

Understanding the factors supporting language teachers' sustained motivation until retirement

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Abstract

While many language teachers leave the profession early, others thrive and teach until retirement. Understanding how these teachers maintain their passion can help identify the support needed for their personal and professional growth. However, research on the factors behind their sustained happiness in the teaching profession is limited. The main objective of this qualitative study was to explore the beliefs and career stories of three recently retired German language teachers in Norway, recognized for their long-term motivation and effective teaching over several decades. Data were generated from in-depth semistructured interviews and analyzed through the lens of self-determination theory. The analysis revealed that the teachers shared several key characteristics. First, they enjoyed a high degree of autonomy related to the choice of subject content and teaching approaches. Second, they perceived themselves as highly competent in the subject and expressed a passion for it. Third, they cherished being with students and managed to establish good relationships with them. The findings suggest that teachers should be aware of their basic psychological needs and reflect on how they can be fulfilled. Furthermore, school administrators should foster trust in teachers as autonomous professionals and actively support their competency development and relationships with students and colleagues.

KEYWORDS

basic psychological needs, language teacher, motivation, retired teachers, self-determination theory

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There is little research on happy, thriving teachers (Hooker, 2020). There is, however, an abundance of research about the problematic sides of teaching, such as teachers' struggles with classroom management (Melnick & Meister, 2008), high workloads, burnout and emotional exhaustion (Chang, 2009; Hakanen et al., 2006), attrition (Borman & Dowling, 2008; Ingersoll, 2001; Mason, 2017), lack of administrative support (Ma & Macmillan, 1999; Tickle et al., 2011), and low payment and status (Aydin et al., 2015).

Despite these worrying tendencies, many teachers thrive in their profession and remain in their jobs until retirement. What can be learned from focusing on these teachers, "teachers of hope and happiness, heroic in their resistance and resilience" (Bullough, 2011, p. 16)? Given the scant research on thriving teachers in general and language teachers in particular, this study explored the teaching lives and experiences of three recently retired language teachers in the Norwegian school context. Regardless of occasional setbacks and stressors, these teachers managed to maintain a consistently high level of motivation throughout their 42-year careers. Insights into the reasons for these teachers' long-term engagement and enthusiasm for their profession can inform our field in several ways. First and foremost, they can help us understand what kind of support language teachers need "to ensure that they flourish in their professional roles and are able to be the best teachers they can possibly be—for the sake of their own professional well-being as well as for their learners' well-being and ultimate learning" (Mercer & Kostoulas, 2018, p. 2).

LITERATURE REVIEW

Why some teachers stay and others go

Investigating the factors explaining teachers' well-being, motivation, and engagement, or lack thereof, is important for several reasons. First, better insights into why some teachers want to stay in the profession and others leave may help develop initiatives to prevent the high rates of attrition among teachers in general (e.g., Borman & Dowling, 2008; Chang, 2009; Ingersoll, 2001; Santoro, 2018) and among language teachers in particular (Mason, 2017). Second, supporting teachers' well-being is vital from a human rights perspective, as all employees should have the right to feel well and secure at work. From an economic perspective, we know that less motivated and mentally exhausted teachers are more often absent and in need of substitution than thriving teachers, resulting in high costs for schools (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2011). And finally, motivated teachers also have more motivated students and achieve better learning results compared with less motivated teachers (Bernaus & Gardner, 2008; Frenzel et al., 2009).

Teachers have reported several reasons for staying in the profession and maintaining their motivation, such as having a passion for teaching and the opportunity to work with students and support their learning. In fact, these factors have been reported across studies and contexts to be the prime factors for job satisfaction (Perrachione et al., 2008; Sutton & Wheatley, 2003). Furthermore, teachers who feel appreciated by their administrators (Day & Gu, 2009), have a degree of autonomy at the workplace (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2014; Wermke et al., 2019), enjoy good relationships with students and colleagues (Spilt et al., 2011; Veldman et al., 2013), and have opportunities for professional development (Thoonen et al., 2011) are more motivated and satisfied than teachers who lack these experiences. Furthermore, teachers' perceived self-efficacy, that is, "teachers' beliefs in their own ability to plan, organize, and carry out activities that are required to attain given educational goals" (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2010, p. 1059), is positively related to job satisfaction and negatively correlated with burnout.

Previous research has investigated demographic factors that may explain differences between teachers, such as context, school type, gender, and age (Bogler, 2002; Lowe et al., 2019; Ma & Macmillan, 1999). Of special interest for this study is teachers' years of experience and age. Most studies on attrition and retention have concentrated on the early years of teaching, documenting that between

20% and 50% of teachers leave the profession during their first years (Ingersoll, 2001). Teachers who stay on and enter their mid careers, however, have often been described as motivated, content, and confident (Hargreaves, 2005), although they, too, clearly face challenges and shifting motivation (Shin et al., 2023; Sulis et al., 2023).

