutional matter, it is equally a social issue (Toraman & Korkmaz, 2022), it comes to influence the teachers' wellbeing and identity construction, processes that are already conceptualized as socio-educational constructs (Jin et al., 2020; Mercer, 2018). The key point here, however, is that there was a dialectic relationship between the effect of payment on teacher wellbeing and the subsequent influences on their personal and social identities. This finding shows the significance of payment in the way teachers' wellbeing and identity inform each other and unpacks the proximity between them through the associated influences.

Our findings also showed that payment functions as a significant factor in the teachers' commitment. Previous research from an AT perspective (e.g., Authors, 2022; Ebadijalal & Moradkhani, 2022; Karimi & Mofidi, 2019) has shown that socio-economic factors can strongly influence language teachers' identity construction. This finding resonates with the way activity systems work in that specific features of such systems come to significantly influence particular corners of individuals' sense-making processes (Hen & Lee, 2013), here regarding payment and teachers' wellbeing and identity. However, that payment served as a key factor shaping the teachers' commitment and identity construction provides novel findings in this regard. The central point here is that payment could influence the teachers' pedagogical effectiveness, which is a dangerous finding in that despite the teachers' attempts to be immune to the challenges of the teaching profession, they may lose/lessen their effectiveness due to an external factor. The outcome of such diminished commitment, sadly, may be extended to students' learning outcomes, which needs careful attention by the related policymakers to take the initiative to deal with this problem. Indeed, the teachers' narratives showed that they have engaged in justifying their own lack of commitment through their inability to meet their social needs, which attests to the substantial effects of payment on individuals who may, or once wanted to, strive for the growth of the educational system.

It was also found that low payment closely associates with self-esteem and self-worth. Wellbeing has been conceptualized as both personal and social (see Mercer, 2020; Gregersen

et al., 2021; Sulis et al., 2023; Talbot & Mercer, 2018). Our findings extend the line of thinking and research on wellbeing in two personal and social terms, as seen from an AT perspective. First, they show how an external factor (i.e., payment) becomes a key component of the way teachers define their self-esteem at a personal level, especially in the teachers' private speech. Second, they reveal how such self-esteem transforms into a social level and defines the way teachers characterize their profession and identity in the light of the significant role of that external factor. Both findings add to the discussion of teacher wellbeing by (1) unpacking new layers of teacher wellbeing, (2) showing how significant and unnoticed payment has gone in terms of its role in teachers' wellbeing and professional identity construction, and (3) revealing the nexus between teachers' personal and professional lives, and how payment could be a factor that attaches to both closely.

Moreover, the teachers did not come to claim adequate worth for themselves as professionals. In this sense, they did not receive enough respect from the institute, which came to profoundly shape their wellbeing and identity as effective and recognized individuals. This finding parallels with Sulis et al. (2023) who argue that wellbeing and identity are often mediated by institutional particularities, which here was the relational nature of wellbeing and its associated contributions for the teachers' identities. Furthermore, the teachers' lack of self-worth was intensified by a central component of the school activity system, which was institutional rules. Engestrom (1999) argued that key components of activity systems often serve like guides giving meaning and direction to the system members. However, the key component of our teachers' system seems to have more impeded the teachers' enhanced wellbeing and effective identity construction by (1) bad promises in paying them adequately and (2) lack of facilitating teachers' optimal wellbeing, whose consequences were extended to teachers' low self-esteem and self-worth.

Finally, we found that payment defines teachers' conceptions of career growth in that they compared their job to other professions. This finding shows how payment could become a source of persistent tensions (see Barahona & Ibaceta-Quijanes, 2019) for teachers, which could adequately justify their earlier arguments regarding the lack of commitment due to low payment. More adversely, such a condition was argued to substantially influence the teachers' wellbeing and lack of independence, as a significant dimension of their professional identity construction. Previous scholarship on wellbeing and identity (e.g., Authors, 2022; Babic et al., 2021; Yazan & Lindahl, 2020) has shown that feeling well can play a key role in effective identity construction of teachers. However, for our teachers, payment was so central that it

could define their efficacy at the activity system of the school and simultaneously connect to the quality of their life at a social level in terms of being dependent or independent. Overall, this aspect of the teachers' wellbeing shows that payment can make teachers develop negative attitudes toward their profession and aggravate such an attitude by making them feel less independent when they see the repercussions of lack of good payment in their social life.

