Teacher Wellbeing in Context: A Comparative Exploration of Factors Shaping Teacher Wellbeing Across Primary and Secondary Schools.

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Summary

This thesis provides an overview of the complex and multifaceted concept of teacher wellbeing, with a focus on the comparative experiences of primary and secondary school teachers in England. The thesis adopts an ecological systems lens and is underpinned by a critical realist framework, to explore the systemic, institutional and interpersonal factors that shape teacher wellbeing at different educational phases. By centring teachers' voices and using qualitative methods, the thesis provides a deepened understanding of the often-hidden structures and contextual nuances that can impact teachers in different educational settings.

This thesis is comprised of three main chapters:

Chapter 1: Literature Review

This narrative literature review explores key frameworks, theories and empirical findings surrounding teacher wellbeing. It first begins by contextualising teacher wellbeing within national and socio-political landscapes. The chapter then moves on to discuss conceptual challenges associated with defining wellbeing and discusses theories and frameworks of wellbeing and their application to teachers. The literature review further examines sector-specific differences between primary and secondary settings, noting distinct contextual influences such as school structures and role expectations. Finally, the review discusses influential factors that can hinder or support teacher wellbeing.

Chapter 2: Empirical Paper

This chapter details the qualitative research study, which investigates factors shaping teacher wellbeing through a comparative lens. It is guided by three research questions that seek to explore how primary and secondary school teachers experience and navigate wellbeing, and the similarities and differences that exist across phases. A purposive sample of teachers from mainstream primary and secondary schools participated in a series of online and in-person focus groups. Activity-oriented questions were utilised to facilitate open and reflective discussion. Data was analysed using Reflexive Thematic Analysis, producing six overarching themes and 17

subthemes. The implications for educational psychology practice, school leadership and national education policy are considered and future research directions discussed.

Chapter 3: Reflective Chapter

The final chapter provides personal and critical reflections on the research journey, with attention to the design, implementation and analysis stages. The chapter offers insight into the authors positionality and how personal identity, prior experience and professional training have shaped the research process. This chapter highlights the transformative nature of the research experience and notes the importance of reflexivity, transparency and critical engagement in qualitative inquiry.

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Abbreviations

Abbreviation	Full Term
BERA	British Educational Research Association
BPS	British Psychology Society
CPD	Continuing Professional Development
DfE	Department of Education
HCPC	Health and Care Professions Council
JD-R	Job Demands-Resources
LSA	Learning Support Assistant
MAT	Multi-Academy Trust
NFER	National Foundation for Educational Research
PWB	Psychological Wellbeing
RTA	Reflexive Thematic Analysis
SDT	Self-Determination Theory
SEN	Special Educational Needs
SLT	Senior Leadership Team
SWB	Subjective Wellbeing

Chapter 1: Literature review

Introduction

This section provides an overview of the current context of teacher wellbeing. It outlines the national context, socio-political context, and why teacher wellbeing is a critical issue to examine.

The National Context of Teacher Wellbeing

The profession of teaching is considered to be one of the most stressful occupations, with research highlighting the widespread nature of stress across all phases of education (Bricheno et al., 2009; Gray et al., 2017). Despite reports that many teachers continue to find enjoyment in their roles (Ofsted, 2019), recent online survey data reveals the ongoing work-related stresses they face. The Education Support Partnership (2024), which surveyed 3,004 education staff; 1,901 of whom were teaching staff, reported that 78% of teaching staff experienced job-related stress, a 6% rise from 2022. Likewise, the NASUWT *Wellbeing at Work Survey* (2024), based on responses from 11,754 teachers who were teacher union members, found that 84% of teachers reported work-related stress, a slight decrease of 6% compared to 2022. While these year-on-year changes suggest a slight variation, they highlight the overall levels of stress for teachers remains high with more than three-quarters of teachers affected.

This level of stress has been linked to increased risk of burnout (Brackett et al., 2010; Vesely et al., 2013; Zhao et al., 2021). Although there is no universally agreed definition of burnout, Schaufeli and Greenglass (2001) conceptualised it as a state of physical, emotional and mental exhaustion resulting from sustained engagement in emotionally demanding work. Maslach et al. (2001), meanwhile, defined burnout as comprising three core dimensions: emotional exhaustion, depersonalisation and reduced personal accomplishments. Within the context of teaching, these features of burnout are particularly relevant given the emotionally intensive nature of the role. Teachers are required to manage not only their instructional duties but also the needs of students, families and colleagues. The ongoing demand on their emotional and physical energy makes them particularly vulnerable to burnout (García-Carmonaet al., 2019). It

is therefore unsurprising that recent survey data shows 35% of teachers felt their symptoms were potential signs of burnout (Education Partnership Support, 2024).

As a result of the high level of stress and burnout teachers face, concerns have grown regarding the impact on teachers' physical and mental health (Capone & Petrillo, 2018; Liu et al., 2018). The Education Support Partnership (2024) used the Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Wellbeing Scale to explore teachers' wellbeing, a tool designed to measure an individual's mental wellbeing with a focus on positive mental health (e.g., optimism and confidence). Results indicated some variation in wellbeing exists based on phase (e.g., early years, primary, secondary etc), region, age and experience. Nonetheless, teachers' overall scores for wellbeing were lower than the United Kingdom's national average for the adult population. Similarly, Ofsted (2019) found that 35% of teachers reported low levels of wellbeing. Teachers' low wellbeing appears to be putting them at an increased risk of developing difficulties with their mental health (Kidger et al., 2016). Recent research indicated that 37% of school teachers had experienced mental ill health, where the symptoms were considered signs of anxiety (45%) and depression (28%) (Education Support Partnership, 2024). Importantly, research from Jerrim et al. (2021) shows that teacher wellbeing and symptoms of depression have remained broadly stable over the last 30 years. This long-term pattern raises important questions about how effectively the profession and wider system have responded to teachers' needs. Systemic factors such as excessive workloads and insufficient support remain embedded within the profession and continue to impact teacher wellbeing (Ofsted, 2019).

The COVID-19 pandemic has undoubtedly intensified these longstanding concerns around teacher wellbeing, placing additional strain on an already pressured profession (Jones & Kessler, 2020). Teachers have faced rising workloads, heightened expectations, and increasingly negative public perceptions of their work (Kim et al., 2022). In the UK, a survey noted just over half of teachers reported a decline in their mental health and wellbeing during the pandemic (Education Support Partnership, 2020). However, to treat these challenges as pandemic-specific risks oversimplifying a much deeper issue. Culshaw and Kurian (2021) note the pressures teachers experienced during the pandemic were not new but intensified by the circumstances of

the pandemic. Freedland (2020) captures this sentiment well, stating that the pandemic exposed and amplified pre-existing systemic issues within the profession. Therefore, it is crucial to acknowledge that these are not temporary cracks within the system, but rather structural weaknesses. Failing to do so places conversations around teacher wellbeing at risk of fading with the pandemic, rather than prompting the change that is needed.

Despite these ongoing challenges, it is important to recognise the work of teaching is one shaped by intrinsic rewards, where the work itself is meaningful, enjoyable and aligned with personal values. Many educators have reported finding a strong sense of joy, fulfilment and purpose in their work (Schutz & Lee, 2014), particularly through the opportunities they have to make meaningful differences to the lives of children, their families, and society at large (Bakar et al., 2014). These findings suggest that positive professional identity and a sense of vocation may act as a psychological buffer that sustains engagement and resilience despite the high levels of stress teachers face. While these protective factors support teacher wellbeing, they do not diminish the significant impact of high stress or the urgent need for systemic reform. Rather, they highlight the complex interplay between individual values and broader professional conditions that shape teachers' overall wellbeing.

The current context of teacher wellbeing shows a profession that is under strain and experiencing systemic pressure. While surveys and research have consistently pointed to a high level of work-related stress, burnout and mental health concerns, these findings only scratch the surface of a deeper issue. Teaching has long been characterised as a profession that is emotionally intense, however the conditions in which it is practiced have made sustaining wellbeing increasingly difficult. The COVID-19 pandemic magnified these challenges, highlighting long-standing structural weaknesses that have often been normalised within the profession. High patterns of stress have remained stable over time, bringing to light a lack of meaningful progress in how teacher wellbeing is addressed at policy and institutional levels. Despite this adversity, many teachers still feel a sense of joy and purpose in their work, emphasising the complex and paradoxical realities of teacher wellbeing.

The Broader Socio-Political Landscape of Teacher Wellbeing

Recent policy developments, such as the Green Paper "Transforming Children and Young People's Mental Health Provision" (Department of Education [DfE], 2017), the Mental Health and Behaviour in Schools (DfE, 2018) and the Mental Health and Behaviour in School: Advice for School Staff (DfE, 2019b), have marked a shift in the UK's approach to wellbeing and mental health in education. While these policies reflect an important focus on student wellbeing, promoting early intervention and whole-school approaches, they also have important implications for teacher wellbeing. Such frameworks may contribute to a healthier school climate and seek to improve student engagement, both of which are positively linked to teacher wellbeing (Burns & Machin, 2013). Moreover, they also acknowledge the importance of equipping teachers with the knowledge and skills to support students' wellbeing. This emphasis on training and development can be considered a positive step in improving teachers' confidence and self-efficacy in responding to pupils needs.

However, there are concerns that these policies may inadvertently contribute to role expansion, where the additional emotional labour, often without sufficient time, resources or support can add to the already high workloads and stress levels of teachers moving teachers further away from their core teaching duties. Though the intent to foster wellbeing is evident, it is clear such reforms overlook the wellbeing of the teaching staff expected to implement them. To be effective, policies must recognise the complex factors that shape a school's emotional climate and support wellbeing at all levels, including teachers.

In recent years, progress has been made towards prioritising teacher mental health through fostering a more supportive environment for educators. Such initiatives include Ofsted's (2019) wellbeing report, the Education Staff Wellbeing Charter (DfE, 2021), the *Wellbeing for Education Return* programme (DfE, 2020) and the *Teacher Recruitment and Retention Strategy* (DfE, 2019c). These policies suggest a commitment to support educators, with a primary focus on reducing workload and increasing mental health awareness. However, this narrow focus risks oversimplifying the multifaceted nature of teacher wellbeing, and overlooks deeper structural and interpersonal factors such as emotional demands and broader policy pressures. By prioritising only select

aspects their effectiveness is limited, providing insight into why teachers' stress levels remain high with little change since their implementation.

This disconnect between policy intentions and the broader realities of the education system are also evident when considering the longstanding financial pressure placed on schools. Current policies shift the responsibility for staff wellbeing onto individual schools, rather than addressing the government's role in shaping the conditions that undermine it. Between 2010 and 2024, schools in the UK faced a 3% real-term cut to their budgets (Sibieta, 2022), which has had a tangible effect on resources and staffing. Reports from the National Association of Head Teachers (2023) revealed that, of the headteachers and senior leaders surveyed, 67% of primary and 40% of secondary school leaders had been forced into difficult decisions, such as cutting Learning Support Assistant (LSA) roles, as well as reducing IT equipment, with 44% of primary schools and 29% of secondary schools reporting such cuts. These cuts place additional burdens on teachers, who must manage growing responsibilities and student needs with fewer resources. The Education Support Partnership's (2022) annual survey highlighted, for the first time, that lack of resources was cited as a significant reason for teachers leaving the profession. This suggests that government wellbeing initiatives may operate in contradiction to broader policy decision making, undermining the outcomes they aim to promote.

The broader landscape that surrounds teachers reveals a complex and often contradictory picture. Recent shifts have noted a focus towards student wellbeing, however when this is not developed and implemented mindfully, reveals a deep issue for teachers. While these reforms seek to create emotionally supportive environments, they ignore the increasing emotional and practical burdens placed on teachers, expanding their roles without sufficient resources or support being provided. Though policies may be well-intended a disconnect exists, with the government failing to reflect on the impact that budget cuts and staff shortages can have on both teachers and students. Though more recent policies that are directed at teachers exist, the lack of meaningful change suggests these reforms are inadequate in addressing the deeper context of teacher wellbeing.

Why is Teacher Wellbeing Important?

Teacher wellbeing is a critical aspect of an effective education system, with implications that extend beyond the individual. Research has shown that poor teacher wellbeing can influence students' outcomes, classroom climate, and the recruitment and retention of teachers.

Research has indicated a positive association between teacher wellbeing and student academic performance (Rae et al., 2017; Spilt et al., 2011). Caprara et al. (2006) conducted a large-scale study of over 2,000 teachers in an Italian school and found that students who were taught by teachers with higher self-efficacy and job satisfaction achieved notably higher grades. Similarly, teachers with greater wellbeing are more likely to engage in effective pedagogical practice, resulting in improved student learning (Duckworth et al., 2009; Turner & Theilking, 2019). Conversely, teacher stress and burnout have been associated with a decrease in student achievement and motivation (Madigan & Kim, 2020), in part because these teachers may struggle with behaviour management, disrupting the learning environment (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009). However, it is important to note that this body of research does not establish casual or directional relationships. For instance, it is unclear whether teacher wellbeing directly influences student outcomes, or whether students with higher academic potential contribute to better teacher wellbeing. Therefore, the possibility of a bi-directional relationship, where teacher and student wellbeing influence one another, should be considered when interpreting these findings.

Moreover, teacher wellbeing plays a crucial role in the emotional climate of the classroom. Research has shown that students emotional and physiological responses, such as elevated cortisol levels, can be influenced by teacher stress (Oberle & Schonert-Reichl, 2016). Furthermore, the quality of relationships between students and teachers has been linked to students' socio-emotional development and wellbeing (Durlak et al., 2011; Ramberg et al., 2020). These findings can give insight into the reasons why research has consistently shown that better teacher wellbeing is associated with greater student wellbeing (Harding et al., 2019; Roffey, 2012). As Jamal et al. (2013) argue, feelings of safety and supportive relationships are central to student wellbeing, which are conditions which may be difficult to foster in classrooms where

teacher themselves feel overwhelmed or unsupported. This points to the need to research teacher wellbeing not only to support outcomes for students, but to gain insight into how schools can become environments that genuinely support the people who work in them.

Additionally, teacher wellbeing has emerged as a critical factor influencing retention in the profession, with significant implications for both individual educators and the broader education system. High teacher turnover is a persistent challenge internationally, contributing to school instability (Cano et al., 2017; Goddard et al., 2006; Chirico, 2017). Frequent teacher departures disrupt school cohesion and continuity, which has been negatively associated with student attainment (Atteberry et al., 2016). This disruption is particularly detrimental to disadvantaged students disproportionately affected by staff instability (Allen et al., 2018). In England, the Department for Education (DfE, 2019c) identified teacher retention as an ongoing issue, highlighting workload as the primary reason for leaving the profession. Likewise, a survey of graduates from the Institute of Education's Initial Teacher Education course reported that workload and work-life balance were the top two reasons for leaving the profession (Perryman & Calvert, 2020). The systemic implications of poor teacher wellbeing are highlighted by the Education Support Partnership (2022), which found that 59% of staff had considered leaving the profession in the past academic year due to pressures on their wellbeing. Similarly, Farquharson et al. (2023) reported 15% of school teachers left the profession after one year.

Overall, it is clear the landscape which surrounds teacher wellbeing is interconnected yet often oversimplified in reality. Indeed, a growing body of research has highlighted the importance of teacher wellbeing for improved student outcomes, classroom environments and teacher retention, however it is important to note that the relationship between teacher and student wellbeing is more complex than simply cause and effect. Though teachers' emotional states influence classroom climates and student development, they themselves are impacted by a broader network of factors such as policy pressures and societal expectations. This complexity highlights that improving teacher wellbeing cannot be seen as an isolated solution for boosting

student success, but instead systemic change is required to create environments where both teachers and students can thrive.

Overview of the Literature Review and Search Strategy

A narrative literature review was selected as the most appropriate approach for this thesis. This method was selected over a systematic review due to its flexible and interpretive nature allowing for the synthesis of diverse evidence, including qualitative studies, theoretical frameworks and policy analyses (Pautasso, 2019; Sukhera, 2022). Given that teacher wellbeing is a complex and context-dependent topic influenced by psychological, social and organisational factors, a narrative literature review enables a nuanced and reflective exploration of the literature (Rozas & Klein, 2010; Ferrari, 2015).

Unlike a systematic review, which follows a strict protocol, narrative reviews provide greater adaptability in search and synthesis, making them particularly suitable for examining fields where theoretical sensitivity and researcher interpretation are essential (Bryman, 2012). This made it possible to explore the broad and layered body of work related to teacher wellbeing across different educational sectors.

The literature review was carried out in two phases between August 2023 and March 2025. First, a broad exploratory search was conducted to map the general landscape of teacher wellbeing research. The second phase adopted a more targeted approach, focusing on literature that was specific to education sectors.

Searches were conducted using several academic databases including PsycINFO, PsycARTICLES, EBSCO, and ERIC. Google Scholar was also used to capture grey literature and conceptual papers not indexed in traditional databases. Key search terms included:

- "teacher wellbeing"
- "educator wellbeing"
- "wellbeing of teachers"
- "wellbeing of educators"
- "primary school teacher wellbeing"
- "elementary school teacher wellbeing"

- "secondary school teacher wellbeing''
- "high school teacher wellbeing''

Spelling variations of "wellbeing'' and "well-being'' were included to ensure comprehensiveness. To enhance the relevance and precision, Boolean operators were applied (e.g., NOT 'student', 'pupil', 'child', 'adolescence') to filter out unrelated studies that focused on student wellbeing. Additionally, a snowballing technique was applied, using reference lists and citations of retrieved articles to identify additional relevant literature. The review prioritised research published within the last 20 years, however influential studies predating this period were included.

Literature review

Conceptualising Teacher Wellbeing

There has been a longstanding debate on how wellbeing should be defined in the literature. Though there is a board agreement that wellbeing is a multidimensional construct (McCallum et al., 2017), researchers have not reached a clear consensus on defining the term (Burke, 2020). These unresolved difficulties in developing a single applicable definition for wellbeing could hinder the development of concise theories (Hascher & Waber, 2021) and make understanding and identifying the needs of individuals' challenging (O'Brien & Guiney, 2021). As a result, several terms have been coined to aid the understanding of wellbeing, in the context of this research, understanding broader notions of wellbeing is essential for framing an understanding of teacher wellbeing. This section will, therefore, explore definitions and conceptualisations of wellbeing.

Subjective wellbeing

Subjective wellbeing (SWB) is understood as an individual's overall evaluation of their quality of life (Diener et al., 2018). It encompasses both cognitive judgements (e.g., life satisfaction) and emotional responses (e.g., positive and negative affect) (Diener, 1984). Diener (1984) first developed the term SWB to understand how individuals evaluate their own lives, considering both their cognitive appraisals and affective reactions (Diener et al., 1997). It has since been defined as "a person's cognitive and affective evaluation of his or her life'' (Diener et al., 2002, p.63).

SWB is often associated with a hedonic approach, which is rooted in hedonistic philosophical ideas that define wellbeing as the maximisation of pleasure and the minimisation of pain (Lambert et al., 2015; Ryan and Deci, 2001). From this perspective, ideal SWB is conceptualised as optimising positive affect and life satisfaction while reducing negative emotions (Diener et al., 2005; 2018). Therefore, SWB measures focus on levels of positive and negative affect, as well as subjective life satisfaction (Diener et al., 2018). In the context of education, teachers' SWB has shown some relevance. For instance, Benevence et al. (2019) found that teachers with high SWB tend to experience more positive emotions and those with low SWB were associated with increased stress, burnout and emotional exhaustion.

While this hedonic approach provides a valuable lens for understanding teacher wellbeing through daily emotional experiences, some researchers argue that it may lack depth. Ryff and Keyes (1995) critique the hedonic framework's narrow focus on transient affective states. They argue that it neglects complex dimensions of wellbeing, including personal growth, meaning, and resilience. It is suggested that the eudaimonic approach offers a more comprehensive framework for understanding wellbeing, as it centres on purpose, personal development, and self-fulfilment (Huta & Waterman, 2014; Ryan & Deci, 2017). This conceptualisation will be discussed below.

Psychological wellbeing

Eudaimonic theories emphasise living a meaningful life, highlighting personal growth, self-realisation, and fulfilment as key to wellbeing (Huta & Waterman, 2014). The concept of psychological wellbeing (PWB) was introduced by Carol Ryff with the aim of developing theory-based indicators of positive human functioning that aligned with eudaimonic principles of happiness (Ryff & Singer, 1996). Ryff (1989) proposed a six-factor model, conceptualising PWB as an individual's ability to function positively and resiliently in daily life. The framework includes six core aspects: autonomy, environmental mastery, personal growth, positive relations with others, purpose in life and self-acceptance. These dimensions reflect a holistic view of wellbeing, capturing both personal fulfilment and adaptive functioning, making them particularly relevant for teachers, whose profession demands a strong sense of purpose and emotional resilience to cope with ongoing challenges (Collie, Shapka & Perry, 2012).

While valuable, the hedonic and eudaimonic approaches have a broad perspective on wellbeing, which may oversimplify the complexity of the construct (Dodge et al., 2012). Thus, they lack the specificity needed to address practical and structural workplace specific factors.

Wellbeing at Work

The concept of wellbeing at work provides an important lens for understanding teacher wellbeing, recognising that professional contexts introduce distinct pressures and demands that differentiate workplace wellbeing from general wellbeing. Within the field of organisational psychology, wellbeing within the workplace has become increasingly acknowledged as distinct from general wellbeing, due to the unique demands and structures of the workplace (Zheng et al., 2015). In teaching, these factors are particularly notable given that teachers are expected to navigate evolving social expectations, high demands and complex emotional labour, all of which directly influence their workplace wellbeing. Conceptualisations of wellbeing at work, such as Fisher's (2014), emphasise subjective satisfaction and positive affect towards one's job, are therefore highly relevant. However, scholars have yet to reach consensus on a clear definition of employee wellbeing (Page & Vella-Brodrick, 2009), and much of the research in this area has historically focused narrowly on job satisfaction, limiting the scope of understanding (Wright & Cropanzano, 1997). This would appear insufficient for a profession such as teaching, where emotional fulfilment, relational quality, and a sense of purpose are central. Therefore, a definition of teacher wellbeing must go beyond job satisfaction, and encompass the emotional, relational and meaningful dimensions of teachers' daily professional lives.

Teacher Wellbeing

Teacher wellbeing remains conceptually fragmented, lacking a clear and universally accepted definition (Ozturk et al., 2024). Definitions range from the individualistic and fluid (McCallum & Price, 2016) to more structured, multidimensional models such as that of the OECD, which outlines cognitive, subjective, physical and mental, and social dimensions (Viac & Fraser, 2020). The issue of a clear definition is further complicated by the inconsistencies in the classification of constructs such as

self-efficacy and resilience. These terms are often used variably as either components of wellbeing or as impacting factors (McCallum et al., 2017; Viac & Fraser, 2020).

Furthermore, researchers have criticised deficit-based or exclusively positive psychology approaches for failing to reflect the multifaceted and dynamic nature of teacher wellbeing (Hascher & Waber, 2021; Ozturk et al., 2024). In a review of 61 studies, Ozturk et al. (2024) found that most conceptualised wellbeing primarily through a professionalism lens, focusing on work-related factors. Only a minority of studies incorporated positive, negative, and professional dimensions in tandem.

The complexities of teacher wellbeing have resulted in an increasing recognition for conceptualisation that reflect the lived experiences of teachers, as well as the multidimensional nature of wellbeing (Hascher & Waber, 2021; Ozturk et al., 2024). Teaching is a profession that involves ongoing emotional, cognitive, and physical interactions with students, colleagues, leadership structures, and broader institutional frameworks. This complexity is captured by Hascher's (2020) emphasis on the multiple dimensions of experience and Roffey's (2012) view of teacher wellbeing as constantly shaped by evolving relationships, workload, policy demands and school culture. By framing wellbeing as dynamic and contextually embedded, these conceptualisations more accurately captures the realities of teachers' work. Therefore, this research takes the stance, that to account for the complex reality of teaching, teacher wellbeing should be understood as a dynamic concept, viewed through a holistic and systemic lens.

Theoretical Underpinnings of Teacher Wellbeing

As discussed above, the concept of wellbeing is complex and multidimensional, given the definition ambiguity, adopting a clear framework to understand and conceptualise teacher wellbeing is pivotal to support with a more critical and coherent understanding. This section will explore some of the key frameworks used to conceptualise teacher wellbeing before positioning the ecological systems theory as the most appropriate framework for this research.

Positive Psychology and the PERMA Model

Positive psychology offers a strengths-based framework for understanding teacher wellbeing, shifting from traditional deficit models and instead promoting

flourishing (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). Central to this perspective is the PERMA model (Seligman, 2011; 2012; 2018), which acts as a versatile tool to understand the multiple domains that contribute to a flourishing life. The PERMA model suggests that there are five core elements to wellbeing: Positive emotion, Engagement, Relationships, Meaning and Accomplishment (Seligman, 2011;2012;2018).

Seligman (2018) describes these elements as the foundational components of wellbeing, where each represents a distinct but interconnected aspect of human flourishing. Positive emotion encompasses feelings of joy, satisfaction, and hope, which help to buffer against the emotional demands of teaching. Engagement refers to deep involvement or 'flow' (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990), fostering a sense of absorption and intrinsic motivation (Butler & Kern, 2016). This is important given that teachers' role involves continuous problem-solving and creative instructional design, all of which require psychological investment. Relationships highlight the importance of social connection as a buffer against stress and a driver of resilience, especially relevant in educational settings where professional relationships span students, colleagues, and school leadership. Meaning, defined as a sense of purpose that extends beyond the self, is often derived from the moral and social significance teachers attach to their work, contributing to a sustained commitment to the profession despite ongoing systemic challenges (Schueller & Seligman, 2010). Accomplishment refers to striving toward and achieving goals, underpinned by motivation, self-efficacy, and resilience (Norrish et al., 2013; Mercer et al., 2016), which for teachers may arise from witnessing the impact on students' academic and personal growth. Collectively, the PERMA model offers a useful lens through which to understand the psychological dimensions of teacher wellbeing and the ways these may manifest in daily professional life.

Research has increasingly used the PERMA framework to understand teacher wellbeing (Dreer, 2024; Golab et al., 2025; Minh 2024; Turner et al., 2021), with studies demonstrating its utility in assessing and enhancing wellbeing in educational contexts. Turner and Theilking (2019) used PERMA to understand Australian teachers' wellbeing, where they found that teachers purposefully utilised PERMA based strategies to enhance wellbeing. Similarly, Dreer (2021) explored German teachers' job satisfaction through the PERMA dimensions, finding that those who showed a strong presence of the

five elements presented with higher job satisfaction. However, many critiques point to its individualistic orientation, advocating for models that acknowledge the interplay between individual and contextual factors (Brown & Rohrer, 2019; Lomas et al., 2020). In teaching, a profession embedded in relational and institutional systems, this limitation is particularly salient (Wright & Pascoe, 2015).

Job Demands-Resources Theory

The Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) theory is a widely used framework which seeks to conceptualise factors that affect employee health and performance (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017, 2023; Demerouti, 2001; Granziera, Collie & Martini, 2020). It integrates various perspectives on job stress and motivation, including two-factor theory (Herzberg, 1966), job demands-control model (Karasek, 1979) and conservation of resource theory (Hobfoll et al., 2018), allowing for a comprehensive understanding of employee health and performance (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017, 2023).

JD-R theory recognises that organisations are unique, and job characteristics may differ however, a central component of the JD-R theory is that job characteristics can be considered through a dual focus (Bakker & Demerouti, 2023). Whereby, job characteristics can be broadly defined as ''job demands'' or ''job resources'' (Demerouti, 2001). Job demands encompass the physical, psychological, social and organisational aspects of a job that requires sustained physical, cognitive or emotional efforts that often lead to physiological or psychological costs. Examples include teachers' experiences of high workloads and conflicting demands. Conversely, job resources refer to the physical, psychological, social or organisational aspects of the job that motivate employees, aid them to achieve work goals, and promote learning and personal development (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017). For instance, social support or flexible working. While some demands and resources, such as workload, are common across various occupations, others are unique to specific roles (Bakker & Demerouti, 2023). For example, the emotional load on teachers may be higher compared to other occupations such as software developers due to the constant interpersonal engagement (Grandey, 2000). The JD-R model suggests that the interplay between job demands and job resources determines the stress or motivation an employee may feel (Bakker and Demerouti, 2006). For example, autonomy (job resource) may buffer the

negative effects of time pressure and high workloads (job demands) on teacher wellbeing. This concept is known as the ''matching hypothesis'' (Langseth-Eide, 2019).

The JD-R theory proposes two central processes which explain the dynamics between job characteristics and employee wellbeing: the health impairment process and the motivational process (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007;2023). The health impairment process posits that excessive job demands can deplete employees' mental and physical resources, leading to exhaustion and adverse health problems. The motivational process suggests that job resources can provide both intrinsic and extrinsic motivation, fostering employee engagement and motivation.

Since the JD-R theory initial conceptualisation (Demerouti et al. 2001), more recent developments have included acknowledging the role of personal resources (Bakker and Demerouti, 2007; Xanthopoulou et al., 2007; Taris et al., 2017). Personal resources refer to an individual's sense of ability to control and influence their environment (Bakker and Demerouti, 2017; Xanthopoulou et al, 2007). Examples include hope, intrinsic motivation, resilience and self-efficacy (Schaufeli and Taris, 2014). Personal resources play a crucial role in how employees perceive and respond to job demands and resources, often acting as moderators or mediators (Taris et al., 2017, Xanthopoulou et al., 2007).

