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Running title: Reflection on law-abidance leadership education

Teaching law-abidance leadership education for university students in Hong Kong: Stories told by the teachers

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Abstract: In response to the requirement of the Hong Kong National Security Law (NSL), we have developed a program covering NSL with reference to law abidance leadership. Several evaluation studies showed that the program enhanced the knowledge of the students on NSL and they were committed to law abidance after taking the program. Besides, teachers teaching this subject under COVID and non-COVID period also had positive reflections about the teaching. After three years' implementation from 2021/22 to 23/24 academic years, we invited the teachers teaching law abidance leadership to reflect on their teaching experience which has impact on the well-being of the teachers and students. Based on written reflection of the teachers, teachers shared that although they initially had negative experience in teaching this program, they gradually had positive experience about the teaching and they worked out different strategies to cope with the challenges arising from the teaching. They also shared their memorable and moving experiences about teaching NSL within the law abidance leadership framework, that are pioneer in the scientific literature.

Keywords: Qualitative evaluation, teacher reflection, Hong Kong National Security Law, law-abiding leadership, teacher well-being

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Introduction

In response to the social unrest in 2019, the Hong Kong National Security Law (NSL) came into effect in 2020. One stipulation in the NSL is that education institutions in Hong Kong should educate students about NSL. As a public university in Hong Kong, we utilized the leadership framework to embrace NSL education to form law abidance leadership (1-3). Our argument is that to be an effective leader, a student should learn to follow laws and regulations similar to compliance to corporate policies and regulations. Besides, as a citizen, a leader should also obey the national and local laws. Our focus is on enabling students to understand the nature of national

security and NSL. Through understand modern Chinese history and national development, we also hope the students would have a greater sense of awareness of the development of the Nation.

Since its inception, we have adopted an evidence-based approach to understand the impact of the program on the students and teachers using both quantitative and qualitative methods (4-16). Basically, the evaluation findings are positive. For the students, they agreed that that the program was beneficial and they would strive to be a law-abiding citizen. For the teachers, they also shared that the program was beneficial to the students and themselves.

As the program has been implemented for three years, there is a need to look at the teaching experiences of the teachers. There are three reasons why we should do this. First, teachers' teaching experience would affect the learning of the students, which would eventually influence the well-being of the students. Second, teachers' teaching experience would influence their own well-being, which would eventually influence student well-being. Finally, if national security education is not properly done, the well-being of the society would be compromised. Hence, from a public health perspective, understand the teaching experience of the teaching when they teach NSL education is an important issue to be considered (1-3).

Methods

After implementation of NSL within the law abidance leadership for three years (2021/22 to 23/24 academic years), we invited the teachers to write reflections on their teaching. Writing reflections is a qualitative evaluation approach commonly used in the health and education settings. There are several advantages of writing reflections. First, as a qualitative evaluation method, we can understand the subjective experience of the teachers which are not easily captured through quantitative means. Second, reflection has flexibility as the informant can freely write narratives that reflect their experience. Third, it captures the views of the informants instead of the researchers based on the language of the informants. Finally, reflections can generate leads for future research.

In this study, we invited 10 teachers who had taught NSL to share their experience with reference to several questions:

1. What did you feel when you knew that you had to teach a lecture on NSL?
2. What were your experiences when you taught this lecture?
3. Did you encounter any difficulties and how did you overcome them?
4. Please cite some memorable or moving experiences in the NSL teaching
5. What were the responses of the students to the NSL lecture?
6. Did the students benefit from the lecture? Please give some examples.
7. Do you feel that you have achieved personal and professional growth in teaching the NSL program?

For the first four questions, they are primarily concerned about the teaching experience of the teacher. For the last three questions, they are related to student well-being and teacher well-being. In this paper, we describe the reflections of the teachers on the first four questions. For students' reactions, student well-being and teacher well-being, we will cover them in another paper.

Results

There are different experiences in the teachers. First, some teachers shared that they had negative experience when they knew that they had to teach law abidance leadership including the Hong Kong National Security Law. Some narratives are presented below.