Important work has been done to identify different stages across teachers' career trajectories, for example, the studies by Day and Gu (2009), Gu and Day (2007), Huberman (1989, 1993), Sammons et al. (2007), and Sulis et al. (2023). Although the trajectories in these studies differ concerning the number of identified career stages, they have in common that the later stages of teachers' careers—typically defined as 20+ years of experience—are described as times of declining motivation, growing dissatisfaction, and withdrawal (see also Ma & Macmillan, 1999). However, Huberman (1989, 1993) recognized considerable variation among the teachers, including teachers who did not seem to experience declined motivation but instead remained engaged and enthusiastic about their work until retirement. However, as also suggested by Day and Gu (2009), too little is still known about the so-called veteran or third-age teachers “and how and why they have managed (or not managed) to continue to fulfil their original call to teaching” (p. 441).

Existing research on teacher attrition and retention and the experiences of veteran teachers has mainly focused on teachers in general, whereas few studies have investigated these issues for subject teachers, including language teachers (Mason, 2017). Researchers have suggested that language teachers may have particularly stressful working lives given the demands to stay updated on subject matter knowledge related to several subdisciplines, such as linguistics, culture, and literature (Hammadou & Bernhardt, 1987). Furthermore, language teachers must maintain their own language skills in addition to content knowledge, and they need to support students struggling with language anxiety and unwillingness to communicate (Gkonou & Miller, 2017; Gregersen et al., 2023; Piechurska-Kuciel, 2011). Indeed, language teachers may suffer from language anxiety themselves (Horwitz, 1996). Only Babic et al.'s study (2023), also reported and discussed in Sulis et al. (2023), has previously explored the factors supporting or hindering the motivation and well-being of veteran language teachers (but see Babic & Talbot, 2019; Oxford et al., 2018, for veteran language teacher educators' perspectives). Through in-depth interviews with veteran language teachers with between 24 and 31 years of experience, Babic et al. identified different pathways toward retirement. Their findings are similar to those of previous studies, showing that several teachers perceived stress and were prepared to retire. Nevertheless, some teachers were busy with work and not thinking of retirement, and a few were still thriving. The reasons for wanting to leave the profession or stay could both be explained by factors in school, but also by individual factors such as illness and caregiver burdens.

Self-determination theory

Self-determination theory (SDT; e.g., Deci & Ryan, 1985, 2000, 2008) has become one of the most influential theories for understanding people's motivation and well-being, or lack thereof. Self-determination refers to “a quality of human functioning that involves the experience of choice. [It is] the capacity to choose and have those choices (–) be the determinants of one's actions” (Deci & Ryan, 1985, p. 38). SDT makes a distinction between autonomous and controlled motivations. People with a strong autonomous motivation act with a sense of inner volition and choice, that is, they are intrinsically motivated, whereas people with a strong controlled motivation tend to act “with the experience of pressure and demand toward specific outcomes that comes from forces perceived to be external to the self” (Deci & Ryan, 2008, p. 14). Furthermore, SDT proposes that people—independent of age, gender, culture, and other factors—have three basic psychological needs: competence, autonomy, and relatedness (Deci & Ryan, 2000). These needs must be met for individuals to thrive and maintain their motivation for continued learning and development. Following from this, the three basic needs must also be met for people's satisfaction, motivation, and effective performance at work (Gagné & Deci, 2005). *Autonomy* refers to people's sense of initiative and ownership in their own

decisions and actions. Teachers, whose autonomy is restricted by the curriculum and other regulations, must have the freedom to make professional choices related to the content and their approaches to teaching (Hyslop-Margison & Sears, 2010; Wermke et al., 2019). *Competence* refers to a feeling of mastery and of being in control of one's learning. Feeling effective and successful in one's efforts stimulates individuals to be persistent in maintaining and enhancing their skills and competencies. Language teachers need to feel mastery of many competencies, such as their own language skills, classroom management, developing engaging teaching activities, and supporting students in their learning. They also need to feel they are in control of their own professional development (Yang, 2021). *Relatedness* refers to people's sense of belonging and connectedness, caring for others, and being seen and valued. For teachers to have optimal working environments, they need to feel relatedness with their students, colleagues, and administrators (Eyal & Roth, 2011; Soini et al., 2010). Thus, motivation is not only a cognitive factor depending on and happening within the individual, but also highly dependent on the social context and to what extent others help facilitate the fulfillment of the needs.