The JD-R model has been widely adopted in teacher wellbeing research due to its broad and flexible framework, which accommodates a wide range of occupational demands and resources (Schaufeli & Taris, 2014). Unlike narrower stress and motivation models, the JD-R model enables a comprehensive analysis of both the positive and negative aspects of work. In the context of teaching, it has been instrumental in examining outcomes such as teacher wellbeing (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2018), job satisfaction (Dreer, 2021), and retention (Van Droogenbroeck & Spruyt, 2016). The model facilitates the identification of specific stressors and support mechanisms within the teaching profession (Silva et al., 2022), and research by Ostermeier et al. (2023) highlights its practical utility in designing interventions. These interventions focus on increasing job resources and reducing job demands, thereby promoting improved wellbeing among teachers.

Although the JD-R model has evolved to incorporate personal resources, Schaufeli and Taris (2014) debate the precise nature of their interaction with job demands and resources. They argue that while some studies suggest that personal resources exert a direct influence on individual wellbeing, others posit that they function primarily as moderators, mitigating the adverse effects of job demands. Moreover, the model builds on PERMA's individualistic nature to include organisational factors. However, JD-R theory still overlooks other salient sources of demands and resources which are critical in teacher wellbeing including familial, community and societal contexts. Therefore, constraining the model's ability to capture the true complexity of influences on teacher wellbeing.

Ecological System Theory

The ecological systems perspective offers insights into individual development by emphasising the dynamic interplay between systemic influences and contextual conditions (Mercer, 2023). Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems theory, and its further development into the bioecological model (Bronfenbrenner, 2001), expands upon existing systemic frameworks, often limited to family dynamics, by situating individual development within a broader network of interrelated systems. Wellbeing, from this perspective, can therefore be conceptualised as an evolving sense of meaning and life satisfaction that arises from an individual's subjective relationship with the experiences afforded by the ecological systems in which they are embedded (Mercer, 2023).

The later development of Bronfenbrenner's theory into the bioecological model incorporated the Process–Person–Context–Time (PPCT) framework. This idea presents development as a function of increasingly complex, reciprocal interactions (proximal processes) between an evolving individual and the people, objects, and symbols in their environment (Bronfenbrenner, 2001). This model also highlighted the synergistic interactions between heredity and environment, and the necessity for regular, enduring interactions for effective developmental outcomes. The addition of the chronosystem drew attention to the influence of time, both in terms of individual life transitions and larger historical events, on human development. In the context of education, this extended framework emphasises how both proximal and distal systemic forces, such

as close interpersonal relationships and broader cultural or policy environments, shape teachers' experiences and outcomes. The theory identifies five interconnected systems that shape behaviour and wellbeing: the microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem, and chronosystem (Bronfenbrenner, 2001). These systems are presented in Figure 1. below

Chronosystem
The dimension of time, including life transitions and sociohistorical contexts e.g., years expereince, COVID-19

Macrosystem
Broader cultural, societal and economic influences e.g., societies value of teaching, funding

Exosystem
External environmental setting that indirectly influence the individual e.g., school policy, local authroity support

Mesosystem
The interactions between mircosystems e.g., leadership interactions, teacher-student relationships

Microsystem
The immediate environement in which the individual operates e.g., classroom, students behaviour

Figure 1. *A visual representation of the five interconnected systems of the ecological system theory (Bronfenbrenner, 2001).*

As illustrated in Figure 1, the Ecological Systems Theory provides a framework which supports the researcher to consider the multitude of factors that could potentially impact an individual, oppose to simply relying on more traditional pathogenic models of mental health that situate wellbeing concerns within the individual and disregard their wellbeing (Williams, 2013; Brooks, 2013). Through

adopting this holistic approach, the research will be able to challenge current societal narratives framing wellbeing as personal issues for teacher to manage independently (Cederstrom & Spicer, 2015; Davies, 2015) and provide scope for broader institutional and national contexts surrounding teacher wellbeing to be explored. Moreover, the role of a teacher is complex, and subject to a myriad of influences which are discussed in more detail later in this thesis. Though JD-R theory can account for the multitude of professional and personal factors that can enable and challenge positive teacher wellbeing, the ecological systems theory shows strength in its ability to account for the constant interactions within and beyond the system that is common in schools. This allows for the researcher to expand the understanding of teacher wellbeing through a multilevel lens.

Teacher Wellbeing in Context

Understanding teacher wellbeing requires close attention to the specific contexts in which educators work. While primary and secondary teachers share a range of occupational challenges, the nature of their roles, responsibilities and working conditions can differ substantially. Recent findings from the Education Support Partnership (2024) illustrate this variation where 86% of primary school teachers reported ongoing stress with no improvement from the previous year's data, while in secondary school's stress levels were slightly lower at 80%, reflecting a modest 3% decrease from the previous year's data. This section critically examines the literature on teacher wellbeing within primary and secondary school settings, with a focus on identifying both commonalities and distinctions. In doing so, this section will highlight the importance of recognising contextual nuances when supporting teacher wellbeing.

Overview of Teaching Contexts

The professional contexts of primary and secondary teaching differ in several key respects. In the United Kingdom, primary education typically serves children aged 4 to 11 and is delivered through a broad curriculum by generalist teachers who manage a single class (DfE, 2012). This structure fosters strong relational continuity and involves significant pastoral care responsibilities, including emotional and social support for pupils (Day & Gu, 2014). In contrast, secondary education begins at age 11 and is characterised by subject-specialist teaching across multiple classes and year groups

(DfE, 2012). Secondary teachers face more fragmented student interactions and increased pressure related to academic attainment and high-stakes assessments such as GCSEs (van Droogenbroeck et al., 2014; Stobart, 2008). It is important to note that primary school teachers also prepare students for assessments such as SATs, tests which serve as a tool for external accountability making them high stake for primary schools, rather than students (Perryman, 2006). Nonetheless, the associated pressure, as with secondary school teachers, may contribute to workload intensification, emotional labour and reduced autonomy (Ball, 2003; Day & Gu, 2010).

Moreover, the organisational structures differ significantly between primary and secondary schools, with implications for teacher wellbeing. Secondary schools are typically larger and more hierarchical, marked by complex timetabling and departmental divisions, whereas primary schools often operate within flatter, more collaborative staff structures (Hargreaves, 2000). Organisational psychology suggests that hierarchical models can impede communication and increase professional isolation, while flatter structures promote collaboration, open communication, and improved employee experiences (Iasmina, 2019). Such environments are associated with reduced bureaucracy, greater professional development opportunities, and higher job satisfaction (Powell, 2002), factors that are positively linked to teacher wellbeing as discussed later in this thesis. These structural distinctions highlight the need to consider organisational context when addressing wellbeing in educational settings. To the researcher's knowledge, there has not yet been research applying this to teacher wellbeing, however, Buonomo et al. (2017) report a general sense of discomfort among Italian secondary school teachers, who often perceive their work as solitary and individualised, perhaps reflecting an organisational structure that is less conducive to collaboration.

Evidence from the DfE's Teacher Workload Survey (2019a) highlights these contextual differences further. Primary teachers were more likely to report engaging with parents or carers, while secondary staff frequently undertook pupil tuition and managed pupil discipline, including detentions. These divergent task profiles reflect the distinct pastoral and behavioural demands of each phase. Notably, perceptions of

workload severity also varied: 21% of primary respondents and 37% of secondary respondents considered workload to be ''a very serious problem'', suggesting a potentially greater intensity of workload-related stress.

Comparing Wellbeing Across Educational Phase

Research into teacher wellbeing has begun to acknowledge the importance of educational context, with several studies examining wellbeing across specific sectors or age ranges. Ozturk et al. (2025), for example, explored how primary school teachers experienced and understood wellbeing to identify factors of influence. Key findings from this research highlighted the role that workload management, supportive leadership, colleague relationships and opportunities for professional development played in influencing wellbeing. While research into sector-specific offers valuable insights into exploring context specific elements it also presents with limitations. Through solely focusing on a singular setting, research risks overlooking broader structural factors which may be more visible when comparing different settings. Therefore, it is pivotal for research to include comparative approaches to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the deeper structures that interact with teacher wellbeing.

Recent comparative studies have begun to explore differences in wellbeing across educational phases. For instance, Agyapong et al. (2022) found that stress was intensified among primary and special education teachers, who typically offer more continuous emotional and instructional support to students than their counterparts in other sectors. Salavera et al. (2024), in a study conducted in Spain, reported that early childhood teachers demonstrated higher levels of PWB compared to primary teachers across all measured variables, suggesting sectoral variation in both demands and supports. Meanwhile, Zhou et al. (2024), in their cross-sectional analysis, identified a stronger negative correlation between psychological distress and overall wellbeing in teachers working within mixed-age settings than in standard primary-secondary structures, indicating that organisational context may moderate wellbeing outcomes.

Among the limited research directly comparing primary and secondary teacher wellbeing, Bricheno et al. (2009), in a study commissioned by the Teacher Support Network, identified notable contrasts. Primary school teachers reported higher perceptions of self-efficacy, more positive views about the rewards and respect

associated with their roles, and overall greater job satisfaction. Secondary school teachers also reported satisfaction, though their experiences were shaped by different role expectations and institutional demands. Similarly, Hargreaves et al. (2007) found that some primary school teachers perceived themselves to be held in lower professional esteem than their secondary counterparts. This perception was attributed to assumptions that primary teaching is less intellectually rigorous and the fact that primary schools typically receive less funding. Nevertheless, the same study noted that primary teachers reported more frequent opportunities for collaboration with parents, which may serve as a protective factor in supporting their wellbeing.

More recently, Nwoko et al. (2023) conducted a systematic review of 38 studies across 21 countries to examine teacher perceptions of wellbeing from pre-school to secondary education. This review highlighted shared wellbeing challenges as well as unique differences between primary and secondary school teachers. Their findings indicate that both primary and secondary school teachers experience high workloads and classroom demands, though the nature of these pressures differs by phase. Primary school teachers were found to be particularly affected by competing demands on their time, often stemming from the need to provide constant supervision and emotional support to younger children. In contrast, secondary teachers, while enjoying greater autonomy in managing their workload, face heightened accountability pressures related to academic performance and standardised assessments. The review also highlights differing personal capabilities required across sectors. Primary teachers often rely on patience and emotional labour, while secondary teachers must draw on subject-specific expertise and instructional skill. Behavioural challenges also diverge, with primary teachers managing frequent disruptions and secondary teachers navigating more complex interpersonal conflicts. Finally, the authors caution that cross-country comparisons are complicated by national differences in curriculum, inspection regimes, and policy environments, with only three of the included studies originating from the UK.

In summary, whilst both primary and secondary school teachers face considerable workload pressures, the nature and intensity of these demands vary by phase. Primary school teachers tend to experience greater emotional labour,

continuous supervision responsibilities, and closer engagement with parents, all of which contribute to a more relational and pastoral role. In contrast, secondary school teachers appear to operate within a more fragmented teaching structure, with increased emphasis on subject expertise and accountability for academic outcomes. These differences are further compounded by variations in organisational structures. Primary schools typically foster collaboration through flatter hierarchies, whereas secondary schools tend to be more hierarchical and departmentalised, potentially creating feelings of professional isolation. These contextual distinctions highlight the importance of considering educational phase when examining teacher wellbeing, as each setting presents unique challenges, expectations, and support structures.

Facilitating Factors and Barriers to Teacher Wellbeing

To the researcher's knowledge, there is a dearth of research exploring the distinctions across education phases and instead viewing teacher wellbeing as a homogenous group. This presents difficulties within the literature review to gain the rich understanding of the factors impacting teachers across phases. In light of this, to provide a broad conceptual foundation, this section of the review will take a generalised approach to reviewing facilitating factors and barriers to teacher wellbeing. While this approach will smooth over contextual differences, it will allow for the identification of key themes that can form a deeper understanding of wellbeing as a dynamic and multifaceted construct.

A growing body of research has sought to identify the factors that influence teacher wellbeing, often focusing on barriers that contribute to stress, burnout and job dissatisfaction (Schleicher, 2018). While the identification of these barriers is well established, the research has been predominantly problem-focused, emphasising negative impacts rather than exploring the conditions that actively promote positive wellbeing (Bricheno, Brown & Lubans, 2009). Some research has begun to explore factors which actively promote teacher wellbeing (Cann et al., 2021; Turner et al., 2022), however, the examination of facilitating factors remains underexplored in the UK (McCallum & Price, 2016; Liu et al., 2018). The reasons behind the limited research for facilitating factors are unclear. One possible explanation is the assumption that reducing barriers automatically enhances wellbeing, rather than recognising that

wellbeing also requires proactive support structures (Hakanen, Bakker, & Schaufeli, 2006). Notably, some factors, such as workload, have been identified as both barriers and facilitators, depending on the context and individual teacher experiences (Day & Gu, 2010). This dual role suggests a need for nuanced interventions rather than a simplistic approach focused solely on barrier reduction.

This section will explore both the individual and contextual factors. Rather than examining each factor in isolation, the discussion will be structured around key themes, with subheadings highlighting prominent influences. Each section will explore the interconnected nature of these factors, considering how broader influences have supported or strained the factors discussed. This approach acknowledges the complexity of teacher wellbeing and the dynamic interplay of contextual influences.

Personal Factors

A number of personal aspects have been recognised as impacting factors for teacher wellbeing. A systematic review of 38 studies conducted by Nwoko et al., (2023) identified four elements under the theme of personal capabilities including: resilience, self-efficacy, autonomy, and coping strategies. These factors will be discussed below.

Self-efficacy

Teacher self-efficacy, rooted in Bandura's (1977) social cognitive theory, refers to one's beliefs in their ability to effectively perform teaching tasks and achieve student learning outcomes (Dellinger et al., 2008). It is a critical factor influencing instructional practices, job satisfaction, and PWB, serving as a buffer against stress and burnout (Schwarzer & Hallum, 2008). Skaalvik and Skaalvik (2010) further define it as teachers' confidence in their capacity to coordinate and implement strategies that support student success. As a mediating factor, self-efficacy moderates the impact of workplace stressors, shaping teachers' resilience and professional commitment.

The role of teacher self-efficacy in shaping instructional quality, emotional resilience and occupational wellbeing has been well-documented in the literature. Empirical studies indicate that teachers with high levels of self-efficacy are consistently associated with improved teaching quality, enhanced emotional experiences and reduced burnout (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2010). A comprehensive review of 40 years' worth

of teacher self-efficacy research by Zee and Koomen (2016) found that self-efficacy was strongly linked to several psychological factors underlying wellbeing including: reduced stress, emotional exhaustion, and burnout.

Higher levels of self-efficacy in teachers have been linked to lower levels of emotional exhaustion, suggesting that teachers who perceive themselves as competent in their instructional abilities are more resilient to stressors inherent in the teaching profession (Klassen & Chiu, 2010; Wilss et al., 2005). Student misbehaviour and perceived inability to manage disruptions contribute to burnout, whereas strong classroom management efficacy protects against it (Aloe et al., 2014; Chang, 2013). Perceived control over student behaviour sustains PWB and professional commitment (Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 2001).

Research has demonstrated that teachers with higher self-efficacy exhibit stronger professional commitment and greater job satisfaction (Schwerdtfeger, Konermann, & Schönhofen, 2008). However, self-efficacy alone does not directly determine teacher wellbeing. Rather, it influences aspirational goals, commitment levels, and responses to professional challenges (Song et al., 2019). The role of institutional support is therefore critical in reinforcing teachers sense of competence and professional agency (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2010). Although self-efficacy has been positively associated with teacher retention, inconsistencies in its measurement across studies have hindered definitive conclusions (Chesnut & Burley, 2015; Zee & Koomen, 2016). The development and use of standardised measurement tools are essential to improve the reliability and comparability of research findings in this area (Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 2001).

Importantly, high self-efficacy does not necessarily buffer against workplace stress in environments where role expectations are unclear. Teachers who report strong efficacy beliefs but experience ambiguous role definitions often face diminished autonomy, emotional exhaustion, and a sense of professional undervaluation (Chan et al., 2021). In such contexts, organisational support plays a pivotal role in enabling teachers to translate self-efficacy into sustainable wellbeing and effective teaching practices (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2017).

Resilience

The interplay between teacher resilience and wellbeing remains a contested issue within the literature, with scholars debating their conceptual distinctions and hierarchical relationships. Some researchers have posited that resilience and wellbeing are interchangeable constructs, as they are often associated with similar outcomes (Gibbs & Miller, 2014; Larson et al., 2018). However, others argue that while they are closely related, they present distinct constructs that function in a dynamic relationship with one another, though the theoretical rationale for their hierarchical ordering remains unclear (Soini, Pyhalto & Pietarinen, 2010; Clara, 2017; Johnson & Down, 2013; Acton & Glasgow, 2015, Noble & McGrath, 2015). Despite differing viewpoints, there is a shared common assumption that resilience and wellbeing are inherently linked.

Ungar (2011) provides a social ecological perspective on resilience, defining it as both the capacity of individuals to access the psychological, social, cultural, and physical resources necessary for sustaining wellbeing and their ability to negotiate for these resources in meaningful ways. This model has been applied to teacher resilience, emphasising the role of external resources in helping teachers navigate professional challenges (Beltman, 2015; Mansfield et al., 2016). Beltman (2015) further conceptualises teacher resilience as a process through which individual and contextual factors interact, leading to positive adaptation, including higher levels of wellbeing, increased job satisfaction, and reduced burnout. Empirical evidence supports the connection between resilience and teacher wellbeing. Research by Burić et al. (2019) demonstrates that higher levels of teacher resilience are associated with lower levels of burnout, negative affect, and symptoms of mental ill-health. Additionally, fostering resilience among teachers not only enhances their wellbeing but also strengthens their commitment to the profession and improves their effectiveness (Gu & Day, 2007; Margolis, Hodge, & Alexandrou, 2014). Furthermore, several studies have shown that successful teacher resilience intervention programmes contribute to improvements in teacher wellbeing (Beshai et al., 2015; Cook et al., 2017; Griffiths, 2014; Mahfouz, 2018), reinforcing the notion that resilience-building initiatives can yield significant benefits for educators.

Several factors contribute to teacher resilience, including strong social support from colleagues and administrators, positive relationships with students, and the use of effective coping strategies (Beltman et al., 2011; Liu & Chu, 2022). Leadership practices, school culture, and teacher workload can also be leveraged to create resilience-promoting interventions that help sustain and support teachers in their roles (Ainsworth & Oldfield, 2019). In particular, a supportive and caring school culture has been identified as a critical element in fostering teacher resilience (Tait, 2008; Yost, 2006).

Autonomy

Teacher wellbeing has been closely linked to the level of professional autonomy teachers enjoy. From a psychological perspective, this idea is unsurprising when considering Self-Determination Theory (SDT). SDT posits autonomy as a basic human need at work, alongside competence and relatedness (Deci & Ryan, 2000). When this need is met, teachers are more likely to thrive. Empirical evidence has shown that that teachers with higher levels of autonomy report lower stress and better mental health outcomes. For instance, Liu et al. (2021) found that teachers in China who demonstrated a greater sense of autonomy tended to have higher teaching efficacy, higher job satisfaction and better mental health. Furthermore, autonomy has been positively correlated with teachers' job satisfaction, sense of workload manageability, and plans to remain in teaching (Ha et al., 2025). Notably, the area of autonomy with the greatest impact was input into professional development, giving teachers a say in setting their own development goals was strongly linked to higher job satisfaction and a desire to stay (DfE, 2020). Conversely, teachers who feel they have little influence or "voice" in their job often experience a loss of professional identity and morale where a perceived "lack of say" can leave them feeling de-professionalised (Acton and Glasgow, 2015). This lack of say has been evident at both school and governmental levels. Teachers who have little control over curricula or are forced to teach to narrowly defined standards often become disillusioned. Indeed, many UK teachers feel that frequent policy changes and stringent oversight leave them with little say in important decisions, fuelling feelings of disempowerment (Jenkins, 2020). One review noted that educators who felt they had minimal control over curriculum content and testing were more

inclined to consider leaving the profession (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2015). Furthermore, teachers who feel they have influence over school policies and classroom decisions are much more likely to stay in their jobs (Ingersoll, 2012). These findings illustrate how autonomy acts as a pillar of teacher wellbeing, as it affirms their professionalism and control.

Research from Collie et al. (2016) has shown that school cultures characterised by meaningful teacher participation in decision-making and collaboration tend to produce more resilient teachers who are able to persist in the face of adversity. In their research, teachers reported that having opportunities to implement their own ideas, take part in decision-making, and exercise creativity in the classroom strengthened their resolve and commitment (Collie et al., 2016). Moreover, international comparisons are instructive here, countries such as Finland, which consistently rank high in educational outcomes, deliberately grant teachers extensive autonomy as part of their professional ethos (Sahlberg, 2011). In Finland's case, rigorous teacher training and cultural respect for educators underpin this autonomy, resulting in a profession that is "highly trained, respected, and free" to teach in the way they think best (Sahlberg, 2011).

Coping strategies

Teaching is widely recognised as a highly stressful profession that necessitates the use of coping strategies to sustain personal wellbeing and maintain teaching quality (Chang, 2009; Spilt et al., 2011). Coping, as conceptualised by Lazarus and Folkman (1984), refers to "constantly changing cognitive and behavioural efforts to manage specific external and internal demands that are appraised as taxing or exceeding the resources of the person" (p. 141).

Research suggests that adaptive coping strategies, such as problem-solving and social support, enhance wellbeing and reduce attrition (Chang, 2013; Wang & Hall, 2021). Teachers who engage in proactive coping report lower stress and greater job satisfaction (Carver et al., 1989). Conversely, maladaptive coping strategies, such as disengagement and avoidance, have been associated with increased stress, emotional exhaustion, and mental health challenges (MacIntyre et al., 2020). Problem-avoidant

coping, characterised by minimal engagement with stressors, is correlated with higher burnout and job dissatisfaction (Wang et al., 2021). Social withdrawal coping, involving avoidance of professional relationships and responsibilities, is linked to heightened anxiety and an increased likelihood of leaving the profession (Wang et al., 2021). Effective coping strategies include maintaining a balance between work and personal life, engaging in peer discussions, and seeking professional development opportunities (Antoniou et al., 2009). The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted the importance of adaptive coping, with teachers adopting strategies such as exercise, meditation, and online professional communities to manage stress (Kim, 2022).

Relational Factors

Teacher-Colleague Relationships

The social environment within schools plays a crucial role in shaping teacher wellbeing, with relationships among colleagues serving as both facilitating and hindering factors. Research consistently underscores the importance of collegial support in mitigating stress and improving job satisfaction (Johnsen et al., 2018). The presence of supportive colleagues creates a buffer against the emotional demands of teaching (Kinman et al., 2011). In contrast, the absence of such support, or experiences of marginalisation and workplace bullying, has been identified as a key contributor to teacher burnout (Sohali et al., 2023; McCallum et al., 2017). A lack of collegial relationships, or toxic school cultures where bullying is prevalent, significantly affects teachers' mental health, with a heightened risk of emotional exhaustion and disengagement from the profession (Sohail et al., 2023). These negative outcomes reflect the critical role that positive interpersonal dynamics play in fostering teacher wellbeing and retention.

Social support from colleagues is integral to teacher self-efficacy, which, in turn, influences resilience and job commitment. Brouwers et al. (2001) found that insufficient support from co-workers and school administrative staff significantly affected teachers from The Netherlands self-efficacy beliefs, ultimately increasing their risk of burnout. Similarly, Wong and Zhang (2014) confirmed a positive correlation between kindergarten teachers' wellbeing and social support from both colleagues and school leadership in Hong Kong. Teachers in supportive environments, where they feel

encouraged by both peers and leaders, report higher job satisfaction and lower levels of stress, reinforcing the idea that social support strengthens teachers' sense of efficacy and professional satisfaction (Wong & Zhang, 2014). Additionally, Turner et al. (2022) highlighted the role of social support in fostering teacher wellbeing through eudaimonic and altruistic behaviours, suggesting that collective efforts in professional communities can enhance individual resilience and job satisfaction. However, Kidger et al. (2016) caution that while the act of supporting others can be rewarding, it should not come at the expense of personal wellbeing, emphasising the importance of balancing the emotional labour involved in supporting others with self-care.

Perceived collegiality and collaboration among teachers are recognised as key influences on teacher wellbeing and professional satisfaction. Research by Sharrocks (2014) emphasises the value of collegiality in enhancing teachers' experiences at work, noting that positive peer relationships foster greater levels of collaboration, trust and a shared responsibility for student outcomes. Similarly, Fouche et al. (2017) argue that strong, collaborative professional relationships provide teachers with vital emotional support and improve their wellbeing and sense of professional fulfilment. Likewise, Revves et al. (2017) found that teachers who engage in collaborative activities report higher confidence in their teaching abilities and a greater sense of accomplishment. Together, these studies highlight the importance of collaborative working for teacher wellbeing and professional satisfaction.

Student-Teacher Relationships

Teachers are thought to have a basic need for relatedness with their students, meaning the quality of daily interactions in the classroom can accumulate to influence a teacher's stress levels, job satisfaction, and overall mental health (Spilt et al., 2011). The relationship between teacher wellbeing, teaching effectiveness, and student outcomes is widely recognised as reciprocal. Jennings and Greenberg (2009) suggest that teacher stress not only impacts student behaviour and engagement but also feeds back into the teacher's own stress levels through the ongoing demands of managing disengaged or disruptive classrooms. This cyclical relationship reinforces the importance of prioritising teacher wellbeing as part of a wider educational agenda. Central to this is the quality of teacher–student relationships, which research

increasingly identifies as a key influence on teachers' emotional experiences at work. These relationships can act as both a protective factor and a source of stress, depending on their nature and quality (Collie, Perry, & Martin, 2017; Liu et al., 2018; Roffey, 2012).

Positive teacher–student relationships, marked by warmth, mutual respect, trust, and low interpersonal conflict, are strongly associated with increased job satisfaction, professional engagement, and emotional resilience (Davis, 2003; Roorda, Koomen, Spilt, & Oort, 2011). From the perspective of SDT (Deci & Ryan, 2000), this reflects the human need for relatedness, a sense of connection and being valued. Teachers who feel appreciated by their students report higher emotional wellbeing and greater job satisfaction (Butler, 2012; Hagger & Malmberg, 2011). Empirical studies demonstrate that teachers who enjoy close, conflict-free relationships with students experience more positive emotions, lower levels of burnout, and reduced anger (Gastaldi et al., 2014; Klassen et al., 2012; Milatz, Lüftenegger, & Schober, 2015). These positive interactions can enhance teachers' professional identity and serve as a buffer against occupational stress (O'Connor, 2008; van der Want et al., 2014).

In contrast, strained or negative relationships with students can significantly undermine teacher wellbeing. Conflict, detachment, or feeling unappreciated by students may lead to increased stress, emotional exhaustion, and eventual burnout (Split et al., 2011). Challenging behaviours, such as difficulty regulating emotions, inattention, or defiance, are frequently cited by teachers as major stressors, particularly when perceived as chronic or unmanageable (Aloe et al., 2014; Dzuka & Dalbert, 2007; Hargreaves, 2000; Nurmi & Kiuru, 2015). These relational stressors not only diminish teachers' capacity to maintain supportive interactions but can also trigger feelings of inefficacy and frustration. Over time, persistent exposure to relational difficulties may erode teachers' sense of professional purpose and increase the risk of burnout (Maslach & Leiter, 2016).

More recently, research has begun to explore how working with students who have experienced trauma introduces an additional emotional toll. Students who have been exposed to adversity may express distress through disruptive or withdrawn behaviours, making it more difficult for teachers to establish trusting, supportive relationships

(Felitti et al., 1998). This dynamic can place teachers at risk of compassion fatigue and secondary traumatic stress, conditions associated with emotional depletion and trauma symptoms stemming from empathic engagement with others' suffering (Lee, 2019; Heffernan et al., 2022). Although these constructs are still emerging within educational research, early evidence suggests they may be key to understanding teacher burnout in high-need settings (Ormiston et al., 2022). Teachers navigating both the emotional demands of supporting traumatised students and the behavioural challenges present in classrooms may experience heightened exhaustion, underscoring the urgent need for trauma-informed support and professional development focused on relational wellbeing.

Parent-Teacher

Despite the increasing focus on teacher wellbeing within educational research, the impact of parent-teacher relationships remains an underexplored area, often limited to commissioned surveys rather than academic inquiry. However, existing reports indicate that challenging relationships with parents contribute significantly to teacher stress, anxiety, and workload (Ofsted, 2019; Adams, 2019; NASUWT, 2005; Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2009). Ofsted's 2019 survey highlighted that poor relationships with parents exacerbate teachers' professional stress, emphasising the necessity of establishing appropriate communication strategies to mitigate these challenges. Furthermore, a lack of institutional support from headteachers and senior leadership teams (SLT) further intensifies the difficulty teachers face in managing these relationships (Adams, 2019; Ofsted, 2019). In her thesis, Birchall (2021) identified that teachers experience increased pressure when parents impose additional demands, whereas their wellbeing improves when parents demonstrate understanding and support. These findings align with Handayani's (2023) systematic review, which synthesised evidence from 14 studies and highlighted trust and effective communication as fundamental to fostering positive parent-teacher relationships.

The COVID-19 pandemic reshaped the landscape of parent-teacher communication, necessitating an accelerated adoption of digital technologies to maintain engagement on an international scale (Chen & Rivera-Vernazza, 2022; Tish et al., 2023; Levy, 2024; Lutovac et al., 2024). While these technological advancements

enhanced accessibility and collaboration, they have also led to an "always-on" culture, where teachers feel compelled to respond to parental enquiries outside traditional working hours (Levy, 2024). Research by Lutovac et al. (2024) found that Finnish teachers reported increased uncertainty and discomfort due to the growing presence of parents in professional knowledge domains. This shift has the potential to contribute to role overload and stress, particularly when parents challenge teachers' expertise or exert undue pressure (Tish et al., 2023). Moreover, digital communication has blurred the boundaries between teachers' professional and personal lives, further exacerbating stress and contributing to burnout (Levy, 2024). When teachers experience role conflict and ambiguity, they may begin to perceive parents as adversaries rather than collaborative partners (Levy, 2024; Tish et al., 2024). Addressing these concerns requires a concerted effort from school leadership to establish clear communication protocols and provide teachers with the necessary support to navigate complex parent-teacher relationships effectively.

