

## WHAT PREDICTS TEACHERS' LIFE SATISFACTION? DATA FROM 30 EUROPEAN COUNTRIES

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### Abstract

Research shows that teachers' life satisfaction is directly related to the quality of their work, student achievement, and job satisfaction (is associated with work quality and job-related outcomes). In addition, national context, including cultural factors, may play an important role in shaping individuals' life satisfaction. Although life satisfaction is a well-established psychological construct, its determinants remain insufficiently researched in a cross-national perspective. This study examined cross-national differences in teachers' life satisfaction using data from the European Social Survey (ESS) Round 11, including 2,229 teachers from 30 European countries. Data from the European Social Survey (ESS) Round 11, covering 30 European countries ( $n = 2229$  teachers), were used for the analysis. Life satisfaction was measured by asking participants to rate "All things considered, how satisfied are you with your life as a whole nowadays?" on a scale from 0 (extremely dissatisfied) to 10 (extremely satisfied). Multi-level modeling revealed significant differences in teachers' life satisfaction between countries. The model fits the data well (AIC = 8898.70, BIC = 8966.76, Pseudo- $R^2$  for fixed effects = .47, Pseudo- $R^2$  total = .52). Country-level differences accounted for 15% of the total variance in life satisfaction (ICC = 0.15), indicating that national context plays a meaningful role, although most variation occurs at the individual level. Mixed-effects linear regression analysis showed that self-transcendence values, happiness, positive affect, lower negative affect, and gender significantly predicted teachers' life satisfaction ( $p < .001$ ). When individual predictors were included in the regression model, the results showed that approximately 10 % of the variance in life satisfaction is attributable to between-country differences (ICC = 0.10). This explanatory decrease of country differences essentially indicates that life satisfaction is a more personal-level phenomenon and individual factors are more predictive of life satisfaction than country characteristics. Overall, the findings indicate that teachers' life satisfaction is primarily shaped by individual-level characteristics, while national context still plays a secondary but relevant role. This highlights valuable insights for practical implications and further research on teachers' well-being.

**Keywords:** *Teachers, life satisfaction, European Social Survey.*

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### 1. Introduction

Teaching is widely recognized as an especially demanding profession characterized by high cognitive, social, and emotional demands (Luque-Reca et al., 2022). Consequently, most existing research has focused on risk factors and harmful outcomes, such as teachers' stress and burnout (Dilekçi et al., 2025; Ghasemi, 2025; Reinke et al., 2025), as well as the increasing impact of job demands on teachers' mental health (Morris et al., 2025). However, there is a lack of research addressing the positive aspects of teachers' professional lives and ways to enhance them (Luque-Reca et al., 2022). Therefore, although studies have been conducted in many countries, teachers' overall life satisfaction remains an insufficiently explored topic. Moreover, research findings indicate that teachers report lower life satisfaction compared to the general population (Office for Standards in Education, 2019).

Life satisfaction is a central cognitive-evaluative component of subjective well-being (Luque-Reca et al., 2022). It is conceptualized as a reflective judgment individual's make about their life as a whole, based on a comparison between current life conditions and self-defined standards (Vittersø, 2025). Teachers' life satisfaction is the major dimension of well-being and has been associated with not only with teachers' level outcome, such as motivation (e.g., Kaya et al., 2024), their job satisfaction (e.g., Aydıntan & Koç, 2016; Demirel, 2014; Erdamar & Demirel, 2016), quality of their work (İlgan et al., 2015), but also with students-level outcomes, including academic achievement (e.g., Hoque et al., 2023) or developmental

indicators (Braun et al., 2020). These findings indicate that teachers' life satisfaction is not only a personal outcome but also a factor potentially linked to educational functioning. Importantly, life satisfaction is shaped by both individual characteristics and broader contextual conditions. Personal characteristics (e.g., values, affect, happiness) and demographic factors (e.g., gender, age) operate within broader socio-cultural environments that influence both evaluative standards and available life opportunities (Kushlev et al., 2019; Zalewska & Zwierzchowska, 2022; Lomas et al., 2025). National context, including cultural factors, also may play an important role in shaping individuals' life satisfaction (Lomas et al., 2025).

Cross-national research has consistently documented meaningful differences in life satisfaction across countries, highlighting the role of cultural and societal contexts in shaping well-being. For example, Krys and colleagues (2022) study highlights the potential utility and importance of distinguishing between positive and negative emotion expression, and both individual and societal perspectives in well-being research. The authors concluded that individual pathways to happiness may not necessarily promote the happiness of others (i.e., negative emotions predicted higher life satisfaction for the expresser but lower life satisfaction for society).

