Research article

Perfectionism, emotion regulation, and teacher retention: An examination of Iranian early career language teachers' well-being

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A R T I C L E   I N F O

A B S T R A C T

This qualitative study examined the experiences of early career language teachers in Iran, exploring the complex interplay between perfectionism, emotion regulation, and their implications for teacher well-being and retention. In this regard, through in-depth interviews with 15 participants, the study provided insights on how self-oriented and socially prescribed perfectionism might affect teachers' sense of well-being. The study findings revealed that while self-oriented perfectionism was associated with a drive for professional growth and job satisfaction, socially prescribed perfectionism contributed to heightened stress and a contemplation of leaving the profession. The study also highlighted the pivotal role of emotion regulation strategies, particularly cognitive reappraisal, in dealing with the emotional demands of teaching, thereby supporting teachers' well-being. Findings also suggested that supportive work environments, opportunities for professional development, and a sense of autonomy are crucial for fostering teacher well-being and encouraging retention. Drawing on relevant theoretical literature, the research emphasizes that addressing the challenges of perfectionism through supportive organizational factors and effective emotion regulation can significantly enhance early career teachers' job satisfaction and commitment to the profession. In light of these findings, the study advocates for targeted interventions that promote a supportive teaching environment, focusing on the development of emotion regulation skills and reducing the pressures of socially prescribed perfectionism. By providing insights into the lived experiences of early career language teachers, this study contributes to our understanding of the factors that might influence teacher attrition, and underscores the importance of nurturing teacher well-being to ensure their retention in the educational sector.

1. Introduction

The attrition of early career teachers (ECTs) poses a significant challenge to educational systems worldwide, with implications for school effectiveness, student learning outcomes, and sustainability of the teaching profession [1–10]. This issue is particularly acute among language teachers, who are struggling with not only the universal trials of the teaching profession, but also with the unique demands of language instruction [11,12]. These demands include the need for high linguistic proficiency, considerable emotional labor, and the ability to create an engaging classroom environment [6,13–16]. The well-being of these teachers is of paramount

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importance, as it directly influences their job satisfaction, performance, and ultimately, their decision to remain in the teaching profession [17–19]. Despite the recognition of the role of these challenges, our understanding of how internal factors such as perfectionism and external pressures affect their professional journey and well-being remained limited [20–23]. This qualitative study aims to contribute to this line of research by exploring the experiences of early career language teachers in Iran. In doing so, the study sheds light on the complexities of the teaching profession that might contribute to high attrition rates and identifying potential pathways to support and retain these educators.

Research into the well-being of ECTs often emphasizes the role of psychological factors [24–26], among which perfectionism might play a significant role [27,28]. On the one hand, self-oriented perfectionism, characterized by setting high personal standards, can drive teachers towards professional growth, enhancing their sense of accomplishment and job satisfaction [29–34]. On the other hand, socially prescribed perfectionism, where teachers perceive external expectations to be unattainably high, can lead to stress, anxiety, and a fear of failure, contributing to burnout and a desire to leave the profession [18,35–39]. In addition to the impact of perfectionism, the ability to regulate emotions emerges as a critical skill that helps teachers navigate the emotional demands of their job [25,40,41]. Effective emotion regulation can mitigate the negative effects of stressful classroom environments, thereby enhancing teacher well-being and potentially influencing their intentions to remain in the profession or leave it [25,42–47]. This study aims to explore these dynamics in more depth, providing insights into how early career language teachers perceive and manage the challenges associated with perfectionism and emotion regulation, and how these perceptions impact their well-being and professional decisions. By focusing on the lived experiences of early career language teachers in Iran, this study contributes to our understanding of the factors influencing teacher attrition. The study findings might have some implications for development of targeted support mechanisms to enhance teacher well-being and retention.

2. Literature review

2.1. Perfectionism and well-being

Perfectionism has attracted considerable attention in psychology and has been recognized as a significant factor influencing individuals' well-being, including those in the teaching profession [31]. Perfectionism is regarded as a tendency to set excessively high standards for oneself and others, accompanied by strong concerns for mistakes and failures [48]. Perfectionism is often categorized into two dimensions: (1) self-oriented perfectionism, which entails setting high personal standards, and (2) socially prescribed perfectionism, which involves perceiving high expectations from others [49]. Both dimensions can contribute to individuals' well-being in various ways. In the teaching profession, perfectionism has been found to have positive and negative effects on well-being. On one hand, self-oriented perfectionism can be associated with increased motivation, conscientiousness, and professional growth [18,50,51]. Teachers with high self-oriented perfectionism may strive for excellence, engage in continuous professional development, and exhibit a strong commitment to their students' learning outcomes [36]. These qualities are often associated with higher job satisfaction and overall well-being among them [52,53]. On the other hand, socially prescribed perfectionism, which involves perceiving high expectations from others, can have detrimental effects on well-being [54–56]. Teachers who experience high levels of socially prescribed perfectionism may feel immense pressure to meet the perceived demands and expectations of colleagues, administrators, parents, and students [18]. This pressure can lead to increased stress, anxiety, and burnout. Research has consistently demonstrated the negative impact of perfectionism on teachers' mental health, job satisfaction, and overall well-being [18,19].

Moreover, the influence of perfectionism on well-being among teachers extends beyond individual experiences, as it can also affect the classroom environment and student outcomes. For instance, teachers with high levels of perfectionism may create an atmosphere of high expectations and pressure, which can influence student motivation, self-esteem, and well-being [57]. Teachers with high levels of perfectionism may inadvertently create an atmosphere of high expectations and pressure within the classroom [36]. They might have an intense drive for flawless performance, resulting in an overemphasis on achievement and compliance. This can foster a competitive and stressful learning environment, where students may feel anxious and fear making mistakes. Research has shown that such an atmosphere can negatively impact student motivation, engagement, and well-being [58,59]. Moreover, students may develop performance anxiety, experience reduced enjoyment of learning, and exhibit lower levels of intrinsic motivation. The perfectionistic tendencies of teachers can also have direct implications for student outcomes, including academic achievement and self-esteem [60]. Teachers who hold unrealistic expectations for themselves may inadvertently project these expectations onto their students, setting impossibly high standards [61]. As a result, students may feel inadequate and experience a decline in self-esteem. They may perceive mistakes as failures, leading to diminished confidence and reluctance to take risks. Consequently, student academic performance may suffer, as the fear of making errors inhibits cognitive engagement and creativity [62].