School-Based Factors

Workload

Research consistently demonstrates that teachers in the UK work exceptionally long hours, with approximately a quarter exceeding 59 hours per week (Rebecca et al., 2020). This far surpasses the UK's legal limit for an average working week, which is capped at 48 hours. A recent Ofsted report also highlighted that teachers work significantly longer hours than the average UK workforce (Ofsted, 2019). This excessive workload has been closely linked to increased levels of work-related stress, burnout, reduced quality of life, and declining teacher retention rates (Jerrim & Sims, 2021; National Education Union, 2018; Foster, 2019; Perryman & Calvert, 2019).

Empirical findings from the Department for Education Teacher Workload Survey revealed that many teachers frequently undertake tasks outside their formal job descriptions (DfE, 2019a). A significant proportion of their workload stems from administrative responsibilities and non-teaching tasks such as assessment, marking, and data entry, tasks often perceived as responses to accountability measures (e.g., Ofsted) rather than pedagogical imperatives (Bradbury & Roberts-Holmes, 2018; Perryman & Calvert, 2019; Selwyn, Nemorin, & Johnson, 2017). A survey by the

Education Partnership (2019) found that teachers reported not having enough time within the workday to complete such tasks. As a result, teachers reported working during their evenings and school holidays to meet their workload demands. In response to workload concerns, UK policymakers have introduced initiatives aimed at reducing administrative burdens, such as streamlining lesson planning requirements, limiting non-teaching responsibilities, and promoting workload-conscious reforms (Copper-Gibson Research, 2018). Policies which emphasise standardised curricula and rigid teaching frameworks constrain teachers' ability to implement creative and contextually relevant instructional strategies (Stacey et al., 2024). Therefore, some scholars caution that these reforms risk oversimplifying teaching by increasing bureaucratic control, thereby exacerbating workload-related stress and diminishing teacher autonomy (Jerrim & Sims, 2019; Stacey et al., 2024). From a labour process theory perspective, such policy-driven constraints contribute to the deskilling of teachers, as pedagogical decisions become increasingly dictated by external mandates rather than professional expertise (Connell, 2013; Hall, 2004). However, this notion is contested by scholars who argue that deskilling is, to some extent, counterbalanced by re-skilling processes, wherein teachers develop new competencies to navigate evolving educational demands (Smaller, 2015).

Beyond policy interventions, institutional support mechanisms play a crucial role in mitigating workload stress and promoting teacher wellbeing. Schools that implement flexible working arrangements, provide access to mental health resources, and encourage peer support networks contribute to improved teacher retention and job satisfaction (Kinman, Wray, & Strange, 2011; Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2009). Thus, while excessive workloads, bureaucratic control, and accountability pressures pose significant challenges to teacher wellbeing, policy reforms and institutional support mechanisms offer potential avenues for alleviation.

Leadership

The role of school leadership in shaping teacher wellbeing is well documented, with studies consistently identifying leadership as a key factor influencing school culture, teacher retention, and emotional health (Day et al., 2010; Ingersoll et al., 2018; Leithwood et al., 2008, 2020). School leaders play a central role in cultivating supportive

environments where trust, collaboration, and professional autonomy are valued (Morris et al., 2020). A positive school climate, reinforced by relational and emotionally intelligent leadership, has been linked to enhanced teacher wellbeing (Burns & Machin, 2013; Renshaw et al., 2015).

Leadership strategies such as providing meaningful professional development, acknowledging teacher contributions, and encouraging agency in decision-making are particularly effective in fostering resilience and job satisfaction (Cann et al., 2020). Moreover, relational trust between teachers and leaders has long been recognised as a cornerstone of school success, with supportive, transparent leadership contributing to greater teacher engagement and lower attrition (Tarter & Hoy, 1988; Tschannen-Moran, 2014; Sutcher et al., 2019). Notably, Lima et al. (2024) found that while pedagogical leadership has the potential to foster innovation and inclusion, it requires consistent institutional support to overcome systemic barriers such as workload and policy constraints. Conversely, when leadership becomes overly bureaucratic or top-down, teachers often experience increased workload, reduced autonomy, and a diminished sense of professional identity (Skinner et al., 2021). Excessive managerial oversight and accountability-focused structures, such as performance-related pay, prioritise outcomes over teacher welfare, contributing to stress and dissatisfaction (Briner & Dewberry, 2007; McQuade, 2024; Vittersø, 2004; Wang et al., 2015).

Continuing professional development (CPD) offers one mechanism through which leadership can actively support teacher wellbeing. High-quality CPD aligned with teachers' goals and school priorities can enhance motivation, reduce burnout, and promote a sense of professional fulfilment (Sandilos et al., 2018; Zysberg & Maskit, 2017). However, the effectiveness of CPD is variable. Teachers often report that compulsory or generic CPD fails to meet their individual needs and, in some cases, adds to their stress (Asdown, 2002; van Driel et al., 2012). Policy recommendations from the National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER, 2021) also emphasise giving teachers a greater role in shaping CPD content and goals, ensuring the relevance and impact of professional learning. It would seem that, school leadership that is responsive, inclusive, and emotionally intelligent is vital for promoting and sustaining teacher wellbeing.

Wider Contextual Factors

Public Perception and Societal Value

The public perception of teachers in the UK is multifaceted and often marked by a sense of underappreciation within the profession. According to the Working Lives of Teachers and Leaders survey, only 12% of teachers believe their profession is valued by society, while a significant 76% disagree with this sentiment (DfE, 2023). Similarly, the Teaching and Learning International Survey reported that only 28.8% of teachers in England felt that the public held their profession in high regard (OECD, 2019). However, broader surveys have uncovered some more optimistic perspectives. For instance, Everton, Turner, and Hargreaves (2007) found that 50% of the public viewed teaching as an attractive career. Their research also challenged hierarchical assumptions within the profession by finding no significant difference in the perceived status of primary versus secondary teachers.

Media coverage plays a pivotal role in shaping how teachers are perceived by the public. During the COVID-19 pandemic, teachers initially gained widespread public admiration for their rapid shift to remote teaching and their commitment to student welfare. However, this positive image was short-lived, as the pandemic continued and media narratives became more critical, contributing to a decline in morale among educators (Kim & Oxley, 2023). A content analysis of UK newspaper articles revealed that teachers' perspectives were frequently underrepresented or mischaracterised, especially in coverage relating to industrial action or student underperformance. This selective portrayal reinforces negative stereotypes and contributes to the ongoing undervaluation of the profession (Kim & Oxley, 2023).

Beyond media reports, government policies and accountability structures also significantly shaped public narratives of teachers. While 65% of teachers reported feeling valued within their individual schools, many expressed distrust toward broader educational systems. In the Working Lives survey, 71% of respondents indicated that Ofsted inspections did not fairly assess school performance, suggesting a wider climate of scrutiny and scepticism (DfE, 2023). When accountability measures dominate the narrative around education, teachers may be seen less as professionals deserving

support and more as subjects of performance evaluation, further eroding public trust in the profession.

Public and policy discourse often treats wellbeing as a matter of individual responsibility, rather than a systemic concern. Davies (2015) and Cederström and Spicer (2015) argue that societal narratives tend to frame wellbeing as a personal issue for teachers to manage independently, rather than recognising the structural and cultural factors that impact mental health in education. This framing can lead to a lack of institutional accountability for supporting teacher wellbeing, reinforcing the sense that teachers are undervalued and expected to cope without sufficient external support.

Government

A long-standing concern among educators is the frequency and pace of organisational changes imposed by both central and local government. Research has consistently shown that excessive policy shifts create instability in schools, requiring teachers to frequently adapt to new teaching methods, assessment frameworks, and administrative procedures (Brown & Ralph, 1995; Bubb & Earley, 2004; Teacher Support Network, 2002). These changes are often introduced with limited consultation or preparation time, contributing to rising workloads and job dissatisfaction (Price, Waterhouse, & Coopers, 2002; Collie, Perry, & Martin, 2017; Van Droogenbroeck, Spruyt, & Vanroelen, 2014). Hargreaves and Dawe (1990) argue that repeated reform demands significant cognitive and emotional labour from teachers, leading to emotional exhaustion without necessarily improving educational outcomes. Similarly, Chang (2009) found that stress linked to rapid policy change is a key factor in teacher burnout and attrition. Several studies suggest that teacher wellbeing could be improved if policy changes were introduced less frequently (Evans, 2016), if expectations were more realistic (Gibson, Oliver, & Dennison, 2015), and if adequate training and support accompanied reforms (Van Droogenbroeck et al., 2014; Collie et al., 2017).

Government funding is a fundamental determinant of school capacity, affecting facilities, resources, teacher salaries, and overall support for staff. Ofsted (2019) found that reduced funding often leads to feelings of disempowerment among teachers, as

financial constraints hinder their ability to deliver high-quality education. This aligns with research indicating that budget cuts can lead to increased class sizes, reduced specialist support, and insufficient professional development opportunities (Bricheno et al., 2009; Guglielmi & Tatrow, 1998). Consequently, teachers experience greater stress and frustration when they perceive that external financial limitations prevent them from fulfilling their professional aspirations. Adequate funding and competitive salaries can improve job satisfaction. Public sector pay rises in Scotland, which have outpaced inflation by 5% between 2019 and 2024, have contributed to better financial security for teachers, though the long-term effects on retention remain under review (Institute for Fiscal Studies, 2024).

Teachers report feeling excluded from decisions that directly affect their work, which can lead to disillusionment and disengagement (Bangs & Frost, 2012; Evans, 2016). Paterson and Grantham (2016) argue that involving teachers more meaningfully in policy development would help bridge the gap between policy and practice, making reforms more realistic and improving morale. This gap has been critiqued by Biesta (2015), stating top-down accountability measures erode teachers' professional judgements. Santoro (2018) refers to this dynamic as moral injury which captures the ethical strain educators experience when compelled to act against their values within constrained systems. This tension is evident in curriculum-related frustrations. For example, a government study found that some Reception teachers removed age-banded expectations from their Early Years guidance documents, describing them as incompatible with the idea that each child is unique (DfE, 2010). One teacher reported that the phonics curriculum expectations were "not achievable for many children" at age five, yet schools felt pressured to meet them to satisfy accountability measures. These kinds of mismatches between policy and classroom reality not only compromise child-centred education but also increase stress for educators navigating conflicting demands.

Ofsted

Ofsted inspections, while designed to maintain educational standards, are a significant source of stress for teachers (Perryman, 2007). Research shows that these inspections increase workload, cause emotional distress, and create a culture of fear

(Fitzsimons et al., 2025). According to a 2023 report by Education Support, 73% of teachers reported that Ofsted inspections negatively affected their mental health (Education Support, 2023). Studies indicate that teachers often experience heightened stress levels during inspection periods, fearing negative evaluations that could impact career progression (Teacher Support Network, 2002; Bubb & Earley, 2004). The pressure associated with inspections can create a high-stakes environment that prioritises performance over holistic education (Ofsted, 2019). Page (2002) noted that nearly half of the teachers surveyed reported that Ofsted inspections significantly increased their workload and anxiety. Providing constructive feedback, rather than focusing solely on deficiencies, could alleviate stress and foster a more positive professional culture (Gibson, Oliver & Dennison, 2015).

Beyond their immediate effects, Hall and Noyes (2009) argue that Ofsted inspections act as normalising mechanisms that embed self-discipline within schools. This culture of accountability and surveillance can conflict with teachers' personal values, as Ball (2003) observes, often placing creativity, autonomy, and integrity at odds with an inspection regime focused on standardisation and conformity.

The Role of Educational Psychologists in Teacher Wellbeing

Despite the wider literature demonstrating the significance of teachers' wellbeing for school functioning and pupil outcomes (Oberle & Schonert-Reichl, 2016; Spilt et al., 2011), the contribution of educational psychologists in this area appears under-explored. The educational psychology profession is still predominantly perceived as a reactive service, with statutory assessment and special educational needs (SEN) responsibilities occupying a substantial proportion of educational psychologists' time (Amstrong & Hallett, 2012; Roffey, 2012, Rae et al., 2017). Though this statutory focus is essential, it is often prioritised at the expense of preventative and systemic work (Rae et al., 2017), reinforcing misconceptions that educational psychologists' primary role is to work directly with individual pupils (Roffey, 2012; Harvest, 2018). This risks overlooking the potential for educational psychologists to support teacher wellbeing, which as suggested by ecological systems theory is interconnected with pupil, family and organisational wellbeing (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Interventions to support teachers, therefore, are likely to hold systemic benefits that indirectly support pupil progress and the wider school climate.

Although the empirical base is limited, a number of studies have sought to explore educational psychologists' role in this area. Salter-Jones (2012), and Evans (2016) both, doctoral theses, represent early attempts that explicitly examine the relationship between educational psychologists' practice and the wellbeing of teachers. More recently, Birchall (2021) explored both teachers and educational psychologists' perspectives on the role of educational psychologists in this field, highlighting notable divergences in views. Furthermore, contributions have been made by Murray (2022), Rae et al. (2017) and Miller (2005), suggesting potential avenues for educational psychologist involvement, including the facilitation of supervision, supporting teachers in contexts with high emotional labour and mediating home-school relationships. Together, this body of literature provides insight into the possibilities and barriers that constrain educational psychologists' involvement.

Research has indicated one avenue for support could be the facilitation of supervision and reflective practice. Murray (2022) identifies the benefits of group supervision for teachers, emphasising its role in providing a containing space in which emotional demands can be processed and resilience sustained. Similarly, Salter-Jones (2012) highlighted the value of supervision, recommending that educational psychologists establish systems for individuals or groups of staff, especially for those who are in high emotional labour roles such as Emotional Literacy Support Assistants. Supervision likely functions through mechanisms of containment (Bion, 1962) and reflective practice, giving teachers space to make sense of their experiences and return to the classroom with a renewed perspective. However, resourcing constraints likely challenge the feasibility of this work. While supervision has the potential to act preventatively, limited service capacity often leaves little space for its implementation. This highlights a wider structural issue where practice that may alleviate pressure on school are those that may be deprioritised within current service models.

Educational psychologists may also play a role in supporting teachers who work with pupils experiencing social, emotional, and mental health needs. Rae et al (2017) note that these teachers are at a heightened risk of stress, compassion fatigue and burnout, with implications for practice and retention. It is suggested that educational psychologists are well positioned to provide psychological formulations, consultative support and provide resilience-building strategies that help staff to reframe these challenges. Evans (2016) further suggests that collaborative and solution-focused approaches, alongside therapeutic techniques can offer valuable support to teachers. However, Evans (2016) also highlighted that stigma may surround wellbeing intervention, where some staff were reluctant to seek support for fear of negative

perceptions. Thus, recommendations need to be feasible and situate wellbeing as a collective rather than individual responsibility.

Miller (2005) emphasised the potential for psychologists to act as mediators in parent–teacher relationships, where conflict is often a source of significant stress. In these situations, educational psychologists act as neutral facilitators, who can support communication and restore trust. However, given the multiple accountabilities under which educational psychologists operate, questions remain regarding the feasibility and neutrality of this role.

Birchall's (2021) research illustrates the ambiguity in the role. While educational psychologists reported believing they had a role in supporting teacher wellbeing, 61% of teachers in the study were unsure. Instead, teachers tended to view educational psychologists in more traditional terms, primarily associated with individual pupil assessment, a finding which has been echoed by earlier studies (Ashton & Roberts, 2006; Roffey, 2012). Birchall (2012) attributed this uncertainty to limited service capacity and the narrowing of many educational psychology service offers to statutory work, which reinforce the ''pigeon-holing'' of the profession. This creates a cyclical problem, whereby teachers are unfamiliar with the broader potential of educational psychology practice and therefore do not seek wellbeing-related support which in turn prevents educational psychologists from demonstrating the value of such contributions.

The findings in this area highlight both the promise and challenge of educational psychologist involvement in teacher wellbeing. The literature indicates that educational psychologists have the skills and theoretical grounding to make a significant contribution to teacher wellbeing. However, role ambiguity, limited capacity and the prioritisation of individual pupil work may constrain their consistent implementation.

Gaps Within the Literature

Despite a growing interest in teacher wellbeing over recent years, significant gaps remain in the literature, particularly in relation to conceptual depth, methodological diversity, and contextual considerations.

While interest in teacher wellbeing has grown, there remains a notable gap in research that adopts an ecological systems perspective, particularly within the UK school context. Although some studies have drawn on ecological systems theory, such as those in the United States (Hanno et al., 2022), Australia (Price & McCallum, 2014), and Malta (Mercer, 2023), these are limited in number and vary widely in focus and

context. In the UK, empirical applications of this framework remain scarce, with Birchall's (2021) thesis being one of the limited examples. As Granziera, Collie, and Martin (2021) point out, few studies have considered teacher wellbeing as multi-level or explored the interconnections of these. A more nuanced and context-sensitive understanding of teacher wellbeing within the UK is needed, justifying the use of this framework in this research.

Furthermore, despite teacher wellbeing research increasing in recent years, it appears that the evidence based within the context of the United Kingdom is still limited. For instance, Nwoko et al. (2023) systematic review of international teacher wellbeing research from 2002-2022 identified 38 relevant studies, of which only three were based within the United Kingdom. Indeed, it is important to note that some studies may have been overlooked due to the inclusion criteria used and since this review more recent studies have emerged such as research from Ozturk et al., (2025), McQuade (2024) and Johnson and Coleman (2023). Nonetheless, research within the United Kingdom remains scarce.

Beyond issues of quantity, concerns have also been raised about the depth and methodological diversity of existing studies. In their review Aziku and Zhang (2024) also noted that research mostly adopts a quantitative approach in the form of surveys (79.6%). While quantitative methods offer valuable insight at scale, qualitative methods allow for greater depth, providing a voice for teachers, an aspect Rich (2017) identifies as a significant gap in the literature at present. Thus, the use of qualitative methods when considering the multifaceted and context-dependent nature of wellbeing becomes pivotal (Ozaturk et al., 2025).

Finally, Aziku and Zhang (2024) observe that much of the existing research on teacher wellbeing explores teachers as a homogenous group, with limited attention paid to specific cohorts such as those working in different educational sectors. However, there is increasing recognition that teachers in primary and secondary schools operate within distinct professional contexts. While similarities in their experiences exist, important differences may shape wellbeing in unique ways (Nwoko et al., 2023; Ozaturk et al., 2025). Despite this, comparative research that explores these sectoral differences remains scarce. Nwoko et al. (2023) note that there is an absence

of studies that have directly compared the wellbeing of primary and secondary school teachers, limiting the field's understanding of how context-specific factors influence wellbeing outcomes. This gap is particularly significant, as the absence of such comparative studies risks the development of generalised frameworks and interventions. A "one-size-fits-all" approach may fail to account for the nuanced stressors that differ between sectors, potentially reducing the effectiveness of wellbeing policies and support strategies for teachers.

Conclusion

To summarise, this review has provided insight into the multifaceted landscape of teacher wellbeing, drawing on a range of national, theoretical and contextual perspectives. While many teachers feel joy in their work (Ofsted, 2019), systemic issues such as high workload, insufficient support and a diminished work-life balance create stress and attrition among teachers (Ofsted, 2019; Education Support Partnership, 2024).

Teacher wellbeing remains conceptually difficult to navigate (McCallum et al., 2017), with definitions ranging from individualistic, fluid ideas to more structured and multidimensional concepts (McCallum & Price, 2016; Viac & Fraser, 2020). While models such as PERMA (Seligman, 2021) and the JD-R framework (Bakker & Demerouti, 2023) provide valuable insight into the components of teacher wellbeing, they fall short of capturing the true contextual and systemic influences and how they interplay in shaping teacher wellbeing. The ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner, 2001) provides a holistic and dynamic perspective, providing space to explore how the personal, institutional and societal factors interact with each other, shaping teacher wellbeing (Mercer, 2023).

It seems that much of the literature for teacher wellbeing tends to generalise teachers as a homogeneous group. This risks overlooking contextual differences that shape wellbeing in phase-specific ways (Nwoko et al., 2023; Ozturk et al., 2025). The limited research that has compared primary and secondary settings reveals differences in stressors, responsibilities and relational dynamics (Hargreaves et al., 2007; Bricheno et al., 2009; Nwoko et al., 2023). For example, primary teachers face greater pastoral

demands and supervision duties while secondary teachers have greater levels of academic accountability and subject-specific pressures (Agyapong et al., 2022).

This review also identified key drivers of teacher wellbeing, including personal resources such as self-efficacy (Zee & Koomen, 2016), resilience (Gu & Day, 2007), autonomy (Collie et al., 2017), and coping strategies (Chang, 2009). Relational factors, such as supportive colleague and student relationships (Spilt et al., 2011; Johnsen et al., 2018), and inclusive leadership (Day et al., 2010; Leithwood et al., 2020). Despite these findings, the UK literature remains heavily quantitative and underrepresents the lived experiences of teachers (Aziku & Zhang, 2024).

Chapter 2: Empirical Paper

Abstract

Teacher wellbeing has gained growing attention in recent years due to rising concerns about retention, job satisfaction and student outcomes. Though numerous factors that impact teacher wellbeing have been identified within the literature, limited research has comparatively explored how these experiences are shaped based on educational phase, particularly within the context of the UK. This study addresses this gap by examining the complex, multi-layered nature of teacher wellbeing through a comparative lens, focusing on primary and secondary school sectors. A purposive sample of primary (n = 6) and secondary (n = 12) teachers from mainstream schools in England participated in online and in-person focus groups. Data was analysed using Reflexive Thematic Analysis, generating six overarching themes and 17 subthemes that capture the distinct and overlapping dimensions of teacher wellbeing across sectors. Themes for primary school teachers included: *Losing Sight of the Core Purpose, Disconnection Across the Systems* and *Fading Respect from Outside*. Themes for secondary school teachers included: *Relational Ties and Tensions, The Hidden Cost of Teaching,* and *The Conditions of Personal Growth*. While commonalities existed among both groups of teachers such as the impact of workload and colleague relationships, their lived experiences of these were shaped by distinct organisational and systemic structures. These phase-specific dynamics not only shaped teachers' wellbeing but also affected their sense of professional identity and purpose. By highlighting these differences, the study questions the utility of aggregated teacher wellbeing data and emphasises the need of educational policy and intervention that is sensitive to sector-specific realities.

Introduction

Current Landscape of the Profession

Many teachers express enjoyment in their profession (Ofsted, 2019), often finding a sense of joy and value within the role (Schutz, 2014) and a feeling of fulfilment through

making a difference in the lives of children and society (Bakar et al., 2014). Despite this, issues of burnout and attrition from teachers continue to reach high levels globally (Borman & Dowling, 2008), where teaching is now widely recognised as a profession marked by stress and diminished wellbeing (Ofsted, 2019; Bricheno et al., 2009; Kidger et al., 2016). Stress is deeply embedded in the profession and has been found to affect teachers across all phases of education (Gray et al., 2017; Nwoko et al., 2023; Education Support Partnership, 2024). Recent data from the UK has indicated that over three-quarters of teachers are experiencing job-related stress (Education Support Partnership 2024; NASUWT, 2024), highlighting persistent issues such as excessive workload, insufficient support and an ongoing struggle to maintain a healthy work-life balance (Ofsted, 2019). These pressures on teachers have been further exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, intensifying job demands and contributing to increasingly negative perceptions of the profession (Jones & Kessler, 2020; Kim et al., 2022). Culshaw and Kurian (2021) argue that the pandemic has merely, amplified pre-existing difficulties, with Freedland (2020) highlighting how it had exposed long-standing structural challenges within the education system. Despite the rising concerns for teacher wellbeing, discourse around resilience has led to expectations that teachers should manage their own wellbeing; limiting changes in practice and research in this area (Tarrasch et al., 2020; Viac & Fraser, 2020).

This high level of stress has notable negative effects on teachers both personally and professionally. The stress teachers are experiencing at work has been linked to increased risk of developing difficulties with their mental health (Kidger et al., 2016). In a survey from the Education Support Partnership (2024) teachers reported impacts such as loss of sleep, breakdown of relationships and symptoms of mental ill health, including depression and anxiety. This acute impact for the profession is creating increased job dissatisfaction and increased turnover, with the Department for Education (2018) suggesting that poor wellbeing is a leading factor for teachers' decision to leave the profession. Additionally, Farquharson et al. (2023) found that 15% of teachers had left within a year, a figure that while not uncommon, reflects a wider issue of avoidable attrition. While early career attrition is expected, research has suggested many of the reasons teachers leave the profession are for preventable reasons such as excessive

workload and challenging pupil behaviour (Towers & Maguire, 2017). Therefore, teacher retention becomes about preventing the departure of good teachers for the wrong reasons (Kelchtermans, 2017). The resulting instability in school has shown to impact students, particularly those in disadvantaged areas (Atteberry et al., 2016; Allen et al., 2018). As issues of teacher shortages is of international concern (Toropova et al., 2020), retaining qualified teachers becomes an urgent priority. Within the classroom, research has indicated teachers who experience higher levels of wellbeing are more likely to engage in effective teaching practices (Duckworth et al., 2009; Jennings & Greenberg, 2009; Turner & Theilking, 2019), foster positive classroom environments (Sharrocks, 2014) and support students' academic and socio-emotional development (Baudoin & Galand, 2018; Collie & Martini, 2017; Roffey, 2012; Soini et al., 2010). When teachers experience poor wellbeing, they experience increased stress, burnout, and a reduced capacity to manage classroom behaviour effectively, all factors which have been cited as negatively affecting student motivation, learning, and wellbeing (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009; Madigan & Kim, 2020; Oberle & Schonert-Reichl, 2016). However, it is important to note that links between teacher wellbeing and student wellbeing or academic achievement are often indirect (Kun & Gadanecz, 2022).

Conceptualisation of Teacher Wellbeing

Teacher wellbeing remains conceptually fragmented, with no universally accepted definition (Burke, 2020; McCallum et al., 2017). The definitions of wellbeing range of individualistic and fluid (McCallum & Price, 2016) to more multidimensional and structured frameworks (Viac & Fraser, 2020). This makes the field of teacher wellbeing one that is characterised by conceptual plurality, creating diversity in the way wellbeing is understood and measured (Hascher & Waber, 2021; Ozturk et al., 2024). Issues with definitions are further complicated from the inconsistent classification of constructs such as self-efficacy and resilience, which are variably viewed either as components or influencing factors of wellbeing (McCallum et al., 2017).

Historically, the exploration of teacher wellbeing has been deficit focused (Roffey, 2012), equating teacher wellbeing to the prevalence of stress, burnout and anxiety (Kyriacou, 2001; Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2007). This approach centres on what is lacking with teachers rather than recognising the strengths and protective factors that may exist. In

response to this, many researchers have begun to utilise positive psychology to explore how to nurture teacher wellbeing (Vo & Allen, 2022). Nonetheless, critics have noted that many wellbeing models fail to account for wellbeing as something that is both subjective and individual as well as objective and social (La Placa et al., 2013). This idea is echoed by Ozturk et al. (2024) who argues that viewing teacher wellbeing from a singular viewpoint limits our comprehensive understanding of the term. Therefore, to gain a comprehensive understanding of teachers' wellbeing, the conceptualisation needs to reflect the lived experiences of teachers as well as the multidimensional nature of wellbeing (Hascher & Waber, 2021).

Given this, there is a pressing need for research to explore teacher wellbeing using frameworks that can accommodate for its complexity. Whilst models such as PERMA (Seligman, 2011) and the JD-R theory (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017) provide valuable insight into teacher wellbeing, they are often limited by their focus on individual factors or workplace-level factors. Therefore, this research posits the ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, 2005) is well suited for this, as it provides a structure which enables the exploration of the multifaceted and interacting factors that shape teacher wellbeing across different levels of influence (Birchall, 2021; Liu, 2018; Price & McCallum, 2015).

The ecological systems model consists of the microsystem, which captures the immediate environments surrounding classroom experiences and peer relationships, with the mesosystem considering the connections between different parts of the teachers' immediate environment e.g., the impact supportive communication between leadership and staff has on the work environment. Broader and indirect influencing systems are captured within the exosystem, that reflects external factors that indirectly influence teacher wellbeing such as policies around workload of curriculum changes. The macrosystem that involves broader cultural values, beliefs and attitudes, such as societal value of the teaching profession. Finally, consideration is given to understanding how teachers' wellbeing can evolve through changes and events over time within the chronosystem, this includes impacts of long-term shifts such as the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Teacher Wellbeing in Context

While increased interest in the topic of teacher wellbeing is becoming evident, much of the literature continues to view teachers as a homogenous group, overlooking the distinct professional and organisational contexts within primary and secondary education. These two settings differ markedly in structure, role expectations, and daily experiences. Research suggests that primary settings operate as generalist and are grounded in relational continuity, where significant pastoral responsibilities are evident (Day & Gu, 2014; DfE, 2012). Whereas, secondary settings experiences with students are more fragmented and they face increasing pressures for academic attainment (DfE, 2012; van Droogenbroeck et al., 2014; Stobart, 2008). Though recent research (see Ozturk et al., 2025) has noted the importance of evaluating teacher wellbeing based on their educational sector, the underlying mechanisms are often left unexplored, such as pastoral intensity and relational continuity within primary school settings.