- “When I first knew that I needed to teach a lecture on NSL, I was a bit panicked. It is because I think it is a sensitive topic which university students may be unwilling to participate in the lecture. In addition, they may challenge the teachers by asking critical questions in class or having some misbehavior in class (i.e., keep coughing to arouse others’ attention, show their poker face which demonstrated their unwillingness to listen to the lecturers). This would affect the teaching quality as students’ responses would affect teachers mentally.”
- “The moment I was assigned to teach a lecture on National Security Law (NSL), I was immediately shocked. The discomfort was clear. I thought about escaping but knew it wasn't an option. The fear of not handling the controversial topic well was always on my mind. I was particularly concerned about the reaction from students, especially those from Hong Kong, whom I thought held negative feelings towards NSL. I worried that no matter what I said about the NSL, it would make them angry. I believed it would negatively affect my teaching evaluation score.”
- “Initially, the sensitivity of the topic left me feeling overwhelmed. My background in Law, acquired XXX almost 14 years ago, focused primarily on XXX Law which may not directly apply to Hong Kong due to the “One Country, Two systems” principle.”
- “I recall feeling a significant amount of stress. As someone with no background in law, I was unsure of my ability to effectively deliver this lecture. The societal atmosphere at the time was fraught due to social unrest, and I was aware that many students held strong resistance towards NSL education, which added to my apprehension.”
- When I first learned that I had to teach a lecture on National Security Law (NSL), I felt unfamiliar with the law and not particularly excited about teaching it. I was concerned about how the students would react, especially given the context of the year after 2019. I anticipated potential resistance at teaching NSL and worried about students’ overall perception of this topic. To be honest, I wasn't sure how to approach such a sensitive subject since students' reactions could be diverse and unpredictable. Additionally, as someone who wasn't studying law, I felt unsure of my competence to teach this topic. It gave a lot of pressure on me.”

However, some teachers were initially stressed but they saw their responsibility as well as the importance of National Security Law education. Some teachers actually had positive feelings about teaching National Security Law education.

- “When I first knew that I had to teach a lecture on NSL, I was worried ... I am not sure how the students would respond and what position I should stand when I teach this topic. There were so many unknowns that made me worried. However, I have a firm belief that it is important for students to be equipped with information about NSL, in order to make well-informed decision. This mindset made me more focus on how to deliver the lecture well, and let the students gain the most out of it.”
- “I felt that this is an obligation for me to teach a lecture on NSL to my students as a local-born Hong Kong educator. As a local-born in 70’s, I did not receive any education about politics in the formal curriculum from primary to secondary schools ... Hence, I always

think that awareness raising on political sense of Hong Kong students would be beneficial for their personal growth, especially in the era of global village. In short, I felt good about teaching NSL through which I can share with my students about the past history in Hong Kong, especially the social and political changes as per my firsthand experiences together with the lecture contents.”

- When I learned I had to teach a lesson on National Security Law (NSL), I felt a mix of responsibility and apprehension. As an educator not deeply versed in this complex field, I recognized the need for rigorous preparation to ensure I could provide a comprehensive and accurate overview. As a citizen, I was aware of the pervasive misinformation and the importance of presenting a balanced perspective. Anticipating potential resistance from students, I prepared to foster an environment of open dialogue and critical thinking, while being ready to navigate challenging discussions and maintain a constructive educational experience for students.”
- “I recognized the importance of understanding this law and the significant consequences it carries – to let our students understand the law and its consequences in the school setting. As an educator, I deeply care about my students and truly want to witness their personal and professional growth without venturing into the illegal pathways ... With this rationale in my mind, to better prepare myself for teaching, I put more efforts to comprehend the teaching materials and studied its relevant documents ... I hoped that my students would benefit from the lecture and able to identify the consequences bring to them.”
- “Emotionally, I did not have much positive or negative feelings during my preparation. Hosting NSL lectures is similar to hosting other lectures on this subject. I believe the key reason for my calm and stable emotion is that I share the same standpoints shown during the lecture: help university students to understand Hong Kong National Security Law and its contextual information, particularly the consequences of not following NSL; we respect students’ choices, although we strongly admonish, encourage, and urge students to understand the Hong Kong National Security Law and follow it.”

Experience about the first lecture on law abidance leadership

When the teachers recalled their first experience in teaching National Security Law, they pointed out they had anxiety and stress. However, some colleagues also pointed out that they had mixed or even positive experience. Some observations are described below.

