



Research paper

Heartfelt pedagogy across borders: Emotional experiences of language teachers in multilingual educational contexts with insights from Malta

Jacqueline Żammit^{a,*} , Lawrence Farrugia Caruana^b 

^a Department of Languages and Humanities in Education, Faculty of Education, University of Malta, Msida, Malta

^b Department of Technology and Entrepreneurship Education, Faculty of Education, University of Malta, Msida, Malta

ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Emotions
Multilingualism
Teacher resilience
Language teaching
Professional development
Emotional support

ABSTRACT

Teachers' emotional well-being is increasingly recognised as essential for effective teaching and sustainable retention across diverse educational systems. This mixed-methods study explores the emotional experiences of 50 Maltese teachers in middle and secondary schools, using the Teacher Emotions Questionnaire and interviews. The findings show that while positive emotions, including joy, pride, and love, enhance teacher-student relationships and professional fulfilment, negative emotions, including anger, fatigue, and hopelessness, intensify with teaching experience and are linked to student misbehaviour, linguistic challenges, limited parental engagement, and insufficient institutional support. These patterns mirror international trends in multilingual and multicultural settings, where language teachers face heightened emotional demands. The participants emphasised the need for emotional intelligence training and systemic support structures beyond individual coping. By situating the Maltese context within broader global discourse, this study offers new empirical insights into teacher emotionality and underscores the importance of sustained, policy-level interventions to enhance resilience in diverse classrooms.

1. Introduction

1.1. Problem statement

The emotional well-being of teachers is a pivotal factor influencing not only teaching effectiveness and job satisfaction but also broader issues of teacher retention and student outcomes. Recent research highlights a recursive relationship between teacher emotions and student outcomes, emphasising how teachers' emotional expressions shape classroom dynamics and, in turn, how student behaviour feeds back into teachers' emotional experiences (Caruana and Żammit, 2024; Frenzel et al., 2021). This underscores the need to examine teacher emotions as dynamic, socially situated, and central to effective teacher education and professional development.

While a growing international literature addresses teacher emotions across diverse contexts, including North America (Frenzel et al., 2021), Asia (Gao et al., 2024), and Sub-Saharan Africa (Molyneux, 2021), few studies focus specifically on the emotional experiences of teachers in multilingual, culturally heterogeneous classrooms. These settings pose unique emotional demands, particularly for language teachers tasked

with both preserving national identity through language and navigating increasingly diverse linguistic repertoires among students (Gkonou et al., 2020; Richards, 2022).

This study addresses that gap by focusing on Malta, a small island nation with a bilingual education system and rising cultural diversity, a microcosm of broader global trends. In Malta, both Maltese and English are official languages, yet increased migration, digital exposure, and global media consumption have contributed to the growing dominance of English in classroom interaction, especially in urban areas and among migrant learners (Camilleri Grima, 2016; Żammit, 2023, 2024a, 2024b). Although Maltese retains official status and cultural importance, its reduced use in educational contexts has sparked concerns about marginalization; a dynamic echoed in other contexts where heritage or less dominant languages are increasingly sidelined (Menken and Sánchez, 2019). While Malta's colonial legacy and sociopolitical context are distinct, emotional and professional tensions similar to those in South Africa, India, and Latin America are evident, where teachers must navigate competing pressures to use globally dominant languages while sustaining local linguistic identities (Heugh, 2015).

In Maltese classrooms, language teachers often balance emotional

* Corresponding author. Department of Languages and Humanities in Education, Faculty of Education, University of Malta, Msida, MSD 2080, Malta.

E-mail addresses: jacqueline.zammit@um.edu.mt (J. Żammit), lawrence.farrugia@um.edu.mt (L. Farrugia Caruana).

investment in preserving the national language with the pragmatic necessity of using English to ensure comprehension. This tension is particularly acute in urban schools with high numbers of migrant students, many of whom arrive with no knowledge of Maltese. At the same time, the pervasiveness of English through digital media and educational platforms reinforces its perceived value, often leading to the sidelining of Maltese. This duality introduces emotional strain, cognitive overload, and professional ambiguity conditions consistent with international research on language teachers in multilingual settings (Gkonou et al., 2020).

Malta's education system comprises state, church, and independent schools, all under the oversight of the Ministry for Education, Sport, Youth, Research and Innovation. While Maltese and English are both compulsory and used as media of instruction, the balance varies by sector and demographic composition. In many private or international schools, instruction is delivered primarily in English, and there is limited formal support for migrant students' home languages. These institutional dynamics shape classroom expectations and teacher emotions, as evidenced in teachers' qualitative accounts reported in the Results section, particularly when Maltese is deprioritised or questioned by students and parents.

Given Malta's bilingual framework, increasing linguistic diversity, and the growing dominance of English, it offers a rich context to examine how language policies and sociocultural shifts affect teacher emotions. Yet, to date, no empirical study has explored how these dynamics shape the emotional well-being of Maltese language teachers. This study addresses that gap, contributing both locally and internationally to the understanding of emotional demands in multilingual education. It highlights the need for teacher education and policy that account for the emotional toll of sociolinguistic change and offer targeted emotional support grounded in cross-cultural research.

Malta's multilingualism is rooted in a unique colonial and sociopolitical history. As a former British colony situated at the crossroads of Europe and the Mediterranean, Malta developed a dual official language policy, Maltese and English, that reflects its hybrid identity. Unlike many postcolonial contexts where indigenous languages have been marginalised, Maltese remains a strong cultural symbol and everyday language, while English has assumed a dominant role in higher education and global engagement. This has resulted in a layered multilingualism that is structurally embedded in schooling but asymmetrically valued across domains. These dynamics influence classroom practices, student expectations, and parental attitudes, placing Maltese language teachers at the intersection of cultural preservation and instrumental utility. By problematising Malta's bilingualism as both a structural and emotional condition, this study contributes a theoretically grounded account of multilingualism as an ideologically charged terrain in small, postcolonial European contexts.

1.2. Study aims

This study aims to investigate the emotional experiences of language teachers in increasingly multilingual and multicultural classrooms, using Malta as a case to generate context-specific insights that may inform understandings of similar dynamics in other international settings. Through a mixed-methods design, the research, drawing on both surveys and in-depth interviews, explored the range, causes, and intensity of emotions experienced by Maltese language teachers in middle and secondary schools and examined how these emotional experiences influenced their teaching practices and professional fulfilment. Drawing on global scholarship from Asia, Latin America, and Africa (Menken and Sánchez, 2019), the study also aimed to identify systemic and contextual factors that shaped teacher emotions in linguistically and culturally complex educational settings. Ultimately, the goal was to contribute relevant insights into the emotions experienced by language teachers and to inform teacher education programmes, school leadership practices, and policy frameworks that support teacher resilience and

emotional well-being in multilingual and culturally diverse educational settings worldwide. As language educators and researchers in teacher development, the authors share a professional and personal interest in understanding the emotional dimensions of language teaching. This positionality informed the study's focus on teacher well-being while also requiring conscious reflexivity to mitigate potential bias in data interpretation.

1.3. Research questions

This study was guided by the following research questions, which aimed to provide insights applicable across diverse multilingual teaching environments.

RQ1. What were the most frequently experienced emotions among Maltese language teachers in multilingual and multicultural classrooms?

RQ2. How did the emotions experienced by teachers influence their instructional practices, sense of professional identity, and job satisfaction?

These questions were designed to generate contextually grounded yet internationally transferable findings, with particular relevance to educational systems facing similar challenges related to linguistic diversity, migration, and language policy.

2. Literature review

2.1. Importance of emotional well-being in teaching

While teacher emotional well-being is increasingly recognised as essential to quality education, this study specifically situates emotional well-being within the complexities of multilingual and culturally diverse classrooms. Studies in small postcolonial or bilingual nations such as Singapore, Trinidad and Tobago, and South Africa show that teachers managing dual-language expectations often face emotional strain due to competing policy demands, shifting student language preferences, and the tension between national identity and global pressures (Gowrie et al., 2015; Heugh, 2015; Ng and Meow, 2022).

This body of research shows that language teachers' emotions are shaped by both classroom interactions and wider sociolinguistic forces that may marginalise particular languages and professional identities. These issues are especially pertinent in Malta, where bilingual policy, increasing cultural diversity, and the growing dominance of English intersect. Building on international evidence, the present study addresses the under-researched context of Maltese language teachers to better understand emotional well-being in multilingual education systems.

Teaching is an emotionally demanding profession that requires constant emotion regulation (Hargreaves, 2001; Hochschild, 2003), a process strongly linked to burnout, disengagement, and reduced motivation (Gross, 2015; McRae & Gross, 2020; Rajendran et al., 2020). A systematic review by Kariou et al. (2021) confirms this relationship, with further evidence from Latin America and Asia showing negative effects on classroom management and teacher motivation (Méndez López & Peña Aguilar, 2013; Tan et al., 2021). Frenzel et al.'s (2021) dynamic model demonstrates how teacher emotions shape instructional behaviour and student responses, creating reinforcing emotional cycles, a finding supported across diverse contexts including China, Ghana, and Mexico (Richards, 2022; Xu, 2018).

Key emotional triggers include student behaviour, institutional support, class size, and educational reform (Becker et al., 2015; Chang, 2009; Richards, 2022). Persistent misbehaviour has been linked to emotional exhaustion and reduced self-efficacy (Chang & Taxer, 2020), while reforms often challenge professional identity, generating anxiety, resistance, and aspirational resilience (Kelchtermans, 2005).

Professional development can moderate these emotional pressures, with collaborative and mentoring-based PD shown to support emotional well-being (Gallo, 2016; Jakhelln, 2011; Nguyen, 2018); however, irrelevant or compulsory PD may instead increase frustration and disengagement (Gkonou et al., 2020).