Despite these clear structural and operational differences, there remains a lack of research that explores and compares experiences of wellbeing across these phases. Existing reviews (e.g., Bricheno et al., 2009; Nwoko et al., 2023) have begun to highlight the similar and contrasting stressors, expectations and coping strategies utilised by teachers at different educational levels. However, this area remains underdeveloped, where the inclusion of UK-based research is sparse. There is an urgent need for research that moves beyond a one-size-fits-all model to explore how educational phase, organisational culture, and role-specific demands interact to shape teacher wellbeing. To fully understand teacher wellbeing, explorations of both the differences between settings and the wider factors that support or hinder wellbeing across schools are needed.

Contextualising the Drivers of Teacher Wellbeing

The limited research that directly examines wellbeing across different educational sectors makes it challenging to draw clear conclusions about how specific phases can impact teacher wellbeing. Research that does exist has indicated that primary school teachers stress was intensified by the continuous emotional and instructional support needed compared to other sectors (Agyapong et al., 2022). Moreover, primary school teachers have higher levels of self-efficacy and job satisfaction than secondary school

teachers (Bricheno et al., 2009), however, primary school teachers felt lower levels of professional esteem due to lower funding rates and assumptions that primary school teaching is less intellectual (Hargreaves et al., 2007). In their review Nwoko et al. (2023) highlighted key differences between the two sectors, with primary school teachers managing competing demands on their time due to constant supervision of the children they work with and managing frequent behavioural disruptions, therefore needing skills such as patience and emotional labour to support them in work. In contrast, secondary school teachers enjoyed higher levels of autonomy in their workload but faced higher levels of accountability for assessments and exams adding to their stress and faced challenges in managing more complex interpersonal conflicts between students. Though these findings offer promising steps forward in understanding the complexities of teacher wellbeing, comparative research across the two sectors remains scarce. Much of the existing literature continues to treat teachers as a uniformed group or falls short of examining what makes their experience distinct within the context of their education phase. Given this gap, a broader review of the drivers of teacher wellbeing has taken place.

Studies have tended to concentrate on identifying and reducing stressors, with comparatively less attention paid to the proactive and context-sensitive conditions that promote positive wellbeing (McCallum & Price, 2016; Liu et al., 2018). This imbalance reflects a prevailing assumption that reducing negative influences is sufficient in supporting teacher wellbeing, rather than acknowledging wellbeing as a multidimensional construct requiring active support (Hakanen et al., 2006). It therefore becomes essential to consider the barriers and facilitating factors for teacher wellbeing.

A growing number of international research has begun to identify the facilitating factors that help sustain teacher wellbeing, including personal resources such as self-efficacy, resilience, autonomy, and coping strategies (Nwoko et al., 2023; Zee & Koomen, 2016; Beltman, 2015; Deci & Ryan, 2000). High levels of self-efficacy have been linked with reduced emotional exhaustion and burnout (Klassen & Chiu, 2010; Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2010). Likewise, resilience has been associated with higher levels of job satisfaction and lower attrition rates (Gu & Day, 2007; Burić et al., 2019). Adaptive coping

strategies, including help-seeking and work-life balance, also appear to serve as a buffer against emotional strain (Chang, 2009; Wang & Hall, 2021).

Relational and organisational factors also play a role in teachers experiences of their wellbeing. Supportive relationships with colleagues can reduce burnout and foster professional commitments (Johnsen et al., 2018; Sonhail et al., 2023), while positive student-teacher interactions have been linked to improved job satisfaction and emotional resilience (Spilt, Koomen & Thijs, 2011; Roorda et al., 2011). On the other hand, relational difficulties with parents, and excessive workload demands consistently emerge as a source of emotional difficulty for teachers (Ofsted, 2019; Perryman & Calvert, 2019). School leadership and institutional culture further influence these dynamics, with emotionally intelligent, inclusive leadership associated with stronger teacher retention and morale (Day et al., 2010; Leithwood et al., 2020; Tschannen-Moran, 2014).

Despite these insights, research in the UK remains limited in capturing teachers' own perspectives on what supports their wellbeing. Moreover, concerns regarding the methodological breadth of the existing literature exist. Aziku and Zhang (2024) note that the majority of studies adopt a quantitative approach, primarily in the form of surveys (79.6%), which, while valuable for identifying large-scale trends, falls short of understanding the lived realities of teachers. Qualitative methods offer a richer, more nuanced perspective. As Rich (2017) argues, giving voice to teachers remains a significant gap in the current literature. Given the multifaceted and socially rooted nature of teacher wellbeing, the use of qualitative methods is both timely and necessary (Ozturk et al., 2025).

Research rationale, aims and questions

Given the issues raised, it is undeniable that teacher wellbeing has become a central concern in education policy and research, with an increasing amount of evidence linking poor teacher wellbeing to adverse outcomes for both students and staff (Ofsted, 2019; Educational Support Partnership, 2024; Borman & Dowling, 2008). Indeed, the adverse impact of these challenges is well established, however, the factors that actively support and sustain teacher wellbeing remain underexplored, particularly in the context

of the UK (McCallum & Price, 2016; Liu et al., 2018). Therefore, it is key research adopts approaches that not only explore barriers but also give insight into systemic strength and support mechanisms (Roffey, 2012; Ozturk et al., 2024).

These limitations are addressed through focusing on the lived experiences of teachers and drawing on Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory to understand how teacher wellbeing is embedded within a multitude of interactions influences (Price & McCallum, 2015; Mercer, 2021; Ainsworth & Oldfield, 2019). Although applying this theoretical framework is widely accepted in developmental and education research, it remains underutilised with only a handful of research applying it to understanding teacher wellbeing.

Furthermore, research within this area lacks contextual and methodological depth. One particularly underexplored contextual dimension is the role that educational settings play in shaping teachers experiences of wellbeing. Whilst some recent research has begun exploring the wellbeing of teachers based on sectors (E.g., Ozturk et al., 2025) and pay limited attention to the distinct features of primary and secondary teachers experiences. Growing evidence suggests that these phases involve unique professional demands and working conditions (Nwoko et al., 2023). Despite this, a limited number of studies have directly compared wellbeing experiences across the two settings. This gap highlights the need for comparative research that explores how phase-specific factors influence teacher wellbeing. In addition, Aziku and Zhang (2024) note that quantitative survey methods dominate the field of teacher wellbeing, falling short of capturing the complexities of teachers lived experiences. By adopting a qualitative approach this research will be well suited to gain a greater depth of understanding into the nuanced, subjective and socially constructed aspects of wellbeing (Rich, 2017).

By addressing these gaps, this research seeks to develop a deeper and contextually grounded understanding into the factors that shape teacher wellbeing, specifically within the context of UK primary and secondary education sectors. Guided by Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory, the study aims to gain greater insight into the interplay between personal, interpersonal and systemic influences across multiple levels of teacher's lived experiences. The research will centre the voices of teachers, to

attend to both their subjective experiences and the underlying social structure that are pivotal to their wellbeing, moving beyond a solely deficit-focused lens.

The research is guided by the following questions:

1. How do primary school teachers experience and make sense of the factors that support or hinder their wellbeing?

2. How do secondary school teachers experience and make sense of the factors that support or hinder their wellbeing?

3. What are the similarities and differences in how primary and secondary school teachers experience and navigate wellbeing in their roles?

Methodology

Introduction

This chapter will provide insight into the methodology of the research. It will outline the ontological and epistemological position of the research and provide details of the data collection methods and the data analysis approach.

Research Paradigm

Research paradigms form the foundation of an investigation, influencing its design, methodology, and the interpretation of findings (Cohen et al., 2017; Robson & McCartan, 2016). These paradigms reflect the researcher's ontological and epistemological positioning, which shapes the way they understand the world and approach their inquiry. Ontology concerns the nature of reality, what exists and how it can be understood (Blaikie, 2007). Epistemology, on the other hand, focuses on the theory of knowledge, exploring how we know what we know and the relationship between the "knower" and the "known" (Crotty, 1998). Thus, ontology determines what exists, while epistemology dictates how we can study and comprehend it.

This research is grounded in the philosophical position of critical realism. Critical realism combines a realist ontology, acknowledging the existence of an objective reality, with a relativist epistemology, recognising the influences of social and contextual factors on knowledge (Bhaskar, 1978, 2008; Maxwell, 2012; Stutchbury,

2021). Critical realism posits that while an objective reality exists independently of human perceptions, it is only partially comprehensible due to the subjective and socially influenced perspectives of individuals (Annan et al., 2014; Willig, 2013). Therefore, critical realism seeks to identify the underlying mechanisms that produce or block outcomes, rather than focusing solely on the phenomena themselves (Robson & McCartan, 2016; Matthews, 2003).

One of the key strengths of critical realism is its meta-theoretical nature, which aims to enhance human emancipation by promoting a deeper understanding of the mechanisms that shape social realities (Archer et al., 2016). The term "critical" in critical realism relates to the argument that there is an epistemic fallacy, whereby analysing what could exist purely based on what can be known or understood is inaccurate (Lyubimov, 2015; Morgan, 2017; Reed, 2005). The "realism" in critical realism asserts that there are real mechanisms (underlying structures or causes) that shape events and phenomena in the world (Archer, 2003; Bhaskar, 1993).

Furthermore, critical realism emphasises the importance of understanding human beings as evolving parts within larger laminated systems (Bhaskar, 2010; Bhaskar, Danermark, & Price, 2017). This perspective aligns well with ecological systems theory, which underpins the current research's understanding of teacher wellbeing. The holistic, anti-reductionist nature of critical realism is crucial for understanding the interactional roles of culture, structures, and agency, and how these factors impact individuals in unique ways (Buch-Hansen & Nesterova, 2021). In this way, critical realism provides a framework for exploring wellbeing that goes beyond simplistic cause-and-effect models, acknowledging the complexity of human experience.

CR critiques positivist reductionism by highlighting the transitive-intransitive dichotomy of human knowledge. According to CR, the objects of human knowledge possess both intransitive and transitive dimensions (Bhaskar, 1978, 2008). The intransitive dimension pertains to the "real" which consists of underlying structures and mechanisms that generate phenomena. The transitive dimension concerns the observable, including events generated by these unobservable structures. Critical realism posits that there are two domains within the transitive dimension, the "actual"

which refers to events that occur as a result of these structures and the "empirical" pertains to our experience or perception of these events (Bhaskar, 1978; McEvoy & Richards, 2006). The transitive dimension is historically, socially, and culturally situated, whereas the intransitive dimension is unchanging and independent of the transitive dimension (Smith, 2011). This distinction helps clarify the layers of reality and the different ways in which we perceive and experience them. These three domains (the real, the actual and the empirical) are detailed below, and their relation to teacher wellbeing explored.

Table 1.

The three domains of critical realism in relation to the context of teacher wellbeing.

Domain	Description	Examples in teacher wellbeing
The Real	The structures, mechanisms and casual power that cannot be directly experienced but have the power to cause change.	Organisational structures such as school policies which either promote or hinder wellbeing. Cultural and social dynamics such as societal values about teachers. Economic factors such as budget allocations
The Actual	Events or phenomena that occur in real life, that perpetuate the empirical. These may or may not be	The unacknowledged emotional toll of working in an

		observed thus reality is not always accessible (Clark, 2012).	under-resourced school. Motivation from effective professional development.
The Empirical		The observable aspects of reality that can be experienced directly, or indirectly (Sayer, 2000).	Teachers' self-reports of their wellbeing. Classroom experiences that teachers express e.g., enjoying student engaging.

In this study of teacher wellbeing, the researcher assumes that underlying structures exist, influencing both the events teachers experience and their subjective feelings. Critical realism provides a theoretical framework to investigate these social situations by identifying the ''real level'' causal mechanisms that shape experiences across various levels of reality (Fletcher, 2017; Buch-Hansen & Nesterova, 2021). As critical realism posits that "the social world consists of open systems, in which any number of occurrences and events can overlap and interact" (Fletcher, 2017, p.185), this perspective allows for a more comprehensive understanding of the complexities of teacher wellbeing. Furthermore, by acknowledging the socially constructed nature of wellbeing and the limits of interpretation, this research is guided by a realist ontology and interpretive epistemology (Scott, 2005). Through this approach, the study aims to offer "an account of what is happening in key social mechanisms and processes" (Ackroyd & Karlsson, 2014, p.22) within school environments, contributing to a deeper understanding of the factors that impact teacher wellbeing.

Participants

Participants in this research were teachers from mainstream primary and secondary education settings. A purposive sample was employed to gain participants who were most likely to provide useful information around the experience of teacher wellbeing (Kelly, 2010; Patton, 2002). The research did not seek homogeneity across participants (e.g., age, gender) as the research aimed to capture a diverse range of perspectives to develop a shared understanding of teacher wellbeing. This decision was grounded in the critical realism approach whereby, the researcher acknowledges that while individuals may experience wellbeing differently based on personal and contextual factors, there are underlying mechanisms and structures that shape these experiences.

As part of the research exclusion criteria, trainee teachers and SLT were not included in the study. Trainee teachers were excluded due to their unique position as both students and educators, which creates an intersectionality that places them in a particularly vulnerable position. The dual demands of their training course and teaching responsibilities can exacerbate wellbeing challenges, making their experiences distinct from those of fully qualified teachers (Malone et al., 2024). SLT members were also excluded from the research, as their presence may influence the wellbeing of teachers. Existing literature has highlighted the significant role senior leadership plays in teacher wellbeing (Day et al., 2010; Ingersoll et al., 2018; Leithwood et al., 2008, 2020) and excluding SLT members was intended to create a safe space if teachers discussed leadership structures and their impact on wellbeing without the fear of repercussions.

Initially, the research aimed to exclude teachers with additional responsibilities, such as subject leaders or heads of year; however, due to the complexity of school structures and the multiple roles teachers typically assume, it proved difficult to identify participants without additional responsibilities, leading to a broader inclusion of teaching staff.

Recruitment

The researcher utilised two approaches to recruitment. The first, a poster was shared on the researcher's personal social media outlets including Facebook and

LinkedIn. A poster for the online focus group was initially posted, which was updated when the research subsequently changed to in-person focus groups (see appendix 1 and 2). Additionally, educational psychologist services were emailed across England asking them to share information with schools linked to their service, so that it could be distribution with prospective participants by headteachers or SENCo's (see appendix 3 and 4).

For the online focus groups an online participant information sheet and consent form were developed to be shared (appendix 5). A total of 37 participants responded, participants were emailed to organise and book the focus groups. Of the 37 participants, 16 responded and confirmed attendance to the online focus group. 9 participants withdrew due to personal or unknown circumstances. For in-person focus groups participants were provided with a printed copy of the participant information sheet (appendix 6) where they then signed informed consent forms before commencement of the in person focus groups. In total the participants who took part represented 10 different schools across England. The table below provides a summary of the participants recruited.

Table 2.

Summary of participants recruited

Focus group type	Participant	Region in England	Years Experienced	Job Role
Online group 1 Primary	1	Eastern Region	15	Class Teacher and Subject Lead
	2	London	Information not provided	Class Teacher
	3	London	14	Class Teacher
Online group 2	4	Southwest	13	Science Teacher with Head of

Secondary				Department Responsibilities
	5	Outer London	7	Physical Education Teacher with Pastoral Responsibilities
	6	Outer London	4	Spanish and Maths Teacher with Pastoral Responsibilities
	7	London	13	Design and Technology Teacher with Pastoral Responsibilities
In-person group 1 Secondary	8	Southwest	Information not provided	Business and Economics Teacher
	9	Southwest	37	Biology and Sports Teacher with Pastoral Responsibilities
	10	Southwest	22	Visual Arts Teacher
	11	Southwest	7	Spanish Teacher
	12	London	7	Class Teacher

In-person group 2	13	London	30	Class Teacher
	14	London	8	Class Teacher
Primary				
In person group 3	15	London	9	Design and Technology Teacher with Teacher Training Responsibilities
Secondary	16	London	15	Textiles with Special Education Needs Responsibilities
	17	London	Information not provided	Food Technology Teacher
	18	London	Information not provided	Food Technology Teacher

Data Collection

Rationale for Focus Groups

This research utilised focus groups for data collection. Focus groups are a well-established qualitative method in psychological research, particularly suited for understanding complex social and emotional experiences (Kitzinger, 1995). Given that teacher wellbeing is influenced by a range of individual and contextual factors, focus groups provide a dynamic setting where participants can share and reflect on their experiences collectively. This method facilitates the co-construction of meaning,

allowing participants to respond not only to the facilitator's questions but also to each other, which can yield richer insights and facilitate more sensitive and personal disclosures than individual interviews (Guest et al., 2017; Morgan, 1996). The interactive nature of focus groups enables researchers to identify patterns in discourse, highlighting not only individual perspectives but also collective understandings that reflect deeper, often hidden mechanisms shaping teacher wellbeing (Archer, 1995). This fits with the critical realist emphasis on uncovering underlying structures that may not be immediately observable but have real effects on individuals.

This research originally opted for online focus groups as an accessible and pragmatic approach (Braun & Clarke, 2013). Teachers experience high workloads and time constraints, which can make in-person participation challenging, especially as the researcher hoped to gain participants from multiple geographical regions in England. Online focus groups remove geographical barriers and allow participants to join from their homes or workplaces, increasing accessibility (Tuttas, 2015). Research suggests that when logistical burdens are minimised, participants are more likely to engage meaningfully in discussions (Stewart & Shamdasani, 2017). Furthermore, online focus groups create a degree of psychological distance, which has been shown to reduce social desirability bias and encourage more open and honest discussions (Joinson, 2001). Studies indicate that participants are often more willing to disclose personal experiences in online settings compared to face-to-face interactions (Schneider et al., 2002). Research shows that in virtual environments, participants feel less hierarchical pressure and are more likely to express dissenting or minority views (Paulus et al., 2008), which is crucial for understanding the full spectrum of teacher wellbeing.

Due to recruitment challenges, dropout rates, and non-attendance, following two online focus groups, the study shifted to in-person focus groups. While online methods enhance accessibility, they can reduce participant commitment and limit non-verbal communication, which is crucial for exploring complex social experiences like teacher wellbeing (Gill et al., 2008). The in-person groups demonstrated stronger participant buy-in, with more consistent attendance. This may reflect the sense of commitment and immediacy fostered by face-to-face interaction, which has been noted in previous research as a factor influencing engagement in qualitative group

settings (Krueger & Casey, 2015). Furthermore, in-person focus groups foster deeper engagement, richer interactions, and greater trust among participants, leading to more reflective discussions (Krueger & Casey, 2015). Given the relational nature of teacher wellbeing, this shift provides benefits to support the research aims by capturing more nuanced insights into the social and institutional factors shaping teachers' experiences.

Procedure

To foster meaningful discussion and participant engagement, the researcher employed activity-oriented questioning techniques (Colucci, 2007). These methods, often referred to as *"questions that engage participants"* (Krueger, 1998) or *"focusing exercises"* (Bloor et al., 2001), were designed to encourage deeper reflection, elicit richer data, and reduce the potential discomfort associated with discussing sensitive aspects of teacher wellbeing (Colucci, 2007). Specific techniques used included free listing and fantasy questions (see appendix 8). These types of questions have been shown to help participants engage more readily with abstract or complex issues and express their thoughts more naturally (Bernard, 1995; Krueger & Casey, 2000).

Focus groups were organised into two categories based on defining features: primary and secondary class teachers. The group size was deliberately considered to create a comfortable environment conducive to sharing sensitive emotions. While there is no clear consensus on the optimal size for focus groups, recommendations typically range from 4 to 12 participants (Cameron, 2005; Stewart et al., 2007; Coenen et al., 2012). This research initially aimed to recruit four to six participants per group, as this range is considered effective for encouraging open dialogue without becoming unwieldy (Greenbaum, 1998; Barbour & Kitzinger, 1999; Breen, 2007; Guest et al., 2017; Coenen et al., 2012). However, due to the significant work pressures faced by teachers, recruiting participants proved challenging. As a result, the researcher opted for mini focus groups, comprising of two to five participants (Kamberelis & Dimitriadis, 2005). While homogeneity in group size between the primary and secondary teacher groups was intended, this was not achievable. Nevertheless, the variation in group size was seen as reflective of the differing contexts of the two settings, with secondary schools typically having a larger teaching staff cohort.

Pre-focus group questionnaire

Prior to partaking in the focus groups participants were asked to complete a short questionnaire regarding demographic information to best place them for the focus groups (appendix 7). As well as ensuring participants met inclusion criteria.

Online Focus Group Procedure.

The online focus groups took place during the Autumn term of 2024 and were conducted via Microsoft Teams, lasting approximately one hour. Participants joined the session from their own homes, which provided a comfortable and accessible environment for engagement. As the participants in each focus group were from different schools and did not know each other beforehand, an introductory segment was included to foster a sense of rapport. This included a brief self-introduction and an optional icebreaker activity, sharing why they got into teaching, following recommendations by Pope and Mays (2020).

The discussion was guided by a semi-structured format, with questions being both verbally presented by the researcher and posted in the chat function to ensure clarity and inclusivity.

In-Person Focus Group Procedure

The in-person focus groups took place during the Spring term of 2025 and were conducted in a secure space within the school environment. Each session lasted between 45 minutes to one hour. Unlike the online focus groups, the participants in these sessions were colleagues and peers who were already familiar with one another. As a result, a formal group introductory segment was not necessary. However, to create a comfortable and open discussion environment, a brief warm-up discussion was included at the beginning of each session to ease participants into the conversation.

As with, online focus groups, a semi-structured format was followed, where questions were presented verbally as well as written on a piece of paper presented to participants.

Data Analysis

Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA) was selected to analyse the dataset. This approach offers a ''contextualised version of realism'' (Braun & Clarke, 2022, p.169), making it particularly suited to the researcher's ontological foundation of critical realism. RTA enables the analysis of both the subjective and structural dimensions of social phenomena. By bridging descriptive and interpretative layers of analysis, RTA supports the investigation of both explicit teacher narratives and latent structures influencing their wellbeing (Braun & Clarke, 2022).

An inductive approach was employed as it facilitates a data-driven description of the experiences of participants, thereby centring their voices and ensuring that the findings are grounded in their lived realities (Braun & Clarke, 2006;2022, Sandelowski, 2000). Semantic and latent coding was utilised for a comprehensive exploration of teacher wellbeing, supporting understanding of both visible experiences and the structural mechanisms behind them (Sandelowski, 2000). This approach enhances the depth and complexity of analysis, allowing for a more nuanced understanding of the data (Braun & Clarke, 2022).

The reflexive element of RTA highlights the importance of making conscious and thoughtful choices throughout the research process. Researchers should be conscious of how they engage with the data and to explicitly acknowledge the assumptions and positionality they may hold (Clarke, 2021; Braun & Clarke, 2019). Through being reflective it is recognised that themes do not passively emerge from data but are instead actively developed by the research. As Elliot et al (2012) states, this means consciously incorporating one's own lens into the analysis rather than striving for an illusory objectivity. Therefore, themes are not treated a fixed or definitive, instead they are refined through an ongoing reflexive engagement, ensuring alignment with the study's critical realist stance. This is pivotal in ensuring a nuanced understanding of a phenomena (Braun & Clarke, 2021).

The process of RTA follows a six-phase framework developed by Braun and Clarke (2022). This is a recursive process, allowing researchers to move flexibly between phases (Xu & Zammit, 2020). RTA emphasises the active role of the researcher,

acknowledging their theoretical orientation and engagement with the data shapes the analytic outcome. When analysing focus group data, it is important to recognise the interactions between participants also produces unique insight. Group dynamics form collective meaning that are not reducible to personal viewpoints or generalised group opinions (Hyden & Bulow, 2003; Albrecht, Johnson, & Walther, 1993).

The following section provides details on the 6 phases and how the researcher approached analysis to provide clarity and transparency and provide insight into how the themes were created (Braun & Clarke, 2019, Nowell et al., 2017).

Table 3.

Six Phases of Reflexive Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006; 2015; 2022)

Phase	Description	Action
Phase 1: Familiarising yourself with the dataset	Researcher immerses themselves in the data. Initial ideas emerge to ensure a deep understanding of the content and context.	Data was engaged with through listening to the recordings in full alongside quality assuring the transcription provided by Microsoft Teams. The recording was listened to again where the research used a ''text-to-image'' approach to help gain a sense of the ideas the researcher was developing from the focus groups (appendix 9). Raw data was also referred to regularly during coding and theming.
Phase 2: Coding	Data is systematically coded to identify features which are meaningful for the research.	Preliminary semantic and latent codes were developed. This was given to data sets which were relevant to the given research question. Codes were written by

	hand as the researcher felt this supported with their processing of the information (see appendix 10). Numerous cycles of assessing and re-labelling were applied and code clusters formed (see appendix 11). Final codes were transferred to post it notes.
Phase 3: Generating initial themes	Codes are organised into potential themes by grouping codes into related patterns/ideas.	Codes were organised into sections based on their perceived likeness and connection to each other (see appendix 12). This was done by transferring post it notes of the codes onto separate pieces of paper to organise codes together.
Phase 4: Developing and reviewing themes	Themes are refined by checking their coherence with the coded data and overall data set.	Initial themes were reviewed in relation to the codes and data set. This involved re-reading codes under each theme and ensuring internal consistency and distinguishability from other suggested themes. During this process some themes were either merged or spilt and codes reassigned as needed.
Phase 5: Refining, defining and naming themes	Themes are further refined and clearly defined to articulate their essence and relevance.	Theme were reviewed to define a core meaning. Clear and concise names were assigned, and support quote were selected.

Phase 6: Writing up	Themes are weaved together to create a coherent narrative that answers the research question/s.	Final themes were integrated into a narrative which placed the findings within the research questions and literature. The write up can be found in the Findings and Discussion section of this chapter.

An inductive approach was employed throughout the analysis, with careful attention given to the interpretative lens brought by the researcher. The RTA was conducted in two distinct phases, allowing for a deeper exploration of contextual understandings of teacher wellbeing. The first phase focused on primary school teachers' experiences, and the second on the experiences of secondary school teachers. This two-phase approach supported a rich, contextualised analysis within each participant group, allowing the researcher to apply a deeper comparative interpretation during the discussion part of this thesis to explore the similarities and differences across the two educational contexts. Please refer to Table 4 for an overview of the phases of analysis.

Table 4.

Phases of Thematic Analysis

Phase	Focus of Analysis	Purpose
1	Primary school teacher focus groups	To identify themes grounded in the experiences of primary teachers
2	Secondary school teacher focus groups	To identify themes grounded in the experiences of secondary teachers

A key aspect of ensuring rigour within this qualitative research was reflexivity (Willig, 2022). Through being reflexive researchers are able to identify and respond to subjects' responses they may have during data collection (Patnaik, 2013). Within this research, it was important for the researcher to be mindful of their own positionality throughout the process of data collection and analysis. This involved actively acknowledging the influence of their own values, politics, biases and perspectives (Braun & Clarke, 2019). Reflexivity is key to enhancing transparency and integrity within research (Etherington, 2004; Holloway & Jefferson, 2013; Yardley, 2017) however it needs to be carefully balanced so that it does not overshadow participants experiences (Parker, 2015). Throughout the process, the researcher reflected on how their identity as a trainee educational psychologist, and as someone with two sisters are teachers, might have shaped their understanding and interpretation of the data. To support this approach reflective diaries were kept (appendix 13) and discussion with peers were had regularly. This encouraged a more thoughtful and transparent interpretation of the data. Please refer to Chapter 3 for a reflective account of the reflexive processes of this analysis.

Lincoln and Guba (1985) emphasise the importance of trustworthiness in research, proposing a four-criteria model to guide its evaluation. Although the model is now several decades old, its impact on how we understand quality in qualitative research is still widely acknowledged as foundational (Treharne & Riggs, 2015). Lincoln and Guba's (1985) four principles: credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability are outlined in table 5 below and an explanation of how the research ensured each principle included.

Table 5.

Lincoln and Guba's (1985) Four Principles for Research Trustworthiness

Criteria	Description	How the research address this
Credibility	Confidence that the findings are considered trustworthy	Through adhering to Braun and Clarke's (2022) guidelines for conducting thematic analysis, the research was

		able to ensure measure were taken to facilitate immersion and engagement within the data. Moreover, by presenting direct quotes when presenting findings, supporting evidence was provide for the analysis process (Johnson et al., 2020).
Transferability	Showing findings have applicability in different contexts	The transferability of this research is considered within the Findings and Discussion section, where the contribution this research makes to for wider contexts is discussed (Yardley, 2017). It is acknowledged that the small-scale qualitative nature of this research means that findings can only be tentatively transferred, however this approach to research provides space for a deeper and richer understanding of teachers' experiences of wellbeing (Braun & Clarke, 2022).
Dependability	Showing findings are consistent and can be repeated in other projects	The write up of this research provides a clear outline of the research processes and aims. Relevant documentation for records is provided in the Appendices.
Confirmability	Showing how findings reflect the data set rather than biases and interpretations of the research	The researcher acknowledges that no research is ever bias-free (Buch-Hansen & Nesterova, 2012). However, by engage in an on-going reflexive process and carefully following Braun and Clarke's (2022) guidelines, the researcher strived to work towards confirmability.

Ethical considerations

Ethical approval was granted by the UEA Ethics Committee prior to conducting the research. The approved ethics approval with the inclusion of an amendment can see seen in appendix 14 and appendix 15. Factors such as consent, confidentiality, the right to withdraw, and psychological harm were carefully considered in accordance with guidelines from the British Educational Research Association (BERA; 2018), British Psychological Society (BPS; 2021) and the HCPC (2016, 2023). Data was handled and stored on a password protected laptop, using university approved secure online system. Data was managed in line with the Data Protection Act (2018) as well as the University of East Anglia's Research Data Management Policy (2019). Table 6 below outlines the steps taken to help mitigate potential ethical risks within the research.

