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This article is part of a collection of practitioner research on the theme of “Engaging With and Exploring Autonomy, Creativity, and Well-Being for Learner Development” for Issue 9 of the Learner Development Journal (LDJ9), edited by Stacey Vye, Robert Moreau, and Ivan Lombardi. Published once a year, each issue of the Learner Development Journal follows a Community of Practices approach over a period of approximately 18 months in which contributors work together, under the guidance of the editors, to share, respond to, and develop their research and writing.

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Where Creativity Meets Care: Autonomy, Wellbeing, and Identity in LDJ9

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When I first sat down with the LDJ9 manuscripts, I opened them with the kind of curiosity that always accompanies new readings and stories of practice. And when I started reading them, I felt that each contribution was speaking directly to me, in one way or another. The authors were thinking aloud, trying to make sense of themselves and their learners, and putting their researcher hat on to allow for their vulnerabilities to surface. As I moved from one article to the next, six themes kept catching my attention: creativity, autonomy, wellbeing, the teacher-researcher as a vulnerable practitioner, reflective narratives, and identity and becoming. All of these themes were profoundly intertwined; impressively, each article seemed to touch upon all of them, even if implicitly, and together all six themes formed a mosaic of what it means to teach and learn in ways that honour the human experience. This commentary is my way of responding to these engaging narratives as a fellow educator who immerses myself in them, listens carefully and empathetically, and learns from them.

Theme 1: Creativity

Contributors to this LDJ issue are willing to remain open to creativity. Cruz (2025) combines introspection and aspiration, as creativity emerges through meditation, imagination, and future-self visioning. Warabi's (2025) students become creative whilst working through the complexities of collaborative fiction writing. Creativity here is not a personal thing but a fundamentally social practice (Maley & Peachey, 2015). Then comes Cohen's (2025) exploration of creative speaking, where humour and risk-taking interplay with language learning. In fact, creativity in language classrooms is often simply the spark that empowers students to speak. Finally, Nunn's (2025) students engage in creativity through literature, not as readers taking the effort to comprehend passages, but as analysts and, pretty often, story re-tellers. This is an indication that apart from being affective, creativity can also have a cognitive function which manifests through analysis, synthesis, and understanding of texts from new angles.

Theme 2: Autonomy

LDJ9 contributors confidently show how autonomy is not solitary independence but can be highly dialogic and relational, shaped through meaningful conversation, guidance, and support of peers and teachers who function as a community. Bradley's (2025) use of ALMS (Autonomous Learning Modules) and counselling dialogues offers a very clear example of this. Students do not become autonomous by being left alone, but instead develop and improve through carefully structured conversations, reflective journals, and a supportive teacher who sees autonomy as a prerogative gained from working together with other students. Nunn (2025) illustrates the same principle from another angle: Students gain autonomy through intentional teacher scaffolding, which is achieved when modelling

critical reading, giving students choice, offering supplemental materials, and gradually removing support to increase independence. Although autonomy increases gradually, it becomes a process which is clearly appreciated by students and strengthened step by step. In Cruz's (2025) study, autonomy arises through imagining one's future self and choosing actions that bring that imagined self closer to today's complex realities of (classroom) language learning. In total, across the issue, learners become more autonomous because they are cared for and encouraged to rethink of themselves and their abilities through a new, collaborative, and interdependent lens.

Theme 3: Wellbeing

Of all the themes that I have identified, wellbeing is the one that caught my attention the most, not just because it links directly with my own area of research specialisation but because it threaded itself subtly and skilfully throughout the entire issue. Johnson's (2025) honest accounts of loss, grief, depression, panic, and subsequent healing have made visible the emotional labour that goes into teaching and that teachers so often (have to) hide. In several cases, teachers do not treat such instances as emotional labour because they have normalised them, often unconsciously, and this can be hugely detrimental to their health, wellbeing, and professional life. Accounts that are similar to Johnson's (2025) can serve as a powerful impetus for learning and cultivating empathy towards what several teachers might be going through (Mercer & Gregersen, 2020). The major reflection that many teachers rarely attend to wellbeing is an uncomfortable yet familiar truth, which can incentivise us to take action and refrain from normalising stress, unmanageable workloads and/or overwork, and self-neglect (Benesch, 2018; Miller & Gkonou, 2018). Cruz's (2025) work also brings wellbeing to the fore by discussing meditation and self-compassion. Bradley (2025) reminds us that social connection is foundational in maintaining and protecting wellbeing, and Nunn shows how achievement and comprehension, when scaffolded compassionately, hold strong potential for cultivating wellbeing and motivation (Brierton & Gkonou, 2022). Taken together, the contributions to LDJ9 demonstrate that wellbeing inherently facilitates creativity and autonomy.