Positive emotions also play a critical role. Teachers often report joy and fulfilment when supported by colleagues or when seeing student success, regardless of geographic context (Aldrup et al., 2023; Erb, 2002; Frenzel et al., 2021; Sutton, 2000). These affective rewards reinforce commitment and can buffer against external stressors.

Language teachers face heightened emotional demands, particularly when teaching in second or minority languages and in culturally diverse classrooms, often leading to anxiety, emotional detachment, and role conflict (Gkonou et al., 2020; Heugh, 2015; Lee and Lew, 2001; Liu, 2016). Teachers' emotional experiences are further shaped by relationships with parents, colleagues, and school leadership, especially when negotiating expectations around achievement and cultural integration (Cross and Hong, 2012; Nguyen, 2018). These challenges are especially relevant in multilingual contexts such as Malta, where bilingual education operates within an increasingly diverse society influenced by migration and the dominance of English.

Research on teacher emotions highlights their central role in effective teaching and professional sustainability (Gkonou et al., 2020; Pekrun, 2016). Guided by Scherer's Component Process Model, emotions are understood as multi-component processes involving appraisal, physiological response, feeling, expression, and action tendencies, with cognitive appraisal playing a key role in emotional regulation and decision-making (Chen, 2016; Moors et al., 2013; Scherer, 2005, 2009). Teacher emotions have been examined through biometric and self-report methods, though ethical concerns limit physiological approaches, making self-report tools the most widely used and context-sensitive in education research (Chen, 2016; Desmet, 2002; Ojha et al., 2021; Shariatmadari et al., 2019; Zembylas, 2007).

The Teacher Emotions Questionnaire (TEQ) captures six core emotions—anger, enjoyment, fatigue, hopelessness, love, and pride—and is widely used due to its adaptability and relevance to language teaching, where emotion, identity, and intercultural interaction are closely linked (Burić et al., 2018). Teacher emotional well-being is influenced by personal, relational, and systemic factors, with supportive student relationships buffering emotional exhaustion and enhancing classroom climate across diverse contexts (Aldrup et al., 2023; Chen, 2016; Cross and Hong, 2012; Frenzel et al., 2021; Lee and Lew, 2001; Méndez López and Peña Aguilar, 2013).

Professional development and emotional intelligence training strengthen emotional resilience and teaching effectiveness, particularly when grounded in reflection and collaboration, while leadership support plays a critical role in preventing burnout and fostering satisfaction (Anekwe, 2020; Collie et al., 2015; Nguyen, 2018; Ruto, 2021; Toropova et al., 2020; Yuliana and Wardhani, 2022). At the systemic level, policy ambiguity, rigid curricula, and high-stakes testing intensify emotional strain and role conflict in multilingual settings, whereas curricular flexibility and professional autonomy reduce stress and improve job satisfaction (Heugh, 2015; Park and Ramirez, 2022; Wang et al., 2021). Building on this literature, the present study examines how these emotional dynamics are experienced by language teachers in Malta's bilingual and culturally diverse education system.

3. Methodology

This study adopted a convergent parallel mixed-methods design to examine the emotional experiences of Maltese language teachers in multilingual and multicultural classrooms. Mixed-methods approaches are increasingly used in teacher emotion research to capture the complexity of educational phenomena by combining quantitative breadth with qualitative depth (Creswell and Plano Clark, 2018; Gkonou et al., 2020). In this design, quantitative and qualitative data were

collected concurrently, analysed separately, and then integrated to allow meaningful comparison and interpretation. Although mixed methods do not automatically produce more comprehensive findings, their value lies in the rigorous integration of multiple perspectives, enabling different dimensions of teacher emotions to be explored (Creswell and Plano Clark, 2018; Greene, 2007).

This approach facilitated a dialogic relationship between statistical trends and personal narratives, supporting a nuanced understanding of teacher emotions. The study addressed two research questions focused on the nature and perceived impact of teacher emotions on classroom practice and professional well-being, situating these findings within broader discussions of teacher well-being and professional identity (Chen, 2016; Yin et al., 2019).

3.1. Sampling strategy

Fifty Maltese language teachers were purposively sampled through professional networks, prior research collaborations, and school contacts to ensure access to experienced practitioners across diverse institutional contexts. Participants were recruited from Malta's three main school sectors—state, church, and independent schools—to ensure socio-cultural variation, a strategy recommended in teacher emotion research for multilingual settings where language policy and educational equity intersect (Heugh, 2015; Menken and Sánchez, 2019). Selection criteria included experience teaching Maltese and active classroom engagement during data collection.

The sample size was justified following McMillan and Schumacher's (2014) view that adequacy in educational research depends on research purpose, population variability, and analytical needs rather than numerical size alone. Given Malta's small educational context, representativeness was achieved through institutional diversity rather than scale. Including teachers from all three sectors enabled meaningful comparison across contexts, while involving the same participants in the qualitative phase supported interpretive complementarity and data saturation, aligning with principles of rigor in mixed-methods research (McMillan and Schumacher, 2014).

3.2. Data collection

All participants were recruited voluntarily and provided informed consent, with access facilitated through school principals and professional educator networks. Principals distributed invitation emails containing an information sheet and the researchers' contact details, allowing teachers to opt in independently and ensuring participation was free from institutional pressure.

Due to Malta's small-island context and the limited population of Maltese language teachers, collecting institutional identifiers alongside demographic data could have compromised anonymity. To address this ethical risk, the study avoided gathering such data and instead ensured contextual diversity by recruiting teachers from state, church, and independent schools while maintaining confidentiality.

All research procedures followed established ethical guidelines, with clear information provided regarding study aims, participant rights, and data use (British Educational Research Association [BERA], 2018; American Educational Research Association [AERA], 2025).

3.3. Quantitative phase: Questionnaire

In the quantitative phase, all 50 participants completed the Teacher Emotions Questionnaire (TEQ), a validated self-report measure assessing enjoyment, pride, love, anger, fatigue, and hopelessness (Burić et al., 2018). The TEQ was chosen for its established validity across diverse contexts, including studies in Croatia, Iran, and China (Chen, 2016; Shariatmadari et al., 2019). Although the sample size does not support statistical generalisation, the data served an exploratory role within the mixed-methods design by identifying emotional patterns that were

subsequently enriched through qualitative analysis.

The questionnaire was administered electronically via secure links to facilitate accessibility and protect participant anonymity. Data were analysed using Python 3.11 within a Jupyter Notebook environment to generate descriptive statistics focusing on emotional frequency and intensity across professional activities. This quantitative phase provided a macro-level overview of teachers' emotional patterns, in line with best practices in teacher emotion research (Frenzel et al., 2021; Pekrun, 2016).

3.4. Qualitative phase: In-depth interviews

To complement the quantitative phase, semi-structured interviews were conducted with the same 50 teachers, either face-to-face or via encrypted video conferencing platforms such as Zoom or Microsoft Teams, according to participant preference. Interviews lasted 30–50 min, were audio-recorded with consent, and transcribed verbatim. Although participants took part in both phases, anonymity was maintained by storing quantitative and qualitative data separately under different identifiers, ensuring that questionnaire responses were never linked to individual interview narratives.

3.5. Integration of quantitative and qualitative strands

Integration occurred at the analysis and interpretation stage, where quantitative and qualitative data were analysed separately and then compared using side-by-side analyses and joint displays aligning Teacher Emotions Questionnaire (TEQ) trends with qualitative themes. This approach enabled examination of convergence, divergence, and complementarity between aggregate emotion patterns and teachers' narratives. Quantitative indicators of fatigue, anger, pride, and joy were interpreted alongside qualitative accounts of workload, classroom management, policy pressures, instructional success, and student relationships. Apparent contradictions, such as high pride alongside emotional exhaustion, were treated as analytic prompts, with negative cases actively informing theme refinement. Distinct analytic units were maintained while supporting a transparent mixed-methods interpretation.

Qualitative data were analysed thematically using NVivo, following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase model: familiarisation, coding, theme development, review, definition, and reporting. Transcripts were coded inductively, with iterative theme refinement ensuring coherence and alignment with the research questions, supported by representative quotations. Thematic analysis is well established in teacher emotion research and is particularly suited to examining burnout, emotional experience, and professional identity (Gallo, 2016; Nguyen, 2018). In this study, analysis generated themes related to emotional triggers, regulation strategies, institutional pressures, and language-mediated emotional expression, interpreted within broader frameworks of emotional well-being in linguistically and culturally complex education systems (Naeem et al., 2023).

3.6. Ethical considerations

Ethics approval was obtained from the University of Malta Faculty of Education Research Ethics Committee (FREC) (Application ID: EDUC-2024-01155) prior to data collection, and all procedures complied with GDPR requirements. Participants were informed of their right to withdraw at any stage.

Beyond procedural ethics, the study addressed power relations, emotional sensitivity, and researcher reflexivity. Given recruitment through professional networks, invitations were carefully framed as neutral and voluntary, with teachers initiating contact independently. As discussions of teacher emotions could evoke distress, interviews were designed flexibly, allowing participants to pause, skip questions, or withdraw at any time, with reminders provided throughout.

To protect anonymity in Malta's small educational context, institutional identifiers such as school sector and geographic location were omitted. Reflexivity was maintained through ongoing reflective journaling and regular peer debriefing among the authors, supporting awareness of positionality, minimising bias, and ensuring respectful and transparent interpretation.

3.7. Rationale for methodological design

The convergent mixed-methods design integrated quantitative breadth with qualitative depth to provide a layered understanding of teacher emotions through complementary perspectives. Quantitative data were collected using the Teacher Emotions Questionnaire (TEQ), which systematically measures the frequency and intensity of teaching-related emotions, while semi-structured interviews enabled in-depth exploration of contextual influences (Burić et al., 2018). The TEQ was selected for its comprehensive emotional scope compared to other self-report tools, including the Teacher Emotion Inventory (Chen, 2016) and the Teacher Emotion Scales (Frenzel et al., 2016).