In language education, SDT has primarily been used to explore students' learning and how teachers can accommodate students' basic psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness (e.g., Haukås et al., 2023; Jones et al., 2009; Lou et al., 2018; Muñoz & Ramirez, 2015), with little research investigating language teachers' own motivation. Nevertheless, existing studies on language teacher motivation and SDT have suggested that language teachers' basic psychological needs must also be met for them to thrive and be willing to engage in professional development (e.g., Hutcheson, 2016; Yang, 2021). Yet, to the best of my knowledge, no studies have used SDT to comprehend teachers' motivation throughout their careers until retirement, and the extent to which their motivation can be linked to the fulfillment of their basic psychological needs.

Summing up, there is an abundance of research related to teacher attrition, particularly concerning the high leaving rates of early career teachers. There is also an abundance of research concerning the problematic aspects of being a teacher, frequently linking the teaching profession to a "culture of unhappiness" (Bottery, 2003). Much less is known about late-career teachers, and about those thriving in their profession. Most research indicates that veteran teachers are less motivated than younger teachers, but that there are also some highly engaged teachers among them. Nevertheless, no studies have so far examined the beliefs and experiences of already retired and previously highly engaged language teachers. Furthermore, investigating the experiences of retired language teachers through the lens of SDT remains unexplored. As suggested by Werbińska (2016), retired teachers have a distance to their profession that may provide both themselves and others new insights related to key factors determining teachers' joys and struggles during their teaching lives. Consequently, the aim of this study was to identify key characteristics of retired language teachers who remained highly engaged throughout their careers. Understanding these characteristics provides insights for language teachers, leaders, policymakers, and teacher educators into the support that language teachers need to thrive and remain in their profession.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Given the lack of previous research on this topic, a qualitative, exploratory approach was adopted to address the following research questions:

- RQ1. What characterizes the teaching biographies of recently retired and previously highly engaged language teachers?
- RQ2. To what extent can teachers' sustained engagement be explained by the fulfillment of their basic psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness?

TABLE 1 Teachers' biographical information.

Pseudonym	Country of birth	Age of retirement	Years of teaching	Teaching subjects
Berta	Germany	67	42	5
Huldra	Norway	65	42	5
Ina	Norway	67	42	2

METHODOLOGY

Context and participants

This study is set in Norway, where various paths can be taken to qualify as teachers. Recently, a 5-year university teacher education was introduced for all levels of teaching in school, with the requirement of writing a master's thesis. Earlier models, however, required between 2 and 5 years of study, with some models preparing teachers to teach up to 10 different subjects at the primary school level, and other models specializing teachers to teach two to three subjects at the secondary level. Teachers at the secondary level (the context of this study) typically teach two or more subjects simultaneously, depending on the needs of the school.

The teaching profession in Norway has increasingly been steered by accountability policies, frameworks, and guidelines (Maaranen & Afdal, 2022). The curriculum is outcome based and there are nationally developed tests and exams that the teachers need to prepare their students for. Nevertheless, teachers have a large degree of autonomy concerning pedagogical planning, including the selection of learning activities and materials. The curricula for foreign languages during the last decades have broadly defined competence aims, thus giving the teachers much freedom of choice of which topics to include and how to teach.

In this exploratory study, secondary school language teachers of German were recruited based on the following criteria: They should be language teachers in Norwegian secondary schools, recently retired, and have a reputation for having been particularly engaged throughout their careers. Three teachers were selected based on suggestions from other language teachers, previous German school students' positive reports, and the researcher's own observations during school visits and professional development courses. The participants, who previously worked at three different schools, were contacted either by email or phone and invited to take part in the study. They were informed that the main objective of the study was to better understand the motivations and practices of particularly engaged language teachers who had remained in their profession until retirement. Furthermore, participants were informed about the protection and anonymization of their data, their right to withdraw from the study at any time, and the approval of the study by the Norwegian Centre for Research Data.

All three teachers consented to take part in the study and chose their own pseudonyms: Berta, Huldra, and Ina. Notably, all participants were women.¹ Table 1 gives an overview of the three teacher profiles regarding their country of birth, age of retirement, years of teaching, and the number of subjects they were qualified to teach (including German).

Research instrument and procedures

The type of data collection for this study can be referred to as an acquaintance interview (Garton & Copland, 2010), meaning that the interviewer and the interviewees had met earlier and had a prior formal relationship with each other. The participants came from the same region and had individually met the researcher in several contexts, such as during school visits and at professional development seminars. Roiha and Iikkanen (2022) argued that "acquaintance interviews can offer researchers a fruitful arena for utilizing the already existing common ground between them and their research

participants” (p. 1). To build trust, it was seen as an additional advantage that the researcher had previously worked as a language teacher, as this could provide a better understanding of the context and the teachers’ professional lives.

