Small wins, big impact: Sustaining teacher motivation and well-being

DANIEL XERRI

ABSTRACT
This article explores how incremental, meaningful achievements can significantly enhance teachers' happiness, job satisfaction and professional resilience. Drawing on research in motivation, career success and well-being, it examines reflective practices, habit formation and institutional support as strategies for leveraging small wins to sustain teacher engagement and improve student outcomes.

BIOGRAPHY
Daniel Xerri is Associate Professor in Applied Linguistics and TESOL at the University of Malta and the Chairperson of the ELT Council. He has published widely on different areas of English language education. His main research interests are teacher research and professional learning.

Introduction

Teaching is a profession that often involves significant emotional labour, daily challenges and fluctuating job satisfaction. Despite its potential for fulfilment and societal impact, the profession is experiencing high attrition rates that are plunging many countries' education systems into a crisis. This problem has prompted researchers and educators alike to explore new avenues for sustaining teacher motivation and engagement. Among these is the concept of "small wins": incremental, meaningful achievements that cumulatively foster professional fulfilment. This article examines how small wins can profoundly affect teachers' professional lives by enhancing happiness, promoting job satisfaction, improving career sustainability and ultimately enriching the classroom experience for both teachers and students.

Teacher attrition, happiness and job satisfaction

Teacher turnover has reached critical levels, driven by a complex interplay of systemic challenges. More than 90% of the projected teacher shortfall in Europe and North America – about 4.8 million educators – stems from individuals leaving the profession with secondary education facing the most severe impact, potentially reaching a deficit of 3.1 million teachers by 2030 (UNESCO, 2024). While the issue has been ongoing for several years, it became more acute following the Covid-19 pandemic. For instance, nearly one in four US teachers contemplated leaving the profession by the end of the 2020–2021 school year (Steiner & Woo, 2021) while in the UK intentions to leave rose markedly across all educational phases (Fullard, 2021). The reasons for this exodus are multifaceted: inadequate remuneration, increasing workloads, strained relationships with stakeholders and continual educational reforms (Galea, 2020). Once teachers leave, many of them transition to other education-related positions or entirely different industries, often experiencing greater job satisfaction and more leisure time (Cuervo & Vera-Toscano, 2025).

While systemic factors play a crucial role, internal experiences – especially teacher happiness – also influence professional commitment. Teachers who perceive their workplace as a source of happiness enjoy better health and higher job satisfaction (Benevene et al., 2019). Happiness in teaching is not merely a personal luxury; it significantly impacts how effectively teachers engage with their students. According to Lavy and Bocker (2018), a sense of meaningful work strengthens teacher-student relationships, which in turn enhances job satisfaction. Yurtseven (2021) provides further insight by identifying two core elements in teacher happiness: effective teaching and professional development. Teachers feel a profound sense of joy when they witness their students' academic growth and when they themselves engage in learning. This satisfaction reinforces their commitment to the profession and buffers against burnout (Cortis & Xerri, 2025).

Just as the teacher attrition crisis affects not only schools but also student outcomes and society as a whole, the benefits of teacher happiness extend beyond personal well-being. As Hofstadler et al. (2020) argue, when teachers are happy, motivated and find joy in their work, they perform more effectively, with their well-being playing a key role in both the quality of their teaching and the success of their students. Likewise, Moskowitz

and Dewaele (2021) highlight the phenomenon of emotional contagion, showing that students who perceive their teachers as happy are more motivated and have a more positive attitude toward learning. In essence, a teacher's sense of fulfilment can become a catalyst for student engagement. This highlights a cyclical relationship: happy teachers inspire engaged students and engaged students reinforce teachers' sense of success and purpose.

Cultivating a sense of success

Feeling successful at work is a powerful motivator. Career success is often categorized into objective (e.g. salary or promotions) and subjective (e.g. job satisfaction or work-life balance) dimensions (Smidt et al., 2018). While objective markers are important, subjective career success tends to have a more immediate and sustained impact on well-being. Individuals with high internal locus of control and occupational self-efficacy – beliefs in their own competence and agency – are more likely to experience both forms of success (Smidt et al., 2018). For educators, subjective aspects of career success, such as work-life balance, positive relationships and making a meaningful contribution, often outweigh the importance of financial success or entrepreneurial opportunities (Gubler et al., 2020). Longitudinal research further indicates that teachers who feel effective in their work and supported by their institutions are far more likely to remain in the profession (Johnson & Birkeland, 2003).