The instrument assesses six core emotions—three positive (joy, pride, love) and three negative (anger, fatigue, hopelessness)—using multiple items rated on a 5-point Likert scale, where higher scores indicate greater emotional intensity. Mean scores (M), therefore, represent the intensity with which teachers experience each emotion while teaching Maltese.

The combination of Python 3.11 environment for statistical analysis and NVivo for thematic coding enabled both structured and emergent insights to surface. This methodological approach was selected to explore, not fully capture, the complexity of teacher emotional experiences in a multilingual educational context. While we acknowledge that neither surveys nor individual interviews can fully reflect the depth or fluidity of emotional life, the combination of aggregate patterns and personal narratives provided layered, if partial, insights. We approached these findings as context-bound and interpretive, aligned with the logic of fuzzy generalisation (as described in qualitative inquiry traditions), whereby insights may resonate beyond the specific context without claiming universal generalisability.

As researchers who are themselves educators and who are embedded in the same educational landscape as our participants, we acknowledge that our insider positionality offers both a depth of contextual insight and a responsibility for reflexive transparency. We therefore situate our interpretations as grounded in lived experience and professional familiarity, recognising this as a strength in accessing nuanced meaning while also subject to ongoing reflexive scrutiny.

Our position as researchers familiar with the educational landscape shaped both the questions we asked and how we interpreted the data, reinforcing the importance of reflexivity throughout the research process. As insider researchers, we were able to draw on contextual and professional knowledge to access nuanced meanings in participants' accounts, while remaining attentive to the need for reflexive scrutiny in interpretation.

4. Results

4.1. Quantitative data analysis

4.1.1. Participant demographics

As shown in Table 1, the sample comprised predominantly male teachers (56%), with females representing 36% and 8% preferring not to disclose gender. Given the male majority in a profession typically dominated by women, future research should examine whether gender moderates emotional experiences, particularly in interaction with years of teaching experience. Participants spanned a wide age range, with most aged 35–44 (28%) and 45–54 (22%), followed by 25–34 (16%), 18–24 (14%), 55–64 (12%), and 65+ (8%).

Most participants (38%) had over 20 years of teaching experience,

Table 1
Demographic profile of participants.

Demographic Variable	Category	Sample (n = 50)	
		Frequency	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	28	56.00
	Female	18	36.00
	Prefer not to say	4	8.00
	Other	0	0.00
Age	18-24 years	7	14.00
	25-34 years	8	16.00
	35-44 years	14	28.00
	45-54 years	11	22.00
	55-64 years	6	12.00
	65 and over	4	8.00
Years of teaching experience	Less than 1 year	1	2.00
	1-3 years	7	14.00
	4-6 years	4	8.00
	7-10 years	6	12.00
	11-15 years	7	14.00
	16-20 years	6	12.00
	More than 20 years	19	38.00

followed by those with 1–3 years and 11–15 years (14% each), 7–10 years (12%), 4–6 years (8%), and less than one year (2%). Although not representative, this distribution mirrors international teacher emotion research, which often includes more experienced teachers whose emotional profiles may differ from those of early-career educators (Gkonou et al., 2020; Yin et al., 2019).

To further examine participants’ emotional profiles, the next quantitative phase analysed mean scores for each emotion measured by the Teacher Emotions Questionnaire (TEQ), providing an overview of the relative intensity of positive and negative emotions experienced by Maltese language teachers. Mean (M) scores were calculated for each emotion and summarised in Fig. 1.

Joy (M = 4.80) and pride (M = 4.76) were the most strongly reported emotions, indicating frequent feelings of satisfaction and accomplishment in teaching, while love (M = 4.17) was also rated highly, reflecting strong affective bonds with students. At the same time, negative emotions were prominent, particularly anger (M = 4.30) and fatigue (M = 4.04). In the TEQ, anger reflects frustration linked to student

misbehaviour and classroom disruption, while fatigue captures mental and physical exhaustion associated with teaching demands. These findings suggest that emotionally demanding situations are a routine aspect of teachers’ work, coexisting with strong positive emotions.

Fig. 2 shows mean emotion scores by gender, revealing minimal variation across groups. Joy and pride remained consistently high, while participants who did not disclose gender reported the highest joy levels alongside comparatively lower fatigue and hopelessness.

The line graph in Fig. 3 shows the mean score (M) for each emotion across the different age groups. A visual analysis shows that anger, fatigue and hopelessness vary significantly across age groups, with younger participants reporting notably lower mean scores for these negative emotions. In contrast, the mean score for positive emotions such as joy and pride remains stable across the different age groups. This analysis suggests that while positive affect is consistently high across age, negative emotional experiences tend to increase with age.

Fig. 4 illustrates the differences in average emotion scores across varying levels of teaching experience. A similar pattern emerges whereby the mean scores for negative emotions, particularly fatigue and hopelessness, increase as teaching experience accumulates. Conversely, the mean scores for positive emotions, such as joy and pride, remain relatively stable irrespective of years of teaching experience. This indicates that while positive emotions are consistently high, longer teaching experience is associated with higher levels of negative emotional experiences.

These findings are consistent with cross-national studies that highlight the coexistence of positive and negative emotions in teaching, particularly in linguistically diverse or resource-constrained settings (Chen, 2016). However, this study contributes context-specific insights from the Maltese bilingual education system, which has received little empirical attention. By focusing on how language policy, cultural diversity, and teacher identity intersect emotionally in this unique context, the study offers a valuable addition to the global literature on teacher well-being.

4.1.2. Effect of teachers’ gender, age and experience on emotions

Given the small sample size, a Kruskal-Wallis test was used to assess whether gender, age and years of teaching experience had a statistically

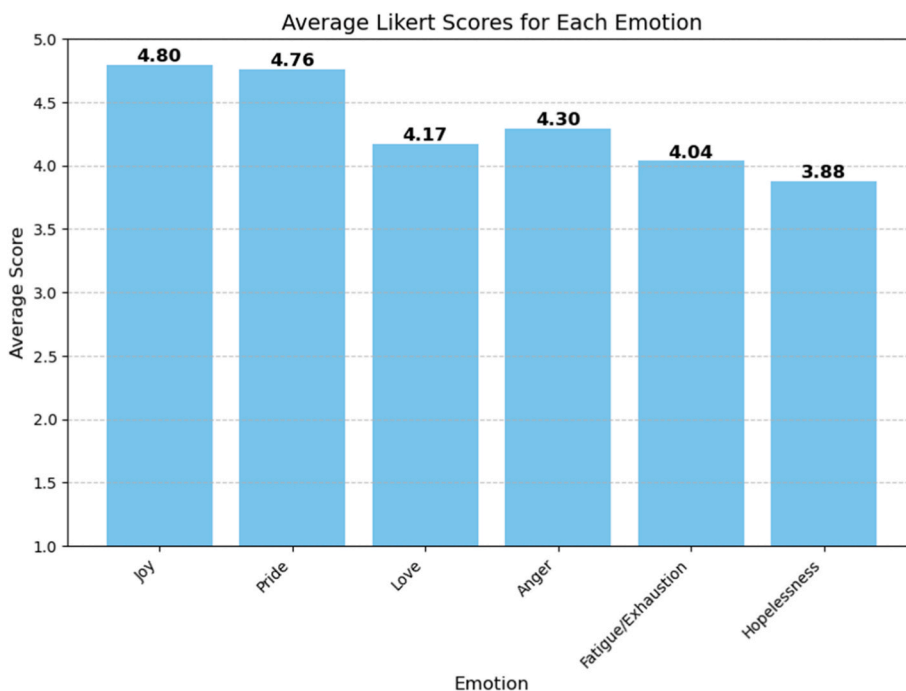


Fig. 1. The average score obtained for each emotion.

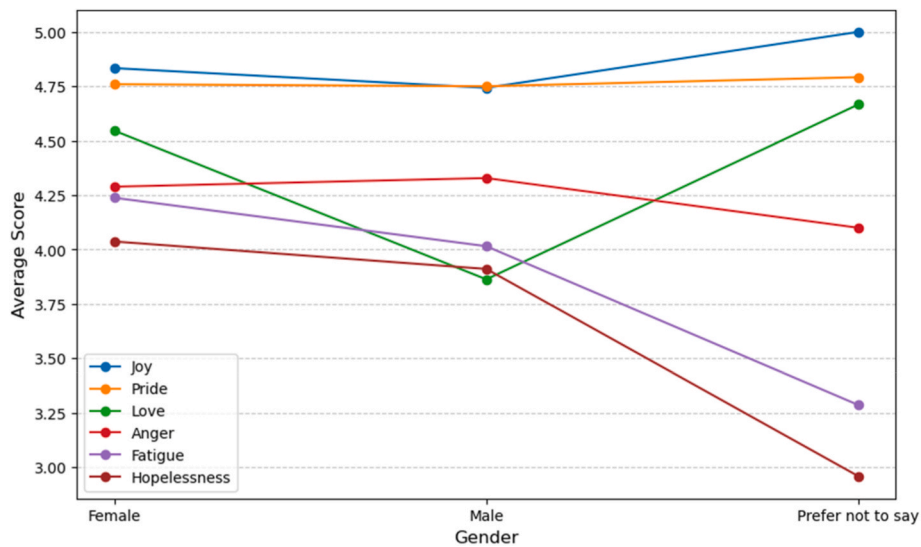


Fig. 2. The mean score of each emotion by gender.