2.2. Emotion regulation and well-being

Emotions are crucial in shaping teachers' professional experiences and interactions with students [63]. The literature emphasizes that teaching is an emotionally demanding profession, with teachers experiencing a wide range of emotions, including joy, enthusiasm, frustration, stress, and even burnout [64–66]. Understanding teachers' emotions is essential as they can influence instructional practices, classroom management, and student outcomes [67,68]. Various factors that contribute to the emergence of teachers' emotions. These factors include the nature of the teaching profession, such as the level of autonomy, workload, and the social dynamics of the school environment [69]. Personal characteristics, beliefs, and experiences also influence teachers' emotional experiences [40]. For example, teachers with high self-efficacy beliefs and positive attitudes towards their profession are more likely to experience

positive emotions and job satisfaction [70]. Emotion regulation strategies are critical for teachers to manage their emotions and create a conducive learning environment effectively. The literature identifies two broad categories of emotion regulation strategies: antecedent-focused and response-focused strategies [71]. Antecedent-focused strategies involve modifying the situational factors that elicit emotions, such as modifying lesson plans or adjusting instructional strategies to prevent potential triggers. Response-focused strategies involve managing emotional experiences after they occur, such as cognitive reappraisal, seeking social support, or engaging in self-care activities.

Effective emotion regulation strategies are crucial for managing these emotions and promoting well-being among teachers [72]. One commonly discussed emotion regulation strategy among teachers is cognitive reappraisal [73]. Cognitive reappraisal involves reframing or altering the interpretation of a situation to modify emotional responses [74]. Teachers who engage in cognitive reappraisal may reinterpret challenging situations as opportunities for growth or focus on the positive aspects of their work [73]. This strategy can help reduce negative emotions and enhance well-being. Another emotion regulation strategy highlighted in the literature is expressive suppression [75,76]. Expressive suppression involves inhibiting or concealing emotional expressions. While teachers may use this strategy to maintain a professional demeanor in the classroom, research suggests that excessive use of expressive suppression can have negative consequences for well-being [77]. Suppressing emotions for extended periods may lead to emotional exhaustion and decreased job satisfaction [78].

Engaging in self-care activities is another crucial aspect of emotion regulation and well-being among teachers. The literature emphasizes the importance of self-care practices such as exercise, relaxation techniques, and leisure activities in replenishing emotional resources and reducing stress [79]. Teachers who prioritize self-care are more likely to experience greater job satisfaction and lower levels of burnout. Social support is also recognized as a valuable emotion regulation strategy for teachers [80]. Seeking support from colleagues, mentors, or friends can provide emotional validation, perspective, and coping resources [81]. Collaborative professional learning communities and mentoring programs are often recommended to foster supportive relationships and create a sense of community among teachers [82]. The literature also underscores the role of organizational factors in shaping teachers' emotion regulation and well-being [83]. School climate, leadership practices, and support systems significantly impact teachers' emotional experiences [43]. A positive school climate, characterized by trust, respect, and autonomy, can contribute to teachers' well-being and their ability to effectively regulate their emotions [80,83]. Adequate administrative support and resources for teachers' professional development also play a vital role in promoting their well-being [84]. Furthermore, the literature highlights the importance of self-reflection and mindfulness in emotion regulation and well-being [85]. Engaging in self-reflective practices, such as journaling or meditation, allows teachers to gain insight into their emotional experiences and develop strategies for managing them [86].

2.3. Teacher retention and well-being

Teacher retention is a critical issue in education, and understanding the factors that influence teachers' decision to stay or leave the profession is of utmost importance [53]. Well-being has emerged as a significant factor in teacher retention, as teachers' overall satisfaction, engagement, and mental health play a crucial role in their commitment to the profession [87,88]. Numerous studies have explored the factors influencing teacher retention. These factors encompass both individual and contextual aspects. Individual factors might include job satisfaction, professional development opportunities, work-life balance, and perceived self-efficacy [89,90]. Contextual factors might encompass school leadership, organizational support, school climate, and the quality of relationships with colleagues [90,91]. In recent years, there has been growing recognition of the importance of well-being in teacher retention [24, 92–94]. Well-being encompasses various dimensions, such as emotional well-being, job satisfaction, work engagement, and work-life balance [47,52,95,96]. Studies have found that teachers with higher levels of well-being are more likely to stay in the profession [18, 97]. Factors contributing to teacher well-being include supportive work environments, positive teacher-student relationships, autonomy, and professional growth opportunities [89,98–100].

Moreover, the existing literature provides more detailed insights on how teacher wellbeing might be related to their retention in the teaching profession. For example, Self-Determination Theory (SDT) [101] as a widely used theoretical framework points to specific mechanisms that teachers' wellbeing can lead to their retention. Central to SDT is the concept of satisfying three basic psychological needs: autonomy, competence, and relatedness [102]. Autonomy refers to the degree to which teachers feel they have control over their work and decision-making processes. Teachers who perceive a high level of autonomy in their role often experience greater job satisfaction and a lower inclination towards leaving the profession [103,104]. Competence involves a sense of efficacy and mastery over one's teaching practice. ECTs, in particular, face a steep learning curve; those who feel competent and capable in their abilities are more likely to report higher levels of well-being and a stronger commitment to their profession [105]. Relatedness, the third need, pertains to the sense of connection and belonging teachers feel with their students, colleagues, and the wider school community [94, 106]. Positive relationships not only contribute to a supportive work environment but also enhance teachers' sense of professional identity and belonging, factors critical for retention. By framing teacher well-being and retention within SDT, it becomes clear that policies and practices that support the fulfillment of these basic psychological needs can have a profound impact on teachers' motivation to stay in the profession [107]. This approach underscores the importance of creating environments that empower teachers with autonomy, acknowledge and develop their competence, and foster a sense of community and belonging, thereby enhancing their well-being and inclination to remain in teaching [108].