Small wins that align with these values, such as a meaningful interaction with a student or the successful delivery of a lesson, can be especially powerful in fostering professional fulfilment for teachers. When schools cultivate collegiality, provide adequate resources and invest in professional growth, they create the conditions for these small wins to occur regularly. Defined as incremental achievements in purposeful work, small wins play a vital role in sustaining motivation. Amabile and Kramer (2011) maintain that the most powerful driver of positive emotions, motivation and perceptions during the workday is making progress in meaningful work, with frequent progress greatly increasing the likelihood of sustained creative productivity over time. This suggests that even modest daily progress can significantly enhance the way teachers feel about their profession and how committed they are to it, with consistent progress influencing how effective they are as professionals.

Small wins and self-improvement

Small wins drive transformative change by turning minor gains into consistent habit-like patterns that foster confidence in achieving larger goals (Duhigg, 2012). Habits function like the compound interest of self-improvement, where seemingly insignificant daily actions accumulate into substantial results over time (Clear, 2018). For teachers, small efforts, such as refining a lesson plan, offering personalized feedback or participating in a brief professional development session, can collectively lead to meaningful growth in their practice. Clear (2018) identifies four principles for building effective habits: make them obvious, attractive, easy and satisfying. Applying these principles can help teachers create sustainable routines that enhance both professional performance and personal well-being. For example, dedicating just ten minutes each day to reflect on classroom successes can gradually shift a teacher's mindset, boosting satisfaction while reducing stress.

Structured reflection tools can help teachers transform small wins into sustained professional growth and resilience. Amabile and Kramer (2011) propose the use of a Daily Progress Checklist to help individuals reflect on their daily experiences and identify both positive achievements and areas for improvement. The checklist can include questions such as:

- What progress did I make today, and how did it affect my inner work life?
- What setbacks did I have, and what can I learn from them?
- Did I positively affect my colleagues' inner work lives?

For teachers, making such a reflective tool part of their daily practice can reinforce a sense of agency and control, a concept linked to higher job satisfaction and reduced burnout (Smidt et al., 2018). By regularly engaging with such questions, teachers can cultivate self-awareness and proactively nurture a sense of professional efficacy.

Building on the reflective habits encouraged by such tools, proactive coping strategies further strengthen teachers' ability to turn small wins into lasting professional resilience. Behaviours such as goal setting, effective time management and seeking constructive feedback not only enhance work engagement but also guard against burnout (De Stasio et al., 2019). These practices align closely with the philosophy of small wins as they promote consistent, manageable actions that accumulate into greater motivation and adaptability over time. Falout and Murphey (2018) further emphasize that finding personal meaning in teaching, whether or not it is seen as a true calling, can greatly improve psychological well-being. Through "job crafting" – i.e. proactively adjusting their responsibilities, interactions and role perceptions to boost their engagement, fulfilment and overall well-being – educators can reshape their roles to reflect their values and strengths, fostering a deeper sense of purpose (Falout & Murphey, 2018). Similarly, Gregersen et al. (2020) advocate

cognitive reappraisal strategies, such as "finding silver linings", which help teachers reframe challenges as opportunities for growth. Together, these approaches create a mindset in which small, deliberate actions reinforce both professional satisfaction and long-term commitment to the teaching profession.

Conclusion

Small wins may seem minor when viewed individually, yet their cumulative effect on a teacher's professional life can be profound. These incremental achievements offer concrete proof of progress, strengthen resilience and reaffirm a sense of purpose, qualities that are indispensable in a career characterized by high demands and rising attrition rates. Cultivating small wins is therefore not merely advantageous; it is essential for sustaining both motivation and commitment to the profession. While personal initiative plays a crucial role, the broader institutional environmentsignificantly shapes the extent to which teachers can realise these gains. Schools and educational authorities must actively recognize and value teachers' experiences by providing targeted professional development, maintaining manageable workloads and offering robust emotional support (Tompkins, 2023). Creating conditions in which daily progress is both possible and celebrated calls for deliberate policies and strong leadership, such as mentorship programmes for early-career teachers, flexible scheduling to allow for adequate preparation and systems that acknowledge even modest successes. By combining intentional habit formation, consistent reflective practice and a supportive organizational culture, teachers can harness the power of small wins to achieve lasting career satisfaction while simultaneously enhancing student learning outcomes.

References

Amabile, T., & Kramer, S. (2011). *The progress principle: Using small wins to ignite joy, engagement, and creativity at work*. Harvard Business Review Press.

Benevene, P., De Stasio, S., Fiorilli, C., Buonomo, I., Ragni, B., Maldonado Briegas, J. J., & Barni, D. (2019). Effect of teachers' happiness on teachers' health: The mediating role of happiness at work. *Frontiers in Psychology, 10*. **https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2019.02449**

Clear, J. (2018). *Atomic habits: An easy & proven way to build good habits & break bad ones*. Avery.