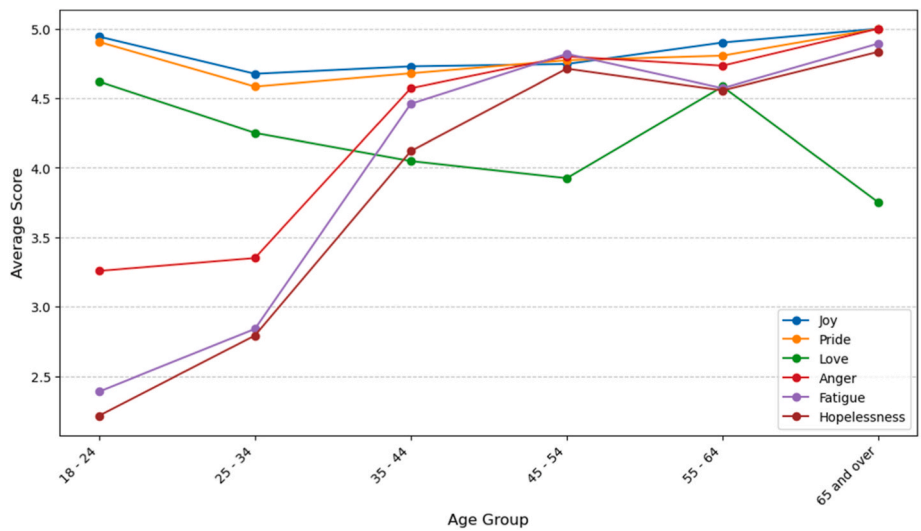


Fig. 3. The mean score for each emotion by age group.

significant effect on teachers’ emotion scores. The results in Table 2 confirm that the only significant effect of gender was observed for love (0.045), while the remaining emotions did not differ significantly across gender groups. In contrast, age and teaching experience demonstrated significant main effects for anger, fatigue and hopelessness ($p < 0.005$), suggesting that these emotions vary according to these demographic factors.

Very low p-values for anger (age = 0.0026; experience = 0.0013), fatigue (age = 0.0001; experience = 0.001), and hopelessness (age = 0.0011; experience = 0.0034) indicate that these negative emotions vary significantly across age and experience groups. This suggests that older or more experienced teachers may perceive or cope with anger and fatigue differently than their younger or less experienced counterparts, aligning with international findings that emotional exhaustion increases with years of service (Chang, 2009; Rajendran et al., 2020).

In contrast, joy, pride, and love showed no significant differences across age or experience ($p > 0.05$), indicating that positive emotions are experienced consistently regardless of teaching tenure. Overall, the results suggest that while positive emotions remain stable, negative emotions such as anger and fatigue are strongly shaped by demographic factors.

4.1.3. Regression analysis

To further explore the patterns identified through the Kruskal–Wallis H test, a linear regression analysis was conducted to examine the predictive value of age and years of teaching experience on emotional outcomes. Gender was excluded from this analysis, as the Kruskal–Wallis results revealed only one significant effect, suggesting that gender did not substantially contribute to variations across most emotions. In contrast, age and experience showed consistent and statistically significant effects for Anger, Fatigue, and Hopelessness, thereby warranting further examination through regression modelling. The results of this analysis are presented in Table 3.

Regression analysis showed that positive emotions (joy, pride, and love) were not significantly predicted by age or teaching experience, as indicated by high p-values and low R^2 values, suggesting stability across career stages. This aligns with evidence that positive emotions, particularly joy, remain relatively stable throughout teachers’ careers (Huang et al., 2020).

In contrast, negative emotions (anger, fatigue, and hopelessness) were significantly associated with both age and teaching experience, with age emerging as the stronger predictor. Age explained over one-third of the variance in these emotions ($R^2 > 33\%$), while teaching

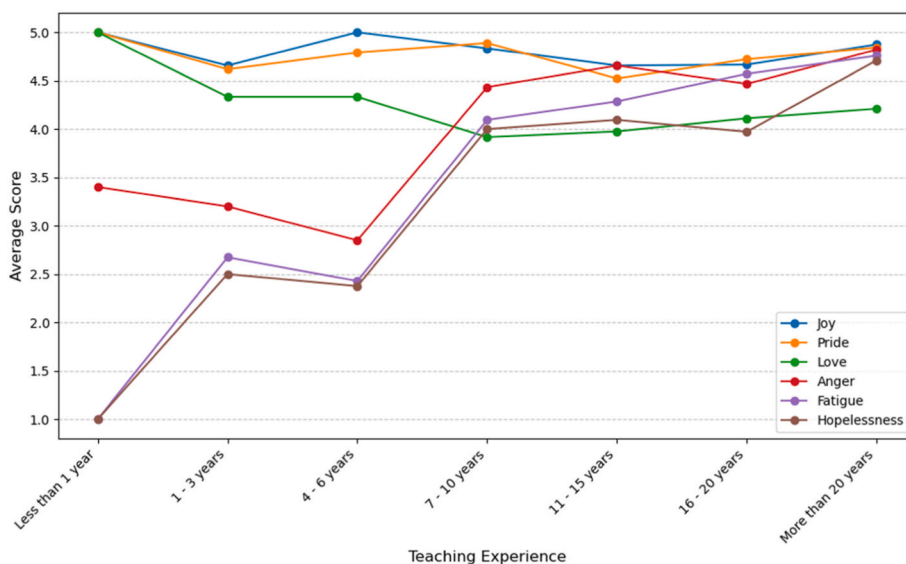


Fig. 4. The mean score for each emotion by years of teaching.

Table 2

Kruskal-Wallis H test for gender, age and years of experience.

Emotion	Gender		Age		Years of teaching experience	
	H statistic	p-value	H statistic	p-value	H-statistic	p-value
Joy	2.199	0.3320	5.294	0.3811	6.276	0.3930
Pride	0.099	0.9517	5.723	0.3341	5.516	0.4796
Love	6.217	0.0447	6.212	0.2862	3.718	0.7148
Anger	1.268	0.5305	18.321	0.0026	21.863	0.0013
Fatigue	3.714	0.1562	24.955	0.0001	21.616	0.0014
Hopelessness	3.569	0.1679	20.274	0.0011	19.490	0.0034

experience accounted for a smaller but meaningful proportion (approximately 15–19%). These findings suggest that although both factors influence negative emotions, age plays a more dominant role.

These patterns reflect established emotional career trajectories. Early-career teachers often experience high positive emotions alongside elevated stress (Lemarchand-Chauvin, 2023; Stará et al., 2020), while mid-career stages are associated with increasing negative emotions and potential disillusionment, moderated by emotional intelligence (Fernández-Berrocal et al., 2017; Zysberg and Maskit, 2017). In later career stages, cumulative demands contribute to greater fatigue and burnout (Burić et al., 2020; Zavidovique et al., 2017), influenced by declining student motivation, effort–reward imbalance, and rising emotional demands (Kinman et al., 2011; Pillay et al., 2005; Skaalvik and Skaalvik, 2017). Consistent with prior research, joy remains largely independent of teaching experience.

In the Maltese context, these emotional trajectories are intensified by sociolinguistic and policy shifts, including increased classroom diversity due to migration and the growing dominance of English over Maltese

Table 3

Regression analysis.

Emotion	Age			Years of teaching experience		
	Coefficient β	p-value	R ²	Coefficient β	p-value	R ²
Joy	0.0198	0.6010	0.0057	0.0401	0.0847	0.0606
Pride	0.0289	0.4738	0.0107	0.0469	0.0582	0.0728
Love	−0.0941	0.2753	0.0247	0.0075	0.8894	0.0004
Anger	0.3991	0.0000	0.3386	0.1722	0.0037	0.1622
Fatigue	0.5592	0.0000	0.3984	0.2154	0.0051	0.1520
Hopelessness	0.5861	0.0000	0.4067	0.2541	0.0013	0.1966

(Żammit, 2021). Older teachers face the compounded challenge of long-term emotional demands alongside adapting to evolving pedagogical practices and language policies, often without adequate systemic support or targeted professional development. This dual pressure likely explains why age, more than teaching experience, predicts higher levels of fatigue and hopelessness among Maltese language teachers.

4.1.4. Qualitative data analysis

The qualitative strand explored the emotional experiences of Maltese language teachers in increasingly diverse classrooms using inductive thematic analysis with NVivo 12 (Braun and Clarke, 2006), a widely used approach in international teacher emotion research (Gkonou et al., 2020; Nguyen, 2018). Interview transcripts from 50 participants were analysed through open, data-driven coding, with codes grouped into broader categories based on semantic and conceptual similarity. Themes such as Emotional Well-being and Classroom Dynamics emerged through iterative team discussions to ensure coherence and grounding in the data.

Following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase reflexive framework, two researchers independently conducted line-by-line coding, consolidated codes through constant comparison and memo-writing, and organised them into code families from which candidate themes were developed. Themes were refined through peer debriefing, iterative review, and negative-case analysis, with no a priori structure imposed. Several early themes were merged or discarded to maintain analytic robustness and reflexivity.

The interview corpus comprised approximately 33 h of data, yielding around 12,500 coded references in NVivo. These were distributed across six thematic areas: Emotional Well-being (N1), Student Motivation and Behaviour (N2), Classroom Dynamics (N3), Parental Involvement (N4), Colleague and School Leadership (N5), and Teachers' Emotional

Support Needs (N6). While reference counts illustrate analytic density, theme development prioritised conceptual coherence and relevance to the research questions over frequency.

For clarity, the reference counts reported for each theme represent the number of coded segments (meaning units) generated in NVivo rather than the number of individual participants; these counts are provided descriptively to illustrate analytic density and distribution across themes, and themes were developed based on conceptual coherence and relevance to the research questions rather than frequency alone.

Integration with the quantitative strand occurred at the interpretive stage through side-by-side comparisons and joint displays aligning group-level Teacher Emotions Questionnaire (TEQ) patterns with theme-level qualitative findings. Convergent results strengthened explanatory depth, such as high TEQ fatigue scores contextualised by interview accounts of heavy workloads and policy pressures, while divergent findings were examined to capture the complexity of teachers' emotional experiences. This approach supported a coherent mixed-methods interpretation of teachers' emotional landscapes.