Despite extensive research on subjective well-being, comparatively limited attention has been devoted to examining how individual and country-level factors jointly contribute to teachers' life satisfaction within a multilevel framework. In particular, it remains unclear how much of the variance in teachers' life satisfaction can be attributed to national context versus individual characteristics across European countries. Therefore, the present study aims to investigate (a) the extent of between-country differences in teachers' life satisfaction and (b) key individual-level predictors of life satisfaction using multilevel modeling based on data from 30 European countries.

## 2. Methods

### 2.1. Sample and data collection

The data from the last Round 11 of the European Social Survey (ESS) in 2023-2024 were used (ESS ERIC, 2025) in order to evaluate factors, that predict teachers' life satisfaction, The European Social Survey is an academically-driven multi-country survey and is one of the biggest surveys conducted in Europe. In the 11th Round, the survey covered multiple European countries and employed the most rigorous methodologies and the survey was based on strict probability sampling principles (Stelmokienė et al., 2024). Sampling and its key principles of implementation in the ESS are guided by the requirements outlined in the official ESS webpage (<https://www.europeansocialsurvey.org/methodology/sampling>). The present study focused on respondents who identified their occupation as teachers. The final analytical sample consisted of 2229 teachers from 30 European countries.

### 2.2. Measures

The respondents of the survey were asked how satisfied in life in general they were by asking "All things considered, how satisfied are you with your life as a whole nowadays?" and evaluated their satisfaction from 0 to 10 points in Likert scale, where "0" meant "Extremely dissatisfied" and "10" – "Extremely satisfied". The authors of this article selected the following variables as predictors of teachers' life satisfaction: values (self-transcendence, self-enhancement, openness, conservation), happiness, negative affect, positive affect, gender and age. The Human Values Scale (21-item) developed by Shalom H. Schwartz was used to measure values. Negative affect was measured by asking: "During the past week, how often did you..." feel depressed, feel that everything you did was an effort, sleep restlessly, feel lonely, feel sad, or feel unable to get going (6 items,  $\alpha = .77$ ), and positive affect: "During the past week, how often did you..." feel happy and enjoy life (2 items,  $\alpha = .77$ ). Finally, happiness in ESS was measured using self-reported single-item question on a 0–10 scale, by asking: "Taking things together, how happy would you say you are?"

Although single-item measures receive criticism (Raudenská, 2023), the single-item life satisfaction and happiness indicators used in the ESS are considered as methodologically valid, as studies show their high construct and criterion validity and strong correlation with multi-item scales. For example, it has been empirically proven that the single-item measurement of life satisfaction is valid compared to the multi-item Satisfaction with Life Scale – SWLS (Cheung & Lucas, 2014). Besides, from a theoretical perspective, life satisfaction is defined as a global cognitive evaluation of life (Vittersø, 2025), so it can be measured with a clearly formulated, general single question. Also, the construct of happiness is universally applicable across cultures and the single-item measurement of happiness showed sufficient cross-national comparability (Raudenská, 2023). That is an important empirical evidence of cross-cultural measurement properties. Thus, ESS used single-item measurement for life satisfaction and happiness has been validated in prior research, particularly across diverse cultural settings.

### 3. Results

Multi-level modeling revealed significant differences in teachers' life satisfaction between countries and the significance of individual level factors. First, Mixed effects linear regression with random intercept at the country level was used (Table 1). These differences explain 15% of the variance (ICC = 0.15). Model fits the data well (AIC = 10404.70, BIC = 10421.82, Pseudo-R<sup>2</sup> (fixed effects) = 0.00, Pseudo-R<sup>2</sup> (total) = 0.15). Country-level differences accounted for 15% of the total variance in life satisfaction (ICC = 0.15), indicating that national context plays a meaningful role.

Table 1. Mixed effects linear regression results (30 countries).

Variable	B	SE	T	df	p
<i>Fixed effects</i>					
Intercept	7.42	0.14	54.69	32.35	<.001
<i>Random effects</i>					
Intercept variance (country)	0.65				
Residual variance	1.55				
ICC	0.15				

Note: B – unstandardized regression coefficient; SE – standard error; t – t statistic; ICC – intraclass correlation coefficient. The intercept is allowed to vary randomly across countries.