More specifically, the point that the teachers connected their wellbeing and identity with payment across jobs and lack of independence implies that payment is not only an intraplane issue, but is also interplane, an observation that complies with Vygotsky's (1978) arguments. That is, teachers interpret their current situation in light of the broader situations that exist in the society. In this regard, the teachers interpreted the social issue of payment across careers and considered their job at a lower status, a perception that came to also negatively define their wellbeing and identities in being independent. Indeed, since the teachers' payment did not align with their social lives, the teachers felt that they are in a persistent position of dependence, which shows (1) connectedness between payment and social wellbeing as influencing their identities and (2) the need for attending to teachers' payment more focally in order to avoid teachers' negative internal perceptions due to the external issue of payment.

Conclusion

This study explored the role of payment in the wellbeing and identity construction of Iranian English language teachers from an AT lens. Collectively, our findings reveal that payment defined the details of the teachers' wellbeing in emotional and identity terms that extended to their professional practice as well. In this regard, we believe that if there is only one idea and lesson we can communicate through this study, it is that payment is perhaps one of the most significant yet underattended dimensions of the social turn in research on teachers and teacher education, especially in TESOL teacher education. We clearly observed how payment can substantially influence the range of professional competencies that define teachers' work, including commitment, self-esteem, and independence. These findings contribute to the body of knowledge on wellbeing and identity by showing how the two become significantly defined by a factor that seems to be the Cinderella (i.e., payment) of research on teachers and teaching.

The findings offer implications for institutional policymakers, not just in Iran but anywhere language teachers have problems with payment. It is now clear that payment is not

just an economic issue and it can directly influence teachers' instructional effectiveness.

The conspicuous point is that if policymakers do not heed the issue of payment carefully, teachers may lose their connectedness over time and this can negatively influence their pedagogical effectiveness. In this sense, if policymakers are not able to raise teachers' payment (which they can and may not wish to), they can at least discuss the reasons with teachers so that the related misconceptions are resolved. The benefit of this issue is that teachers become aware of the reasons for the lack of adequate payment. We think that this issue could also be an interesting line of research in the future, which could be done to see how policymakers view the issue of payment and how it influences teachers' wellbeing and identity construction. However, teachers can act collectively and agentively in discussing the issue of payment with policymakers (if they would wish so) so that those policymakers value teachers' job more and respect their wellbeing and professional identities more. The policymakers could also run joint meetings in which they clarify the criteria for merit-pay principles of working or raise the teachers' awareness of their activity system individually through briefing sessions.

Throughout the study, we recurrently reported narratives related to teachers' instruction as a function of payment. One limitation of the present study is that we did not explore the teachers' in-class practices to see how and whether they are linked to the role of payment in their professional performances. This agendum suits perfectly with longitudinal studies in capturing how payment comes to shape teachers' boredom or burnout over time due to payment. Moreover, we did not take into account the voice of institutional policymakers because payment is directly related to them and their policies as well, which is another limitation of the study. Exploring these issues in future research would helpfully unpack the less-attended dimensions of teachers' professional career in relation to payment. Overall, this study has unpacked an innovative dimension of language teachers' wellbeing and identity construction, one that should become more focal in academic discussions of TESOL and in institutional systems of professional work.

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Appendix A

Narrative frame

One of my most negative experiences about the role of money in my emotions was It influenced my emotions by I mention this experience because This experience negatively influenced my feeling well by

One of my most positive experiences about the role of money in my emotions was It influenced my emotions by I mention this experience because

..... This experience positively influenced my feeling well by

Appendix B

Interview questions

1. Please tell me about the financial condition of Iranian language schools. Do they pay well? Please explain.
2. How do money and payment influence your professional work as a teacher?
3. How do money and payment influence your emotions as a teacher? Please explain.
4. How do money and payment influence your feeling well? Please explain.
5. Generally, how does payment play a role in teachers' professional life?

Figure 1. The Procedure of Data Analysis