Findings are organised across six thematic areas—Emotional Well-being, Student Motivation and Behaviour, Classroom Dynamics, Parental Involvement, Colleague and School Leadership, and Teachers' Emotional Support Needs—which extend the aggregate survey trends. For example, although TEQ results indicated high pride and fatigue, interviews revealed contextual sources such as conflicting institutional demands and linguistic displacement. To enhance analytic transparency, NVivo reference counts are reported for each theme: Emotional Well-being ([N1]), Student Motivation and Behaviour ([N2]), Classroom Dynamics ([N3]), Parental Involvement ([N4]), Colleagues and School Leadership ([N5]), and Teachers' Emotional Support Needs ([N6]).

4.1.5. Teachers' emotional well-being

Many participants described their emotional experiences as complex and shifting across teaching contexts. Several teachers shared that their emotional well-being was deeply affected by the linguistic diversity of their classrooms. For example, one teacher noted, "Trying to keep Maltese relevant in a class where half the students speak English at home is exhausting; it feels like I'm fighting a losing battle, emotionally and pedagogically." Others linked their well-being to the societal positioning of the Maltese language: "When parents question the usefulness of Maltese, it undermines my motivation. I feel like I'm defending my identity every day," said another.

The teachers also expressed pride and love for their work despite emotional fatigue. "There's nothing like seeing a student who was struggling finally connect, even if it's in English," shared one, highlighting the tensions between emotional reward and language shifts.

These accounts reflect a dual emotional reality in which cultural attachment and linguistic advocacy are sources of both motivation and strain. Rather than a simple dichotomy of positive vs. negative emotions, teachers articulated how emotional well-being is shaped by broader sociolinguistic forces, institutional pressures, and personal values.

4.1.6. Student motivation and behaviour

A central aspect of this theme was the emotional strain caused by persistent student misbehaviour, which teachers described as both a barrier to learning and a significant trigger of negative emotions. Several participants identified major challenges in motivating students, especially those learning Maltese as a second language. Participant 12 noted, "Keeping international students motivated is an uphill battle. Many come with little to no background in Maltese and often don't see the value in learning it."

Participant 9 explained, "Some students tell me openly that they don't need Maltese. They speak English at home and think they'll leave Malta soon. That kind of mindset is hard to work against emotionally. It feels like the subject I teach is being dismissed, and that affects my morale." Others highlighted the effect of migration narratives on

motivation. Participant 21 shared, "For many refugee or migrant students, their focus is survival; learning Maltese can seem irrelevant compared to other pressures. This makes it emotionally complex for me to push them academically when I know they're dealing with so much more."

The participants also reflected on the emotional toll of classroom misbehaviour. Participant 31 stated, "Persistent disruptions, especially from students who show no interest, wear me down. It becomes emotionally draining to repeat instructions or manage defiance." Participant 49 added, "Sometimes, when students mock the Maltese language or switch to English on purpose, I take it personally; it feels like a cultural rejection, not just misbehaviour."

Several strategies to enhance motivation were identified. Participant 3 found, "Visual aids, cultural immersion activities, and one-on-one encouragement have helped keep international students interested and better behaved." Participant 50 added, "I try to show how learning Maltese can open doors for them socially and academically. When students see real-life relevance, their motivation improves." These insights highlight the complexity involved in teaching a national language that holds contested value in a globalised, multilingual society. Teachers in Malta not only manage classroom behaviour but also navigate complex socio-linguistic attitudes that affect both motivation and identity. Interview excerpts already illustrate that issues of student misbehaviour and classroom disruption emerged as salient emotional triggers in the analysis, not only as reflections in the discussion. For example, teachers described how persistent interruptions, disrespect toward the Maltese language, and emotional exhaustion linked to behavioural management directly shaped the "Student Motivation and Behaviour" theme.

Some participants also implicitly referred to the role of students' social-emotional capacities. Instances where students demonstrated empathy or self-regulation, such as responding calmly to feedback or expressing appreciation for Maltese culture, were described as emotionally uplifting. These findings resonate with Çelik and Erbay-Çetinkaya's (2022) study, which shows that learners' empathy and self-regulation reduce classroom tensions and can directly mitigate teacher frustration and fatigue. While this was not explicitly explored in our interview protocol, these reflections suggest a bidirectional relationship between teacher emotional well-being and student SECs.

This complexity is further amplified by Malta's strategic positioning as an international education hub, which welcomes students from diverse cultural backgrounds as part of broader economic and branding initiatives. While this global orientation enriches classroom diversity, it also adds to teachers' emotional workload, particularly when students view Maltese as secondary to English or irrelevant to their future plans. This aligns with findings on multilingual classrooms, where educators balance cultural integration with curriculum expectations while managing varying levels of student engagement (Menken and Sánchez, 2019).

4.1.7. Classroom dynamics in a mixed-culture setting

Many participants discussed the complexity of navigating linguistic diversity. Participant 31 remarked, "It feels like teaching two classes at once. While some are fluent, others need constant translation and simplification. It's overwhelming." Participant 18 shared, "I constantly code-switch between English and Maltese. It's emotionally exhausting trying to ensure everyone follows."

Cultural diversity also presented emotional dilemmas. Participant 23 commented, "There are moments when I feel I'm failing both groups. The native students get bored while I slow down for beginners. That balance is emotionally tricky." Participant 2 suggested a more constructive outlook, "Cultural misunderstandings can cause tension, but they also offer learning moments. I try to use them as chances to foster inclusivity."

On adapting pedagogy, Participant 44 shared, "Adapting lessons for both levels increases my workload and stress. Sometimes I feel burnt out by the end of the week." While Participant 35 noted, "I plan multiple

versions of the same lesson. It takes effort, but I've learned to pace myself to manage emotional exhaustion."

These dynamics are consistent with research from postcolonial and linguistically diverse contexts, where teachers are expected to differentiate instruction while managing language hierarchies and emotional strain (Heugh, 2015).

4.1.8. Parental involvement

Parental attitudes toward Maltese language learning were seen as influential. Participant 29 stated, "Some parents don't value Maltese, and it shows in the students. Especially with international families, there's a lack of encouragement at home." This frustration reflects a deeper ideological tension, where Maltese is often devalued in favour of English, echoing patterns of linguistic marginalization observed in postcolonial contexts (Heugh, 2015). The perception that Maltese lacks global utility, particularly among international or mobile families, reinforces its symbolic subordination within the classroom, contributing to teachers' emotional strain. In contrast, Participant 21 reported, "Supportive parents make a noticeable difference. Even a little involvement can boost a child's confidence in learning the language."

Emotional reactions to parent interactions varied. Participant 37 explained, "Dealing with demanding or disengaged parents is frustrating. I often feel undermined, especially when they don't understand the classroom challenges." Participant 5 shared, "Positive relationships with parents energise me. When parents appreciate the effort, it motivates me emotionally." This aligns with findings showing that the emotional tone of teacher-parent relationships strongly affects teacher morale and stress levels, particularly in cross-cultural educational environments (Cross and Hong, 2012; Nguyen, 2018). Not surprisingly, in Malta's postcolonial bilingual context, such dynamics are further complicated by enduring language hierarchies that position English as the default language of opportunity and Maltese as a cultural holdover. These ideologies shape not only student motivation but also teacher emotional investment, especially when their professional efforts are perceived as being undermined by societal language attitudes.

4.1.9. Relationships with colleagues and school leadership

The presence or absence of peer and leadership support was significant. Participant 17 expressed, "I often feel isolated. There's little guidance from leadership on how to handle culturally mixed classrooms." In contrast, Participant 20 noted, "My colleagues are a lifeline. We share resources and emotional support, which lightens the burden a lot."

Leadership challenges were raised by Participant 46, "When the SMTs [Senior Management Teams] are dismissive of our concerns, it feels demoralising. It's like they don't understand the ground realities." Participant 11 emphasised proactive dialogue, "We don't always agree, but open dialogue with my team and admin helps resolve issues before they escalate emotionally."

Suggestions for improvement included more targeted training. Participant 12 recommended, "More tailored training for multilingual classrooms and emotional well-being workshops would help immensely." Participant 25 added, "The SMTs should check in more often and actually listen. Simple validation goes a long way emotionally."

Globally, school leadership is a key moderator of teacher stress and emotional engagement, with perceived administrative responsiveness linked to both teacher retention and emotional well-being (Anekwe, 2020; Toropova et al., 2020).

4.1.10. Teachers' concerns and emotional support needs

The teachers in this study voiced ongoing concerns about sustainability and emotional toll. Participant 38 reflected, "My biggest concern is being stretched too thin. The emotional strain of differentiation and cultural management is rarely acknowledged." Participant 49 stated, "I worry about burnout. There's no long-term emotional support in place

for teachers."

Addressing emotional needs was a recurring theme. Participant 10 suggested, "Regular emotional check-ins and a clear referral path for mental health support could make a big difference." Participant 22 advocated for policy-level reform, "National policies should reflect the emotional demands of teaching. We need systemic solutions, not just quick fixes."

Several participants also valued emotional intelligence and professional development. Participant 1 noted, "Training in emotional intelligence helped me understand my triggers and manage classroom stress more effectively." Participant 9 concluded, "Professional development should focus more on classroom psychology, not just curriculum updates."