Table 6.

Examples of step taken within the research to address ethical risks that may occur

Ethical Considerations	Examples of steps taken
Informed Consent and Voluntary Participant	• Participants received a Participant Information Sheet and Consent form outlining aims of the research and what it involves. • Participant was entirely voluntary, where participants were informed, they could: 1) Choose not to answer any questions they were uncomfortable with. 2) Leave the focus group at any point. • Additional efforts to reduce power dynamics (e.g., where headteachers were involved as gatekeepers) to ensure staff consented independently.

Anonymity and Confidentiality	• Transcripts were anonymised and pseudonymised to remove identifiable details • Online participants had the option to: 1) Join anonymously or under a pseudonym 2) Turn off camera to protect visual identity • All participants were reminded of the limits of anonymity within group settings and asked to keep discussion confidential.
Managing Sensitive Topics and Emotional Risk	• Given the topic of wellbeing, it was anticipated that some participants might experience discomfort, emotional distress or wish to withdraw during discussion. • To minimise discomfort: 1) Ground rules were shared before each focus group. 2) Participants were reminded they can withdraw at any point or skip uncomfortable questions. 3) Creating a safe and contained space for discussion. 4) A verbal and written debrief was provide, including signposting to relevant wellbeing support services. 5) Environmental considerations (e.g., quiet private spaces). • If a participant was to become upset during the focus group, they would be able to leave the session, and the researcher would check in with them privately.

Safe Environment for Participants	• Online participants were advised to join from a private, quiet space and use a virtual background if necessary. • In-person focus groups were held in a private room within schools. • Confidentiality expectations were communicated at the beginning of each group
Unique Challenges of a Focus Group	• Confidentiality within group settings cannot be guaranteed, as participants are visible to one another. To mitigate this: 1) Participants were informed in the participant information sheet and again at the start of the session that confidentiality cannot be ensured within the group itself. 2) Clear ground rules were established, including the expectation for participants not to disclose any information discussed during the group. • Withdrawal during and after focus groups: 1) Participants were informed they could the focus group at any time or skip questions that made them uncomfortable. 2) Participants were made aware once comments are made during the session, they cannot be removed from the group transcript as this could impact the integrity of the discussion.
Researcher Safety and Supervision	• Research was conducted in line with UEA's lone working and online safe working policies

- Researcher adhered to all visitor protocols during in-person sessions (e.g., sign-in systems, DBS checks).

Findings

Introduction

This section presents the findings from the focus groups conducted with primary and secondary school teachers exploring their experiences and perspectives on teacher wellbeing. Findings will be presented reflecting the two phases of RTA that took place: primary school teachers and secondary school teachers. This structure was chosen to ensure alignments with the analytic process and to honour the distinct contexts and experiences represented within each of the participant groups.

Each theme is presented with its accompanying subthemes, where applicable. Direct quotes from participants are incorporated to maintain the richness and authenticity of their accounts. Although themes will be presented separately within the thematic maps, it is important to consider their interconnectedness throughout the participants narratives. A full thematic map outlining themes and subthemes for both primary and secondary school teachers can be seen in Figure 2.
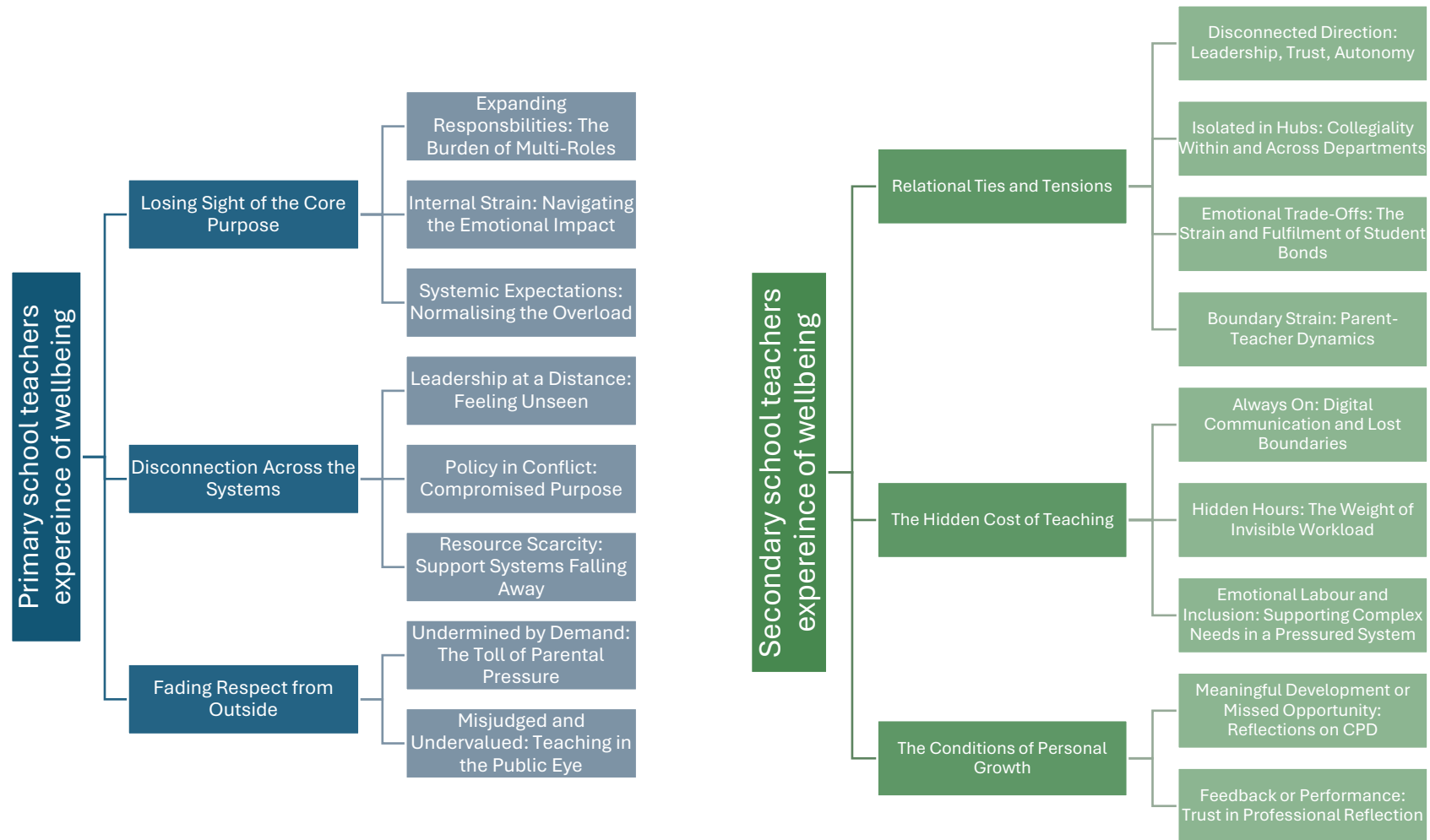
Figure 2. Thematic Map detailing the Themes and Subthemes for Primary and Secondary School teachers

Findings: Primary School Teachers Experiences of Teacher Wellbeing

Theme 1: Losing Sight of the Core Purpose

This theme focuses on teachers experiences around the feeling of disconnection from the core purpose of their role. Participants described how the increasing demands, responsibilities and emotional pressures have eroded the time, energy and professional fulfilment they experience from teaching. As Participant 13 reflected, ''*I was doing nothing that was actually teaching related*.'' This disconnection highlights a growing tension between teachers' professional identity and the expectations being placed on them.

The subtheme *Expanding Responsibilities: Burden of Multi-Roles* explores the increasing expectations placed on teachers to fulfil roles that range beyond their primary function as educators. The emotional outcomes of this are examine in the subtheme *Internal Strain: Navigating the Emotional Impact*, which captures the strategies teachers adopt to protect themselves from the emotional toll of these demands. Finally, *Systemic Expectations: Normalising the Overload* highlights the institutional and cultural forces that normalise overworking and contribute to a school climate where overextension is expected and rarely questioned.

Together, these subthemes describe a collective sense of frustration, as participants explain the gradual decline of meaningful teaching in favour of fulfilling externally imposed and emotionally challenging demands.

Subtheme 1 Expanding Responsibilities: The Burden of Multi-Roles

This subtheme represents primary teachers' experiences of being pulled across multiple and often competing responsibilities that extend far beyond classroom instructions. Participants described how the accumulation of multiple roles including behaviours management, safeguarding, administrative tasks and extensive communication with parents, has significantly reduce the time and energy available for teaching. As participant 13 reflected, ''*The time I spend sitting at my class computer I would say 70%-80% of the time…is not doing actual preparation for teaching''*.

Several teachers discussed how their sense of efficacy and identity was shaped by the emotional toll of managing pupils with complex needs. Participant 12 shared ''*I*

have to change the way I teach so much...I can't be the teacher I am...it's draining''. The need to continuously adapt to pupils needs, often without the support structures in place, left participants feeling depleted and disconnected from the aspects of teaching they found most fulfilling.

Many participants described how managing multiple demands affects not only their own wellbeing but the learning experiences of the wider class. As participant 3 noted, *''I've been in these situations before. I've got the resilience to deal with them. What I get upset about is that it affects the other children''* Even for those who felt emotionally capable of managing challenging behaviour, the consequences for pupils' learning weighted heavily on them.

The extent to which participants felt support in navigating these multiple roles varied across the focus groups. Some described feeling abandoned when faced with severe behavioural incidents and emotional challenges. Participant 3 notes ''*Behaviour has changed...swearing, physically hurting teachers...in my particular school I'm just left like that's just what you do like now''*. On the other hand, other participants reflected on the value in leadership practices that acknowledge and actively alleviated additional pressures and demands on teachers' time. Participant 13 explained ''*[The] Headteacher is very mindful...report writing...streamlined that into something I think is actually quite a valuable document''*.

This subtheme highlights the cumulative weight on the multi-role expectations placed on teachers, and the extent that these responsibilities can impact their capacity to engage in teaching itself. While some participants found that structural supports exist, many described a growing sense of role strain, fatigue and a loss of connection to the core purpose of their profession.

Subtheme 2 Internal Strain: Navigating the Emotional Impact

This subtheme describes how teachers attempt to manage the emotional impact of being unable to meet the standard of teaching they set for themselves. Participants discussed the feelings of frustration, guilt and self-doubt they experienced when they felt stretched too thin to give students the level of attention and care they believe they deserved. These responses were often shaped by a strong sense of personal

responsibility and empathy. As participant 3 shared ''*It's almost like empathy for them. I just imagine my own children being in that classroom''*.

Many of the participants explained the emotional weight that came with falling short of their own expectations. Participant 1 describe ''*You feel a sense of guilt...you're like oh, man, that's my fault''*, highlighting the internalised pressures felt. For some participants, this was exacerbated by the increasing needs of students and limited time and capacity they had given excessive workloads. Participant 3 summarised this sense of helplessness as ''*it's out of your control''.* These feelings were further intensified by the immersive nature of the role, especially in primary education where teachers remain with the same group of children throughout the day. As Participant 14 noted, *"and you're with them all day,"* pointing to the constant emotional engagement and limited respite from the demands of caregiving and behaviour management.

For some participants these feelings were magnified by the close emotional bond they felt towards their students. Participant 2, for example, referred to her class as ''*my children''*, highlighting the deep relational connection that heightened her sense of emotional investment for them.

Despite these challenges, participants also described moments of emotional fulfilment that helped offer a sense of emotional assurance, such as small signs of progress in students learning or behaviour. As participant 1 shared ''*It reminds you why you do teaching when little things like that happen''*. These moments acted as an emotional anchor, helping teachers reconnect to the meaning of their work.

In addition to connections with students, the quality of team relationships was also highlighted as a supportive factor against emotional strain. When staff dynamics were positive and supportive participants felt a greater sense of emotional safety and shared understanding. Participant 3 explained ''*It can go both ways can't it? But at the moment...we're all on the same page...everyone kind of respects everyone's way of working''.*

Overall, this subtheme highlights the emotional dissonance that teachers experience when they are unable to meet their own expectations and engage in teaching due to structural constraints. In response to this, they rely on professional

relationships and moments of pupil progress to manage the emotional impact of their role.

Subtheme 3 Systemic Expectations: Normalising the Overload

This subtheme describes how teachers experience a relentless and reactive work environment that often leaves them with little opportunity for recovery, reflection or autonomy. Participants described being caught in a cycle of demands that not only shaped their working hours, but also their entire way of life. As participant 2 explained ''*It's just the pace of an hour, the pace of your day, the pace of your week and therefore your life''*. For many participants this fast-paced rhythm of work left them in a state of alertness that was emotionally and physically unsustainable. For participant 14 this led to the loss of previously helpful coping strategies ''*There used to be a point that I used to be able to be like, right….do some exercise''*.

This sense of overload was compounded by frustrations with inefficient systems and poor communication. Teachers described how duplicated tasks and unclear responsibilities added otherwise avoidable pressure to an already demanding role. Participant 12 noted ''*It wasn't clear whether I had to sort it out...then I found someone else was dealing with it…I wouldn't have spent 10 minutes trying to get my head around that.''* These inefficiencies contributed not only to a loss of time, but also feeling of futility, fuelling the sense that time and effort were constantly being drained by avoidable issues.

In attempts to regain a sense of control, many participants adopted time management strategies, such as arriving early, staying late or extending their work hours at home. However, rather than alleviating the strain, this effort often fed into a wider school culture where overwork was normalised. As participant 12 explained ''*I got here early because I knew I had lots to do''*. These patterns of work reflected a lack of structural support and a silent expectation that teacher would compensate systemic short fallings through personal sacrifice.

Despite these difficulties, participants noted that moments where greater flexibility helped restore a sense of autonomy and professional trust. Being able to manage their time independently, especially outside of strict monitoring, was

experienced as protective for mitigating the emotional toll of workload pressures. As participant 14 shared ''*That flexibility...like I know I'm going to get my work done...there's no one asking me.*''

Taken together, participants account reveals how a culture of overwork has become embedded into school systems. This culture is often sustained by constant urgency, structural inefficiencies and an implicit expectation that teachers will extend themselves beyond their limits. While some shared small experiences to resist these pressures, most remain entangled in a cycle that normalised overworking, impacting teacher wellbeing.

Theme 2: Disconnection Across the Systems

This theme provides insight into how wider educational systems, at the level of school leadership, policy and funding shape teacher wellbeing. Participants described feelings of disconnect between policy and practice, school leadership and classroom experiences as well as needs and resources. These disconnects create an environment which undermines resilience and job satisfactions rather than supporting it. Across focus groups, teachers voiced a sense of strain that is created not by the work of teaching itself, but by the structures that frame it.

The subtheme *Leadership at a Distance: Feeling Unseen* explores how the perceived absence of relational and responsive leadership diminishes teachers' sense of value and visibility. *Policy in Conflict: Compromised Purpose* highlights how national curriculum and accountability frameworks were often experienced as incompatible with teachers' pedagogical values. Finally, *Resource Scarcity: Support Systems Falling Away* focuses on how limited staffing, training and access to external services have left teachers feeling overextended and unsupported in meeting growing pupil needs.

These subthemes portray a picture of teaching in which professionals are left working within an increasingly unsupportive system, which often fails to see, understand or provide for the complexity of their work.

Subtheme 4 Leadership at a Distance: Feeling Unseen

Participants discussed a growing divide between school leadership teams and the realities of classroom life. This distance was experienced not just as a lack of

understanding but also as an emotional absence, where support was distant, and acknowledgement of their work was minimal. Participant 2 shared ''*They haven't been in the class for a while...being in class...I think may help with some of their decision making''*, highlighting a desire for leadership that is connected to the evolving demands of the classroom.

Several participants described how the perceived lack of presence from leadership led to a breakdown in professional trust. Oversight mechanisms that were intended for accountability, such as time monitoring and presenteeism, were perceived to undermine participants autonomy. As participant 13 shared ''*It's like an infantilisation isn't there? You've got to be in there sitting at a computer to prove you're working''*. Rather than feeling empowered by their leaders, many felt feelings of being surveilled and a lack of trust.

Participants expressed a desire for leadership that was relationally attuned, that understood the emotional complexities of teaching, responding with empathy rather than procedure. As participant 2 noted ''*when you've had one of those days...they say did you follow that step...you try your best to do everything...but sometimes that's not what you want hear at that moment''*. In these moments, teachers sought compassion and a recognition of effort, rather than correction.

Subtheme 5 Policy in Conflict: Compromised Purpose

Participants described tensions that existed between the requirements of national education policy and the values that underpin their teaching practices. There was a shared sense that the national curriculum framework was developmentally inappropriate and too prescriptive, particularly for young children. As participant 1 noted ''*Our curriculum is very packed...children who would have coped in the past aren't coping now''*.

This conflict in policy left teachers feeling unable to exert their professional judgement. Participant 3 shared ''*We just have schemes for everything because the school's so paranoid about Ofsted''*. For many of the participants, the curriculum felt less like a framework and more like a script that was driven by inspection pressures

rather than child development and need. The result of this was a sense of frustration and loss of autonomy over classroom practice.

Participant 2 raised concerns about inconsistencies in policy implementation, noting ''*They release these reports to say this, but yet…their expectations of us aren't in line with what they've published…so that's a challenge''*. This misalignment between guidance and accountability adds to feelings of disillusionment.

Whilst there was some recognition of the value of clear frameworks, many shared the current system placed them in a position of conflict, creating tension between what they were told to do and what they believed was right for their pupils. These experiences led to feelings of moral compromise, as teachers were positioned to prioritise measurable outcomes over meaningful learning.

Subtheme 6 Resource Scarcity: Support Systems Falling Away

Participants shared the impact a lack of appropriate resourcing was having on their ability to do their job. In particular, the shortage of support staff was noted as a major barrier to meeting pupil needs. Participant 13 stated ''*There just isn't the staff to support and kind of manage''*, while participant 12 reflected ''*When we had teaching assistants, everything felt a lot easier''*.

Without sufficient adult support in the classroom, teachers described feelings of not being able to cope with or manage the complex behavioural, emotional and academic needs of students. As participant 2 noted ''*They haven't got maybe the adult with them…then have more of a dysregulated* session''. This strain was exacerbated further by the limited availability of external services. Participants explain how agencies traditionally relied on to support pupils' mental health, welfare and family circumstance were often at full capacity, leaving schools to take on responsibilities beyond their educational remit. As participant 13 explained ''*where is the crossover between becoming a parent for them?''*

For many, the additional responsibility that came with the loss of support systems felt professionally disorienting. Participant 3 noted ''*Sometimes it's actually beyond our skillset''*, pointing to the emotional and ethical strain of being expected to fil roles they felt unqualified to perform.

Participants also shared how funding had led to a reduction in CPD, highlighting a broader withdrawal of support structures for teachers. Participant 3 recalled *''...when you used to...get trained in things....how inspiring it would be''*, highlighting the role training provides in developing a sense of progression within the role. In the current context, the lack of access to CPD not only left teachers feeling professionally unsupported but also contributed to a wider sense that systems which use to nurture growth and sustain morale were no longer available. This reinforced feelings that another key layer of support had quietly fallen away.

Theme 3 Fading Respect from Outside

This theme explores participants experiences of professional devaluation from external sources of pressure. Though much of the emotional strain stemmed from internal school demands, this theme focuses on the way parent interactions, public perceptions and societal discourse adds to teachers feeling of being dismissed and misunderstood. These external pressures shaped how teachers were treated, their ability to advocate for themselves and maintain boundaries as well as sustain a sense of professional worth.

The subthemes *Undermined by Demand: The Toll of Parental Pressure* explore how teacher-parent relationships have become an increasing source of emotional and professional tensions. The second subtheme, *Misjudged and Undervalued: Teaching in the Public Eye* highlights how the teaching profession is commonly misunderstood and undervalued by the public, media and policy makers. These subthemes highlight how the breakdown of respect and recognition impacts teachers' morale and advocacy skills.

Subtheme 7 Undermined by Demands: The Toll of Parental Pressure

Teachers reflected on the changing nature of their relationships with parents, describing a rise in complaints, demands and emotionally charge interactions. These encounters were often described as draining and demoralising. As participant 3 shared, *''I had a parent demanding an audience with me. Please respond by this time''*. Teachers felt these interactions often wore away at their boundaries with their expertise frequently being questioned. Participant 2 similarly described the emotional

anticipation that accompanied repeated parent complaints: "*There is an incident… it involves a child with a parent who you know is always up at the school and always complaining*."

Participants noted how parents would bypass teachers, sharing concerns with senior leadership. This left staff feeling undermined and unsupported. As participant 13 explained ''*Mum complains to the Head on the gate…that needs to be shut down right at the parent's point of view''.* Others noted how leadership would accommodate parental demands without consulting or protecting staff. Participant 12 noted ''*It's very hard to go back when you're a kind of yes school…you know we'll accommodate that''*. This 'yes culture' left many participants feeling exposed and unable to rely on their leaders to uphold professional boundaries.

For some participants, this translated into a reluctance to speak up and advocate for themselves. Participant 14 shared ''*It's like not feeling like we are allowed to''*, highlighting how the broader school culture implicitly discouraged staff from asserting themselves. The emotional toll of this dynamic was particularly strong for those managing ongoing difficult relationships. Participant 14 went on to admit ''*I have two parents I have to see next week, and I want to avoid because they've been so nasty''*.

Participants also reflected on the shift in parenting styles that added to the strain they felt. There was a shared perception that many parents were more inclined to protect their children from discomfort rather than promote resilience. Participant 13 shared ''*The lack of consequences and wanting to rescue children''*. These tensions placed teachers in challenging positions where they struggled to balance professional expectations with the emotional demands of family relationships, often without institutional backing.

Subtheme 8 Misjudged and Undervalued: Teaching in the Public Eye

Participants describe a persistent sense that the public misunderstand or underestimates the nature of their work. Participants shared feelings of frustration that the emotional, intellectual and relational demands of teaching remained largely

invisible to those outside of the profession. As participant 3 noted ''*It would be so nice if people understood like, why we're in the profession and how hard the profession is*''.

Participants felt that societal views often reduced their role to surface-level routines such as early finishes, and school holidays, without the recognition of the hours and energy that often goes unseen. As participant 12 shared ''*There's still very much a culture of they're working at nine, they're finishing at half three*''. These perceptions were experienced as invalidating, particularly when they were echoed in political or media discourse.

Participants also reflected on the role media plays in shaping public opinion, describing feelings of being misrepresented. Participant 2 explained ''*Like with the media and things like that, you don't feel like anyone's really on your side*''. These portrayals left teachers feeling not only misunderstood, but also unfairly judged.

This frustration was deepened by participants' views that their reasons for speaking out were often misrepresented by the public and the media. Teachers felt that public narratives tended to frame their actions as being driven by monetary purposes, rather than by the broader issues affecting the profession. As Participant 2 explained, "*It's not the pay. It's all the other things. Just want the government and Ofsted to actually listen to what they're being told and take it on board*". This quote reflected a desire for those in power, and society more widely, to understand that calls for change are rooted in the need to protect the profession, not personal financial gain.

These accounts reflect the cumulative impact of cultural narrative that misjudge the profession and undervalues its complexity. Without public or political recognition of their contribution, participants described feeling overlooked and dismissed in a role they viewed as important and personally meaningful.

Findings: Secondary School Teachers Experiences of Teacher Wellbeing

Theme 4: Relational Ties and Tensions

This theme provides insight into how relational dimensions of school life shape teachers' wellbeing, both as a source of strength and strain. Participants described how relationships with colleagues, students, leaders and parents provide emotional

grounding. In many instances, these relational ties served as protective factors amid the wider pressures of the role. However, participants also expressed that these relationships could become emotionally demanding and fragmented, especially when shaped by inconsistency, lack of recognition or blurred boundaries.

The subtheme *Disconnected Direction: Leadership, Trust and Autonomy* examines the impact of leadership visibility and coherence on professional confidence and wellbeing. *Isolated in the Hubs: Collegiality Within and Across Departments* considers how departmental relationships act as key supports, while structural silos hinder wider staff connections. *Emotional Trade-Offs: The Strain and Fulfilment of Student Bonds* explores the duality of care and emotional labour within teacher-student relationships. Finally, *Boundaries Strain: Parent-Teacher Dynamics* highlights the growing complexity of parental engagement, where increased access and expectation are eroding teachers' professional boundaries.

These subthemes together, reveal how teachers are continuously navigating relationships in their role, while connections provide a positive impact on wellbeing at times, they also expose them to exhaustion and uncertainty when not supported by clear structures and shared understanding.

Subtheme 9 Disconnected Direction: Leadership, Trust and Autonomy

A central concern raised by participants was the impact of leadership visibility and consistency on teachers' wellbeing. Across the focus groups, teachers described feeling disconnected from the schools' direction due to limited interaction with senior leaders. Participant 11 shared, "*They very rarely come over to my department*," before reflecting, "*Being seen and being talked to*" was a missing touchpoint. This absences of everyday relational contact created a sense of distance and left some unsure of their place within the broader school vision. Interestingly, participant 11 went on to reflect ''*I don't know how they do that in a school this size*'' when discussing leaderships visibility for all teachers, giving insight into the nuanced challenges secondary schools may face.

Leadership culture was also described as inconsistent, with several participants highlighting a lack of coherence in staff expectations. This contributed to perceptions of inequality and professional mistrust. As Participant 5 noted, "*Depending on who they*

are, some get away with murder and some get away with nothing." In some cases, participants described leadership teams themselves as misaligned, which undermined confidence in the overall direction of the school. As Participant 7 explained, "*You hear SLT slagging off an idea… you're thinking, aren't you all meant to be on the same page?*" For some, overhearing such informal conversations left staff wondering, ''*what are you saying behind my back?'',* as explained by participant 4. This led to a culture of mistrust, leaving teachers feeling exposed and unsupported.

Despite the challenges, participants also discussed moments of positive leadership. Participant 7 explained a positive experience for her was '*'being acknowledge for the work I do…as teachers, we're not recognise for how many plates we spin''.* This suggests leadership which is rooted in relational care and professional respect can act as a buffer against stress.

While leadership that promotes autonomy was widely appreciated, a tension emerged where the absence of clear structures created ambiguity and uncertainty. Participants valued being trusted to exercise professional judgement, with Participant 8 sharing, "*If a judgement is made and you've got good reasoning, everyone's very supportive.*" However, some expressed that without explicit guidance, it could be difficult to understand the boundaries of their autonomy. As Participant 9 explained, "*It's not clear what you do and don't do.*" This suggests that while autonomy can foster professional trust and wellbeing, it is most effective when accompanied by clear frameworks that provide teachers with a sense of security and direction.

Subtheme 10 Isolated in the Hubs: Collegiality Within and Across Departments

Collegial relationships emerged as a central part of participants' day-to-day emotional experience. Participants spoke about the value of small acts of kindness, informal check-ins and moments of connection that helped lift morale and foster a sense of community. As Participant 17 shared, "*There's one person… she makes sure there are little treats around the school… for me that helps wellbeing a lot.*" These seemingly small moments carried a notable emotional weight, helping sustain a sense of connection during the demands of the school day.

Within departments, strong relationships were likened to "*little families*" (Participant 11), creating a sense of belonging that fosters emotional safety and understanding. Participant 15 highlighted, ''*Colleague relationships and the dynamics within departments...determine your wellbeing. I know people who are not happy and it affects them*''. This highlights the importance of these relations being positive, providing a space to feel supported.

Participant described how increasing workload and departmental silos were making it difficult to build relationships beyond immediate teams. As participant 5 explained ''*Teachers quite often stick to their little hubs*'', suggesting that while close departmental relationships remain strong, broader connections become limited. Participants noted efforts to bridge these divides, such as informal socials and buddy systems, were viewed as important for wellbeing and wider staff cohesion. Participant 5 noted ''*We've started doing a team or buddy up thing...to try and learn stuff*'', while participant 11 reflected on the value of shared spaces, observing ''*When we did have more time....amazing conversation came up or problems were solved...You weren't on your own*''.

Tensions between departments were also discussed, particularly where subject-specific demands were not understood across the wider staff body. As Participant 17 explained, "*Practical subjects... they see me turn up late for form and think I'm late every day... they might not realise the safety set up involved.*" These misperceptions created feelings of judgement and a sense of marginalisation. While most participants emphasised the importance of supportive relationships, one participant offered a counterview. Participant 17 noted, "*I don't have to talk to you... I just get on with my job,*" suggesting that relational needs are also shaped by individual coping styles and preferences. This highlights the person–environment interaction where wellbeing is influenced not just by context, but by how individuals relate to it.

Subtheme 11 Emotional Trade-Offs: The Strain and Fulfilment of Student Bonds

Teacher–student relationships were described as both emotionally fulfilling and emotionally demanding. Participants expressed that their bonds with students were often at the heart of their motivation and identity as teachers. As Participant 8 reflected, "*The smile on the kids... they were happy to see you back... that culture must be*

ingrained from staff to kids," pointing to the value of being recognised and appreciated by pupils. Others described how events like Comic Relief or World Book Day helped foster a sense of connection and community with students. As Participant 15 noted, "*We participate in events... and I think that brings up wellbeing*."

However, this relational closeness also brought emotional strain. Participants shared how they often sacrificed their breaks or personal time to support students' needs. Participant 4 explained, "*Students coming to me at lunchtime for help*," while Participant 8 reflected, "*We have hundreds of pupils... very few industries would hold you responsible for so many.*" These interactions contributed to a sense of emotional labour that, over time, impacted teachers' capacity for recovery.

Disciplinary inconsistencies were also noted as a strain on teacher–student relationships. When behaviour policies were not consistently enforced, participants felt undermined. As Participant 9 shared, "*It becomes really difficult... when teachers don't implement things consistently*," and Participant 17 added, "*That chips away at my wellbeing*." These accounts suggest that emotional fulfilment and strain often coexist in teacher–student relationships, with relational dynamics impacted by systemic inconsistency.