Additionally, the Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) Model [109] provides another theoretical framework for understanding the dynamic interaction between the various demands placed on teachers and the resources available to them, and how this balance impacts their well-being and decisions to stay in or leave the teaching profession. According to the JD-R Model, job demands

encompass those physical, psychological, social, or organizational aspects of the job that require sustained effort and are associated with certain physiological and psychological costs [83,110,111]. For teachers, these demands can include workload, classroom management challenges, and the emotional labor involved in teaching. When these demands exceed the resources available to teachers, such as social support, autonomy, and opportunities for professional development, the risk of burnout increases, negatively affecting their well-being and potentially leading to attrition [98,111]. Conversely, when teachers have access to adequate resources, they are more likely to experience job satisfaction, engagement, and a strong sense of well-being, which are conducive to retention. The JD-R Model emphasizes the critical role of organizational support in providing these resources, highlighting the need for educational institutions to invest in professional development programs, foster supportive leadership and collegial relationships, and grant teachers the autonomy to innovate and adapt their teaching practices. By addressing both the demands on teachers and enhancing their resources, the JD-R Model suggests a pathway to improving teacher well-being and reducing turnover. Implementing strategies based on this model can help mitigate the stressors associated with teaching, promote a positive work environment, and support teachers' professional growth and satisfaction, thereby encouraging their continued commitment to the profession.

2.4. The present study

The existing literature indicates that perfectionism can positively and negatively affect teacher well-being. While self-oriented perfectionism may lead to increased motivation, conscientiousness, and commitment to professional growth, socially prescribed perfectionism can result in elevated stress levels, burnout, and reduced job satisfaction. Therefore, exploring how these different dimensions of perfectionism manifest among early career language teachers and how they may impact their overall well-being is crucial. Moreover, the literature emphasizes the significance of emotion regulation in managing the emotional demands of the teaching profession. Effective emotion regulation strategies, such as cognitive reappraisal, self-care practices, and seeking social support, have been associated with higher levels of well-being and job satisfaction among teachers. However, there is a dearth of research investigating how early career language teachers utilize emotion regulation strategies to cope with the challenges they face and how these strategies may relate to their well-being and intention to remain in the teaching profession.

Additionally, while the literature suggests that teacher well-being is linked to retention, the specific mechanisms that influence early career language teachers' decision to stay or leave the profession require further exploration. It remains unclear how well-being and specific factors, such as emotional well-being and work-life balance influence teachers' career choices. This study contributes to addressing these gaps and sheds light on the complex relationship between well-being and retention among early career language teachers in Iran. The research questions guiding this study are as follows.

1. How do early career language teachers in Iran describe their experiences with self-oriented and socially prescribed perfectionism, and its impact on their well-being?
2. How do early career language teachers' perceive the role of emotion regulation strategies in their well-being?
3. In what ways do early career language teachers perceive their well-being as influencing their decision to remain in or leave the teaching profession?

3. Method

3.1. Research design and participants

For this study, a qualitative approach was employed to gain in-depth insights into the experiences of early career language teachers with respect to their well-being, with a specific focus on the role of perfectionism and self-regulation of emotions. Qualitative research is appropriate for exploring complex phenomena and understanding subjective perspectives and lived experiences [112,113]. The recruitment of participants was conducted over a period of two months, utilizing a multi-channel approach that included social media platforms, direct contacts with teachers, and teachers' co-operation in inviting their colleagues to participate in the study. This strategy was employed to ensure selection of a diverse pool of potential participants, reaching those who might be particularly reflective about their experiences and willing to share. In total, the recruitment effort resulted in responses from 35 language teachers.

The selection of participants for this study was based on the he following criteria. First, the participants were selected based on their status as early-career language teachers. This refers to teachers in the initial years of their teaching profession, typically within the first 1–5 years of their teaching experience [114,115]. Second, the participants were selected from private schools, as teachers in the private sector have limited organizational support and professional developments opportunities [116]. To apply the inclusion criteria, each respondent was initially screened through a brief online questionnaire that gathered information on their teaching experience and employment sector. This initial screening ensured that participants met the specific criteria set for the study. Third, the participants had high levels of English language proficiency and academic degrees in Teaching English to Speakers of other Languages (TESOL) from higher education institutes in Iran. The final sample of 15 early-career language teachers was then selected based on a purposive sampling strategy. This sample size is considered appropriate for qualitative research, allowing for in-depth exploration and analysis of participants' experiences [117]. Further demographic information about the participants are provided in Table 1.

3.2. Data collection

The data collection for this study involved semi-structured interviews [118,119], which provided a platform for the participants to

Table 1
Study participants.

Participants	Age	Education	Institute	Gender	Teaching Experience
Ali	24	BA in TESOL	A	Male	4
Azadeh	22	BA in TESOL	A	Female	1
Bijan	24	MA in TESOL	A	Male	2
Saeed	23	BA in TESOL	A	Male	3
Yasmin	22	MA in TESOL	A	Female	1
Arash	23	BA in TESOL	B	Male	2
Leila	25	MA in TESOL	B	Female	2
Reza	23	BA in TESOL	B	Male	2
Shirin	25	MA in TESOL	B	Female	4
Zahra	23	MA in TESOL	B	Female	2
Farhad	22	BA in TESOL	C	Male	1
Maryam	24	MA in TESOL	C	Female	3
Mehrdad	23	BA in TESOL	C	Male	2
Narges	26	MA in TESOL	C	Female	4
Parisa	22	MA in TESOL	C	Female	2