- “I vividly remember the anxiety I felt during my first NSL lecture. My hands were shaking, and I found myself delivering the lecture without any interaction. I was concerned that discussing this topic could potentially trigger negative emotions in the students. Looking back, I realized my reaction was driven by the fear of judgement, potential negative or aggressive behaviors from the students, and even the fear of silence.”
- “Despite my initial nervousness, the teaching experience turned out to be positive. I received excellent support in the form of extensive training and professionally edited teaching material and guidelines. This support system was instrumental in equipping me with the necessary tools to deliver the lecture effectively. After the mock teachings, I felt that I was not alone ... Fortunately, the delivery was much smoother and more effective than I expected.”

- “Teaching NSL was a journey of evolving experiences. Initially, I encountered the anticipated challenge of students' insufficient engagement, which made the first two semesters particularly tough. Recognizing the need for change, I adapted my approach by allocating more time for student interactions, both among their peers and with me. This adjustment began to bear fruit from the third semester onwards, as gradually, more students started to participate actively.”
- “My experience was quite enjoyable. It is because students showed that they are quite interested in the topic and the class is quite interactive. In one of the comments sharing, a student claimed that “*teacher has demonstrated interesting teaching skills to keep us awake and continuously interacts with us which helps us engage more in class*”. Another student mentioned that “*This lesson deepens my understanding towards the four categories of offences of NSL.*” This provides a great experience for me as students and I could learn from each other, and I am glad that we have an enjoyable class.”
- “My experience was both rewarding and fulfilling, particularly seeing our students were active in participating the class activities (e.g., group discussions). Surprisingly, many local students revealed that they had acquired basic knowledge of the NSL in secondary school, in which the group discussions further assisted them to apply the NSL principles in daily life.”
- “Teaching this lecture was a fruitful experience to me. The best part of the lecture is the interaction with students. I noticed that students do have some doubts and questions in their minds of the reasons that they need to take this lecture, but as the three hours lecture progressed, I could see the queries are gone gradually, as some of them would show the affirmation by nodding their heads, or they would proactively engage in the activities in class.”
- “My experience teaching this lecture turned out to be better than I initially expected. During the first two years, most of the students remained quiet in the class and focused on their own tasks, while some even became disruptive or made noise when sensitive court cases were discussed. Interestingly, it was primarily mainland Chinese and foreign students who actively participated and provided answers to my questions. Local Hong Kong students seemed reluctant to engage or intentionally avoided participating in any kind of discussion.”
- “I will describe the experience as between neutral and positive. I cultivate an interactive learning atmosphere in my lectures, and I treasure my interactions with my students. During the NSL lecture, we had sharing and discussions about the concepts of national security, points of view on different NSL cases, and myths and facts. My students were more willing to share their ideas anonymously through the online platform and respond to my questions.”

Difficulties encountered and overcoming strategies

Teachers shared that they did encounter difficulties initially but they used different teaching techniques and approaches to cope with the difficulties. Some cases are reported below.

- “I remembered one of the students coughed continuously especially when I taught the four major offenses. In the first half of the lecture, he acted normally (i.e., he was willing to have discussion with his classmates and answered some of the questions that I had raised in class). He didn't cough during the first two-hours lecture. Unfortunately, when I

started talking about the first case study of the four major offenses, he started to cough. He also murmured with his classmate and showed that he was not eager to participate.”