Subtheme 12 Boundary Strain: Navigating Parent-Teacher Dynamics

Interactions with parents added another layer of emotional complexity to teachers' relational landscape. While participants acknowledged the importance of parental engagement, many felt that increasing demands from parents were extending beyond their professional remit. Participant 9 shared, "*That's way beyond my job description... but then you feel crumbs*," reflecting the emotional conflict between wanting to help and needing to protect personal boundaries.

Participants also reported being second-guessed or micromanaged by parents, which challenged their professional authority. As Participant 6 noted, "*Most my push back comes from parents.*" Inconsistencies between home and school values were frequently discussed, with teachers seeking to promote independence while feeling that parents were unintentionally undermining this. This dynamic contributed to feelings of frustration, especially when teachers' feedback or expertise went

unacknowledged. Participant 8 noted, "*I haven't yet had a parent say, I've read your feedback*."

Late-night emails and ongoing expectations of availability added further strain. As Participant 6 shared, "*It often started with a parent email late at night... it's in the back of your mind the whole day*." These experiences point to a wider breakdown in professional boundaries, sustained by cultural shifts in parental engagement and digital access. While structured systems like parents' evenings offered moments of control and clarity, most participants described feeling emotionally exposed and professionally unsupported in their day-to-day interactions with families.

Theme 5: The Hidden Cost of Teaching

This theme explores the often invisible and emotionally taxing demands placed on teachers, highlighting how professional responsibilities extend beyond the normal structures of the day. Focus groups described how digital connectivity, hidden workload and the emotional labour of supporting complex students' needs collectively contributed to a sense of exhaustion. The cumulative demands of sustaining their roles within under-resourced systems often left teachers feeling overwhelmed and depleted.

The subtheme *Always-On: Digital Communication and Lost Boundaries* explores how digital platforms have created difficulties with work-life balanced, leading to a sense of obligation. *Hidden Hours: The Weight of Invisible Workload* focuses on how the accumulation of unseen tasks intensify workload pressures and diminish teachers' control over their time. Lastly, *Emotional Labour and Inclusion: Supporting Complex Needs in a Pressured System* examines the emotional demands of supporting vulnerable students in an education system that lack sufficient resources or clear structures.

These subthemes highlight the hidden emotional and temporal costs of current teaching, where conditions normalise overextensions and emotional strain as part of the everyday experience.

Subtheme13 Always-On: Digital Communication and Lost Boundaries

Across the focus groups, teachers described the impact of a growing 'always-on' culture, driven by digital communication platforms such as email and Teams. While

intended to improve efficiency and coordination, these tools often blurred the boundary between work and rest. Participants reflected on how notifications continued into the evenings and weekends, creating an underlying sense of obligation. As Participant 9 explained, "*They're not supposed to message after 7pm, but you're supposed to respond... you can be watching a movie at home with your phone pinging.*" These experiences contributed to a sense of inescapability and hypervigilance, where teachers felt constantly tied to their work.

The pace of the school day left little opportunity to process or respond to messages, meaning that vital information was frequently missed or misunderstood. Participant 4 described, "*On the off chance that you read the email... which I didn't... so I found out about it today,*" highlighting how important updates were often left to chance. Many participants expressed that digital tools had gradually replaced informal face-to-face communication, leading to a breakdown in relational touchpoints that previously sustained team cohesion.

Despite the challenges, participants acknowledged that some digital interactions were meaningful and contributed positively to their sense of value. Participant 11 noted, "*Sometimes they [the pupils] can't say something face-to-face, and then you have those lovely conversations,*" highlighting how intentional communication could still carry relational depth. However, the overwhelming volume of digital traffic, and the lack of clear boundaries around its use, left many feeling emotionally overloaded.

Subtheme 14 Hidden Hours: The Weight of Invisible Workload

Across focus groups, a disconnect between formal timetables and the lived reality of teachers' workload was noted. Participants described an environment where much of the work required to sustain their role remained unseen and unaccounted for. Participant 6 explained, "*It's like a hidden workload which on the timetable doesn't look like it's there.*" Tasks such as planning, marking, pastoral support, and additional role responsibilities were consistently underestimated. Participant 5 reflected, "*If you adopt one more lesson a week, that's not just one hour of your time... it's three hours added*

on," capturing how seemingly minor additions accumulated into significant workload demands.

The intense and reactive nature of the day further added to these pressures. Teachers described being in constant motion, with little to no opportunity to plan or reset during the day. As participant 10 shared, "*On Tuesday I have six periods and a meeting at break and a meeting at lunch… it's like when can I do anything?*". Similarly, Participant 4 explained, "*If I have a full day, that's really demoralising because I know I'm not going to get a break*", reflecting the anticipatory stress generated by a packed schedule. Even when participants attempted to manage their workload through strategies such as to-do lists or utilising small gaps in the timetable, these efforts were frequently undermined by last-minute cover and unexpected meetings. As Participant 9 noted, "*You plan to do one thing…you get put on cover.*" The reactive demands of the day eroded teachers' sense of control and contributed to emotional strain.

In some focus groups, participants also described measure their schools had taken to ease workload such as meeting free weeks and early finishes. Participant 7 shared, "*My old school… gave everyone like a late start or an early finish one day a week… also introduced a meeting-free week… it actually helped with teacher workloads.*" However, the effectiveness of these measures was often department-dependent, with some subjects facing additional stress. Participant 17 shared early school finishes meant her lesson time had been shorten, "*My lesson… I have to do GCSE practical in 55 minutes… you try make a lemon meringue pie in 55 minutes.*" Participants also reflected on how staffing shortages and systemic underfunding intensified workload pressures, as Participant 16 explained, "*Workload is going up and getting hard because there's less and less people and less money kind of around.*"

Leadership practices further shaped the experience of workload. Several participants reflected on how senior staff delegated administrative tasks to teaching staff not out of necessity, but for convenience. As Participant 4 described, "*They didn't want to spend the time digging through. So, they said we have to copy and paste everything in.*" Even when time allocations were formally adjusted for additional responsibilities, participants felt the extra time was insufficient and often absorbed by other demands. Participant 4 reflected, "*Heads of year get an extra 10 hours off a*

fortnight, whereas heads of department only get four... and they still fill up the time. It's like a never-ending job." Unequal distribution of workload across subjects also emerged as a concern, with larger class sizes in some subjects creating disproportionate demands. Participant 9 noted, "*Some teachers will teach subjects with 25 kids in every lesson, and they get the same number of teaching lessons as someone with three or four.*"

Subtheme 15 Emotional Labour and Inclusion: Supporting Complex Needs in a Pressured System

Teachers also reflected on the emotional toll of supporting students with complex needs, particularly those with SEN or emotion-related challenges. While participants consistently expressed a commitment to inclusive education, they often felt underprepared and unsupported in meeting these students' emotional and educational needs. As Participant 10 explained, "*I've got a child... very specific special education need... that almost anxiety. Like you can say the wrong thing,*" pointing to the emotional challenges of navigating these relationships.

This emotional labour was compounded by information overload. Participant 9 described, "*I've got 120 kids... we've got to read every single tiny [detail],*" highlighting the administrative burden tied to support plans and safeguarding notes. Teachers felt caught between the need to care deeply and the limits of what could be sustained across large class sizes and high caseloads. These feelings were further heightened by the post-COVID landscape, with many participants noting increased student dependency. Participant 9 reflected, "*The kids are more needy, I think many of them are still recovering.*"

Structural limitations were frequently cited as a barrier to effective support. As Participant 5 noted, "*The kids with a plan... the money they get... it's so small... we have the worst paid LSA.*" Participants questioned how student progress could be meaningfully achieved without adequate resources. Teachers found themselves navigating complex emotional territory without clear pathways or specialist staff to turn to. Even when referral systems existed, participants described them as unclear or

unreliable. As Participant 11 stated, *"We've got a counsellor here... it's knowing who to pass them to."*

Moreover, participants found themselves feeling frustrated with the in-school support systems for students with additional needs. Participants felt that the flexibility for SEN support often translated into the removal of meaningful challenge. Participant 9 highlighted this tension stating *''How is a kid supposed to progress...if they're not expected to do anything apart from attend?''*. This approach showed frustrations teachers held on the risk of fostering dependency rather than students' resilience.

Theme 6: The Conditions of Professional Growth

This theme explores how teachers' sense of growth and value is shaped by opportunities for professional development. CPD and feedback processes were viewed as either affirming professional identities or adding to feelings of disconnect and vulnerability.

The subtheme *Meaningful Development or Missed Opportunity: Reflections on CPD* explores how the relevance, relational context and emotional climate of CPD shape teachers' engagement and motivations. *Feedback or Performance: Trust in Professional Reflection* examine how feedback and observation processes could either foster authentic growth or trigger anxiety.

These subthemes reveal that professional growth is not simply a matter of offering development opportunities but creating the conditions of trust, relevance and emotional safety that enable sustainable and meaningful engagement.

Subtheme 16 Meaningful Development or Miss Opportunity: Reflections on CPD

Across the focus groups, teachers expressed mixed experiences with CPD. While meaningful CPD was described as energising and important for retention, much of what was offered was viewed as generic or irrelevant. Participant 4 reflected, *"If you want to retain staff and make them feel good about themselves... making them feel like you're getting better... more confident in what you're doing,"* highlighting how growth and confidence were linked to feeling valued. However, many participants described development opportunities that felt out of touch with their subject area or irrelevant to their day-to-day practice. Participant 7 expressed their frustration, *"We had one on*

phonics and I was like... am I really gonna be bringing phonics into a GCSE year 10 lesson? Probably not''. Participant 5 summarised this in one word "*Meaningful*", pointing to development opportunities that genuinely align with teachers' professional needs.

External CPD appeared more positively viewed than internal sessions, not only for the quality of the content but also for the emotional climate it fostered. Participant 17 explained that while internal CPD could be ''*brilliant*'', it often lacked the psychological safety needs for honest reflections ''*You'll never open up...you are going to feel...vulnerable*''. External CPD was perceived as offering greater relational distance, creating safer spaces for authentic learning and critical discussion. Moreover, external providers were seen as more credible and specialised, with Participant 17 highlighting the value of "*having a trained professional who knows their [subject],*" particularly in subject-specific secondary education contexts.

Subtheme 17 Feedback or Performance: Trust in Professional Reflection

Feedback and observation processes were similarly experienced as relationally charged moments that could either support or undermine professional growth. When feedback was low-stakes, constructive, and genuinely developmental, participants described feeling affirmed and motivated. Participant 8 reflected, "*I have to watch you do this, try this next time... I don't see that as a negative... it's constructive, a genuine positive point,*" illustrating how supportive feedback fostered feelings of competence and ongoing development.

On the other hand, when observations were framed as high-stakes or performative, they heightened anxiety and created a sense of emotional exposure. Participant 16 shared, "*It shouldn't be such a big thing... but when they make a point of it, it almost becomes something like, oh, I've got to do something special,*" revealing how pressure to perform overshadowed opportunities for authentic growth. These experiences reflect the broader culture of performance-driven accountability in education, where developmental processes risk becoming exercises in compliance rather than reflection.

Positive feedback experiences were also seen to buffer against professional anxiety. Participant 6 shared, "*I didn't think it went very well… but I got the feedback today and it was good, so that made me feel less stressed*," demonstrating how relationally sensitive feedback could ease self-doubt and support wellbeing. Across the focus groups, participants highlighted that feedback processes must be rooted in relational care, authenticity, and a developmental rather than performative purpose if they are to meaningfully contribute to professional growth and teacher wellbeing.

Discussion

This section presents an interpretation of the findings from the current research, addressing the research questions and situating the results within the context of existing literature on teacher wellbeing. Following this, the implications for educational psychologist, school leadership, and government policy are examined. Finally, the limitations of the study are acknowledged, and directions for future research are suggested.

RQ1: How do primary school teachers experience wellbeing and navigate the supporting and hindering factors?

This study highlights the complex and emotionally demanding nature of primary school teaching, where wellbeing is shaped by systemic, relational, and individual factors. Teachers navigate these dimensions in a profession increasingly marked by intensification, emotional labour, and policy-driven constraints.

Connecting with their Core Teaching Role

The research provides insight into the fundamental importance of teachers feeling connected to the core values and instructional responsibilities that initially drove them to enter the profession (Theme 1: Losing Sight of the Core Purpose). Such results are to be expected given that a teacher's sense of vocation appears to act as a buffer against stress, providing them with a sense of purpose and fulfilment (Schutz, 2014; Bakar, 2014). It is therefore concerning that teachers described multiple barriers, such as rising responsibilities, increasing pupil needs, and reduced classroom support, that inhibited their ability to connect with this purpose (Subtheme 1: Expanding Responsibilities: The Burden of Multi-Roles). Rather than being marginal disruptions to

their work, these pressures appeared to alter the structure of teachers' daily work, wearing away at the foundation of their professional identity. This raises concerns not only for teacher wellbeing but for the broader functioning of education systems. Prior research shows that when teachers are made to prioritise bureaucratic, reactive tasks over instructional values their sense of professional agency and efficacy declines, often leading to exhaustion and attrition (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2015; Perryman & Calvert, 2020).

This research noted that teachers' frustrations with bureaucratic inefficiencies were a significant barrier to teachers being able to connect with their core purpose (Subtheme 3: Systemic Expectation: Normalising the Overload). Rigid systems and repetitive administrative processes exacerbated workload and contributed to feelings of stress. This study echoes earlier research which has suggested that streamlining administrative tasks and increasing flexibility can improve workload manageability and restore a sense of purpose (DfE, 2019a; Stacey et al., 2023). The findings, also note the important role leadership practices play in acknowledging the pressures and being responsive to these played in being a buffer against their impact.

However, this study goes further by highlighting how systemic inefficiencies not only consume time but appears to contribute to a culture of sustained overwork and pressure to perform (Subtheme 3: Systemic Expectation: Normalising the Overload). It appears that over time, this reinforces a cultural norm where overwork was silently accepted and at times even valued as a buffer against other existing stresses within the profession. Such dynamics align with critiques of neoliberal productivity cultures within education, which treat urgency, self-optimisation and resilience against structural obstacles as markers of professionalism (Ball, 2003). Critically, the study challenges dominant narratives of resilience as an unproblematic support for teacher wellbeing. While resilience is noted as a protective factor for teacher wellbeing (Beltmen et al., 2011), this study suggests a more ambivalent reality. It seems that resilience has shifted from being an internal strength to an external expectation imposed by leadership and wider educational discourse. This normalisation of 'coping' without systemic change results in teachers adopting short-term survival strategies, including working extended hours and sacrificing personal wellbeing, undermining their long-term emotional

wellbeing. This understanding echoes cautionary perspectives on the decontextualised use of resilience (Johnson & Down, 2013; Cederström & Spicer, 2015), which argue resilience discourse can serve institutional failings and encourage harmful working cultures. These factors combined have resulted in teachers becoming increasingly distant from the core purpose of their role, where their professional identity is shifting from one centred on meaningful pedagogical work to one that is replaced by a continuous need to withstand and navigate systemic pressures.

Alongside the growing burden of bureaucratic demands and the normalisation of overwork, this study also highlights the emotional dimensions of teaching that contribute to strain on teachers' professional identity (Subtheme 2: Internal Strain Navigating the Emotional Impact). As with existing research, this study highlighted the important role positive student-teacher relationships play in shaping teacher wellbeing (Roffey, 2012; Collie et al., 2017). However, this research builds on this narrative by presenting this relationship as a form of dualism in the current teaching climate. Student relationships were certainly a source of joy, meaning and professional satisfaction, however these close bonds fostered a deep sense of personal responsibility and emotional attachment, which, under conditions of systemic strain, became difficult to sustain without emotional cost. When systemic limitations, such as funding cuts and reduced staff, prevented them from meeting students' holistic needs, teachers experienced a sense of guilt. These findings extend current understanding by highlighting how strong student–teacher bonds can become emotionally taxing under institutional pressures (Spilt et al., 2011).

Alongside student relationships, supportive colleague relationships were noted as a supportive factor (Subtheme 2: Internal Strain: Navigating the Overload). This support offered teachers emotional validation, and helped them manage the tolls of the day, acting as an important buffer. This aligns with findings from multiple studies noting that these relationships support teachers in managing feelings of stress and isolation (Gu & Day, 2007; Bricheno et al., 2009; Johnsen et al., 2018). This research highlights that in the face of systemic pressures and emotionally demanding days, colleague provide a source of empathy, understanding and shared resilience that supports teachers in reconnecting with professional purpose.

Taken together, this research therefore highlights the pressing importance of teachers' ability to remain connected to the core pedagogical and relational purposes that motivated them to enter the profession (Theme 1: Losing Sight of the Core Purpose). Meaningful engagement with teaching, positive student-teacher relationships and supportive colleague connections continue to serve as powerful sources of fulfilment. This emphasises the intrinsic motivations that are innate to the teaching profession as foundations of wellbeing. However, these protective factors become fragile under the strain of bureaucratic inefficiencies, cultures of overwork and under resourcing, reducing teachers' ability to engage in authentic teaching work, forcing teachers to prioritise survival strategies over professional fulfilment. Therefore, supporting teacher wellbeing requires an education system that empowers teachers to connect with their core purpose, and experience relational rewards without unsustainable emotional costs. A shift towards a systemic empathy, flexibility and structural alignment with teachers' intrinsic motivations becomes essential if wellbeing is to be promoted within the profession.

A Wider Systemic Disconnect

The findings of this study point to a growing disconnect between the values embedded within educational policy, leadership practices and the lived realities of classroom teaching (Theme 2: Disconnection Across the Systems). It highlights a growing misalignment between teachers' professional values and the expectations placed upon them.

Primary school teachers are experiencing increasing policies which prioritise performative, external metrics over authentic educational and developmental engagement (Subtheme 5: Policy in Conflict: Compromised Purpose). This has resulted in a sense of professional dissatisfaction echoing concerns raised by Biesta (2015) who argues that these policy-practice gaps have negative impact of teachers' motivation and wellbeing. These experiences can be viewed as a form of moral compromise, where teachers feel compelled to prioritise externally imposed ideas, over the developmental needs of their pupils. This aligns with the concept of moral injury (Santoro, 2018), which occurs when professionals are required to act in a way that goes against deeply held

values. This is undermining the relational and developmental work that sustains teacher engagement.

Additionally, leadership in primary schools was viewed as increasingly disconnected from the emotional and practical elements of classroom teaching (Subtheme 4: Leadership at a Distance: Feeling Unseen). There was a clear desire for leadership that responded with compassion and relational attunement rather than bureaucratic detachment. This desire is unsurprising given that emotionally supportive leadership has been shown to foster resilience, commitment and professional engagement (Leithwood et al., 2008; Burns & Machin, 2013). The absence of relational leadership was a source of strain, where surveillance practices and presenteeism highlighted a culture of compliance over care. This intensified feelings of being unseen and undervalued.

This research therefore raises questions about how the disconnection from leadership and government with classroom realities, impact teacher autonomy, a critical factor for sustaining wellbeing (Collie et al., 2017). Prescriptive curricula, Ofsted-driven compliance cultures and rigid managerial expectations limit opportunities for genuine professional agency. This supports Collie et al. (2016) argument that autonomy cannot thrive in environments where trust is lacking, and creativity is systematically constrained. Therefore, when autonomy is reduced to superficial choice-making within controlled parameters, its ability to be a buffer is weakened, causing a sense of frustration and disconnect from teachers' intrinsic professional values.

Moreover, the research highlights how teacher wellbeing must be understood within the broader socio-political landscape, revealing contradictions between government wellbeing initiatives and the material realities faced in schools (Subtheme 6: Resource Scarcity: Support Systems Falling Away). Funding cuts, reductions in support staff and overwhelmed external services have left teachers managing complex pupil needs without adequate support. This research highlights how resource scarcity is not only increasing workload but also adding an emotional and ethical strain. This aligns with wider literature that highlights greater access to professional resources and funding is positively associated with teacher wellbeing (Kidger at al., 2010; Sharrocks,

2014). Moreover, it supports Birchall (2021) argument for greater investment in dedicated SEN provisions. Without these supports, teachers are left navigating expanding responsibilities in a depleted system adding to wellbeing difficulties.

In addition, the reduction in funding has also led to a decline in access to CPD opportunities, creating a further barrier to professional fulfilment (Subtheme 6: Resource Scarcity: Support Systems Falling Away). Previous research has demonstrated that CPD acts as a protective factor in supporting teacher motivation, resilience and job satisfaction (Day & Gu, 2010; Sandilos et al., 2018). Therefore, it is understandable that teachers in this research reflected on CPD as inspiring and that its recent reductions have led to a stagnation in their professional purpose.

These ideas together, show the crucial role of systemic conditions in enabling and undermining teacher wellbeing. While emotionally supportive leadership, professional autonomy, access to CPD and alignment between personal values and educational practices serve as powerful protective factors, these are often constrained by systemic barriers. Policy-practice misalignment, emotionally detached leadership, rigid compliance cultures, and under-resource due to funding cuts impact teachers' ability to grow and experience meaningful connection to their work (Theme 2: Disconnection Across the System). It is therefore key that governments' focus on improving wellbeing goes beyond simply reducing workload, and that the needs for relationally attuned leadership, authentic professional agency and a rebalancing of expectations that restore primary school teaching as a meaningful, developmental practice become key.

External Pressures

This research also highlights the increasing influence of external social and cultural pressures on teacher wellbeing. It reveals how shifting parent expectations, negative public narratives and limited institutional support contribute to their wellbeing and professional identity (Theme 3: Fading Respect from Outside).

Consistent with previous research, the importance of feeling respected and supported by parents was an important protective factor for teacher wellbeing (Subtheme 7: Undermined by Demand: The Toll of Parental Pressure [Paterson &

Grantham, 2016; Patridge, 2012]). Given its importance, it is concerning that teachers in this research noted a shift in relationships with parents, characterised by increasing demands, emotionally charged interactions and challenges to teachers' professional opinions. This research builds on existing literature by highlighting the pivotal role that leadership plays in mediating the teacher-parent relationship. Leadership that prioritised appeasement over professional advocacy left teachers feeling exposed, unsupported and undervalued. This highlights the protective role leadership plays in light of broader emotional labour generated by external pressures.

The research also highlighted the mischaracterisation of teaching within public and political discourse as a contributing factor to teacher wellbeing (Subtheme 8: Misjudged and Undervalued: Teaching in the Public Eye). Teachers felt that reductive public narratives failed to capture the relational, intellectual and emotional complexities of their work. These frustrations are not new, with previous research showing a declining respect for the profession has long been a source of stress (Webb et al., 2004; Bricheno et al., 2009). This research adds to existing literature by highlighting the frustration teachers face when advocating for change, with their efforts often being misrepresented by both media and government as financially motivated rather than rooted in broader issues affecting the profession. This dismissal has reinforced feelings of disillusionment and increased teachers' sense that their voices are marginalised within educational policymaking.

Taken together, these findings emphasise that teacher wellbeing is also shaped by the broader social and cultural context in which education takes place (Theme 3: Fading Respect from Outside). Relationships with parents, public narratives and government responses all act as either barriers or facilitating factors. Respectful and supportive relationships with parents, leadership advocacy, and public recognition of the profession's complexity were noted as supportive factors for wellbeing. However, when these conditions were absent, where parental demands escalated unchecked, leadership failed to defend professional boundaries and public discourse devalued teachers' work, they created a sense of strain and disillusionment for teachers. With this in mind, teachers need leadership that upholds their professional expertise and public narratives, and government policy makers need to create a safe space that

amplifies authentic teacher voice to foster an empathetic understanding of their experiences.

Synthesising Findings Within the Ecological System Theory

To synthesise these findings, Figure 3 illustrates the systemic, organisational, and relational factors that participants identified as influencing their wellbeing. Drawing on ecological systems theory, this model maps the key facilitators and barriers across different systems.
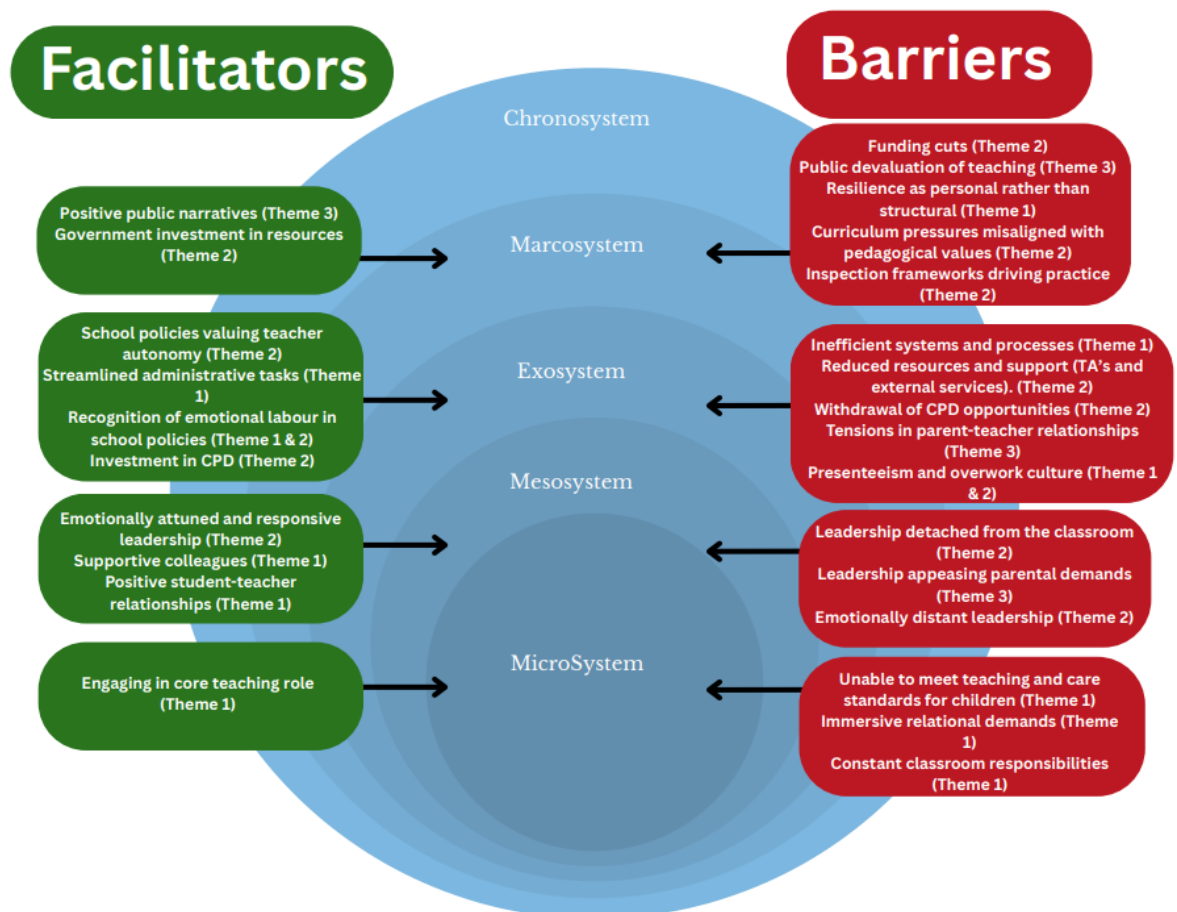
Figure 3. Ecological model of factors influencing primary school teacher wellbeing.

RQ2: How do Secondary school teachers experience wellbeing and navigate the supporting and hindering factors?

Relational Wellbeing

This research provides important insight into the relational dimensions of secondary school teachers' experience of wellbeing. It notes the important role relationships with students, colleagues, leaders, and parents can have on shaping wellbeing experiences (Theme 4: Relational Ties and Tensions).

Given that existing research has demonstrated the critical role student relationships have in supporting teacher wellbeing (Roffey, 2012; Collie et al., 2017), it is not surprising that this research found strong teacher-student relationships were a central source of meaning and professional fulfilment (Subtheme 11: Emotional Trade-Offs: The Strain and Fulfilment of Student Bonds). These moments were often fostered through informal connections that helped humanise teachers' interactions with students and reinforce a sense of purpose. However, this research extends existing understanding by highlighting the emotional cost of such closeness, where teachers often sacrificed personal time to meet students' needs. The research also brought to light the role of systemic inconsistency in this relational connection. It highlighted inconsistency among staff, particularly in terms of behaviour policy implementation which undermine teachers' authority, breaking down relational security for students and increasing the emotional labour teachers had to expend to maintain what they perceived as school expectations.

Similarly, colleague relationships also played a role in supporting teacher wellbeing (Subtheme 10: Isolated in Hubs: Collegiality: Within and Across Departments). This research provides unique insight into secondary school collegiality, highlighting how departmental structures, while fostering strong intra-departmental bonds, simultaneously fragment broader staff cohesion. Departmental silos were found to limit collaboration across subject areas and create misunderstandings about the demands associated with different disciplines. Given this fragmentation, it is not surprising that teachers placed particular value on small acts of kindness and informal peer connections outside of their departments, as a way of feeling a sense of belonging and collegiality. This aligns with Turner et al (2022), who found teacher wellbeing can be

enhanced through altruistic behaviours and collective efforts in professional communities. This suggests that while 'micro-communities' can promote wellbeing within departments, they may also hinder the development of a unified, supportive whole-school culture. Leadership may therefore find ways to preserve the strengths of departmental belonging while actively fostering cross-departmental collaboration and understanding.