share their experiences, perceptions, and insights related to their perfectionist tendencies, self-regulation of emotions, and wellbeing. The following steps were taken in the process of data collection. First, an interview guide was developed to ensure consistency and structure during the interviews (Appendix A). The guide was designed to cover a range of topics related to perfectionism, self-regulation, and well-being, addressing aspects such as participants' experiences, challenges, coping strategies, and perceptions of support systems. The interview guide included open-ended questions and prompts to encourage participants to reflect on their experiences in detail. Second, prior to conducting the main interviews, a pilot study was conducted with a small sample resembling the study participants to test the effectiveness and clarity of the interview guide. The feedback from the pilot interviews was used to refine the interview guide and ensure that the questions effectively elicit the desired information. Third, participants were recruited using purposeful sampling based on the criteria mentioned earlier and they were informed about the study's objectives, procedures, and confidentiality and were given the opportunity to provide informed consent. Next, the interviews were conducted in a private and comfortable setting by one the researchers, allowing participants to express their thoughts and experiences freely. The interviews were audio-recorded with participants' consent. The researcher conducting the interviews adopted an empathetic and non-judgmental approach, creating a supportive environment that encourages participants to share their perspectives openly. Finally, the audio recordings were transcribed verbatim following the interviews, ensuring accuracy in capturing participants' responses. The transcriptions were anonymized to maintain confidentiality.

3.3. Data analysis

The data collected from the interviews was analyzed using Nvivo software using an inductive thematic analysis approach, which allows for identifying patterns, themes, and meanings that emerge directly from the participants' responses [120,121]. The first step in the analysis process involved open coding, where the researchers systematically coded the data by assigning descriptive labels or codes to text segments [122]. This process involved highlighting significant statements, phrases, or ideas that capture key concepts related to perfectionism, self-regulation, and well-being. Next, codes that shared similar meanings or concepts were collated into initial themes [120]. The researchers then grouped related codes together to form potential themes that captured important aspects of the participants' experiences. The initial themes were reviewed, refined, and organized coherently. The relationships between codes and themes were closely examined, ensuring that they accurately represented the data and reflected the participants' experiences. Finally, each refined theme were defined and given a descriptive and meaningful name that encapsulated its content and significance. This step involved synthesizing the data within each theme and formulating clear and concise descriptions. To establish intercoder reliability [123–125], approximately 20 % of the interview transcripts were randomly selected for dual coding by an additional, independent coder. The coding was then compared, and discrepancies and disagreements were discussed and resolved through discussion. For the purpose of calculating inter-rater reliability, Cohen's kappa was employed to assess agreement between raters beyond chance, complemented by percent agreement as a straightforward measure of concordance. The analysis yielded a Cohen's kappa of 0.82, indicating substantial agreement, and a percent agreement of 89 %, reflecting a high level of consistency in coding. Following this process, minor adjustments were made to the codebook to clarify definitions and ensure more consistent application across the dataset. All transcripts, including those initially coded, were then re-analyzed with the refined codebook to ensure uniform application of the coding scheme.

Furthermore, several strategies were employed to ensure rigor and validity in the analysis process. First, the researchers maintained reflexivity by acknowledging their personal biases, assumptions, and preconceptions throughout the research process. Reflexivity allowed for critical self-reflection, ensuring that the researcher's perspectives did not unduly influence the interpretation of the data. Second, the preliminary findings were shared and checked with participants to validate the accuracy and credibility of the interpretations. This process allowed participants to provide feedback, confirm the accuracy of their experiences as portrayed in the analysis, and contributed to interpreting the data. Moreover, the researchers engaged in discussions with three colleagues who were familiar with qualitative research methods to gain insights, feedback, and alternative perspectives on the analysis process and findings.

This process further enhanced the trustworthiness and reliability of the analysis.

4. Findings

This section presents the main findings concerning each research question guiding the study.

1 Perfectionism and ECTs' Well-Being

The first research question aimed to explore how early career language teachers in Iran describe their experience in relation to aspects of self-oriented and socially prescribed perfectionism and perceived impacts on their well-being. The findings revealed that both self-oriented and socially prescribed perfectionism played significant roles in shaping their well-being. More specifically, the participants' experiences of perfectionism varied, with some teachers expressing positive impacts on their well-being due to self-oriented perfectionism, while others reported negative effects arising from socially prescribed perfectionism.

4.1. Theme 1: self-oriented perfectionism

Self-oriented perfectionism has been identified as an influencing factor on the perceived well-being of Iranian ECTs. In this regard, those participants who exhibited some levels of self-oriented perfectionism in their work often expressed higher levels of motivation and a strong commitment to their professional growth. Some of them reported setting ambitious personal standards for their teaching practices, and consequently they viewed mistakes as opportunities for improvement rather than signs of failure. For example, Azadeh, reported consistently setting high personal standards for herself and sought opportunities for professional development. She mentioned, *"I always aim to deliver more and more engaging and high-quality lessons to my students. This process pushes me to learn new teaching strategies and seek feedback from my colleagues to enhance my teaching skills."* This commitment to excellence seemed to influence her overall job satisfaction and a sense of accomplishment: *"When I do my best in the classroom in providing quality teaching, it makes me feel really good and elative about being a teacher and also being able to make a difference in lives of my students"*. Additionally, Bijan exhibited some aspects of self-oriented perfectionism, emphasizing the positive influence on his commitment to continuous improvement: *"I believe that my students deserve the best education, and that drives me to invest more time and effort in my own development too. In this regard, I attend many workshops and many conferences to stay updated with the latest and up-to-date teaching techniques."* This dedication to professional growth also positively influenced his job satisfaction and well-being, as he viewed teaching and progress as *"a meaningful and the most rewarding life undertaking"*.

4.2. Theme 2: socially prescribed perfectionism

On the other hand, socially prescribed perfectionism negatively affected the perceived well-being of ECTs. More specifically, those participants who experienced socially prescribed perfectionism often felt overwhelmed by the perceived expectations from administrators, parents, and some students, which lead to increased stress levels and reduced job satisfaction. In this regard, Shirin shared her experiences of socially prescribed perfectionism. She described feeling a lot of pressure to meet the expectations of others in her teaching practices: *"I sometimes feel like that I'm never doing enough. No matter how hard I try, the parents always want more! This is both emotionally exhausting and it also affects my enthusiasm and motivation for teaching,"*. This pressure negatively impacted her overall well-being and job satisfaction. Moreover, Farhad also reported feeling overwhelmed by the perceived external standards he needed to meet, which led to elevated stress levels and reduced job satisfaction. He expressed feelings of inadequacy and emotional exhaustion due to the constant worry about meeting others' expectations: *"As a language teacher, I have a genuine passion for helping my students learn and grow, but the constant and relentless pressure to meet the expectations of the others makes it really difficult for me to work as a teacher. Sometimes, I find myself constantly worried about not measuring up to those standards set by others"*.