- “I encountered two major challenges during this process. First, covering over 150 PowerPoint slides in a single 3-hour lesson, and second, the issue of some students not attending the NSL lecture. To address the first challenge, I employed a flipped classroom approach, asking students to review the material beforehand ... To encourage students to engage with the material, they were given instructions on what, why, and how to access the material before the NSL lecture. For those who did not attend the NSL lecture and complete the online quiz, reminders were sent to them for their self-study and to finish the online quiz.”
- “The primary challenges I encountered included the topic’s sensitivity and constrained time. To enrich our students’ learning experiences and encourage open expressions without fear, I adopted an online tool known as Mentimeter where students can share their opinions anonymously throughout the lecture. Moreover, I inserted a short class quiz in the beginning of the lecture.”
- “I recognized the need to overcome my own fears and biases ... Teacher’s implicit biases can influence their teaching practices, as well as the beliefs and expectations conveyed to students. Therefore, approaching the subject matter objectively and presenting it in a balanced manner were crucial for me as an instructor. Engaging in reflective writing was a valuable tool in addressing this problem. Apart from this, observing students’ reactions and collecting feedback after each lecture helped me to reform my belief about providing NSL education.”
- “Expertise of teachers in the subject matter, their enthusiasm, and their creativity have been identified as critical factors in enhancing students’ content knowledge and learning outcomes. One way to tackle my anxiety in delivering NSL education was to enhance my knowledge in the related area ... This heightened competence allowed me to create a more engaging and enriching learning experience for my students.”
- “I encountered the difficulties of the students losing interest during lecture ... It is important to provide students with understanding NSL and its reasons for the implementation of NSL in Hong Kong. I chose to present the facts and information by transforming them into a story. I found this helped in attracting students’ attention and regaining their interests for the topic and lecture effectively.”
- “One challenge was how to handle sensitive topics and local court cases without causing unnecessary tension or discomfort in the classroom ... Another challenge I faced was dealing with the students’ diverse ideas and opinions on NSL ... Some students believed they were forced to attend the lecture and learn NSL, while others believed we should have gone over some of the topics more thoroughly. To facilitate their understanding to NSL, I would allow them to express their opinions through voting or in a platform without recording their name.”
- “I overcome the difficulties by promoted stronger learning interests and motivation in students regarding the lesson, more interactive activities were added instead of long lecturing, deliberately used some more personal sharing and examples to illustrate the concepts, showing acceptance to students, arranged reasonable short breaks (or quick stretch breaks) for students, promoted an atmosphere of mutual respect in the class, encouraged interaction and discussion, and have more self-disclosure.”

- “One significant difficulty was students' reluctance to discuss closed cases, fearing repercussions for expressing opinions divergent from judicial decisions. To address this, I emphasized the educational purpose behind analyzing such cases, highlighting the value of understanding diverse legal interpretations and the reasoning behind judicial outcomes. By taking initiative in presenting balanced viewpoints and encouraging a safe, respectful environment for discussion, I aimed to demystify the process and reassure students.”
- “Before the lecture, I engaged in a dialogue with each class regarding the prospect of video recording the session. After open discussion, it was collectively decided to forgo recording, thereby creating a space where students felt safer to express their opinions. During the lecture, there were no challenging questions or radical responses were received and students demonstrated a cooperative and quite engaged demeanor.”
- “I did not encounter any difficulties with it. I would pay more attention to NSL related news and issues one to two weeks before the lectures. I would also browse the local online forums and social media platforms to look for hot topics that could help facilitate interactions with my students. I believe the mock teachings, the training, the prepared slides, and my preparation can handle it smoothly.”

Memorable or moving experiences in NSL teaching

With respect to the memorable or moving experience in the NSL teaching, the teacher highlighted their self-disclosure leading to self-disclosure of the students.

- “I shared that when I am passing the Canadian security check, I was stopped by the police officers as the security alarm was on when I cross it. I was invited to take off my shoes and have a full security check. I was furious and felt it was quite annoying to take off my shoes in public. However, the policy officer released me after five minutes as they found that my shoes got some metal materials which stimulated the alarm. At the end, I understand that sometimes it is quite troublesome when following laws and instructions. However, we need to put ourselves in other people' shoes as the police officers need to maintain the security of their country. After my sharing, one of my students raised his hand and would like to share his feeling about the lecture. He mentioned that he had a similar case when he went to another place for travelling. He reflected that he understands the importance of following the law when we go to other countries for travel. It is important for different countries to have law to protect their citizen.”
- During the lecture, I have shared one of my personal experiences with students about a very close friend of mine who was being convicted as she committed one of the NSL offences. She was the only child in the family, living with her mother after her father passed away some years ago. She was a certified public accountant and having a good life with her mother and friends. After being arrested, she was on bail and waited for trial. It was the most difficult time for her, as my friend said, since she did not know the acts were actually violating the law, and she was worried about going to jail, leaving her mother alone and the accountant certificate might be removed permanently which she would never be able to practice again. I had many experiences that crying with my friend and her mother and we did not know what to do. At last, my friend was sentenced for 34-month imprisonment. One of the students approached me after the lecture and started to cry. She told me that it was really sad to hear that story because her elder brother was in jail for the similar offence too. I comforted her and told her the purpose of sharing the

story is to underscore the importance of being well-informed about the information and facts of NSL and think about the position we should stand and the decision we should make.”