Cortis, L., & Xerri, D. (2025). An investigation into teachers' perceptions of their wellbeing in the ELT sector in Malta. In K. Agha & A. Ali (Eds.), *Insights on wellbeing and happiness in the workplace* (pp. 399–420). IGI Global. **https://doi.org/10.4018/979-8-3693-2939-9.ch021**

Cuervo, H., & Vera-Toscano, E. (2025). Teacher retention and attrition: Understanding why teachers leave and their post-teaching pathways in Australia. *Asia Pacific Journal of Education*, 1–18. **https://doi.org/10.1080/02188791.2025.2473356**

De Stasio, S., Fiorilli, C., Benevene, P., Boldrini, F., Ragni, B., Pepe, A., & Maldonado Briegas, J. J. (2019). Subjective happiness and compassion are enough to increase teachers' work engagement? *Frontiers in Psychology, 10*. **https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2019.02268**

Duhigg, C. (2012). *The power of habit: Why we do what we do in life and business*. Random House.

Falout, J., & Murphey, T. (2018). Teachers crafting job crafting. In S. Mercer & A. Kostoulas (Eds.), *Language teacher psychology* (pp. 211–230). Multilingual Matters. **https://doi.org/10.21832/9781783099467-017**

Fullard, J. (2021, June 16). *The pandemic and teacher attrition: An exodus waiting to happen?* Education Policy Institute. **https://epi.org.uk/publications-and-research/the-pandemic-and-teacher-attrition-an-exodus-waiting-to-happen/**

Galea, F. (2020). Investigating teacher attrition in Malta. *Malta Review of Educational Research*, *14*(1), 93–114. **http://www.mreronline.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/5-Fabian-Galea-Investigating-Teacher-Attrition-in-Malta.pdf**

Gregersen, T., MacIntyre, P., & MacMillan, N. (2020). Dealing with the emotions of teaching abroad: Searching for silver linings in a difficult context. In C. Gkonou, J. Dewaele, & J. King (Eds.), *The emotional rollercoaster of language teaching* (pp. 228–246). Multilingual Matters. **https://doi.org/10.21832/9781788928342-017**

Gubler, M., Eggenhofer-Rehart, P., Andresen, M., Mandel, D., Mayrhofer, W., Lehmann, P., Schleicher, N. E., & Schramm, F. (2020). Are teachers 'same same but different'? – The meaning of career success across occupations. *Teacher Development, 24*(1), 1–20. **https://doi.org/10.1080/13664530.2019.16916**43

Hofstadler, N., Talbot, K., Mercer, S., & Lämmerer, A. (2020). The thrills and ills of content and language integrated learning. In C. Gkonou, J. Dewaele, & J. King (Eds.), *The emotional rollercoaster of language teaching* (pp. 13–30). Multilingual Matters. **https://doi.org/10.21832/9781788928342-006**

Johnson, S. M., & Birkeland, S. E. (2003). Pursuing a "sense of success": New teachers explain their career decisions. *American Educational Research Journal, 40*(3), 581–617. **https://doi.org/10.3102/00028312040003581**

Lavy, S., & Bocker, S. (2018). A path to teacher happiness? A sense of meaning affects teacher–student relationships, which affect job satisfaction. *Journal of Happiness Studies, 19*(5), 1485–1503. **https://doi.org/10.1007/s10902-017-9883-9**

Moskowitz, S., & Dewaele, J. M. (2021). Is teacher happiness contagious? A study of the link between perceptions of language teacher happiness and student attitudes. *Innovation in Language Learning and Teaching*, *15*(2), 117–130. **https://doi.org/10.1080/17501229.2019.1707205**

Smidt, W., Kammermeyer, G., Roux, S., Theisen, C., & Weber, C. (2018). Career success of preschool teachers in Germany – The significance of the Big Five personality traits, locus of control, and occupational self-efficacy. *Early Child Development and Care*, *188*(10), 1340–1353. **https://doi.org/10.1080/03004430.2017.1314275**

Steiner, E. D., & Woo, A. (2021, June 15). *Job-related stress threatens the teacher supply: Key findings from the 2021 State of the U.S. Teacher Survey*. RAND. **https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RRA1108-1.html**

Tompkins, A. (2023). Breaking the cycle of teacher attrition: Suggested policies and practice for retention. *Journal of School Administration Research and Development, 8*(1), 24–35. **https://doi.org/10.32674/jsard.v8i1.3960**

UNESCO. (2024). *Global report on teachers: Addressing teacher shortages and transforming the profession*. UNESCO. **https://doi.org/10.54675/FIGU8035**

Yurtseven, N. (2021). Are teachers happy? Illuminating insights into teachers' instructional practices. *Journal of Education, 203*(1), 32–40. **https://doi.org/10.1177/00220574211016420**