4.3. Theme 3: coping strategies and support systems

While perfectionism impacted early career language teachers' perceptions of their well-being, coping strategies and support systems were considered significant in mitigating or exacerbating its impact. Accordingly, Zahra emphasized the importance of using positive coping strategies to maintain her well-being: *"I do set high standards for myself, but I have learned to take breaks and practice self-care when I needed. This process helps me a lot in managing the pressure and avoid burnout"*. Her ability to effectively regulate her perfectionist tendencies through self-care contributed to her overall well-being. Likewise, Saeed experienced socially prescribed perfectionism. Nevertheless, he highlighted the supportive work environment as a crucial factor in managing the negative impact of perfectionism: *"Having a lot of supportive colleagues and an understanding supervisor in the school make a big difference. It helps me feel more valued and cared for. This* support *also lessens the pressure a lot"*. Consequently, the presence of a positive work climate acted as a buffer against the negative effects of socially prescribed perfectionism on his well-being.

2 ECTs' Emotional Experiences and Wellbeing

The findings for the second research question shed light on how ECTs perceive and manage their emotional experiences through various emotion regulation strategies. In this regard, cognitive reappraisal emerged as a widely used strategy for maintaining

emotional resilience, while expressive suppression had mixed consequences, impacting teachers' perceptions of their well-being. The participants' responses also pointed to the importance of balanced emotional expressions, self-care practices, and supportive relationships in coping with the emotional demands of teaching.

4.4. Theme 1: cognitive reappraisal as an effective Emotion regulation strategy

Most participants reported employing cognitive reappraisal to regulate their emotional experiences when facing with challenges in their teaching practices. They also described how they reframed difficult situations as opportunities for personal and professional growth. By adopting a positive outlook, some teachers were able to transform setbacks into valuable learning experiences. For example, Parisa shared her experience of using cognitive reappraisal: *"When I face a challenging classroom situation, most of the times I try to see it as a chance to improve my classroom management skills. It helps me stay focused and lessens the anxiety associated with the situation."* This teacher's ability to reinterpret challenges allowed her to approach them with determination rather than being overwhelmed by negative emotions. Moreover, Reza also emphasized the importance of cognitive reappraisal: *"If a lesson in the classroom doesn't go as planned, I remind myself that teaching is a process associated with continuous learning. This mindset helps me stay motivated to improve."* In this case, positive reinterpretation of setbacks contributed to his emotional resilience and professional growth.

Participants also reported using cognitive reappraisal to shift their attention from negative aspects to positive aspects of their teaching experiences. By redirecting their focus, some teachers were able to maintain a sense of enthusiasm and fulfillment in their job. In this regard, Yasmin expressed: *"When I feel overwhelmed with grading or administrative tasks, I remind myself of the joy I experience when my students succeed. In this way, I can stay motivated."* Here, the teacher's ability to focus on the positive aspects of her role as an educator contributed to her emotional well-being and sense of purpose. Furthermore, Ali highlighted the significance of cognitive reappraisal in maintaining job satisfaction: *"Teaching can be a challenging job, but I always remind myself of the impact I have on the lives of my students. It brings a sense of fulfillment that outweighs the difficulties of teaching."* His focus on the positive outcomes of his teaching efforts might enabled him to manage stress and emotional strain effectively.

4.5. Theme 2: expressive suppression and its perceived consequences

Some early career language teachers reported engaging in expressive suppression as a means to maintain professionalism in the classroom. While this strategy allowed them to conceal their emotions during challenging situations, it often came at the cost of their well-being. For example, Maryam described her use of expressive suppression: *"Most of times, I try not to show my frustration or disappointment to the students, even when things get really tough. Maintaining a positive atmosphere in the classroom is important, but it can be emotionally challenging at times."* Her efforts to maintain a composed demeanor in the classroom led to perceived emotional exhaustion. Arash also acknowledged the consequences of expressive suppression: *"I hide my anger, stress and anxiety from my students, because I want to be regarded as a reliable source of* support *for them. However, it sometimes leaves me feeling emotionally exhausted after a long day."* His tendency to suppress his emotions in front of his students influenced his perceptions towards well-being. Furthermore, some participants recognized the importance of balancing expressive suppression and authentic emotional expression. They highlighted the significance of acknowledging and appropriately expressing their emotions to maintain emotional well-being. Leila, emphasized the need for balanced emotional expression: *"While I try to remain professional as a teacher, I also believe that it's essential to be genuine with my emotions. This is important for connecting better with my students and colleagues."* Her approach to balanced emotional expression allowed her to establish more meaningful relationships in the classroom and workplace. Mehrdad also shared a similar experience: *"I believe that showing vulnerability is a part of being human. Sharing my feelings with colleagues during challenging times has been comforting and has reduced my stress levels."* His willingness to express his emotions appropriately created a supportive environment, contributing to his emotional well-being.

4.6. Theme 3: importance of self-care and social support in ECTs' wellbeing

Some teachers acknowledged the significance of self-care practices in replenishing their emotional resources and reducing their stress. For example, Farhad emphasized the importance of self-care: *"Taking time for myself, like going for a walk, watching a nice movie, or engaging in hobbies, helps me recharge. Sometimes, we need to prioritize our well-being."* His commitment to self-care contributed to his perceived emotional resilience. Moreover, some participants highlighted the importance of supportive relationships with colleagues, mentors, and friends in coping with the emotional demands of teaching. In this regard, Zahra emphasized the role of social support: *"Having a mentor to guide me has been really invaluable. It's truly comforting to have someone to talk to when you have problems. It is also helpful for sharing experiences and seeking advice for teaching."* Accordingly, supportive relationship with her mentor provided this participant with emotional validation and coping resources. Saeed also emphasized the importance of support systems in teaching context: *"My relationships with my colleagues are essential for creating a positive work environment for me. When* support *each other in challenging times, this makes being a teacher more enjoyable and less stressful."* His positive relationships with colleagues contributed to his increased emotional well-being and perceptions in relation to overall job satisfaction.