Given the lack of research in the field, conducting semistructured interviews was regarded as the optimal approach to collect data from the participants. Such interviews allow for comparison across participants. At the same time, they are sufficiently flexible to let participants have the freedom to share unique experiences and topics they themselves wish to address (Drever, 1995). The interview questions were developed partly based on interview guides from two similar interview studies focusing on language teachers’ well-being and teacher happiness for in-service teachers (Hooker, 2020; Talbot, 2021).

A first version of the interview guide was shared with a particularly engaged language teacher approaching retirement. She was informed about the objective of the study and asked to comment on the clarity and meaningfulness of the questions as well as provide suggestions for reformulations and the addition of questions she felt could add further insights into the topic. Her feedback was valuable for reformulating several questions by using terminology that the teachers would be more familiar with. The final interview guide addressed the following main themes: (a) background and motivation for becoming a language teacher, (b) language teacher identity, (c) language teacher motivation, (d) stressors, and (e) work–life balance.

Interview participants should always be placed in the most favorable condition for sharing their thoughts and experiences (Van der Maren, 2010). Thus, making sure the teachers were given enough time to reflect on their long language teaching histories, all interview questions were shared with them in advance. Furthermore, they were invited to share their reflections in the language(s) of their choice (Norwegian or German).

Analysis

The verbatim-transcribed data set consisted of 30,724 words and was analyzed using a combination of inductive and deductive thematic analysis. Thematic analysis can be described as “a method for identifying, analyzing and reporting patterns (themes) within data” (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 79), and is a stepwise process. In the context of this study, the first analytical step was already taken while conducting the semistructured interviews, as constant choices had to be made on how to follow up the thoughts and experiences of the teachers. Immediately following each interview, my own reflections were noted. Furthermore, transcribing the interviews was a helpful process to get deeper insights into the data set, including taking notes during the process to get an impression of the main themes. Thereafter, reading the transcripts multiple times and coding the interviews in the data management software NVivo gave opportunities for a more detailed analysis in which main themes and subthemes could be identified.

The coding of the interviews in the first round was done inductively. Thus, an open, bottom-up coding scheme was generated without specifying a theoretical framework, and by adding new codes as deemed necessary. This resulted in 19 categories, which were subsequently grouped into the following major themes: passion for teaching, passion for the subject, relationships, and professional development. In a second, deductive round, the data were coded top-down through the lens of SDT, using competence, relatedness, and autonomy as the main categories. Subsequently, the two rounds of coding were compared, and categories and themes from the first round that could be identified as belonging to one of the SDT themes were merged into them. Additionally, one theme that could not easily be fitted into the SDT main themes (advice for other teachers) was added. Thus, the final set of themes with subthemes in parentheses were formulated as follows: autonomy (subject autonomy, collaboration), competence (subject competence, teaching competence), relatedness (relatedness with students, relatedness with colleagues and leaders), and advice for other teachers. Finally, compelling quotes that could both highlight typical characteristics of each theme and/or that were representative

for each participant were chosen and translated into English by the author (see the [Online Supporting Information](#) for the original untranslated versions of all quotes discussed in this article). However, the final writing of the article can also be seen as part of the analytical process in a thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). It includes a number of decisions, since it is normally the only way for readers to “understand the grounds on which it (the study) was undertaken” (Lincoln, 2001, p. 25) and, thereby, to evaluate its trustworthiness and relevance.

Member checking is important to create trustworthiness in qualitative research (Creswell & Miller, 2000). In this study, this was done by producing a video where the researcher presented her analysis and findings with the teachers several months before the article was submitted for peer review. Sharing the video with the teachers allowed them to validate the researcher’s analysis of their experiences and stories, but also to speak out if they felt misrepresented. All three participants reported having seen the video, and they expressed gratitude for focusing on an important topic for the teacher profession. However, member checking can also be a way to “give back” to the research participants and to engage them in a reflective process (Candela, 2019). Huldra expressed that sharing her experiences in the interview and seeing the video had had an important and even therapeutic effect on her. In an email to the researcher, she wrote:

I think that teachers do too little (if they do it at all?) of such reflection. What is nice/fun/stressful/hard etc. about my job? Do I have the inner joy that is needed, or is there only “eat to work, and work to be able to eat”? It is my conviction that if the inner flame does not burn as it should over time, then one can become ill. It is not healthy to just work because you have to. We have to get excited as teachers, and the key is to meet the student as a whole person. (Huldra, Email, 25 February 2022)

FINDINGS

In the following, the main themes with corresponding subthemes are addressed in turn by presenting and comparing the teacher’s reflections and experiences related to the themes.