The identified themes affirm global findings that emotional support, whether peer-based, institutional, or policy-driven is essential to teacher resilience, particularly in linguistically diverse and emotionally demanding contexts (Gkonou et al., 2020; Sutton, 2000). To move beyond general calls for support, specific and actionable models from other decentralized or small-state systems could be adapted to the Maltese context. For instance, Singapore's "Teacher Wellness Circles" (Tan et al., 2021), peer-led reflective groups that meet regularly within schools, offer a scalable, low-cost strategy for promoting emotional sustainability among educators. Similarly, Finland's structured mentorship programs (Pennanen et al., 2018), in which experienced teachers support early-career colleagues through formal emotional and pedagogical guidance, may be especially relevant given the high proportion of veteran teachers in Malta. Implementing such models could not only institutionalise emotional check-ins but also foster relational continuity in schools, in alignment with Malta's community-based educational ethos.

5. Discussion

This study explored the emotional experiences of 50 Maltese language teachers in increasingly multicultural and multilingual classrooms, using both quantitative and qualitative methods to reveal patterns of emotional strain and resilience. Through integrated analysis of quantitative data from the Teacher Emotions Questionnaire (TEQ) (Burić et al., 2018) and qualitative interview transcripts, several key insights emerged. These findings contribute to a growing recognition that emotional well-being is both contextually embedded and relationally constructed, particularly in small nations like Malta, where language policy, national identity, and demographic change intersect in unique ways.

Rather than portraying emotions as fixed or purely internal states, our analysis suggests that teacher emotions are dynamic, socially mediated, and often shaped by conflicting institutional and cultural ideologies. The TEQ data revealed a dual emotional landscape, with high levels of joy ($M = 4.80$) and pride ($M = 4.76$) coexisting alongside fatigue ($M = 4.04$), anger ($M = 4.30$), and hopelessness ($M = 3.88$). While this mirrors findings from global studies (e.g., Kariou et al., 2021), our interviews suggest that these emotions are intensified in Malta by the ambiguity surrounding the role of the Maltese language in education. As one participant noted, "It feels like Maltese is valued on paper, but English is the default in practice", a comment that highlights the emotional toll of working within policy-practice contradictions.

However, other studies have shown that emotional regulation can improve with experience, mitigating negative emotions over time. For instance, Taxer and Frenzel (2015) found that veteran teachers often develop coping strategies that reduce burnout, suggesting that emotional strain is not universally cumulative. This underscores the importance of contextual and individual differences in emotional trajectories.

Student motivation and misbehaviour were key emotional triggers. Teachers felt demoralised when students devalued Maltese as irrelevant to their futures, a perception amplified by Malta's positioning as a

globally accessible, English-speaking education destination. This suggests that teacher emotions are entangled with wider narratives of globalisation, linguistic hierarchy, and nation branding. While quantitative scores captured this disillusionment through increased fatigue and hopelessness in more experienced teachers, qualitative accounts revealed the identity-related strain of teaching a language that is culturally central but institutionally marginalised. For instance, the statistically significant rise in fatigue and hopelessness among older and more experienced teachers, as shown through the Kruskal-Wallis test and regression analysis, was echoed in interview narratives describing cumulative emotional strain and a lack of systemic emotional support.

Student misbehaviour, particularly when it involved mocking or rejecting the Maltese language, was emotionally charged. Such behaviours were not perceived as routine disruptions but as symbolic acts of cultural rejection, triggering feelings of personal affront and existential stress (Liu, 2016). These experiences illustrate how language, identity, and authority converge in multilingual classrooms, requiring educators to perform constant emotional regulation. Moreover, the findings suggest that such misbehaviour is influenced by classroom emotional dynamics rather than being solely the responsibility of teachers. Çelik and Erbay-Çetinkaya's (2022) study shows that learners' empathy and self-regulation can significantly reduce teacher stress, highlighting the importance of student social-emotional competencies in shaping the emotional climate of classrooms.

Teachers also discussed the challenge of addressing broad ability ranges within linguistically diverse groups. While this has been widely reported in international contexts (Gkonou et al., 2020), our study adds nuance by showing how this differentiation is not only instructional but also emotional. Teachers in Malta described planning for mixed proficiency levels as “an invisible workload,” often unrecognised by school leaders. This reflects the kind of unacknowledged emotional demands that exceed formal expectations but are still emotionally taxing (Yin et al., 2019).

Cultural responsiveness, though viewed as pedagogically necessary, also emerged as a source of emotional fatigue. Teachers expressed a desire to meet students' cultural needs, but often felt underprepared or unsupported. This reveals a tension between inclusive ideals and structural realities, suggesting that intercultural competence, while ethically important, is emotionally demanding in under-resourced contexts. This echoes Gay's (2010) concept of “cultural load” and extends it by revealing how it accumulates over years of unaddressed policy and leadership gaps. However, DeCapua and Marshall (2010) argue that when cultural responsiveness is embedded in well-supported teaching frameworks, it can enhance teacher efficacy and promote more positive teacher–student interactions, which may in turn ease emotional challenges associated with classroom diversity. This points to the moderating role of institutional backing in shaping the emotional outcomes of inclusive practices.

Teacher–parent relationships further demonstrated the intersection between emotion and ideology. While some families supported Maltese instruction, others viewed it as a barrier to progress in English or other subjects. These conflicting perspectives affected teachers emotionally, especially when parents dismissed their work as irrelevant. This reveals the ideological friction that underpins daily emotional experience in language education, and highlights the need to address language attitudes at the community level, not just within classrooms. Yet, research by Epstein (2011) suggests that proactive communication and trust-building between schools and families, especially in diverse settings, can foster collaborative emotional climates that protect teacher well-being. This suggests that negative parental interactions are not inevitable but contingent on school–community relationship quality.

This ideological friction also aligns with raciolinguistic perspectives (Flores and Rosa, 2015; van Hattum, 2018), which emphasise how language ideologies are inseparable from racialised hierarchies of legitimacy. In the Maltese context, these dynamics emerge through perceptions of linguistic purity and belonging, where teachers'

emotional responses reflect broader socio-historical tensions between language, identity, and social positioning. Integrating a raciolinguistic lens, therefore, deepens the understanding of how emotional labour in language teaching is mediated by ideological and racialised structures.

Colleague and leadership relationships were strong determinants of emotional resilience. Teachers who reported empathetic leadership and collegial support described greater emotional stability, while those who lacked such support experienced isolation and stress. This points to the importance of collective emotional ecology, where teacher well-being is contingent not only on individual coping, but on shared emotional responsibility. Calls for emotionally intelligent leadership, mentorship, and regular check-ins were consistent across age groups, underscoring the need for institutionalised emotional infrastructure. Gender may also play a role in how such emotional support is received or sought. While not directly explored in our data, the male majority in our sample contrasts with broader global feminisation trends in teaching. Future intersectional analyses could help reveal whether male and female teachers differ in how they experience or respond to emotional stressors in linguistically diverse contexts.

Professional development emerged as a vital, yet under-implemented, support mechanism. Teachers specifically advocated for training in emotional intelligence, classroom psychology, and culturally responsive pedagogy. Rather than framing emotional resilience as a personal trait, participants envisioned it as a collective competency cultivated through ongoing support and reflection.

Ultimately, what distinguishes this study is its dual emphasis on emotional complexity and institutional responsibility. While teacher emotion research has often focused on internal regulation (Sutton and Wheatley, 2003), our findings suggest that systemic reform ranging from leadership training to language policy alignment, is equally critical. The desire for structural change reflects a shift in teacher expectations: away from coping in silence, and toward advocating for emotionally sustainable professional environments.

To ensure these insights translate into practice, Malta's decentralized education system would benefit from context-sensitive, structured models that support teacher well-being. For example, Singapore's Teacher Wellness Circles (Tan et al., 2021), peer-led emotional reflection groups within schools, and Finland's formal mentorship programs (Pennanen et al., 2018) offer concrete frameworks that could be adapted locally. These models could institutionalise emotional check-ins and ongoing collegial support, aligning with Malta's small-scale, community-based educational ethos and addressing the emotional demands highlighted by this study.

By integrating emotional, behavioural, cultural, and systemic dimensions, this study presents a holistic framework for understanding language teacher emotions in postcolonial, bilingual contexts. It affirms prior findings (Chang, 2009; Liu, 2016) but extends the field by highlighting how macro-level discourses such as educational tourism, linguistic prestige, and national identity shape the emotional realities of everyday teaching.

6. Limitations and future research

This study offers important insights into the emotional experiences of Maltese language teachers in multilingual and multicultural classrooms. However, several limitations should be noted. The sample, though institutionally diverse, was limited to 50 participants within a single national context, restricting generalisability. The voluntary nature of participation may have introduced self-selection bias, as teachers with more intense emotional experiences may have been more inclined to respond. Furthermore, the study did not collect data on participants' specific institutional affiliations or school locations in order to protect anonymity within Malta's small teaching community. While this limited the possibility of comparing findings across educational sectors, purposive recruitment ensured diversity across state, church, and independent schools.

The sample was also imbalanced in terms of gender, age, and years of experience. While the inclusion of 38% veteran teachers enriched the study's insights into long-term emotional experiences, it may have underrepresented younger and early-career educators, whose emotional trajectories and resilience profiles may differ. According to the National Statistics Office of Malta (NSO, 2023), approximately 78% of teachers in Malta are female; therefore, the majority-male composition (56%) in this sample is atypical relative to the national workforce. Similarly, the majority-male composition of the sample is unusual in a typically female-dominated profession and may limit the transferability of findings across gendered contexts. Thus, claims that negative emotions intensify with experience should be interpreted cautiously, as emotional patterns likely differ across demographic groups and career stages. Future research should therefore include comparative designs that examine how gender, age, and other sociocultural factors mediate teacher emotions and classroom management strategies. Such intersectional analyses would clarify the extent to which emotional demands and coping resources vary across demographic lines, especially in linguistically and culturally diverse educational settings. Additionally, future work should stratify sampling by career stage or adopt longitudinal designs to capture the evolution of teacher emotions over time. Understanding how emotional demands and coping strategies shift from novice to veteran teachers is vital for tailoring professional development and emotional support initiatives to different phases of the teaching career.