3 ECTs' Wellbeing and Career Trajectories

The findings for the third research question provided some insights on how early career language teachers' perceived well-being plays a crucial role in their intentions to remain in or leave the teaching profession. Positive emotional experiences, job satisfaction,

and work engagement were identified as important factors in shaping such trajectories. Additionally, supportive work environments, positive school climates, professional development opportunities, and autonomy were identified as important organizational factors that might contribute to teachers' well-being and intention to continue their careers in teaching.

4.7. Theme 1: well-being as a critical factor in teacher retention

The findings of the study provided insights on how ECTs' perceptions of their well-being positively impacted their intention to remain in teaching. In this regard, the participants who reported higher levels of perceived well-being expressed a stronger commitment to their role as teachers, and demonstrated a greater willingness to persevere through challenges. For example, Azadeh expressed her commitment to teaching: *"I really enjoy teaching, and it brings me a sense of happiness and fulfillment. Despite some difficulties, I am determined to continue in this job and make a difference in my students' lives."* Her positive emotional experiences and sense of job satisfaction contributed to her dedication to the teaching profession. Shirin also shared a similar experience: *"When I feel supported and valued in the school, I am more motivated to work more. Teachers must have a positive and encouraging work environment."* Accordingly, her experience of well-being within a supportive school climate seems to reinforce her commitment to the teaching profession.

Participants who reported higher levels of perceived well-being were also more likely to experience work engagement. Their perceptions of positive emotional experiences and sense of fulfillment in their roles contributed to their overall job satisfaction, making them more inclined to continue their career in teaching. For example, Bijan described his sense of job satisfaction: *"I feel fulfilled when I see my students' progress and their excitement about learning. It motivates me to improve my teaching methods and be more innovative in the classroom."* His perceptions of job satisfaction and passion for teaching were considered as instrumental in his intention to remain in the profession. Another participant, Maryam, expressed: *"When I am fully engaged in the classroom, it's like time flies. In this regard, I feel a strong connection with my students. It makes me realize that teaching is my true calling."* This teacher's deep engagement in her teaching role had a critical role in her decision to continue her career as an educator.

4.8. Theme 2: organizational factors and teacher well-being (and retention)

The findings highlighted the facilitative role of supportive work environments and positive school climates on early-career language teachers' perceptions in relation to their well-being and intention to remain in the teaching profession. Participants who perceived their schools as supportive and conducive to their well-being expressed a stronger desire to continue their teaching careers. For example, Farhad emphasized the role of the school environment: *"When teachers are treated with respect in the school and when they are provided with necessary resources, it fosters a positive work environment for them. It makes us feel valued and motivated as teachers."* His experience of a supportive work environment positively have influenced his intention to remain in the teaching profession. Narges also described the impact of school climate: *"A positive school climate promotes collaboration and communication among us as teachers. It makes us feel like we are part of a larger community, which greatly impacts our commitment to the school."* Her positive experience of school climate seemed to enhance her overall well-being, contributing to her retention intention.

Participants also emphasized the importance of professional development opportunities and autonomy in shaping their well-being and intention to remain in the teaching profession. When teachers were provided with opportunities for growth and autonomy in their roles, it positively contributed to their retention. For example, Reza highlighted the significance of professional development in his work: *"When schools invest in our professional growth and provide us with some workshops and training sessions, it shows that they value teachers. It motivates me to improve and contribute more and more to the school community."* His access to professional development opportunities positively influenced his perceptions of well-being and intention to stay in the profession. Yasmin further emphasized the role of autonomy: *"Having the freedom to design my own lessons and use innovative teaching methods makes me feel more engaged and satisfied with my job as a teacher. In other words, such a freedom gives me a sense of ownership over my work."* Her experience of autonomy in her teaching role contributed to her perceived well-being and retention intention.

5. Discussion

The findings from the first research question align with existing literature on perfectionism and well-being among teachers. More specifically, the observation that self-oriented perfectionism impacts perceptions of well-being is consistent with research that suggests self-oriented perfectionism can lead to increased motivation, conscientiousness, and commitment to professional growth [18,51]. ECTs who exhibit self-oriented perfectionism may strive for excellence, continuously improve their teaching practices, and demonstrate a strong dedication to the learning outcomes of their students. However, the negative impact of self-oriented perfectionism on well-being corresponds to studies indicating that self-oriented perfectionism can lead to increased stress, burnout, and reduced job satisfaction [19,54]. The constant pressure to achieve perfection and the tendency for self-criticism can create a cycle of heightened stress and exhaustion among teachers. Similarly, the detrimental impacts of socially prescribed perfectionism on well-being is also consistent with previous research highlighting the negative effects of perceiving high expectations from others [55,56]. In this regard, ECTs who experience socially prescribed perfectionism may feel an overwhelming pressure to meet external expectations, leading to increased stress and reduced job satisfaction. The findings also underscore the importance of self-care practices and social support in mitigating the negative consequences of perfectionism on well-being. Engaging in self-care activities, seeking support from colleagues and mentors, and finding a balance between external expectations and personal well-being might be regarded as some essential strategies for ECTs to cope with perfectionism and maintain their overall well-being.

Moreover, these findings might be explained in light of the Job Demands-Resources Model (JD-R Model) [111,126] and the

Self-Determination Theory (SDT) [101]. The JD-R Model posits that job demands (e.g., high expectations, workload) can lead to burnout and decreased well-being, while job resources (e.g., support, autonomy) can enhance job satisfaction and well-being. Accordingly, social support, autonomy, and self-care practices acted as resources that help ECTs manage the demands of perfectionism and maintain their well-being. Additionally, the Self-Determination Theory emphasizes the importance of autonomy, competence, and relatedness in promoting well-being and intrinsic motivation. ECTs who exhibit self-oriented perfectionism may experience a sense of competence and autonomy in their commitment to professional growth. Conversely, socially prescribed perfectionism may undermine their sense of autonomy, as they feel pressured to meet external expectations. Thus, supporting teachers' autonomy and competence while providing a positive and supportive work environment can foster their overall well-being.