Autonomy

Being autonomous in choosing the content and the approaches when teaching the German subject was important to all three teachers. Ina explained she had mainly worked in a school with little collaboration. This had made her very independent:

What I liked was that you had the freedom of methods. You walk into the classroom and you can decide for yourself. No one else says you have to do it like this or that. That would be really frustrating. I can do it in my own ways, as long as it is within the framework of the curriculum. (Ina, Interview, 14 February 2022)

In fact, collaborating with other teachers was not a preference for Ina:

I must admit that I am more of the solo player type. I realize that collaboration can be valuable, but then it depends on who you are working with. I don’t like to be forced to collaborate. This happened during the reforms in the nineties. I found that difficult and agreed with my partner to just pretend to be collaborating to please the leadership, and then we just did our own things. We were both ok with that, no bad blood between us. (Ina, Interview, 14 February 2022)

Huldra liked to collaborate with other teachers in the other language subjects she was teaching (Norwegian and English). But being the only German teacher in her school, she admitted that she enjoyed having the freedom to decide everything herself: “It was lovely to keep the German subject to myself. To have a subject where you don’t have to relate to and plan every lesson in detail with someone else” (Huldra, Interview, 25 February 2022).

Berta, however, while being extremely autonomous in all her initiatives in and out of the classroom, missed more collaboration among colleagues. She would have liked to collaborate not only with other German teachers but also across subjects. She felt that her colleagues hesitated to collaborate with her, and that there was minimal support or recommendations from the leadership that such collaboration was welcome and seen as an asset for their students’ learning and for the professional development of the teachers. Thus, Berta mainly found her partners for collaboration elsewhere, among engaged people in language teachers’ associations, in national and international projects, and by recruiting and inviting numerous language assistants and guests to her classroom. Berta enjoyed her freedom to initiate new projects and teaching approaches, claiming she would always go on with her plans regardless of receiving support from her leaders or not.

Competence

Regarding fulfilling the need for competence, it became clear from the analysis that all three teachers felt mastery of the German subject. Their confidence was related to speaking the language fluently, knowing the details of grammar, and having deep insights into the cultures, history, and present situation in German-speaking countries. Berta grew up and studied to become a teacher in Germany, and thus felt more confident to speak and explore in her teaching of German than in her other language subjects. Both Huldra and Ina reported that they had spent many summer holidays as travel guides for German tourists or in German-speaking countries while working as teachers during the regular school year. These rich and varied experiences helped them maintain and develop their language skills and deepened their cultural knowledge and intercultural understanding, which they believed had positive effects for their mastery of the subject in the classroom. All teachers emphasized that knowing one’s subject well is necessary for your well-being as a language teacher. This also meant staying updated on recent linguistic and cultural developments, such as new terms or political happenings. Furthermore, the teachers said that the students quickly noticed that they were confident in their subject, which would make them respect and trust their teacher. Witnessing the students’ respect and trust resulted in increased self-efficacy for the teachers.

Another important aspect of competence that the teachers referred to was the ability to engage their students and support them in their learning. Seeing themselves as leaders and supervisors of learning, and feeling competent in doing so, were important for their self-efficacy. Ina reported having found her teacher identity quite early in her career. She loved being “on stage” telling the students about important events in German history or explaining with enthusiasm a tricky grammar rule. Whereas Ina was, with few exceptions, content teaching according to similar principles throughout, Huldra and Berta were constantly exploring new ways to approach language teaching. To Huldra, an important turning point was when she learned about the concept of “communicative competence” in the 1980s and decided to move away from a strongly grammar-focused, cognitive approach, toward seeing communication as the ultimate and most meaningful purpose of the subject. Still, she did not want to leave grammatical correctness behind, and consequently developed her own approach that could combine communication with a precise understanding of the language. Berta stated that her life motto was to stay updated and to engage in lifelong learning. She was particularly invested in developing her teaching approaches, which resulted in the initiation of and participation in numerous projects, both in the classroom and together with national and international partners. Completing these projects and seeing the results of the students’ learning was an important source for her feeling of competence in the profession.

Relatedness

Relatedness with students

All three teachers said that a good relationship with the students was central to their engagement and motivation for being teachers. “To be a teacher, you need to like people, you need to like students,” Ina said in her interview (14 February 2022). A perfect day at school for her was when the students showed interest in the topic she had chosen for the lesson, being curious and asking questions. She saw it as one of her main strengths as a teacher that she was able to connect with most students: “You need to have a good dialogue with them and have some fun with them too. And the worth of that connection and seeing them become engaged, cannot be counted in money” (Ina, Interview, 14 February 2022).