Interestingly, the research also highlights that the absence of close colleague relationships does not consistently suggest a decline in wellbeing (Subtheme 10: Isolated in Hubs: Collegiality Within and Across Departments). Rather, the study suggests that the impact of collegial connectedness can be mediated by individual differences and the broader person–environment interaction. For some, wellbeing was maintained through clear work-life boundaries rather than social connectedness. This extends the existing research highlighting that the absence of social support from colleagues can create experiences of marginalisation (Sohail et al., 2023; McCallum et al., 2017), by suggesting the role of individual relational preference can play a role in mediating this. Therefore, it is important for wellbeing initiatives around peer support to be flexible and sensitive to individual preferences.

This research also highlighted the role leadership relationships play in teacher wellbeing (Subtheme 9: Disconnected Direction: Leadership, Trust, Autonomy). Absences of everyday interactions with senior leadership, perceived inconsistencies in staff expectations and leadership misalignment created a culture of mistrust and emotional disconnect. This resonates with research that has noted trust between teachers and leadership is vital to school success, where transparent leadership supports greater teacher engagement (Tarter & Hoy, 1988; Tschannen-Moran, 2014; Sutcher et al., 2019). The research also highlighted the role leadership plays in promoting autonomy, which was situated within coherent leadership structures that offer emotional security and professional clarity (Morris et al., 2020).

The final relationship the research found as important was that of parent-teachers (Subtheme 12: Boundary Strain: Parent-Teacher Dynamics). This relationship was shown to have an increasing impact, where rising parental demands, blurred communication boundaries through digital technologies, and conflicting values about

students' independence challenged their professional authority and emotional boundaries. These findings are consistent with Lutovac et al. (2024), who found that teachers reported growing discomfort and uncertainty as parents became more involved in traditionally professional domains. Such intrusions can blur lines of professional expertise, leading to role ambiguity. When teachers face such role conflicts, it risks them perceiving parents less as collaborative partners and more as adversaries (Levy, 2024; Tish et al., 2023). This highlights the pressing need for schools to mediate parental expectations and foster positive relationships.

Together, these findings highlight the relational elements of secondary school teacher wellbeing (Theme 4: Relational Ties and Tensions). Relationships with students, colleagues, leaders, and parents all hold the potential to support or undermine wellbeing depending on the structures, cultures and boundaries that surround them. Therefore, it becomes key for systemic environments not only to encourage relational work, but to actively cultivate trust, coherent leadership and clearly define professional boundaries that protect teacher autonomy and emotional wellbeing.

Hidden Labour

This research highlighted secondary school teachers' experiences of emotional and administrative demands, with much of their working remaining unseen, unmeasured, and undervalued (Theme 5: The Hidden Cost of Teaching).

The study notes that a significant factor in teacher workload is the increasing integration of digital technologies (Subtheme 13: Always On: Digital Communication and Lost Boundaries). Platforms such as emails and Teams have enhanced logistical coordination across large sites and aided student communication, however in the absence of clear institutional boundaries, technology has become a barrier to wellbeing. The expectation of instant responses, and the intrusion of digital notification during teaching time and personal time has created a sense of hypervigilance for messaging. These findings align with emerging literature which highlights digital intensification is creating a psychological cost of 'always-on' work cultures (Levy, 2024). This suggests an urgent need for clearer communication protocols and leadership modelling of digital boundaries to protect staff wellbeing.

Secondary school teachers are also experiencing multiple workload demands which are not reflected within timetabled hours (Subtheme 14: Hidden Hours: The Weight of Invisible Workload). Intense teaching days, often packed with back-to-back lessons, leave little structured space for planning, feedback, or pastoral documentation. This aligns with research noting that teacher workload stems from administrative responsibilities and non-teaching tasks, for which they are provided with little time to complete (Bradbury & Roberts-Holmes, 2018; Education Partnership, 2019; Perryman & Calvert, 2019; Selwyn, Nemorin, & Johnson, 2017). This research builds on these findings by highlighting the frequent disruptions to planned workload strategies from last minute cover requests and ad hoc meetings. This suggests workload management cannot be meaningfully addressed through minor time allocation, instead there needs to be structural protection of non-contact time in workload policies.

Furthermore, the study suggests that leadership practices, such as delegation of tasks for personal convenience, added to the hidden workload teachers faced, effectively shifting systemic inefficiencies onto teaching staff (Subtheme 14: Hidden Hours: The Weight of Invisible Workload). This aligns with research that suggests when leadership becomes overly bureaucratic, teachers experience increased workloads (Skinner et al., 2021). Nevertheless, some positive leadership interventions were appreciated by staff including flexible start and finish times, aligning with research showing that flexible working arrangements improve job satisfaction (Kinman, Wray, & Strange, 2011; Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2009). The current study extends this by noting the effectiveness of these measures can be mediated by departmental structures, where broader school-wide strategies can instead intensify the pressure teachers face. This shows that while small adjustments can support teacher wellbeing, in secondary school settings they need to be carefully implemented to ensure they address workload equitably across the staff body.

Beyond administrative demands, this study highlights how hidden labour can also manifest in the emotional domain (Subtheme 15: Emotional Labour and Inclusion: Supporting Complex Needs in a Pressured System). The increased dependency of students, rising mental health concerns and lack of systemic support has placed teachers in a position where the emotional labour that accompanies this becomes an

unacknowledged and unprotected component of their workload. To the author's knowledge, this area has received limited attention, however it does align with research indicating increasing mental health needs in secondary school students (Waite et al., 2021). Balancing an increasing need, in the absence of specialist support and sufficient resourcing appears to diminish teachers' self-efficacy.

This study therefore highlights how hidden labour, both administrative and emotional, can strain secondary school teachers' wellbeing (Theme 5: The Hidden Cost of Teaching). Digital overload, fragmented workload structures and rising emotional demands often remain unacknowledged adding to stress. However, positive experiences with flexible working practices and meaningful digital interactions act as a buffer against some of these pressures. It is therefore important to note that systemic change may require protecting non-contact time, setting clearer digital boundaries, investing in specialist support for students' needs, and fostering leadership cultures which recognise the emotional complexities of teaching.

Professional Growth

This research also highlighted the role that professional development and feedback practices play in shaping secondary school teachers' wellbeing (Theme 6: The Conditions of Personal Growth). Given that professional learning that aligns with professional goals can enhance wellbeing and reduce burnout (Sandilos et al., 2018; Zysberg & Maskit, 2017), it is not surprising that this research found that meaningful professional growth opportunities that were in touch with classroom realties were important for teacher wellbeing (Subtheme 16: Meaningful Development or Missed Opportunity: Reflections on CPD). However, it also revealed that when CPD was generic, irrelevant or felt imposed, teachers felt frustration and as though their time had been wasted. This echoes concerns that standardised professional development fails to meet individual needs and can add to teachers' sense of frustration (Asdown, 2002; van Driel et al., 2012).

This study builds on the body of research, noting the importance of the relational climate in which CPD occurs (Subtheme 16: Meaningful Development or Missed Opportunity: Reflections on CPD). External CPD was generally perceived as more

favourable, not only for its credibility but also for the psychological safety it offered. This is essential to teacher wellbeing as it allows teachers to engage authentically in learning without fear of judgement, exposure or failure. This emphasises the importance of the NFER (2021) recommendations that teacher voice and choice are critical to effective professional learning.

Similarly, feedback processes mirrored this dual potential to support or hinder teacher wellbeing (Subtheme 16: Feedback or Performance: Trust in Professional Reflection). When feedback was constructive and low-stakes, it fostered growth and buffered against self-doubt. However, when framed through performative, high-pressure lens, observations would heighten anxiety. This study therefore echoes broader concerns that performance-oriented accountability cultures can risk reducing development opportunities to compliance exercises rather than ones of meaningful growth (Ball, 2003).

Overall, the study highlights that depending on the design and delivery of CPD and feedback teacher wellbeing can either be supported or hindered (Theme 6: The Conditions of Personal Growth). Meaningful, subject-specific CPD, characterised by psychological safety, relevance and teacher agency is an important factor inencouraging motivation and professional fulfilment. Likewise, relationally sensitive, low-stake feedback allows for emotional affirmation to support ongoing development in staff. On the other hand, generic, compulsory CPD and performative feedback cultures act as a barrier which can increase anxiety and vulnerability. Thus, to support teacher wellbeing schools may consider creating learning environments around authentic growth, where CPD is relationally safe, teacher-informed and practically relevant. Furthermore, feedback processes need to be grounded in trust, developmental purpose and emotional care.

Synthesising Findings Within the Ecological System Theory

To synthesise these findings, Figure 4 illustrates the systemic, organisational and relational factors that participants identified as influencing their wellbeing. Drawing on Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory, this model maps the key facilitators and

barriers across different ecological levels, highlighting how direct relationships, institutional structures, broader social narratives intersect to shape teacher wellbeing.
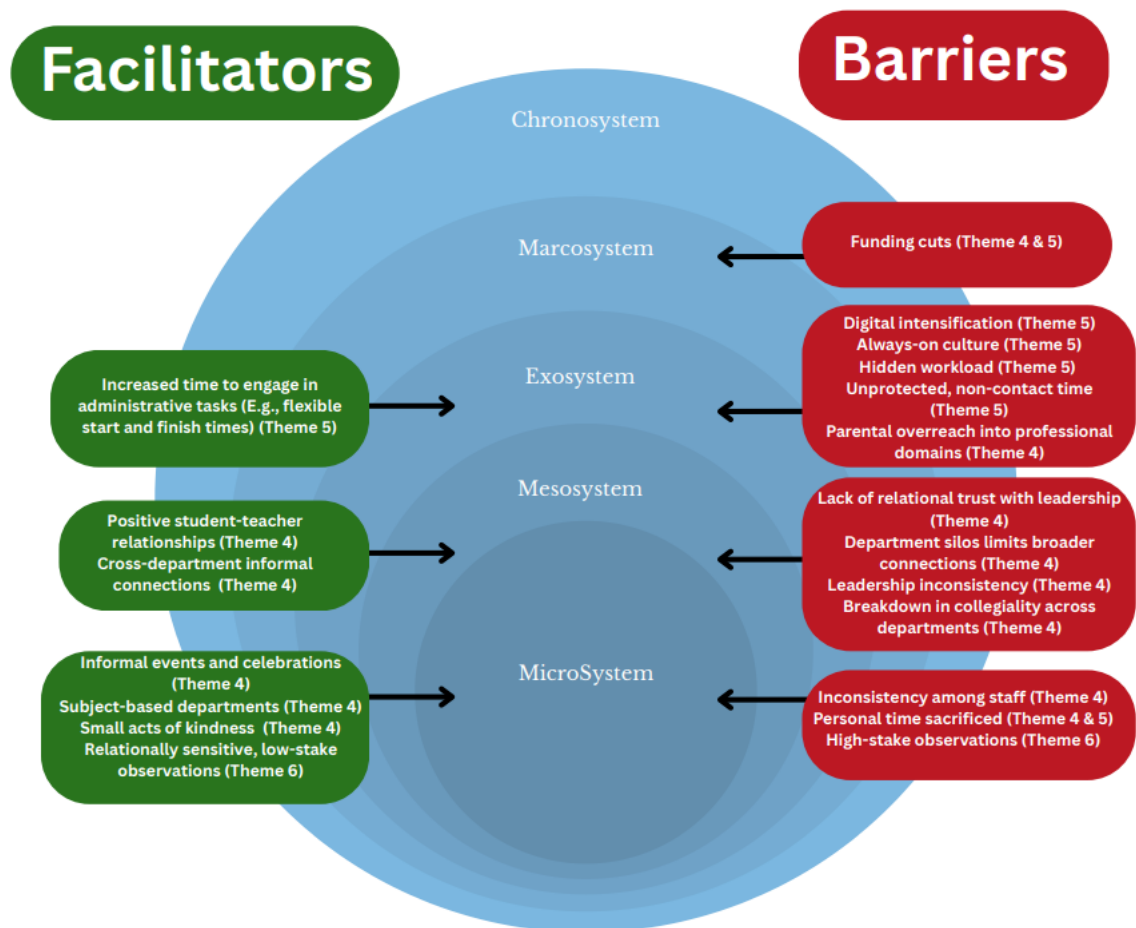
Figure 4. *Ecological model of factors influencing secondary school teacher wellbeing*

RQ3: What are the similarities and differences in how primary and secondary school teachers experience and navigate wellbeing in their roles?

This research found that both primary and secondary teachers' experience of wellbeing are shaped by systemic, relational and personal factors that align with existing research which conceptualises teacher wellbeing as a dynamic, contextually embedded phenomenon (Ozturk et al., 2024). In both groups, colleague support, student relationships, workload intensification and leadership culture were central influences on wellbeing, however the nature and impact of these factors were mediated

by the structural, organisational and relational characteristics that were specific to each educational phase.

While peer relationships were valued across both primary and secondary schools, the way they were experienced and discussed reflected distinct organisational realities (Theme 1: Losing Sight of the Core Purpose; Theme 4: Relational Ties and Tensions). In secondary schools, teachers explicitly sought and valued opportunities for collegial connection. This intentionality may reflect the departmental silos and hierarchical structures characteristic of secondary settings, which research suggests can reduce spontaneous collaboration across broader staff communities (Iasmina, 2019; Buonomo et al., 2017). In contrast, primary teachers experienced more embedded interactions with colleagues, which were organically situated into the school day through shared classrooms and continuous proximity, as is expected with flatter hierarchies (Powell, 2002). These findings extend existing literature by showing that the need for more intentional connection was more pronounced within secondary schools, where structural barriers made spontaneous relational support less accessible. This highlights the need for secondary schools to intentionally create cross-departmental opportunities for colleague connection, whereas primary schools may preserve and nurture the naturally embedded collaborative spaces.

Strong relationships with students were at the core of both primary and secondary school teachers' wellbeing (Theme 1: Losing Sight of the Core Purpose; Theme 4: Relational Ties and Tensions). Both sets of teachers experienced these relationships as a dualism; while offering deep emotional fulfilment, they also came at a personal cost the strain manifested. For secondary teachers, given that stress in secondary education often stems from the high-stakes, performance-driven academic culture (Torrance, 2007; Salerno, 2021), it makes sense that the cost was through self-sacrificing personal time to provide academic support. Whereas primary school teachers experienced a strong sense of guilt when unable to meet the holistic needs of their students, reflecting the emotionally immersive nature of primary teaching, where teachers maintain continuous, full-day contact with the same cohort (Day & Gu, 2010; Spilt et al., 2011). These findings extend the understanding of teacher wellbeing by

illustrating how school structure and role expectations shape distinct emotional vulnerabilities across sectors.

The experience of leadership on wellbeing differed between primary and secondary school teachers, where the expectations and interpretation of leadership were shaped by distinct organisational realities (Theme 2: Disconnection Across the Systems; Theme 4: Relational Ties and Tensions). Primary settings placed value on visible leadership who were in touch with classroom realities as being central to their wellbeing. In secondary schools, while teachers noted the absence of everyday leadership visibility, there was a greater recognition of the structural challenges in achieving relational presence across large, departmentalised environments. Instead, secondary schools raised concerns regarding inconsistency and misalignment within leadership teams, impacting organisational coherence (Buonomo et al., 2017; Hargreaves, 2000). This research illustrates how, in larger institutions, it is the emotional uncertainty created by fragmented leadership culture that impacts wellbeing. This highlights the need for leadership development to move beyond an emphasis on visibility and instead prioritise relational coherence. Secondary schools may focus on consistent. Transparent messaging and aligned leadership practices, while primary schools need to maintain direct emotional engagement between leaders and staff.

As suggested by previous research, the pressure of workload was a notable barrier to both primary and secondary school teachers' wellbeing, but the nature of this workload differed (Nwoko et al., 2023). Primary school teachers' workload was a result of blending multiple roles into a seamless but emotionally draining flow across the day (Theme 1: Losing Sight of the Core Purpose). The immersive nature of primary teaching made workload pressures relationally embedded and often difficult to separate from core teaching responsibilities. In contrast secondary school teachers experienced hidden workload arising from systemic and bureaucratic processes (Theme 5: The Hidden Cost of Teaching). These findings extend current literature, which often presents teacher workload as a homogeneous stressor (DfE, 2019a), by illustrating how sector-specific organisational structures mediate the form and experience of labour. Therefore, workload reform could become phase-sensitive to have a meaningful impact. Primary schools might address the emotional and role diffusion aspects of workload, whereas

secondary schools need to streamline bureaucratic demands and protect protected non-contact time.

Both primary and secondary school teachers are experiencing an increasing shift in their interactions with parents (Theme 4: Relational Ties and Tensions; Theme 3: Fading Respect from Outside). Both settings share similar views that parents have become increasingly confrontational. This was felt across both sectors, as a contributing factor to the erosion of their autonomy and professional authority. This is interesting given that previous research has pointed to primary school teachers reporting greater opportunities for collaboration with parents (Hargreaves et al., 2007) and perhaps reflects a shift in parenting culture more broadly. Whilst these experiences were similar, the communication methods differed slightly. Secondary schools experienced a greater level of interaction through digital communication which often eroded their work-life balance. Primary schools were more likely to experience parental interaction face-to-face due to pick up time at the end of the school day. Regardless of these differences both primary and secondary schools felt unsupported by leadership in managing parental boundaries. This finding aligns with research showing that exclusion from decision-making processes and a lack of respect for professional boundaries fosters disillusionment among teachers (Bangs & Frost, 2012; Evans, 2016). Schools may develop clear, phase-sensitive policies for parental engagement that protect teacher autonomy, establish boundaries around communication expectations, and promote respect for professional judgment across both primary and secondary settings.

An important nuance emerged when considering the impact of government policy across primary and secondary teachers wellbeing (Theme 2: Disconnection Across the Systems). While both groups operated within systems shaped by national standards and accountability frameworks, primary teachers more frequently cited government policies as a direct source of emotional strain. This may reflect a deeper value misalignment: primary educators often view their professional purpose as supporting holistic child development, an aim that is often sidelined by policies focused on measurable academic outcomes (Day & Gu, 2010; Perryman, 2006). In contrast, secondary teachers, although burdened by accountability pressures, work within a

structure where academic attainment is already a central professional value, potentially creating less perceived ethical dissonance. These findings suggest that for primary teachers, wellbeing is not simply undermined by workload, but by a systemic devaluation of the relational and developmental dimensions of teaching.

Synthesis with the ecological system theory

These findings, conceptualised through an ecological lens, illustrate that teacher wellbeing is the product of dynamic interactions across relational, organisational, and societal systems and that sector-specific structures mediate how these systems are experienced. Table. 7 highlights the differences between the two sectors through an ecological systems lens.

Table 7.

Differences between primary and secondary schools' experiences of wellbeing through an ecological system lens.

Ecological Layer	Primary Teachers' Wellbeing	Secondary Teachers' Wellbeing
Microsystem	Continuous emotional immersion with one class increases relational exhaustion.	Fragmented emotional connections across multiple classes create cumulative emotional fatigue.
Mesosystem	Flatter structures and shared spaces embed peer support naturally.	Departmental silos limit spontaneous collegiality; intentional efforts needed to build wider staff relationships.
Exosystem	Multi-role burden (teacher, carer, administrator) creates seamless but overwhelming workload.	Bureaucratic demands (marking, SEN admin, cover duties) create fragmented and unpredictable hidden labour.

Marcosystem	Government policy focuses on academic outcomes misaligns with child development values, causing ethical tension.	Academic focus aligns more closely with policy priorities, intensifying performance pressure without the same ethical conflict.

Implication for practice

The findings of this research hold meaningful implications for teacher wellbeing. Implications for educational psychologists, school leaders, and government stakeholders will be presented.

Implication for Educational Psychologists

Educational psychologists' practice is often characterised under five primary functions: consultation, assessment, intervention, research and training (Fallon et al., 2010). Therefore, when considering how educational psychologists may wish to support teacher wellbeing based on these findings, applying these five functions offers a useful and structured lens.

Consultation:

Educational psychologists may continue to approach consultation with empathy and attunement to the emotional realities of teaching. This includes maintaining a non-judgemental stance and offering professional challenge in ways that are respectful, compassionate and context aware. To avoid reinforcing existing pressures, it is important that educational psychologists ensure that consultation does not become another demand on already overstretched staff.

In a primary school context, educational psychologists may use consultation as an opportunity to affirm the broad pastoral load and immersed experiences primary teachers face. educational psychologists may create a space for reflection, helping teachers reconnect with their purpose amidst rising workloads and competing demands. The application of solution-focused approaches can act as an important ground for educational psychologists to support primary school teachers to see what

they are doing well despite the challenges they face in engaging with their core teaching responsibilities presently.

In secondary schools, consultations might be strategically structured to respect the realities of time pressures and departmental silos. Educational psychologists could consider teachers' non-contact periods where possible, and where this is unavoidable, acknowledge the cost of giving up protected time and show appreciation.

A critical consideration across both settings is the involvement of parents during consultation. While join consultations with parents and school are often ideal from an educational psychologist's perspective, this study found parental interactions to be increasingly a source of emotional strain for teachers. Educational psychologists may therefore balance the benefits of transparency and shared planning with the potential negative impact on teacher wellbeing. Where joint consultations with parents are key, educational psychologists may help teachers feel supported and advocated for in the process and help parents understand the pressures teachers face. Miller (2005) highlights the potential of an educational psychologist as a neutral facilitator in teacher-parent relationships, showing how role-modelling boundary setting and framing difficult conversations can buffer wellbeing. In some cases, it may be important to hold separate consultations first with staff and then with parents, if trust and psychological safety are lacking.

Assessment:

Within assessment work, educational psychologists could consider teacher wellbeing as an integral part of psychological formulation. Educational psychologists can continue to adopt a collaborative stance that recognises the complex systemic and emotional contexts in which teachers operate. This is particularly important given the differing structural and relational pressures experienced across educational phases, as highlighted in this research. Attending to this contextual dynamic during assessment allows educational psychologists to formulate more holistic understandings of children and young people's needs, situated in the real-world capacity and wellbeing of the staff supporting them.

In line with Wagner's (2000) model of consultation, educational psychologists may continue to co-construct strategies with teachers and school staff through open, reflective dialogue. This promotes joint problem-solving and shared ownership of interventions in place for the pupils they work with.

Additionally, educational psychologists should make a conscious effort to highlight teachers' strengths within formulations and reports, drawing attention to the positive impacts of their practice. This strength-based framing may offer emotional affirmation, which many teachers in this study felt was lacking in their daily work.

Finally, educational psychologists might be mindful of the way assessment processes are conducted, particularly in secondary settings where digital communication overload was noted. Rather than relying on mass email requests to gain information such as 'round robins', educational psychologists may consider liaising with SENCos to use existing meeting times to gather information informally. For instance, bringing teachers together in a short, structured discussion during a set meeting time.

Intervention:

Educational psychologists can use their knowledge of organisational change to support school leadership in developing whole-school wellbeing approaches that are aligned with teachers' needs and embedded in daily practice. In primary schools, educational psychologists may consider supporting schools to strengthen communication, foster inclusive leadership and create structures that validate teachers' experiences and priorities. This is particularly important given Birchall's (2021) finding that teachers were often unsure of educational psychologists' potential contribution beyond pupil work. Through working alongside leadership to embed wellbeing within organisational practice, educational psychologists can highlight their systemic role more visible, while also ensuring that staff feel recognised and supported at a whole-school level.

For secondary school teachers, educational psychologists may consider how to help school develop more integrated and relational systems, facilitating dialogue across departments and support leadership to develop shared goals and visions. This would

address challenges noted by Rae et al. (2017) around the emotional toll of working with pupils who have high needs.

Furthermore, secondary school teachers had notable difficulties accessing and applying SEN information, often due to the scale and structure of their settings. educational psychologists can therefore support SEN departments within school in developing ways to simplify and centralise key pupil information. This may include supporting the school to develop systems which reduce the digital load secondary school teachers' experience such as aiding school in developing ''SEND advocates'' across departments within the school.

Moreover, educational psychologists might consider strength-based relational approaches such as Video Interaction Guidance and Working on What Works , to support teachers to reflect on and build successful interactions with pupils. These approaches will be particularly helpful for primary school teachers by supporting teachers to grow their relational efficacy and help to reconnect them with their core values and purpose in the role.

Finally, in line with findings from Murray (2022) and Salter-Jones (2012), educational psychologists could consider offering supportive supervision spaces to help teachers process the emotional demands of teaching. When contracting supervision with schools, educational psychologists might be mindful to frame it not as a resilience-building intervention that places responsibility on the staff to adjust their approach or thinking, but as one part of a wider package of support. It is important that leadership understands the need for ongoing systemic change alongside reflective practice to ensure that supervision complements structural reform rather than replacing it. During supervision educational psychologists may consider the structure of this supervision where peer supervision may be well suited for secondary schools as a way to bridge departmental divides and build collegial support. Lastly, educational psychologists should carefully consider the framework they apply, for instance, The Seven-Eyed Model of Supervision provides a useful framework that considers the multi-layered dimensions of teacher wellbeing giving space to reflect on individual, relational and systemic dimensions of their work. This multi-layered lens allows for a more holistic way to make sense of professional challenges.

Training*:*

Educational psychologists could consider ways to influence the wider culture of schools through training that supports both leadership and classroom staff. However, for this training to be impactful, it needs tobe grounded in the realities of different educational phases. Leadership behaviours, decision making practices, and policy implementation all play a significant role in shaping the emotional climate of a school. Training may support leadership to understand the nuanced challenges teachers in their educational phases might face. This training may also go beyond general wellbeing advice and instead support leaders to reflect on their role in staff wellbeing and help them understand which leadership qualities are most important for the teachers at their schools.

Similarly, bespoke training might reflect the contextual realities of school settings. Educational psychologists should carefully consider which staff their training is most relevant for and conduct robust needs analysis to help keep training both relevant and meaningful. This is particularly relevant in secondary schools, where departmental cultures can vary widely and influence the value they hold in content.

Finally, educational psychologists may remain attuned to the emotional impact on teachers when delivering training on pupil needs, such as trauma inform practice. Drawing on findings from Rae et al. (2017), who identified the vulnerability 9of teachers working with children with social, emotional and mental health needs, training that validates staff experiences while offering strategies may help mitigate feelings of isolation or stigma. It will be important to draw on key environmental factors that can impact this such as the immersive nature of primary school teaching which may intensify compassion fatigue, or departmental silos in secondary school which decrease opportunities for peer support. Providing safe, reflective spaces for teachers to process these demands is essential, equipping staff while validating their experiences.

Research*:*

While educational psychologists often work at a systems level, their contact with teaching staff can at times be limited and filtered through consultation frameworks. As such, there is a risk of losing sight of the pressures teachers face in the classroom. It is therefore important for educational psychologists to remain grounded in the day-to-day realities of classroom life, recognising that the experiences of teachers can differ notably across primary and secondary settings.

To do this, educational psychologists can be encouraged to actively engage with research that explores the contextual factors influencing teacher wellbeing at different stages of education. Birchall (2021) highlighted that teachers lack awareness of educational psychologists' broader role, potentially indicating a stronger research base into wellbeing could make this contribution more visible. Doctoral training programmes and CPD providers may therefore consider ways to provide content that deepens educational psychologists' knowledge of sector-specific demands, working structures and relational dynamics. Without this awareness, there is a risk of offering general recommendations that do not account for the complex and nuanced nature of teacher wellbeing.

Implication for School and Multi-Academy Trust (MAT) Leadership

School-Level Leadership

School leadership in each setting might consider the unique challenges that their cohort of teachers face. Leadership within a primary school setting might consider ways to be visible in classrooms and develop their understanding of child development to help support with linking policy and classroom realities. Secondary school leadership may consider the more fragmented and departmentalised environment, prioritising clarity, coherence, and staff voice. Given the structural context of secondary schools, leadership may need to be mindful of ways they delegate responsibilities in a fair and structured way, to support staff to feel empowered and supported.

MAT-Level Leadership

For MATs, the findings underscore the importance of developing a coherent yet flexible wellbeing strategy that recognises the distinct demands of different school phases. Participants' experiences emphasised that wellbeing is not simply about

adding initiatives, but about removing systemic difficulties, duplication of tasks, inefficient communication, unclear roles that take energy and time. MATs may facilitate the sharing of best practices across schools, especially in areas such as curriculum planning in primary schools or reducing admin workload in secondary schools.

Importantly, resource allocation needs to be tailored to specific needs. For example, if primary staff are disproportionately affected by emotional exhaustion from constant pupil contact, MATs might consider investing in higher-level teaching assistants. In secondary contexts, additional administrative support or improved systems for managing SEN information may help alleviate the specific burden identified by participants.

Leadership development across the trust could include training in emotional intelligence, phase-sensitive wellbeing challenges, and systems thinking. This is particularly pressing given participant narratives describing SLT as disconnected or unaware of day-to-day classroom realities. A commitment to growing relationally intelligent leadership across both phases will help build a more compassionate, sustainable education system.

Implication for Government

Rethinking Curriculum Design to Support Primary School Teacher Wellbeing:

This research shows that many of the pressures primary school teachers face are tied to the expectations placed on them by the current curriculum. Teachers spoke about how parts of the curriculum simply don't match what they know about how children learn and develop, especially for younger pupils or those with SEND. These misalignments don't just make learning harder for pupils, they contribute to behavioural issues, emotional strain, and a deep sense of frustration for teachers who feel they can't do their job in a way that aligns with their values.

In light of this, it's concerning that the Government's *Curriculum and Assessment Review (2025)* frames the challenges faced by pupils with SEN as largely driven by factors outside the curriculum. The findings here suggest the opposite that curriculum design and assessment structures play a central role in shaping the

classroom environment, and in turn, influence both pupil behaviour and teacher wellbeing. If the Government are serious about supporting the profession, particularly for primary school teachers, it needs to acknowledge that curriculum and assessment are not neutral. A review of the curriculum's developmental appropriateness is urgently needed, especially in early and primary years where teachers report a mismatch between expectations and children's development. It would be recommended that the Government bring together advisory panels made up of teachers, educational psychologists, and researchers to help ensure future curriculum reform is grounded in both evidence and classroom experience. This would go a long way towards creating a more inclusive, manageable, and meaningful curriculum for all.