The study's reliance on self-reported data through surveys and interviews also poses limitations due to potential social desirability bias and the challenges of accurately recalling emotional experiences. Though widely used (Pekrun, 2016), self-report instruments may not fully capture the immediacy or unconscious aspects of emotion.

The cross-sectional design captures only a snapshot in time. Since teacher emotions evolve with classroom dynamics, institutional pressures, and career progression, longitudinal research is needed to trace these shifts over time. Additionally, this study focused solely on middle and secondary school teachers, excluding voices from primary, adult, or informal education, which may involve different emotional dynamics and coping strategies.

To broaden generalisability, future research should include larger, more representative samples from diverse sociolinguistic contexts. Comparative studies across education systems could reveal how structural, cultural, or policy factors shape emotional experiences. Cross-disciplinary research could also explore whether emotional demands differ between language educators and teachers of other subjects.

Future work should incorporate complementary methods, such as classroom observations, reflective journals, or physiological indicators, to triangulate findings and offer a richer, real-time picture of teacher emotions. Action-oriented research is also needed to evaluate the impact of specific emotional support structures, such as mentorship, peer collaboration, or school-wide emotional check-ins. Such evidence is crucial for informing both policy and practice and for fostering emotionally sustainable teaching careers in increasingly complex and diverse classrooms.

7. Conclusion

This study examined the emotional experiences of fifty Maltese language teachers working in multilingual, multicultural classrooms. Using a convergent parallel mixed-methods design, it integrated survey data from the Teacher Emotions Questionnaire with in-depth interview findings, offering both statistical breadth and contextual depth. The results revealed a dual emotional landscape; teachers reported high levels of joy, pride, and love, alongside fatigue, anger, and hopelessness, particularly among more experienced educators.

These negative emotions were linked to structural and interpersonal stressors, including student misbehaviour, parental disengagement, linguistic heterogeneity, and insufficient institutional support. Teachers

expressed a strong need for systemic change: greater emotional intelligence training, proactive leadership, and ongoing collegial and psychological support.

The Maltese context offers valuable insight to international scholarship. As a bilingual postcolonial nation and global education hub, Malta presents a unique convergence of language policy ambiguity, identity tensions, and transnational student mobility. These features create a distinct emotional environment for language teachers, illuminating challenges that are becoming more widespread globally.

By integrating Frenzel et al.'s (2021) and Scherer's (2005) emotion frameworks, and employing an ethically grounded design, the study contributes robust, context-sensitive evidence to the literature on teacher emotions and emotional well-being. It highlights that teacher well-being is shaped not only by individual capacity but also by policy, leadership, and sociolinguistic conditions.

Ultimately, sustaining emotionally resilient teachers requires more than personal coping. It calls for structural reforms in teacher education, leadership, and policy that prioritise emotional well-being as essential to effective, inclusive language learning in a globalised world.

GLOSSARY

Term	Definition
Multilingual Education	Teaching and learning practices that involve the use of more than one language.
Teacher Emotional Well-being	The emotional health and resilience of teachers in managing stress, relationships, and job demands.
Cultural Load	The emotional and cognitive strain of adapting teaching to students from diverse cultural backgrounds.

CRedit authorship contribution statement

Jacqueline Żammit: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Visualization, Validation, Supervision, Software, Resources, Project administration, Methodology, Investigation, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Lawrence Farrugia Caruana:** Writing – review & editing, Validation, Supervision, Software, Resources, Methodology, Investigation, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization.

Ethical approval

This study was approved by the University of Malta Faculty of Education Research Ethics Committee (Application ID: EDUC-2024-01155).

Funding

This research did not receive any specific grant from funding agencies in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Acknowledgements

The authors would like to thank the participating Maltese language teachers for their insights and time. Appreciation is also extended to the University of Malta for institutional support throughout this study.

Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data to this article can be found online at <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tate.2026.105481>.

Data availability

Data will be made available on request.

References

- Aldrup, K., Carstensen, B., & Klusmann, U. (2023). The role of teachers' emotion regulation in teaching effectiveness: A systematic review integrating four lines of research. *Educational Psychologist, 59*(2), 89–110. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00461520.2023.2282446>
- American Educational Research Association. (2025). *Professional ethics*. AERA. Retrieved May 23, 2025, from <https://www.aera.net/About-AERA/AERA-Rules-Policies/Professional-Ethics>.
- Anekwe, R. I. (2020). Leadership challenges and Nigeria development. *The issues and imperatives. International Journal of Academic Accounting, Finance & Management Research, 4*(1), 1–5.
- Becker, E. S., Keller, M. M., Goetz, T., Frenzel, A. C., & Taxer, J. L. (2015). Antecedents of teachers' emotions in the classroom: An intraindividual approach. *Frontiers in Psychology, 6*. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2015.00635>
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology, 3*(2), 77–101. <https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp0630a>
- British Educational Research Association. (2018). *Ethical guidelines for educational research (4th ed.)*. BERA. <https://www.bera.ac.uk/publication/ethical-guidelines-for-educational-research-2018>.
- Burić, I., Slišković, A., & Macuka, I. (2018). A mixed-method approach to the assessment of teachers' emotions: Development and validation of the teacher emotion questionnaire. *Educational Psychology, 38*(3), 325–349. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01443410.2017.1382682>
- Burić, I., Slišković, A., & Sorić, I. (2020). Teachers' emotions and self-efficacy: A test of reciprocal relations. *Frontiers in Psychology, 11*. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2020.01650>
- Camilleri Grima, A. (2016). Young children living bilingually in Malta. *Lingwistika Stosowana, 17*(2), 1–13.
- Caruana, L. F., & Żammit, J. (2024). Exploring beliefs, motivations and emotions: Insights from learning Maltese as a second language. *Language Teaching Research, 0*(0). <https://doi.org/10.1177/13621688241289724>
- Chang, M.-L. (2009). An appraisal perspective of teacher burnout: Examining the emotional work of teachers. *Educational Psychology Review, 21*(3), 193–218. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10648-009-9106-y>
- Chang, M. L., & Taxer, J. (2020). Teacher emotion regulation strategies in response to classroom misbehavior. *Teachers and Teaching, 27*(5), 353–369. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13540602.2020.1740198>
- Chen, J. (2016). Understanding teacher emotions: The development of a teacher emotion inventory. *Teaching and Teacher Education, 55*, 68–77. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tate.2016.01.001>
- Creswell, J. W., & Plano Clark, V. L. (2018). *Designing and conducting mixed methods research (3rd ed.)*. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE.
- Cross, D. L., & Hong, J. Y. (2012). An ecological examination of teachers' emotions in the school context. *Teaching and Teacher Education, 28*(7), 957–967. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tate.2012.05.001>
- DeCapua, A., & Marshall, H. W. (2010). Reaching ELLs at risk: Instruction for students with limited or interrupted formal education. *Preventing School Failure: Alternative Education for Children and Youth, 55*(1), 35–41. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10459880903291680>
- Desmet, P. (2002). *Designing emotions*. Delft: Delft University of Technology.
- Epstein, J. L. (2011). *School, family, and community partnerships: Preparing educators and improving schools* (2nd ed.). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429944673>
- Erb, C. S. (2002). *The emotional whirlpool of beginning teachers' work*. Toronto, Canada: Annual Meeting of the Canadian Society of Studies in Education.
- Fernández-Berrocal, P., Gutiérrez-Cobo, M. J., Rodríguez-Corrales, J., & Cabello, R. (2017). Teachers' affective well-being and teaching experience: The protective role of perceived emotional intelligence. *Frontiers in Psychology, 8*. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2017.02227>
- Flores, N., & Rosa, J. (2015). Undoing appropriateness: Raciolinguistic ideologies and language diversity in education. *Harvard Educational Review, 85*(2), 149–171. <https://doi.org/10.17763/0017-8055.85.2.149>
- Frenzel, A. C., Daniels, L., & Burić, I. (2021). Teacher emotions in the classroom and their implications for students. *Educational Psychologist, 56*(4), 250–264. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00461520.2021.1985501>
- Gallo, E. (2016). "I want to be happy as a teacher". How emotions impact teacher professional development. In D. Gabrys-Barker, & D. Galajda (Eds.), *Positive psychology perspectives on foreign Language learning and teaching* (pp. 249–266). Springer International Publishing. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-32954-3_14.
- Gao, Y., Liu, Y., Zeng, Y., & Wang, X. (2024). Studies on language teachers' beliefs and emotions: Current status and future directions. *Heliyon, 10*(19), Article e38695. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.heliyon.2024.e38695>
- Gay, G. (2010). *Culturally responsive teaching: Theory, research, and practice (2nd ed.)*. Teachers College Press.
- Gkonou, C., Dewaele, J.-M., & King, J. (Eds.). (2020). The emotional rollercoaster of language teaching. *Multilingual Matters*. <https://doi.org/10.21832/GKONOU8335>
- Gowrie, G., Ramdass, M., Birbal, R., Dass, N., Singh, V., & Rocke, J. (2015). Teacher stress in primary schools in one education district in Trinidad and Tobago. *Advances in Social Sciences Research Journal, 2*(9), 26–40. <https://doi.org/10.14738/assrj.29.1120>
- Greene, J. C. (2007). *Mixed methods in social inquiry*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Gross, J. J. (2015). Emotion regulation: Current status and future prospects. *Psychological Inquiry, 26*(1), 1–26. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1047840X.2014.940781>
- Hargreaves, A. (2001). Emotional geographies of teaching. *Teachers College Record, 103*(6), 1056–1080. <https://doi.org/10.1111/0161-4681.00142>
- Heugh, K. (2015). Epistemologies in multilingual education: Translanguaging and genre – Companions in conversation with policy and practice. *Language and Education, 29*(3), 280–285. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09500782.2014.994529>
- Hochschild, A. R. (2003). *The managed heart: Commercialization of human feeling (20th anniversary ed.)*. University of California Press.
- Huang, X., Lee, J. C.-K., & Frenzel, A. C. (2020). Striving to become a better teacher: Linking teacher emotions with informal teacher learning across the teaching career. *Frontiers in Psychology, 11*. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2020.01067>
- Jakhelln, R. (2011). Early career teachers' emotional experiences and development – A Norwegian case study. *Professional Development in Education, 37*(2), 275–290. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19415257.2010.517399>
- Kariou, A., Koutsimani, P., Montgomery, A., & Lainidi, O. (2021). Emotional labor and burnout among teachers: A systematic review. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health, 18*(23), Article 12760. <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph182312760>
- Kelchtermans, G. (2005). Teachers' emotions in educational reforms: Self-understanding, vulnerable commitment and micropolitical literacy. *Teaching and Teacher Education, 21*(8), 995–1006. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tate.2005.06.009>
- Kinman, G., Wray, S., & Strange, C. (2011). Emotional labour, burnout and job satisfaction in UK teachers: The role of workplace social support. *Educational Psychology, 31*(7), 843–856. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01443410.2011.608650>
- Lee, E., & Lew, L. (2001). *Diary studies: The voices of nonnative English speakers in a master of arts program in teaching English to speakers of other languages*. <https://api.semanticscholar.org/CorpusID:146277645>.
- Lemarchand-Chauvin, M.-C. (2023). EFL novice teachers' emotions and professional development. *The Language Learning Journal, 51*(5), 621–635. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09571736.2023.2249908>
- Liu, Y. (2016). The emotional geographies of language teaching. *Teacher Development, 20*(4), 482–497. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13664530.2016.1161660>
- McMillan, J. H., & Schumacher, S. (2014). Participants, subjects, and sampling for quantitative designs. In (160., Vol. 7. *Research in education: Evidence-based inquiry* (p. 141). Pearson Education.
- McRae, K., & Gross, J. J. (2020). Emotion regulation. *Emotion, 20*(1), 1–9. <https://doi.org/10.1037/emo0000703>
- Méndez López, M. G., & Peña Aguilar, A. (2013). Emotions as learning enhancers of foreign language learning motivation. *Profile - Issues in Teachers' ProfesProfile - Issues Teach' Prof. Dev., 15*(1), 109–124.
- Menken, K., & Sánchez, M. T. (2019). Translanguaging in Latin America: Legitimizing Indigenous languages in school. *Annual Review of Applied Linguistics, 39*, 73–90. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0267190519000041>
- Molyneux, T. M. (2021). Preparing teachers for emotional labour: The missing piece in teacher education. *Journal of Teaching and Learning, 15*(1), 39–56. <https://doi.org/10.22329/jtl.v15i1.6333>
- Moors, A., Ellsworth, P. C., Scherer, K. R., & Frijda, N. H. (2013). Appraisal theories of emotion: State of the art and future development. *Emotion Review, 5*(2), 119–124. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1754073912468165>
- Naem, M., Ozuem, W., Howell, K., & Ranfagni, S. (2023). A step-by-step process of thematic analysis to develop a conceptual model in qualitative research. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods, 22*. <https://doi.org/10.1177/16094069231205789>
- National Statistics Office (NSO). (2023). *Education statistics 2023*. National Statistics Office Malta. https://nso.gov.mt/themes_sources_met/education-statistics/.
- Ng, E., & Meow, E. (2022). Preschool teachers' experiences of work-related stress: A pilot study of Singapore teachers. In O. S. Tan, K. K. Poon, B. A. O'Brien, & A. Rifkin-Graboi (Eds.), *Empowering teaching and learning through policies and practice: Singapore and international perspectives: Vol. 2. Early childhood development and education in Singapore* (pp. 303–320). Singapore: Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-16-7405-1_15.
- Nguyen, M. H. (2018). ESL teachers' emotional experiences, responses and challenges in professional relationships with the school community: Implications for teacher education. In *Emotions in second Language teaching: Theory, research and teacher education*. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-75438-3_14
- Ojha, S., Vitale, J., & Williams, M. A. (2021). Computational emotion models: A thematic review. *International Journal of Social Robotics, 13*, 1253–1279. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12369-020-00713-1>
- Park, D., & Ramirez, G. (2022). Frustration in the classroom: Causes and strategies to help teachers cope productively. *Educational Psychology Review, 34*, 1955–1983. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10648-022-09707-z>
- Pekrun, R. (2016). Using self-report to assess emotions in education. In M. Zembylas, & P. A. Schutz (Eds.), *Methodological advances in research on*.
- Pennanen, M., Heikkinen, H. L. T., & Tynjälä, P. (2018). Virtues of mentors and mentees in the Finnish model of teachers' peer-group mentoring. *Scandinavian Journal of Educational Research, 64*(3), 355–371. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00313831.2018.1554601>