Huldra expressed a deep compassion for all her students: “You need to love them all, the high performing students, the low performing ones, and those with discipline problems or with a dislike for the subject” (Interview, 25 February 2022). During four decades of teaching, she had become increasingly conscious of how to establish close relationships with all students and between students. “I think I have had the ability to get my students interested and engaged. But of course, you cannot do that if you walk around like a zombie in the classroom,” Huldra claimed. Always during the first interaction with her students, she would declare that everybody should feel well and safe and no laughing at others would be tolerated. The relatedness in the group was systematically developed by routines such as celebrating new learning steps and by frequently telling them how proud she was of them and how privileged she felt to be allowed to be their teacher:

You need to be very physical, smile, laugh and use body language. This is so much fun! Let’s crack some codes together! I’m so proud of you! This is so good, you are fantastic! Things like that. The students get really engaged, and it feels real for me too. It is not something I just say, because I get really fond of them. (Huldra, Interview, 25 February 2022)

Huldra had kept letters from the students from four decades of teaching and showed several of them during the interview. Typical feedback in these letters was that she had been a very engaged and competent teacher who cared about everyone and was strict in a good way.

Berta built relationships with students in slightly different ways than Ina and Huldra. By initiating numerous projects where the content was developed along with the students, she demonstrated she trusted them and expected them to do their best. Quite often, the autonomy, creativity, and engagement of the students surpassed her own expectations, which inspired her to continuously embark on new projects. One of the best parts of being a teacher for Berta was to get to know and spend time together with “the different student personalities” and help them learn. One of her most memorable events was to set up a play that also included the schools’ cognitively impaired students and perform the play both locally and internationally. Like Ina and Huldra, Berta maintained that being in a good mood in the classroom was very important. She would often sing out her messages to wake people up, and a drawing made by one of the students showed her in a typical position, standing between students whistling.

Having compassion for and a close relationship with the students also meant that students’ struggles in and outside of school would occupy the teachers when the school day was over. Ina said she had problems shutting out thinking of students she knew were struggling: “They kept churning in my head, day and night. It was hard to let them go, although I told myself that I could not do more at the moment” (Interview, 14 February 2022). Huldra was also aware of herself as a teacher constantly thinking of and worrying about struggling students. Similarly, Berta said that students quickly find the teachers they can confide in and who will meet them with empathy, and that she was one of them: “In between classes, students have told me that their parents split up, and there were several instances of suicide attempts among our students. Then it is important to be mentally balanced yourself and act professionally” (Interview, 15 February 2022).

Despite thinking of and caring for their students outside of the school hours, in addition to pre- and post-planning their teaching, none of the teachers regretted that this was the case. They had all adopted and accepted a language teacher identity where there was no sharp distinction between work and private life. Ina said she had always thought this is what it is like to be a teacher. Huldra expressed her views in similar terms in her interview (25 February 2022): “You bring home the struggles, but also the joys.” Berta said she never considered balancing work and private life, because such a split did not exist in her life.

Relatedness with colleagues and administrators

All three teachers reported they had enjoyed good relationships with their colleagues throughout their careers. Ina missed the social 1980s and the 1990s, when a lot of good conversations among teachers of all subjects happened during teaching breaks. This mainly disappeared when teachers were given access to computers and working spaces in school. Nevertheless, during later years, she still enjoyed the chats with her colleagues. Berta and Huldra had similar experiences of good conversations and relationships with their colleagues. Berta laughed when saying: “I was called the rock star of foreign languages!” (Interview, 15 February 2022). Nevertheless, Berta had experienced a lack of support and compassion from the principal and school leadership in critical times. When her car was vandalized with a Nazi symbol, or when students from other classes entered the classroom with a Nazi greeting, the principal did nothing to address these problematic issues with the students.

Huldra reported a traumatic incident toward the end of her career. This involved a conflict among students, and she wanted to help solve their problems like she would normally do. Her attempt to help was misunderstood by the parents, who claimed she had threatened their children. Huldra’s shock was the lack of support from the new school principal, who sided entirely with the parents and turned her back on Huldra. The conflict with the principal escalated and ended with sick leave for Huldra.

Retired teachers’ advice

Throughout the interviews, the teachers frequently addressed what they thought were necessary qualities and competencies in a teacher. Additionally, they were asked what advice they would give to new language teachers on what to focus on to thrive in the profession for several decades. Table 2 shows the qualities that were highlighted the most by the teachers.

The table clearly indicates a high level of agreement among the teachers regarding the approaches that foster long-term engagement and motivation. These approaches encompass both subject and teaching competence, as well as passionate engagement with both the subject and the students. As summarized by Ina, “You need to have a passion for your subject, know your subject well, and love people. There are teachers who teach a subject without being particularly passionate about it. I could never be one of those” (Interview, 14 February 2022).

In addition, there are elements highlighted by individual teachers. Interestingly, only Berta emphasized the importance of engaging in professional development as a key source for maintaining teachers’ motivation. She mentioned participating in numerous projects, shorter courses, and completing several university studies while working as a teacher.