Other memorable experiences are related to student responses in the lecture, including their participation, engagement and discussion. The involvement of international students in the class discussion is also an observation deserving attention.

- “Teaching NSL has brought me three memorable experiences. Firstly, despite the compulsory nature of attendance in the Tomorrow’s Leaders program in which the NSL lecture overlapped with the mid-term period, the average attendance remained above 90% across five classes over two semesters. Secondly, as mentioned above, I initially felt overwhelmed due to the topic’s sensitivity, where my major concern was the possibilities that our students might raise sensitive words during discussions making the lecture atmosphere became uncomfortable. However, to my surprise, our students spontaneously redacted those sensitive words. Lastly, one of the non-local students, who had previously studied in the US before joining PolyU, shared that she found the NSL lecture useful particularly the case studies in which she can learn how to apply the NSL into the real-world setting step by step.”
- “Sometimes the class discussion is greatly enriched when students with different nationality are included in the classroom. I often invite international students to share their views on NSL-related cases and share the national security laws implemented in their respective home countries. This approach was particularly beneficial in helping students grasp the concept of national security and its significance. In one of the lectures, a noticeable silence filled the classroom as the lecture started at 08:30 a.m. It was observed that students were initially hesitant to speak up, perhaps cautious about what they share in the lecture. A student from Thailand was invited to talk about the national security law in his country. He introduced the laws that had been implemented in Thailand and further shared his views on why he believed it was an important practice. His sharing broke the ice in the classroom and motivated other students to share their views on the Hong Kong NSL. This exchange of ideas fostered a more open and engaging atmosphere and engaged students in constructive discussion.”
- “Another unforgettable incident occurred when students were invited to share their interpretation of the slogan, “Liberate Hong Kong, Revolution of Our Times”, which is now categorized illegal. Overall, students held three distinct views on the meaning of the slogan ... Firstly, some students believed that individuals who chanted this slogan during the social unrest did not have the intention to commit secession. They viewed the slogan as a plea from the citizens to communicate with the government concerning the decision regarding anti-extradition amendment bill. The slogan was seen as a call for dialogue rather than a call for separatism. Another group of students believed that the slogan was a request for the Central Government to refrain from intervening in the social unrest and related political issues in Hong Kong. These students did not perceive the slogan as advocating for the overthrow the government or the promotion of Hong Kong independence. Rather, they saw it as a plea for non-interference. The third group of students believed that the slogan carried a secessionist meaning and that individual who chanted this slogan had the intention to promote Hong Kong independence and are likely to exhibit aggressive behaviors. This group interpreted the slogan as a call for separating

Hong Kong from China. The discussion provided students with a valuable lesson in understanding that a single message can be understood in numerous ways. They discovered that the same words can evoke different meanings and emotions in different people, depending on the context, the receivers' backgrounds, experiences, and beliefs. This realization fostered a sense of empathy and respect among the students and reminded them the importance of both critical thinking and social-emotional competence."

- "During one of my National Security Law lectures in the past three years, I remembered that there were some students intended to make noise, for examples, flipping their notes loudly and coughing occasionally, which was a bit distracting to my teaching. Additionally, one to two students in another class got up and went to the toilet while I was going to discuss the four major crimes and court cases related to NSL. It was obvious while they were intended to stand up and looked at me. On a positive side, I had the opportunity to have conversations with both mainland and foreign students from Russian, Kazakhstan, Malaysia, and Turkey and after the NSL lecture last year. It was truly enlightening to hear their unique perspectives and insights on NSL. They honestly shared their viewpoints, giving me with a deeper understanding of the diverse opinions surrounding this topic during our group project consultation meetings. One conversation that stuck out was when a Turkish student related their experiences with NSL in their home country with a group of mainland groupmates, both provided excellent international perspective to our conversation. All these conversations were respectful, unbiased, and mutually helpful to each other."
- In the NSL teaching, students were quite attentive because they perceived this is a serious topic to know about. When I was introducing the Tong Ying-kit (Case Number: HCCC 280/2020), I asked the class, "do you think that the persecutor's judgement is correct?" One student voiced out, "of course, the government is always correct!". The student's response was quite interesting to show that there was a wrong perception on the fairness of the judicial system and the student also mixed up the roles of the government and the judicial system."
- "One particularly memorable moment was when some quiet and passive students, initially struggling with the nature of NSL education and feeling uneasy sharing their ideas, experienced a breakthrough after different group discussions, in which they were willing to respond and share in front of the class. The opinions shared are also constructive to the discussion. Witnessing their stronger engagement and the depth of their arguments was rewarding, and those are evidence of the effectiveness of our collaborative and secure learning environment. Their changes did give me some renewed strength to continue my classes."
- "One particularly memorable event during my teaching of NSL occurred last semester while discussing the case of Jimmy Lai. As I lectured, I heard a persistent sound of finger snapping that lasted for several minutes. Realizing it was intentional, I paused the lecture, descended from the podium, and took a seat among the students. I apologized for initially overlooking the disruption and acknowledged that it might signify a desire to express opinions or emotions ... This incident not only reinforced the importance of critical thinking but also highlighted the need for open communication and the value of addressing student concerns directly. It was a powerful reminder of the dynamic nature