The findings for the second research question shed light on emotion regulation strategies that ECTs employ to manage their emotional experiences. The findings provided insights on how such strategies might contribute to their perceived wellbeing. Cognitive reappraisal emerged as a prominent strategy used by most of the participants, with teachers reframing challenges as opportunities for growth and focusing on the positive aspects of their teaching experiences. This finding aligns with the literature on emotion regulation, which highlights cognitive reappraisal as an adaptive strategy associated with increased well-being and reduced emotional distress [74]. Additionally, the findings revealed that some teachers engage in expressive suppression to maintain professionalism in the classroom, which aligns with previous research highlighting the prevalence of expressive suppression among educators [77]. However, it was evident that excessive use of expressive suppression can lead to emotional exhaustion and reduced job satisfaction, highlighting the importance of finding a balanced approach to emotional expression in teaching. Furthermore, the role of self-care practices and social support in promoting teacher well-being was evident in the findings. Engaging in self-care activities, such as exercise, mindfulness, and hobbies, served as effective strategies for emotional replenishment and stress reduction. Social support from colleagues, mentors, and friends provided valuable coping resources and emotional validation for teachers facing challenges in their professional lives. These findings align with existing literature emphasizing the positive impact of self-care and supportive relationships on teacher well-being [79,80].

The findings of this research question can be further explained in light of theoretical literature related to emotion regulation and well-being. Cognitive Reappraisal, as an effective strategy identified by the participants, aligns with the cognitive model of emotion regulation [127]. According to this model, individuals can reinterpret or reappraise a situation to alter their emotional response. By perceiving challenges as opportunities for growth and focusing on positive aspects, ECTs teachers might engage in cognitive reappraisal to manage their emotional experiences and promote well-being. Moreover, the use of expressive suppression observed among some participants can be understood in the context of emotional labor theory [128,129]. ECTs may feel the need to manage their emotions to meet professional expectations and create a positive classroom environment for their students [68,130,131]. However, this emotional labor can come at the cost of their own well-being, leading to emotional exhaustion and reduced job satisfaction [68]. The findings underscore the importance of addressing emotional labor and promoting authentic emotional expression in teaching. The importance of self-care practices and social support as perceived by the participants also aligns with the principles of the self-determination theory [101], which posits that individuals have innate psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Engaging in self-care activities and seeking support from others can fulfill these psychological needs, promoting teachers' well-being and motivation to remain in the profession.

The findings the third research question provided insights into the perceptions of ECTs in relation to their well-being and the resultant intention to remain in or leave the teaching profession. The results suggest that teacher well-being seems to play a crucial role in promoting teacher retention. Early career language teachers who perceive higher levels of well-being expressed more commitment to the teaching profession and showed a desire to continue teaching in the long term. This observation also might be explained through Job Demands-Resources model [109,111], which posits that job resources, including well-being and positive emotional experiences, contribute to work engagement and overall job satisfaction. When teachers experience positive emotions and satisfaction in their work, they are more likely to invest in their teaching roles and remain committed to their profession. Furthermore, the findings underscore the importance of organizational factors, such as supportive work environments and school climate, in shaping teacher well-being and retention. This aspect of the findings further aligns with the Social Exchange Theory [132], which suggests that positive exchanges between individuals and their organizations, such as support, resources, and autonomy, foster positive attitudes and commitment to the organization. Teachers who perceive their schools as supportive and empowering are more likely to experience higher levels of well-being and be motivated to stay in the teaching profession [101].

6. Study implications

The findings of this study have several implications for the field of education, particularly in the context of ECTs. Understanding the complex interplay between perfectionism, emotion regulation, well-being, and teacher retention provides insights into the challenges teachers face and informs the development of targeted interventions to support their well-being and retention. The study's results highlight the dual nature of perfectionism on teacher well-being [18,57,59]. While self-oriented perfectionism might positively impact motivation and professional growth, socially prescribed perfectionism mostly leads to stress and career dissatisfaction [28,29,36]. School administrators and policymakers can use this knowledge to design professional development programs that address self-oriented perfectionism positively, fostering a growth mindset [133] and supporting teachers' continuous improvement. Moreover, interventions targeting socially prescribed perfectionism could focus on reducing external pressures and creating a supportive school environment that values effort over perfection [134–136]. As emotion regulation emerged as a key factor influencing ECTs' well-being, it is also essential to incorporate emotion regulation training into teacher preparation programs and professional development initiatives [137–140]. Equipping teachers with effective emotion regulation strategies, such as cognitive reappraisal, can enhance their

ability to manage the emotional demands of the profession and reduce burnout. Moreover, providing resources and support for self-care practices and promoting collaborative professional learning communities can foster a culture of emotional well-being among educators [141,142].

Moreover, the findings of the study underscore the significance of organizational factors in shaping teacher well-being and retention [143–145]. School leaders should prioritize creating supportive work environments with positive climates [114]. Encouraging autonomy, providing adequate resources for professional development, and fostering supportive relationships among teachers can contribute to their emotional well-being and job satisfaction [94,106]. Furthermore, mentoring programs can be established to offer guidance and emotional support for ECTs during their formative years in the profession [146]. The positive impact of teacher well-being on retention emphasizes the need for comprehensive teacher retention strategies. Efforts should focus on promoting ECTs' well-being and job satisfaction to encourage their commitment to the profession. Schools and educational institutions can create a more nurturing and fulfilling work environment by addressing the specific factors that influence teacher well-being, leading to higher retention rates among early career educators.