Theme 4: The Dual Role of the Teacher as a Vulnerable Practitioner-Researcher

This is perhaps the most distinctive theme of LDJ9 because every article reveals a teacher who dares to be vulnerable and admit to their own uncertainties, insecurities, failures, personal and professional histories, as well as hopes. In reflecting on these aspects, teaching is largely shaped as constant inquiry, which is a fundamentally human endeavour. But what is of utmost importance here and what teachers should understand is that such candid expressions of vulnerability do not weaken their claims, professionalism, and positionality as teachers. On the contrary, this subjective vulnerability gives credibility to the teachers' lived experiences and is an indication that they were willing to study and reflect on their puzzling moments – and to talk about them openly too (Gkonou & Miller, 2020).

Theme 5: Research Methodology Through Reflective, Person-Centred Narratives (Barkhuizen et al., 2014)

Throughout the present issue, teacher knowledge is generated through reflexive thematic analysis e.g., Bradley (2025), Cruz (2025), Johnson (2025); practitioner research including

Exploratory Practice e.g., Bradley (2025), Cohen (2025), Warabi, (2025); narrative inquiry and reflective writing for identity sense-making e.g., Cruz (2025), Johnson (2025); individual case study approach e.g., Nunn (2025); and data collected through learner reflections, counselling sessions, interviews, and journals. Knowledge, therefore, emerges from lived experiences and is co-constructed in relationships, shaped through dialogue, and interpreted through the emotional landscapes of teachers and learners (Gkonou & Miller, 2023).

Theme 6: Identity and Becoming

If creativity, autonomy, and wellbeing are visible themes from my perspective as a reader of all six articles who was invited to comment on them, identity is another thread that weaves them together and connects them. Each contribution clearly shows that learning a language is never just about the linguistic side of things, but it is an act of becoming. For example, Cruz's (2025) learners imagine their future English-speaking selves, Bradley's (2025) students negotiate identity through institutional structures and social networks, Johnson's (2025) students form friendships and social relationships, Warabi's (2025) learner groups create shared identities through narrative collaboration, Nunn's (2025) students explore cultural identities through Japanese literature, and in Cohen's (2025) creative-dialogic classrooms, learners play with identities, trying out new voices and ways of speaking.

Closing Remarks

In drawing this commentary to a close, I would like to highlight that these unique LDJ9 contributions are more than an amalgam of the six themes listed above. What connects these articles is their shared belief in the humanity of language learning and teaching, and the need to humanise them even further. Each author, in their own way, views learners and themselves as teachers as people who experience distinct emotions, struggles, hopes, and connections. In addition, these teacher authors do not see themselves as experts, but as vulnerable practitioners who constantly navigate real classrooms, real emotions, and real lives.

And this is when the process of learning and teaching can thrive. It can happen when people feel seen, looked after, and connected; where there is trust, respect, and support in teacher-learner relationships (Gkonou, 2022; Gkonou & Mercer, 2017); when classrooms allow for imagination and creativity; and when language learning and teaching open up possibilities for identity and transformation.

I also see this issue as an open call or invitation to slow down, take one step at a time, listen carefully, and remember that both learning and teaching are relational work that we do with, through, and for others. Language classrooms are a lot more than mere linguistic spaces. Above all, they are and should be treated as inherently human spaces, which are made up by people who bring all of their individuality and complexity into them.

Author Bio

Christina Gkonou is Associate Professor at the University of Essex, UK, where she leads the MA TESOL programme and teaches on modules in language teacher education and the psychology of language learning and teaching. Her recent research focuses on language teacher emotions, and she has published widely in her field. Christina has served as external examiner for doctoral students and postgraduate programmes internationally. She currently oversees the entire provision for the Faculty of Language Studies across all seven branches of the Arab Open University in her role as Chief External Examiner. She is

also co-editor of the Psychology of Language Learning and Teaching book series published by Multilingual Matters.

Christina Gkonou. 英国エセックス大学准教授。MA TESOLプログラムを統括するとともに、言語教師教育および言語学習・教育の心理学に関する科目を担当している。近年の研究では言語教師の感情に焦点を当てており、同分野において多数の著書・論文を発表している。さらに、博士課程学生の指導や大学院プログラムの学外審査員を国際的に務めている。現在は主任学外審査員として、Arab Open Universityの全7キャンパスにおける言語学部の教育課程全体を統括している。また、Multilingual Matters社から出版されている書籍シリーズ『Psychology of Language Learning and Teaching』の共同編集者も務めている

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