DISCUSSION

Whereas numerous studies have investigated the factors behind teachers’ struggles, burnout, and reasons for leaving the profession (e.g., Aydin et al., 2015; Borman & Dowling, 2008; Chang, 2009; Hakanen et al., 2006; Ingersoll, 2001; Mason, 2017; Melnick & Meister, 2008), the main aim of this

TABLE 2 Retired teachers' advice for a long and fulfilling career.

Advice	Berta	Huldra	Ina
Know your subject well	X	X	X
Love your subject	X	X	X
Be engaged	X	X	X
Be well prepared	X	X	X
Develop a good relationship with your students	X	X	X
Have high expectations for your students' learning	X	X	X
Combine communication and a focus on correctness	X	X	X
Give frequent and constructive feedback	X	X	
Be systematic		X	
Engage in continuous professional development	X		
Become familiar with the culture in your school			X
Get yourself a professional network inside and outside of school	X		

Note: "X" indicates that a teacher expressed this advice.

study was to gain understanding of the factors supporting the long-term motivation of three recently retired language teachers who had remained in the profession for more than four decades. The data collected through semistructured interviews and the following analysis generated rich insights into the teachers' career stories. Furthermore, the analysis revealed that most of the teachers' experiences and reflections concerning their happiness in and motivation for the profession could be related to the fulfillment of their basic psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Deci & Ryan, 1985, 2000, 2008).

According to Deci and Ryan (2008), autonomous motivation should be promoted in education and elsewhere, as it predicts persistence and strong commitment, and is also reliably related to psychological well-being. Likewise, existing literature on teachers' professional lives has highlighted the importance of teachers having the freedom to make independent choices concerning how and what to teach in their classrooms (Hutcherson, 2016; Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2014; Wermke et al., 2019). The participants in this study seemed to have enjoyed a high degree of autonomy as German teachers. Huldra appreciated the possibility of designing her teaching approaches and content herself. Similarly, Ina actively avoided collaboration to be able to teach in her own ways. Although missing collaboration partners in her school, Berta seemed to be extremely autonomous, constantly initiating new projects both locally and internationally. Thus, the teachers' high perceived degree of autonomy through their teaching careers has likely contributed to their long-term motivation (Eyal & Roth, 2011).

SDT predicts that teachers feeling mastery and who are given possibilities for professional growth are more likely to be motivated and thrive (Deci & Ryan, 1985, 2000, 2008; Niemiec & Ryan, 2009; Yang, 2021). Perceiving themselves as competent language teachers appeared to have been central for the teachers' confidence and well-being during the decades of teaching. For all three, this included a high proficiency in the German language, knowledge of the language as a system, and insights into the cultures and current debates in the German-speaking countries. They all insisted that knowing one's subject well, and even loving it, is key to a good life as a teacher. The strong emphasis on being proficient in the language and the subject is an important finding, as previous research in the field has mainly focused on more general and non-subject-specific factors (e.g., Babic et al., 2023; Day & Gu, 2009). Interestingly, the analysis of the teachers' experiences and beliefs showed that feeling competent in their teaching can take quite different forms. Whereas Ida had a more teacher-centered approach with a love for telling and showing, Huldra combined a teacher-centered approach with a systematic development of team spirit and various student-centered activities in her classes.

Berta, meanwhile, was strongly oriented toward experimentation and toward giving the students a large degree of autonomy. As all three teachers were known for good learning outcomes by the students, this suggests that quite different teaching approaches can be effective, and that more traditional ways of teaching, as in the case of Ina, should not automatically be regarded as outdated or insufficient based on new pedagogical trends or reforms. Furthermore, the participants' self-perceived high linguistic and teaching competences may have facilitated their love for their students and the close relationship with them, as suggested in previous research (Dewaele & Mercer, 2018).

Several studies have shown that having close relationships with students is a key reason why teachers want to teach and remain teachers (Hooker, 2020; Perrachione et al., 2008; Sutton & Wheatley, 2003) and a key predictor of teachers' well-being (Spilt et al., 2011; Veldman et al., 2013). In addition to strong recommendations for knowing and loving one's subject, the teachers repeatedly emphasized the importance of liking their students and building good relationships with them. The joy of spending time with young people, connecting with them, and seeing them learn was central to their teacher identities. Their stories from the classrooms and their beliefs about teaching suggest that they were socially and emotionally competent teachers able to develop supportive and encouraging relationships with their students (Frenzel et al., 2009; Jennings & Greenberg, 2009). This is consistent with Fredrickson's (2004) broaden-and-build theory, indicating that the teachers' close relationships with their students not only heightened their positive emotions but also nurtured an enduring commitment to strengthening these relationships. However, the close connection with students also entailed involvement in their struggles and accepting a teacher identity without a distinct boundary between work and private life. While the three teachers appeared comfortable with this lifestyle, others may face negative consequences, including reduced motivation and job satisfaction. In some cases, teachers may choose to leave the profession if they struggle to maintain a balance between their professional and personal lives (Sorensen & McKim, 2014).