- Pillay, H., Goddard, R., & Wills, L. (2005). Well-being, burnout and competence: Implications for teachers. *Australian Journal of Teacher Education*, 30(2). <https://doi.org/10.14221/ajte.2005v30n2.3>
- Rajendran, N., Watt, H. M. G., & Richardson, P. W. (2020). Teacher burnout and turnover intent. *Aust. Educ. Res.*, 47(3), 477–500. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s13384-019-00371-x>
- Richards, J. C. (2022). Exploring emotions in language teaching. *RELC Journal*, 53(1), 225–239. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0033688220927531>
- Scherer, K. R. (2005). What are emotions? And how can they be measured? *Social Science Information*, 44(4), 695–729. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0539018405058216>
- Scherer, K. R. (2009). The dynamic architecture of emotion: Evidence for the component process model. *Cognition & Emotion*, 23(7), 1307–1351. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02699930902928969>
- Shariatmadari, M., Mahdi, S., & Gramipour, M. (2019). The development of teacher academic emotions (TAE) scale. *Journal of Pedagogical Research*, 3(1), 60–79. <https://doi.org/10.33902/JPR.2019.5>
- Skaalvik, E. M., & Skaalvik, S. (2017). Dimensions of teacher burnout: Relations with potential stressors at school. *Social Psychology of Education*, 20(4), 775–790. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11218-017-9391-0>
- Stará, J., Wildová, R., & Popelková, Š. (2020). The teaching profession from the perspective of novice primary school teachers – Responsibility and joy. *Pedagogika*, 70(4). <https://doi.org/10.14712/23362189.2020.1687>
- Sutton, R. E. (2000). *The emotional experiences of teachers*. New Orleans, LA: Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association.
- Sutton, R. E., & Wheatley, K. F. (2003). Teachers' emotions and teaching: A review of the literature and directions for future research. *Educational Psychology Review*, 15(4), 327–358. <https://doi.org/10.1023/A:1026131715856>
- Tan, J., Mao, J., Jiang, Y., & Gao, M. (2021). The influence of academic emotions on learning effects: A systematic review. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 18(18), 9678. <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph18189678>
- Taxer, J. L., & Frenzel, A. C. (2015). Facets of teachers' emotional lives: A quantitative investigation of teachers' genuine, faked, and hidden emotions. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 49, 78–88. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tate.2015.03.003>
- Toropova, A., Myrberg, E., & Johansson, S. (2020). Teacher job satisfaction: The importance of school working conditions and teacher characteristics. *Educational Review*, 73(1), 71–97. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00131911.2019.1705247>
- van Hattum, F. (2018). Raciolinguistics: How language shapes our ideas about race. *Critical Inquiry in Language Studies*, 16(4), 293–295. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15427587.2018.1522864>
- Wang, H., Hall, N. C., & King, R. B. (2021). A longitudinal investigation of teachers' emotional labor, well-being, and perceived student engagement. *Educational Psychology*, 41(10), 1319–1336. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01443410.2021.1988060>
- Xu, Y. (2018). A methodological review of L2 teacher emotion research: Advances, challenges and future directions. In J. D. D. Martínez Agudo (Ed.), *Emogvtions in second Language teaching* (pp. 35–49). Springer International Publishing. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-75438-3_3
- Yin, H., Huang, S., & Chen, G. (2019). The relationships between teachers' emotional labor and their burnout and satisfaction: A meta-analytic review. *Educational Research Review*, 28, Article 100283. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.edurev.2019.100283>
- Żammit, J. (2021). Maltese as a foreign language educators' acquisition of intercultural capabilities. *Asian-Pacific Journal of Second and Foreign Language Education*, 6(9), 1–19. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s40862-021-00116-3>
- Żammit, J. (2023). Exploring the effectiveness of virtual Reality in teaching Maltese. *Computers & Education: X Reality*, 3, Article 100035. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cexr.2023.100035>
- Żammit, J. (2024a). Could virtual reality be the next approach for international students learning Maltese? *Educ. Technol. Res. Dev.*, 72, 3471–3493. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11423-024-10375-9>
- Żammit, J. (2024b). Capturing the full potential of Maltese language learning through ChatGPT. *Technology in Language Teaching & Learning*, 6(1), 1–22. <https://doi.org/10.29140/tld.v6n1.1082>
- Zavidovique, L., Gilbert, F., & Vercambre, M.-N. (2017). Teachers' well-being at work and quality of life: Any differences according to years of experience? *Occupational and Environmental Medicine*, 74(Suppl 1), A85. <https://doi.org/10.1136/oemed-2017-104636.224>. A85.
- Zembylas, M. (2007). Emotional ecology: The intersection of emotional knowledge and pedagogical content knowledge in teaching. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 23(4), 355–367. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tate.2006.12.002>
- Zysberg, L., & Maskit, D. (2017). Teachers' professional development, emotional experiences and burnout. *Journal of Advances in Education Research*, 2(4). <https://doi.org/10.22606/jaer.2017.24009>