In Model 2, individual-level predictors included: values (self-transcendence, self-enhancement, openness; conservation), happiness, negative affect, positive affect, gender and age. Mixed-effects linear regression showed that self-transcendence values, happiness, positive affect, lower negative affect, and gender predict how satisfied with life as a whole the teachers are ( $p < .001$ ). The results are presented in Table 2. Model fits the data well (AIC = 8898.70, BIC = 8966.76, Pseudo-R<sup>2</sup> for fixed effects = 0.47, Pseudo-R<sup>2</sup> total = 0.52).

Table 2. Mixed effects linear regression predicting teachers' life satisfaction from individual-level factors.

Predictors	<i>How satisfied with life as a whole</i>			<i>How satisfied with life as a whole</i>		
	Estimates	CI	p	Estimates	CI	p
Intercept	7.42	7.15 – 7.69	<.001	2.26	1.58 – 2.93	<.001
Self-transcendence				-0.15	-0.26 – -0.04	.007
Self-enhancement				0.02	-0.05 – 0.10	0.547
Openness				0.02	-0.07 – 0.10	0.706
Conservation				0.00	-0.08 – 0.09	0.967
Happiness				0.64	0.60 – 0.69	<.001
Negative affect				-0.34	-0.49 – -0.19	<.001
Positive affect				0.15	0.05 – 0.25	.004
Gender (1 = male)				0.18	0.05 – 0.31	.005
Age				0.00	-0.00 – 0.01	0.147
<i>Random effects</i>						
$\sigma^2$	2.40			1.43		
$\tau_{00}$	0.42	country		0.16	country	
ICC	0.15			0.10		
N	30	country		30	country	
Observations	2229			2147		
Marginal R <sup>2</sup> / Conditional R <sup>2</sup>	0.000 / 0.150			0.472 / 0.525		

Generally, the results indicate that life satisfaction is primarily an individual-level phenomenon, as the between-country variance decreased substantially after including individual-level predictors. Specifically, the country-level variance was reduced from 0.42 to 0.16, suggesting that individual-level factors are more predictive of life satisfaction than country characteristics. After accounting for individual-level predictors, approximately 10% of the remaining variance in life satisfaction was attributable to between-country differences (ICC = .10).

#### 4. Discussion and conclusions

The main findings indicate that teachers' life satisfaction is mostly shaped by individual-level characteristics, while national context accounts for a smaller, yet significant share of the total variance. These results are consistent with previous research emphasizing the dominant role of personal factors in shaping teachers' well-being (Tong, 2025).

One possible explanation is that individual factors are more important than the national context because the individual-level characteristics are related with teacher's emotional state and subjective assessment of life. In turn, the national context in different countries (e.g., teachers' prestige in society, salary, social guarantees) creates the framework within which individual factors operate. Although this study did not analyze the interaction between these two domains, it can be interpreted that individual factors may be more important in countries where contextual support is weaker. On the other hand, supportive national context can help to mitigate unfavorable individual characteristics. This could be a direction for further research.

This study, like other studies, has its limitations. First, the impact of the national context may seem weaker due to the selected indicators, and other factors could reveal a stronger effect. Second, the study is not longitudinal, so causal relationships are only hypothetical. Finally, a single-question scale is sufficient for measuring selected variables, but further research on teachers' well-being could consider using other instruments. Besides, individual-level measures can reflect contextual norms, for example, although values are an individual-level measure, they reflect societal factors.

Based on the findings of this study that life satisfaction is largely an individual-level phenomenon, practical recommendations specifically emphasize individual-level interventions that can be implemented in educational institutions and teacher education. Therefore, it is recommended that educational institutions implement interventions that focus on positive aspects: enhancing subjective happiness, increasing positive affect, and reducing negative affect (e.g., stress, burnout). Since self-transcendence values (caring for others, meaningfulness, contribution to society) significantly predict life satisfaction, school leaders could systematically recognize the "soft" contribution of teachers (not only academic results) and encourage reflection on the meaning of a teacher's work. In addition, teacher training programs could include modules on teachers' values and professional identity. Since the results of this study revealed that female gender is more associated with life satisfaction, which may indicate that male teachers are less likely to seek emotional support, it is recommended that institutions develop gender-sensitive well-being strategies (e.g., recognizing different well-being needs).

In conclusion, the findings suggest that efforts to enhance teachers' life satisfaction should primarily focus on individual-level interventions aimed at promoting self-transcendence values, addressing gender-specific needs, and in general, strengthening teachers' psychological well-being.

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