The perceived relatedness with the students appeared to be more important than the relationship with colleagues and leaders for the three teachers. As also noted by Hooker (2020), the main sources for teachers' happiness are typically linked to interacting with the students: "There are no references to colleagues, administrative work, parents or professional learning meetings, which as well as classroom time with children make up a significant part of how a teacher spends their day" (p. 78). Nevertheless, when a teacher feels no support from colleagues or administration, this tends to have negative consequences and sometimes leads to teachers leaving their jobs (Ma & Macmillan, 1999; Tickle et al., 2011). Berta and Huldra both perceived a lack of support from their leaders in critical situations. In Huldra's case, this culminated in sick leave, highlighting the potential consequences when teachers' basic psychological needs are unmet. Clearly, the role of school leaders is pivotal in ensuring that teachers feel acknowledged, supported, and respected (Eyal & Roth, 2011). However, as Sulis et al. (2023) discussed, many school leaders also struggle with heavy workloads and a perceived lack of autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Thus, Sulis et al. (2023) argued that leaders must receive adequate training and support "to ensure they are equipped with the skills to take care of their staff properly and that they themselves can serve as positive role models for wellbeing behaviors" (p. 180).

Although the findings of this exploratory study are not generalizable across larger populations and contexts, implications for teachers and school administrators can be suggested. The analysis of the reported experiences of the three retired teachers suggests that their basic psychological needs of autonomy, competence, and relatedness had, to a large extent, been met throughout their teaching lives. Learning from these insights, teachers need to become aware of some key factors that can help them maintain their motivation and willingness to stay in the profession. This includes identifying ways to experience autonomy and agency within the restrictions of the curriculum and their educational contexts (Hyslop-Margison & Sears, 2010; Sulis et al., 2023; Wermke et al., 2019). Furthermore, teachers should reflect on what is needed for them to be confident in the language classroom and how they can develop their competencies, including how to build good relationships with their students. The negative consequences of teachers feeling inadequate, such as decreasing motivation and the risk of burnout, can have a direct impact on their quality of teaching and reduce their students' learning and

motivation (Roth et al., 2007). Therefore, sustaining teachers' motivation over time becomes crucial, and school administrators play a key role in this process (Ma & Macmillan, 1999; Tickle et al., 2011). By valuing and trusting teachers as autonomous professionals and providing support for their ongoing professional development, school administrators can contribute to teachers' well-being, reduce attrition rates, and enhance student learning effectiveness, as suggested by Day and Gu (2009). The positive impact of responsible school leadership on various aspects, including teachers' well-being and student outcomes, cannot and should not be underestimated.

CONCLUSION

Being among the first to explore retired language teachers' career stories and beliefs about language teaching, this study serves as a fruitful starting point for further investigations into teachers' long-lasting motivation. Yet, with its unique location (Norway) and participants (three retired female teachers), caution should be exercised when generalizing the findings to other contexts and practitioners. However, readers are encouraged to draw their own conclusions and relate them to their own experiences based on the descriptive and interpretive data presented (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). While it is observed that highly motivated veteran teachers are predominantly women (Bogler, 2002; Lowe et al., 2019, Ma & Macmillan, 1999), future research should aim to include male teachers to identify the factors that support their motivation to remain in the profession. Additionally, it is important to gather perspectives from retired teachers of other languages and also non-language subjects in diverse contexts to further enrich our understanding of their experiences. Furthermore, this study concentrated on one of the participants' subjects, German, without exploring their motivation in teaching other subjects. Examining their motivation across all subjects could have yielded more comprehensive and nuanced insights into their teaching experiences and motivation. To conclude, retired teachers' biographies can provide "vitaly important lessons for policy makers, continual professional development programmes, and educational leaders including school principals as well as for teachers themselves" (Mercer & Kostoulas, 2018, p. 6). For pre-service and in-service teachers, in particular, retired teachers' biographies can help them identify and reflect on factors in their own careers that make them flourish and prevent them from burning out and from leaving the profession. In fact, encouraging in-service teachers to regularly reflect on their teaching lives and pay closer attention to their happy experiences and what helps them thrive can be an important part of their continuous professional development, as also suggested by Huldra, one of the participants in this study.

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ENDNOTE

¹ A better gender balance could have provided additional insights into the topic. However, it should be noted that all recommendations from both teachers and students regarding highly engaged language teachers specifically mentioned females, despite a balanced gender distribution in Norwegian secondary schools, especially among veteran teachers.

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