7. Conclusions, limitations, and future research

This qualitative study explored the intricate relationship between perfectionism, emotion regulation, well-being, and teacher retention among early career language teachers in Iran. Through in-depth interviews with 15 participants, the findings provided insights into these teachers' experiences, perceptions, and challenges. The study revealed a complex interplay between different dimensions of perfectionism and teacher well-being. While self-oriented perfectionism positively influenced motivation, commitment to excellence, and professional growth, socially prescribed perfectionism led to increased stress, fear of failure, and career dissatisfaction. These findings emphasize the need to address perfectionism in a nuanced manner, recognizing its dual nature on teacher well-being. Emotion regulation emerged as a critical factor in managing ECTs' emotional experiences. Cognitive reappraisal was identified as an effective strategy, helping teachers reframe challenges as opportunities for growth and focus on positive aspects of teaching. On the other hand, expressive suppression had adverse effects, impacting well-being and necessitating balanced emotional expression. The importance of self-care practices and seeking social support in promoting emotional replenishment and coping was also highlighted. Teacher well-being emerged as a crucial factor influencing ECTs' intention to remain in or leave the profession. Enhanced commitment, job satisfaction, and work engagement positively influenced teacher retention. Organizational factors, including supportive work environments, school climate, and professional development opportunities, played a vital role in shaping teacher well-being and their decision to continue teaching.

While this study provides insights into the experiences of early career language teachers, it is essential to acknowledge its limitations. Firstly, in reflecting on how well the interviews answered the research questions and achieved the purpose of the study, it is important to note that while the semi-structured interview format facilitated in-depth exploration of participants' experiences, it also posed challenges. Specifically, the reliance on participants' self-reporting may have influenced the depth and breadth of insights into perfectionism and emotion regulation strategies. Although measures were taken to encourage open and honest responses, the inherent subjectivity of self-reported data could limit the scope of interpretations drawn from these narratives. Secondly, the selection process for participants, while aimed at capturing a diverse range of experiences among early career language teachers, may carry implications for bias. The criteria for selecting participants were designed to ensure relevance and richness of the data; however, this focus on ECTs in private schools potentially overlooks the nuanced experiences of those in public schools or with different levels of teaching experience. Lastly, while the sample size of 15 participants is appropriate for qualitative research and allowed for detailed thematic analysis, it inherently limits the breadth of perspectives and contexts represented. The findings of this study are specific to the participants involved, and additional research with larger and more diverse samples is necessary to validate and broaden the understanding of the relationship between perfectionism, emotion regulation, well-being, and teacher retention.

This study provides some directions for future research in teacher well-being and retention. Longitudinal studies tracking ECTs over an extended period can offer insights into their stability and changes in perfectionism, emotion regulation, and well-being. Understanding the trajectories of these factors and their impact on teacher retention can inform more targeted support initiatives. Conducting comparative studies across different countries and educational systems can reveal contextual variations in the experiences of ECTs. Comparing the impact of perfectionism, emotion regulation, and well-being on retention across diverse settings can inform global strategies for supporting and retaining educators. Integrating quantitative methods with qualitative data can provide a more comprehensive understanding of the complex relationships explored in this study. Combining survey data with in-depth interviews can yield both breadth and depth in exploring the experiences of ECTs. In conclusion, this study's findings underscore the importance of understanding perfectionism, emotion regulation, well-being, and their influence on teacher retention. Tailoring support for perfectionism, providing emotion regulation training, enhancing organizational support, and prioritizing teacher well-being are essential steps toward supporting and retaining early career language teachers. Acknowledging the study's limitations, future research should continue to explore these relationships in diverse contexts to advance our understanding of early career teacher experiences and inform evidence-based strategies for their well-being and professional sustainability.

Ethics statement

All data collection procedures were in agreement with the ethical standards of the institutional research committee and the 1964 Helsinki Declaration. Ethical review and approval was not required for this study in accordance with the local legislation and institutional requirements in Iran issued by National Committee for Ethics in Research [147]. The patients/participants provided their

written informed consent to participate in this study.

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Data availability

The datasets generated during and/or analyzed during the current study are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

Informed consent

The patients/participants provided their written informed consent to participate in this study.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Faegheh Sadat Sadraei: Writing – original draft, Validation, Resources, Methodology, Investigation, Formal analysis. **Zahra Ebrahimi:** Writing – original draft, Validation, Methodology, Investigation, Data curation. **Ismail Xodabande:** Writing – review & editing, Supervision, Conceptualization.

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.

Appendix A. Semi-Structured Interview Guide:

Opening:

- Start with a brief introduction about the purpose of the interview.
- Assure confidentiality and the anonymous treatment of their responses.
- Explain that there are no right or wrong answers and encourage openness.

Background Information:

1. Can you start by telling me about your journey into language teaching?
2. What inspired you to become a language teacher?

Experiences with Perfectionism:

3. Reflecting on your time as a teacher, have you felt pressure to meet certain standards or goals? Can you share specific instances?
4. In what ways do you set high standards for yourself in your teaching practice?
5. Have you ever felt that external expectations (from students, parents, administration, etc.) regarding your teaching were high? How did you deal with these perceptions?

Emotion Regulation Strategies:

6. Can you describe a challenging situation you've faced in your teaching career and how you managed your emotions during this time?
7. Are there specific strategies you employ to maintain a positive outlook or cope with stress related to teaching?
8. How do you balance expressing your emotions while maintaining professionalism in the classroom?

Well-being and Professional Fulfillment:

9. What aspects of teaching contribute most to your sense of well-being and job satisfaction?
10. Have there been moments in your teaching career that made you question your decision to be a teacher? How did you navigate these moments?
11. Can you discuss any support systems or resources that have been particularly beneficial for your well-being as a teacher?

Influence on Retention Decisions:

12. How does your current well-being and job satisfaction influence your thoughts about continuing in the teaching profession?
13. Are there specific factors or conditions that might lead you to consider leaving teaching? What might encourage you to stay?
14. Looking to the future, what changes or improvements would most positively impact your decision to remain in teaching?

Closing:

- Is there anything else about your experiences as an early career language teacher that you think is important and we haven't discussed?
- Thank the participant for their time and insights.

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