of teaching sensitive subjects and the profound impact of fostering an environment where students feel heard and empowered to challenge ideas.”

- “I recall a sharing from my student, who discussed his changes after our discussion in the lecture. The student first disagreed with the necessity of implementing NSL in Hong Kong ... I asked whether he would accept visitors to recite Buddhist scriptures (Sutra) or burn incense in a Church. The student replied that those behaviours were offensive and more than inappropriate. I raised the visitor might just act normally based on his/her religious background and belief. The student immediately understood the message behind my example, and he agreed that all people should follow the rules and norms in different places, even if they might interfere with their original behaviours.”
- “Over three semesters of teaching the NSL module, I saw a big change that became an important part of my teaching journey. At first, it was hard to get students interested in the topic, and I even doubted if I could teach it well. Some students even skipped the NSL lecture. But with enough training and help from the subject team, I became confident in teaching NSL. This included clearly explaining why NSL is important and discussing it from an academic viewpoint. I saw students start to accept the topic more. Taking this active approach made students more curious and responsible.”

Discussion

The Hong Kong National Security Law (NSL) is a new thing in Hong Kong. Hence, when we implement NSL education, the need to evaluate the impact is of paramount importance. There are several unique characteristics of this study. Primarily, this is a pioneer study documenting the teaching experience of teaching NSL in Hong Kong after a three-year implementation period. This is important for several reasons. First, NSL has been regarded as a “taboo” or “stigma” by young people as it is a direct product of the Social Event in 2019. Hence, teachers teaching this program undoubtedly have anxiety and stress. Second, adopting an evidence-based approach in teaching, evaluation is indispensable. Third, teaching NSL influences teacher well-being which would eventually influence student well-being. Finally, the findings are empowerment for teachers who teach the NSL program. Another uniqueness of the study is that it employed a qualitative methodology via writing reflections by the teachers. Capitalizing on its flexibility, we can understand the subjective experience of the informants.

Consistent with the previous studies, there are several observations from the study. First, some teachers were initially stressful and apprehensive when they knew they had to teach NSL. At the same time, teachers saw the meaning and importance of teaching NSL. In fact, the degree of anxiety expressed by teachers was not as severe as that reported previously. Second, some teachers found the first lecture distressing whereas some teachers mentioned that they enjoyed the teaching because of the positive responses of the students. Third, teachers devised different strategies to deal with their worries and difficulties encountered. In short, two observations can be highlighted from the sharing of the teachers. First, there was diversity in the teachers’ experiences and responses which challenges the common myth that teaching NSL program is necessarily stressful. Second, the experiences of the teachers are basically positive and they realize how to handle difficulties and negative experiences.

Regarding the most memorable experiences of the teachers, there are several interesting observations. First, teachers’ self-disclosure does help students to be more engaged. Unfortunately, self-disclosure is not an encouraged activity in the Chinese culture. In future, teachers should be trained to know the ways of disclosing their experiences on NSL so that this

can enhance student engagement. Second, teachers were moved by student responses and their changes. Obviously, such experiences are empowering for teachers. Such experiences would also transform teachers' motivation and interest in teaching NSL program. As we have argued, positive experiences of teaching NSL can enhance teacher well-being which would eventually enhance student well-being in the long run. In short, the present findings are empowering for teachers who teach topics on national security and law-abidance and they contribute to the very limited scientific literature in this field.

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