Positioning Teachers to Fil the Gaps of Struggling Public Services:

This research makes it clear that both primary and secondary teachers are being asked to do far more than teach. Participants described how they're stepping in to support children with complex emotional, social, and mental health needs, often because there's nowhere else for those children to turn. Services like child and adolescent mental health services, social care, and family support are stretched thin, and schools are being left to fill the gaps. The expectation that teachers should act in the place of counsellors, social workers and crisis responders, without adequate training, resources or staffing is simply not a sustainable solution. This approach places a large emotional strain on educators, and risks leading to higher rates of teachers leaving the profession.

It is therefore recommended that if the government continues to expect schools to absorb this wider social role, it could also provide the appropriate infrastructure to do so. This means, investing in additional staff, making sure teachers have access to high-quality training and strengthening links with external services. Without this, the expectation that teachers act as frontline responders to societal issues, without the adequate support is both professionally irresponsible and ethically problematic. More broadly, government needs to tackle key issues underpinning these challenges, such as child poverty, rebuilding public services, and ensuring every child has access to the right support at the right time. School can and should play a key role in safeguarding and early intervention, but they cannot do this alone, nor should the expectation be that

they should. Therefore, to sustainably support children and young people, and in turn teacher wellbeing, there needs to be joined-up investment across educational, health and social care, not just increased expectations within schools.

Limitations and Future Research Directions

Though this research provides important insight into the experiences of teachers and their wellbeing across educational sectors, a topic which is under-researched. The researcher acknowledges several limitations in this study, each offering valuable directions for future research.

Firstly, a methodological shift occurred during data collection. The study initially employed online focus groups to facilitate participation from teachers across various schools and geographical regions. However, the low engagement in the online format led to method adaptations, where focus groups took place in person within the same school. Although, this change fostered group cohesion and allowed participants to discuss and build on shared experiences, the challenges related to recruiting participants from the same setting need to be recognised. Open discussions may have been constrained, particularly due to the sensitive topic of wellbeing and discussions around institutional policies and leadership. Teachers may have found it difficult to speak freely in the presence of colleagues, leading to socially desirable answers. While the choice of focus groups allowed for a rich understanding of shared experiences, future research may wish to address this limitation by using individual interviews to provide a private space for reflection and to allow for a deeper exploration of experiences which may be difficult to discuss in a group setting where participants are part of their workplace (e.g., social connection and senior leadership).

A second limitation lies within the uneven representation between primary (n=6) and secondary (n=12) participants. While the number of participants from each group broadly reflects staffing differences between the two sectors, where secondary schools tend to have a larger number of staff, the number of focus groups remained inconsistent (three for secondary and two for primary). This imbalance and the small sample size were influenced by recruitment challenges and a restricted data collection period. Therefore, the findings presented may not fully capture the full range of experiences

teachers have across educational phases. To better account for the contextual nuances of teacher wellbeing, future research should strive for a more balanced sample to enable effective comparisons between primary and secondary school teachers.

An additional limitation relates to the deliberate decision not to gather specific demographic details, such as gender and age, to maintain participant anonymity. While this ethical stance supported data protection, it also limited the researcher's ability to contextualise certain responses. Similarly, the researcher's choice to not adopt a definition of wellbeing and to present this to participants could be considered a further limitation as the lack of a single applicable definition has been argued to make understanding and identifying the needs of individuals challenging (O'Brien & Guiney, 2021). However, wellbeing is subjective and context-dependent and by embracing the fluid nature of wellbeing this study was able to gain a rich and broad understanding into teachers' wellbeing allowing the focus groups to co-construct their experiences together and provide insight that may not have emerged with a singular definition. Nevertheless, future research may benefit from focusing on more discrete indicators of teachers' wellbeing emerging from these findings, to build a more structured and measurable framework for understanding and supporting teachers' wellbeing.

Conclusion

This research offers a valuable contribution to the limited UK based research that explores teacher wellbeing. By adopting Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory and engaging with teachers through focus groups, the complex and context-specific factors influencing wellbeing came to light.

Findings provide a greater depth into the factors impacting teacher wellbeing and show clear distinctions between primary and secondary contexts. These differences suggest that phase-specific support is essential, and wellbeing needs to be addressed through systemic changes rather than positioning the individual as responsible alone.

It is hoped this research will encourage policymakers and school leaders to reflect on the key systemic changes that need to occur, so that they are able to better support teacher wellbeing in a way that is both nuanced and sustainable. Further

research should continue to build on this by exploring how context shapes teachers'

experiences.

Chapter 3: Reflective Chapter

Introduction:

This chapter provides reflective accounts of my journey through the research. It will focus on the influence that my personal, professional and epistemological positioning as a practitioner-researcher has had on the way I developed my research and engaged in exploring teacher wellbeing.

As a trainee educational psychologist, my involvement in research is integral for professional development and practice. Educational psychologists have an important role in conducting, evaluating and promoting research that is contextually relevant (BPS, 2022; Boyle & Kelly, 2017). Given that evidence-based practice plays a central role in decision making and service delivery (Sedgwick & Stothard, 2021), it is pivotal that research is not only methodologically robust but also ethical, reflexive and relevant to practice (Boyle, & Kelly, 2017). Throughout this research, I have acted in a reflective manner to navigate my evolving relationship with the research process.

My positionality within this research is shaped by multiple factors. I am a white, middle-class female trainee educational psychologist with previous experience working in schools alongside teachers. My sisters are currently teachers within primary and secondary mainstream settings, making me maintain a strong emotional connection to teacher wellbeing. These factors place me in a unique position where my reflections were influenced by my emotional proximity to and critical distance from the topic. Figure 5 below illustrates who I amin relation to this research. Through recognising my own biases and position within this research, I have been able to engage in critical self-reflection on how these aspects influence my engagement with my study.
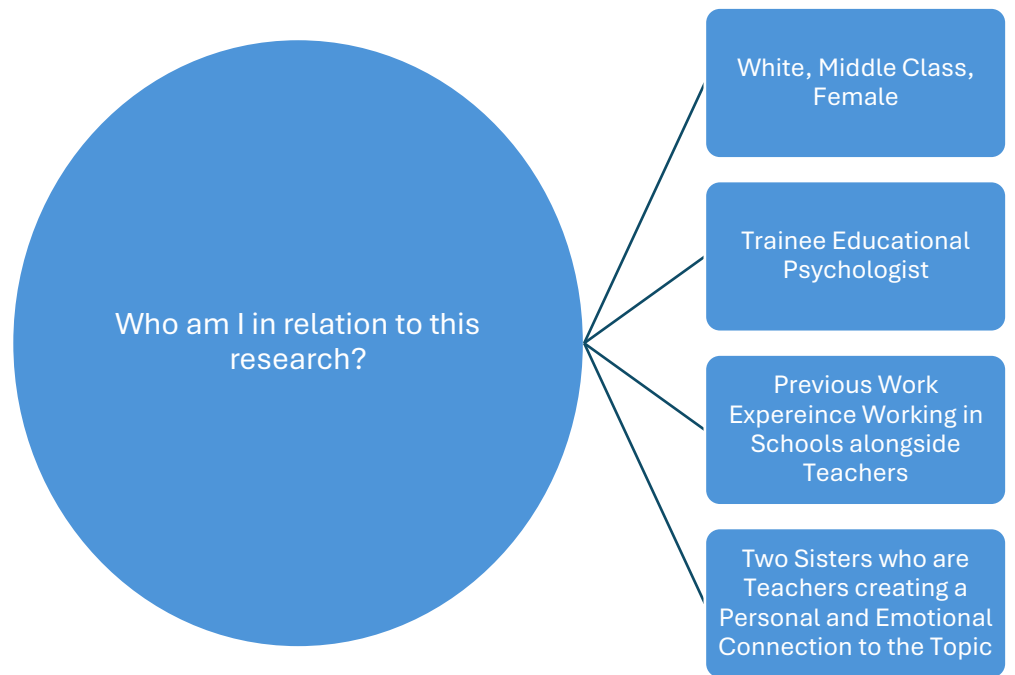
Figure 5. *Authors positionality to the research*.

Why Teacher Wellbeing: Connecting Experience with Inquiry

Initially, I was considering multiple research topics, including situational mutism and mental health needs of pupils. However, reflecting on the type of educational psychologist I would hope to be, it was evident that the work I find most meaningful is that which has the potential to create structural and cultural change within a school setting. As a practitioner I believe the most sustainable and impactful work comes from addressing the broader systems that shape children's experience. This prompted me to ask myself, 'who interacts most consistently with children in schools?' the answer being teachers. If teachers do not have the emotional and professional capacity to support children effectively, then collective efforts to promote inclusion, wellbeing and equity remain limited. Therefore, for me, supporting teacher wellbeing became a necessary foundation to help support meaningful support for pupils.

The decision to explore teacher wellbeing was also rooted within the personal and professional experiences of the topic. Having two sisters working within the education system, one a primary school teacher and one a secondary school teacher meant that conversations around the workload, stress and emotional toll teaching

involves were a regular part of my personal life. These conversations were real-time accounts of the systemic constraints and emotional labour teachers navigate daily. Being part of these discussions made me reflect on the differences in stress they each faced often relating to the contextual factors of their work. This sparked the topic of teacher wellbeing becoming one of the topics I thought about researching.

My interest in the topic was further reinforced through my work as a trainee educational psychologist. In many of the schools I would visit for work, I felt a deep sense of stress and emotional strain among the staff I encountered. I remember several occasions when I could enter a school building and get an immediate sense of the emotional climate of the school. These experiences often left me reflecting on the impact staff wellbeing has not only on an individual, but how it shapes school climate, relationships and the capacity for teachers to support pupils effectively. My professional reflections on the current landscape for teacher wellbeing was deepened through my supervision experience. I often found myself repeatedly returning to questions about the systemic pressures placed on teachers. I regularly felt frustration at how these constraints were impacting teachers' ability to best support the outcomes for children and young people. These conversations affirmed the importance of teacher wellbeing in the work of educational psychologists.

Ontology and Epistemology

When designing this research, I spent a lot of time considering my philosophical foundation. I have always found ontology and epistemology difficult to fully grasp, so I felt it was important to ensure I truly understood these concepts and their implications to my research.

Initially, I felt that I aligned with social constructionism, and I felt it was fitting for the topic of teacher wellbeing. From this perspective, wellbeing is understood not as a fixed or objective condition but as a socially constructed phenomenon shaped by cultural norms, organisational practices and interpersonal relationships. Given that wellbeing is often a subjective, fluid and context-dependent experience, the constructionist perspective made sense.

However, as I reflected on the concept of wellbeing and how it applies to teachers, I wondered if constructionism could fully address the complexities I sought to explore. As I read more research to help me understand what was going on for teachers in terms of their wellbeing, I felt that teacher wellbeing was not only shaped by individual interpretations but also by enduring structural factors, such as workload policies and leadership styles. For me, I felt that these issues highlighted deeper, often invisible mechanisms that were impacting the lived experiences of teachers.

Following this, I began exploring critical realism. I felt this resonated strongly with the needs of my research. It allowed me to acknowledge the reality of teachers' subjective experiences, whereby wellbeing is experienced and interpreted differently across contexts, while also helping me consider the generative mechanisms that contributed to those experiences. I felt this would offer a greater sense of how and why differences in wellbeing may arise based on school context.

I do think, within my personal life, I am probably more aligned with a social constructionism perspective, which prompted my initial attraction to it. However, I think for my research aims and what I wanted to explore, critical realism offered a coherent basis for exploring teachers' experiences in context, appreciating the subjective richness of wellbeing while also engaging in a deeper analysis of the conditions that enable or constrain it.

Importantly, I think the position I took had implications for the research design. Under a social constructionist approach, I may have adopted different methods which prioritised individual meaning-making. For instance, a narrative inquiry approach would likely have been more fitting, allowing for the richness of each teacher's personal story and the discursive constructions of their wellbeing experiences. In contrast, adopting a critical realist framework led me to design the study around focus groups, enabling the exploration of shared experiences and the identification of patterns and structures influencing wellbeing across different school contexts. Focus groups, combined with RTA, allowed for the identification not only of the ways wellbeing was experienced, but also of the deeper mechanisms and conditions shaping those experiences.

Data Collection: Participant Recruitment

Recruiting participants for this study proved to be one of the more challenging practical aspects. Though, I knew there would be some challenges, I was surprised at how hard it was to recruit teachers.

Initially, I attempted to organise online focus groups, with one of the assumed benefits being that it would be convenient for busy teachers and allow for greater flexibility. However, even with initial interest expressed drop-off rate were high. This led to a shift to in-person groups, reasoning that a face-to-face environment might better facilitate engagement and connection. While this change led to a slight improvement in recruitment, it still remained difficult to gain the amount of participants I had hoped for.

Reflecting on these difficulties, I have come to recognise several factors which may have contributed to this. In particular, I think I underestimated the potential anxiety associated with participating in an online focus group, especially within the context of wellbeing. Unlike professions where remote networking or collaboration with unfamiliar colleagues is common, teachers are in a profession where interactions typically occur in a familiar, school-based community. Being asked to join an online meeting with strangers, on a sensitive topic, may have introduced an additional psychological barrier I deeply underestimated, perhaps due to my own confidence in such formats, therefore I did not fully appreciate at the outset.

More broadly, I also wonder if the recruitment challenges could be seen as a reflection of the current strain teachers are under. The difficulties with engagement could signal the extent of the emotional and cognitive load educators experience on a daily basis. This would align with the critical realist perspective I adopted, whereby surface observations (E.g., low participation), are often symptomatic of a deeper underlying mechanism, such as the intense pressure that are shaping teachers' professional lives.

Data Collection: Facilitating Focus Groups and Group Dynamics

Prior to my first focus group, I felt a level of nervousness and doubt in my ability to effectively manage the discussion. Though I had prepared appropriately for the group, I found that this did not immediately translate into practice. During the early stages of

the first group, I found that participants tended to respond to my questions one at a time, rather than in a collaborative group discussion. This challenged my initial assumption about how focus groups should work, leaving me feeling unsure of how to manage the interactions. As I eased into the session, I began trialling subtle prompts to encourage participants to build on each other's answers such as ''Does anyone else have any thoughts around that comment?''. These helped to shift the tone of the session, making the conversation more dynamic and organic, allowing participants to increasingly build on each other's ideas, rather than looking to me for sole direction. I was able to carry this approach into my other focus groups allowing for rich and in-depth data to be generated by the group.

The overall group dynamics surprised me where I had anticipated I may need to manage and facilitate a space for quieter participants. However, I found that all participants contributed meaningfully and that the conversations felt equal. Whilst this was a positive experience, it also raised questions around the type of participants who chose to participate in the focus groups. I felt the fact that everyone engaged so readily could reflect a form of selection bias, where those who felt confident and invested enough volunteered to take part, meaning the sample may not reflect the broader population of teachers. This is something that may have been notably more prominent within the online focus groups, where joining a virtual discussion with strangers can require a certain level of confidence to feel able and willing to discuss matters with others.

Furthermore, there were also notable differences within the conversation dynamic between the in-person and online focus groups. I found that the online focus groups, though they had a slightly slower pace with some occasional silences, allowed for more open discussions around topics such as school leadership. In contrast, the in person focus groups, which were colleagues who knew each other, showed some level of hesitation when discussing leadership, with some participants leaving their thoughts unfinished or trailing off. This difference highlighted the importance of context and perceived safety within the focus group setting. Knowing others in the room could have led to a sense of caution, particularly when reflecting on topics around power, management and interpersonal dynamics within the school. This supports the original

reasoning behind my decision to use online focus groups, to allow for more open discussion around systemic frictions. Nonetheless, I do feel like that the in-person groups provided their own benefits including participants understanding the school system they were in and being able to build and add to others' points about what was going well or not.

A final area of reflection was around the content of the group discussion, particularly the balance between barriers and facilitating factors. The focus group questions were designed to intentionally encourage participants to reflect on both challenges and supports, aiming for a balanced exploration of experiences. However, during the facilitation, I noticed that there was a strong tendency to predominantly focus on the barriers, even when responding to questions framed to elicit examples of strengths, positive practices, or supportive structures. Reflecting on this, I wondered if one possible interpretation was related to the wider cultural and professional narratives surrounding wellbeing and mental health. In current public discourse, I feel that wellbeing often appears closely linked to discussions of difficulties and deficits. I began to wonder whether the concept of wellbeing itself may carry implicit associations with struggle and negative affect, thus unconsciously guiding participants toward more problem-saturated accounts. I think this highlights the deeper cultural mechanism that may exist and shape how wellbeing is conceptualised and discussed. Moreover, I also wondered if my role as a researcher played a role in shaping the discursive space of the focus group. Although questions were framed to be open and balanced, it is possible that the act of positioning the research around ''teacher wellbeing'' subtly prepared participants to foreground problems and challenges.

I do wonder if providing a formal definition of wellbeing at the start of the focus group may have helped orient participants towards a broader understanding, including positive and negative dimensions. However, I did feel it was important to allow participants to construct their own meanings based on their lived experiences. From a critical realist perspective, participants' understanding of wellbeing offers important insights into the real but socially shaped conditions they experience. By choosing not to set a definition I aimed to avoid restricting how participants made sense of their own

realities. Instead, I wanted to allow their views to surface naturally, reflecting the deeper cultural, structural and emotional factors influencing them.

In considering ways to balance the discussion further, I also reflected on the potential use of solution-focused questioning techniques. While this approach might have supported a more positive narrative when asking questions which sought to explore facilitating factors, I felt it also requires participants to be in a psychological space where they feel able to engage with solution-oriented thinking. Given the current climate of widespread teacher stress and systemic pressures, I do wonder how effective solution focused questioning would have been in addressing this difficulty.

Data Analysis: Comparative Element

Deciding how to analyse my data and structure the comparison between primary and secondary school teachers was one of the more stressful and challenging parts of this thesis process. I found that there was limited guidance around the procedure of conducting comparative analysis in qualitative research. This created a large amount of uncertainty for me leaving me to navigate a range of possible approaches without a definitive methodological roadmap.

I explored several options during this period. The main type of analysis can came up when I began my search process was Qualitative Comparative Analysis, a method designed to examine causal configurations across cases. While Qualitative Comparative Analysis is useful for identifying patterns of conditions and outcomes. However, as my research was about exploring the depth and complexity of teachers experiences of wellbeing, rather than isolating casual pathways, Qualitative Comparative Analysis was not an appropriate fit.

I went on to explore Framework Analysis, which involves organising data into a matrix to allow structured comparison across categories or cases. This initially seemed appealing due to its systematic approach to comparison. However, Framework Analysis tends to be more deductive and structured which I feared could restrict the inductive richness of participants' accounts. Furthermore, its emphasis on pre-defined categories felt misaligned with the exploratory nature of my research as well as the critical realist approach.

During researching ways to analyse my data, I came across several studies which had employed what they called a comparative thematic analysis. However, when I tried to explore this in more depth, there was very limited methodological literature on how to apply it rigorously. In many of the research papers that applied this approach, the process was vaguely described, offering little practical guidance on how to maintain both depth within groups and rigour in cross-group comparison.

Ultimately, after a lot of reflection, I decided to conduct two separate RTA, one for primary school teachers and one for secondary school teachers and then undertake a comparative interpretation when answering the relevant research question. I felt that by conducting two separate RTAs respected the context-specific nature of each group's experiences, allowing the inductive development of themes without forcing premature comparisons. I felt this approach maintained depth and authenticity in the analysis of each data set. Comparative interpretation was then conducted afterwards, focusing on identifying patterns of similarity and difference between the two groups. This meant that the comparison emerged naturally, grounded in the data, rather than being imposed artificially.

Reflecting on this aspect of the thesis process, it is clear that my approach to the comparative element of my research, while coherent and defensible, was shaped as much by practical necessity and the absence of clear methodological guidance as by deliberate design. In hindsight, the approach I adopted introduced a certain amount of limitations as well as strengths. While this approach allowed for depth within each group, it created a risk of inconsistency between the two analyses, particularly given the interpretive flexibility of reflexive analysis. I wonder if my own analytic lens, and potential shifts in that lens over time, may have influenced the nature of each dataset's themes in subtle ways. To limit the risk of this, I used a consistent coding procedure across both datasets (e.g., line-by-line coding), maintained a comparative analytic memo throughout, where I noted emerging hunches about similarities and differences between groups, and conducted regular analytic check-ins, where after preliminary coding for one group, I briefly reviewed the codes/themes from the other group asking myself critical questions such as ''*am I interpreting emotional tone, agency or institutional factors consistently?*''

More broadly, this experience highlighted the discomfort that comes with working in areas of methodological ambiguity. The nature of qualitative research often demands a tolerance for uncertainty, but the lack of established comparative models for qualitative data left me constantly questioning if I had made the correct decision and if my approach was valid. Embracing this uncertainty and accepting that methodological choices always have trade-offs was an important learning point in my development as a critical and reflective researcher.

Data Analysis: Data Analysis Journey

When I began the data analysis, although I was excited to delve deeper into my data and I also found the process daunting. My previous experience of conducting RTA had shown me that the process was iterative, messy and full of dilemmas. I was therefore aware that each analytic decision, from how I engaged with the transcripts to the way I developed themes would require both flexibility and critical self-awareness. This awareness framed my approach, encouraging me to document my thinking and view each phase as part of an evolving relationship with the data. Below I reflect on and explore my data analysis journey.

Familiarisation

I began this process by immersing myself in the data for each participant group separately, first with primary then with secondary school teachers. This allowed me to fully engage with the context and nuances of each dataset prior to considering any comparisons. I listened to the audio recordings to check for transcription accuracy and to reconnect with the tone, pace and group dynamics of participants.

Alongside reading, I produced ''familiarisation doodles'' for each focus group, allowing me to visually map out key contextual details. This included recurring concerns, school setting details, and distinctive expressions. I had not used this method before, however I found it was a very effective way for me to engage both analytically and creatively with the data. I found the doodles supported in early noticing of patterns and contrasts. For example, in several of the primary school teachers' doodles, I noticed that pupil behaviour featured prominently, whereas in secondary teachers' doodles often contained references to colleague relationships. Whilst these patterns were interesting, I was cautious not to leap into early theme formation, reminding myself that familiarisation was about understanding and immersion and not premature categorisation.

During this phase I also noted how my own professional experience might lead me to notice certain elements more easily, for example systemic issues in education policy, while overlooking more subtle or unexpected aspects. Therefore, I made a conscious effort to highlight moments that surprised me or challenged my assumptions even when they seemed less prominent at first glance.

Coding

Prior to coding I transferred each transcript into Word, printed it and annotated them by hand. This physical interaction slowed my reading and allowed me to engage more deeply with the data. Coding was not a straightforward process, many extracts could plausibly sit under more than one code, which reflected the interconnected nature of the teachers' experiences. For example, a single quote about working during personal time could reflect ''workload intensity'', ''boundary erosion'' and ''emotional exhaustion''. Reflecting on Braun and Clarke's (2022) guidance, I treated overlaps as meaningful intersections rather than problems. This also prompted refinement of merging overly narrows codes or splitting overly broad ones.

Developing Themes

To help me develop my themes, I transferred my codes onto individual post-it notes and began grouping them onto sheets of paper. This hands-on process helped me see connections, overlaps and outliers more clearly than when I worked on a screen. Post-it notes were repeatedly moved, testing different combinations and asking myself ''what is the story of this theme?''. Initially, I defaulted to broad, surface-level theming such as ''student behaviour'', and ''workload''. This was an efficient way to organise a large volume of data but as I worked through the process of generating my themes, I reflected how it reduced my analysis to a descriptive summary rather than capturing the complexity of teachers' experiences. Braun and Clarke (2022) caution against this approach, noting that themes should represent patterned meaning.

As I worked iteratively through my data analysis, my critical realist stance supported me to explore the underlying mechanisms shaping these surface issues. For instance, ''student behaviour'' often revealed tensions between professional values, and systemic constraints. Therefore, refining student behaviour as part of the theme of ''losing sight of the core purpose'', reflecting on how student behaviours influence teachers' capacity to focus on what they value most.

This shift led me to learn to sit with the discomfort of moving away from neat and obvious categories' towards more meaningful themes. The use of post it notes to physically

reorganise codes helped me test whether these emerging interpretations were both coherent as well as grounded within the data. By the end of the process, I felt the themes I had developed told a richer, more nuanced story about teacher wellbeing across the two educational sectors.

Data Analysis: Theming

During the coding and theming of my data, it was critical that I remained aware of my positionality whilst I engaged with the data. My proximity to the topic of teacher wellbeing presented both opportunities and challenges during theming. On the one hand, my familiarity with the educational context and pressures teachers face enabled me to recognise the subtleties in participants' accounts that might otherwise have been overlooked. This sensitivity enriched my analysis by allowing me to attend carefully to what was said and how it was said, including emotional nuances that might not have been captured by a more detached reading.

On the other hand, I was conscious of the risk that my own experiences and investment could lead me to overemphasise certain themes. To minimise this risk, I ensured I engaged in critical self-reflection throughout the process. In my diary I kept notes of analytic decisions, emotional reactions to the data, and emerging concerns about the potential bias. Maintaining this critical distance while honouring the emotional connection was an ongoing balancing act I had to manage. There were several moments where I found myself wanting to ''speak for'' participants, particularly when their accounts resonated with conversations I had previously had with my sisters. During these times, I critically examined my impulse to advocate and re-centred my focus to allow participant's voices to emerge authentically.

Other Interesting Findings

Although the research focused on exploring teacher wellbeing, several emergent findings arose. The first being one participant pointed out the lack of ethnic diversity within school leadership, highlighting how leadership teams remained predominantly white, middle-class males. She argued that for schools to embody diversity and inclusion, it needs to be evident at leadership levels not simply among pupils and frontline staff. This finding raises questions around attempts at diversity within school while leaving power structures unchanged. Leadership homogeneity perpetuates

existing inequities and signals to those from minoritised backgrounds that leadership roles may be less accessible to them. These structural exclusions may reinforce feelings of marginalisation and undermine educational equity and social justice aims. This finding raises questions around the commitment to diversity and inclusion in many schools. It suggests structural changes such as active efforts to diversify leadership, address unconscious bias in recruitment and promotion and reimagine what leadership in education should represent.

The second finding was from a teacher who reflected on the perceived rise in pupils with special educational needs. She reflected that the increasing pace, complexity and rigidity of the curriculum was out of step with many children's developmental needs, leading to more children struggling and being labelled as having additional needs or behavioural challenges when rather than these difficulties being within child, they laid within the education system itself. This holds implication for how education systems conceptualise and respond to learner diversity. It raises the possibility that educational systems are contributing to the medicalisation of normal variations in learning and development. As curriculum pressures increase, children who do not fit narrow trajectories of academic achievement may be positioned as ''problems'' to be diagnosed and managed, rather than considering the wider systemic issues which need to be addressed. It calls into question the extent to quick current education models accommodates the diverse learning profiles and highlights a need for more flexible, developmentally informed approaches to curriculum design and assessment.

Finally, an interesting pattern emerged relating to the socio-economic and geographic contexts of the participating schools. Though I did not systematically collect data on the specific areas or economic statuses of the schools, my own knowledge of some of the areas I visited for data collection revealed some potentially interesting insights which could direct future research. I noted schools I knew that were situated in more affluent areas tended to reference parents and their expectations to a greater extent than the schools I recognised as being in a more economically disadvantaged area. I wonder if this contrast reflects broader structural inequalities in how families engage with schools and how schools respond to that engagement. Calarco (2018)

highlights how middle-class families often ''negotiate opportunities'' for their children by leveraging their cultural capital and assertively advocating within school systems, practices that are often less accessible to working-class families. The difference in parental involvement between the schools may therefore point to schools unknowingly privileging families who are better equipped to navigate institutional expectations. Thus, these findings point to a potential wider social structures that shape both educational access and teacher experiences, underscoring the importance of considering and addressing inequality at the systemic level in future research.

Dissemination of Findings

Following approval for this doctoral thesis, the findings will be shared through a multi-stranded communication approach, which has been suggested to increase successful dissemination (Harmsworth & Turpin, 2000). This aligns with the BERA (2018) guidelines, which refer to a responsibility to make research findings public for the benefit of others.

Harmsworth and Turpin (2000) suggested three purposes of dissemination, awareness, understanding and action, all of which would be applicable to this study. The purpose of awareness is to reach broader audiences, such as school staff and educational professionals who may benefit from understanding the importance of teacher wellbeing. This may involve sharing a brief and accessible summary of key findings (e.g., through a LinkedIn post, or via a blog). Dissemination for understanding and action would seek to target educational psychologists who seek to use the findings to reflect on and adapt their practice. This could include seeking opportunities to present findings during team meetings or internal/external CPD opportunities such as regional conferences. There is also consideration of submitting the research for publication in a professional journal, contributing to the evidence base on teacher wellbeing across education sectors.

Looking forward, within a role as a newly qualified educational psychologist I hope to draw on my own findings to inform training, consultation and system-level work to raise awareness of teacher wellbeing and bring attention to the phase-sensitive and contextually grounded approaches needed to support teachers.

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Appendices

Appendix 1: Recruitment Poster (Online FG)

TEACHERS WANTED FOR RESEARCH PROJECT

Facilitating factors and barriers to positive teacher wellbeing: A comparison between Primary and Secondary School Teachers.

WHY IS THIS RESEARCH IMPORTANT?

Research has indicated that the teaching profession is facing increasing challenges when it comes to their wellbeing at work. In recent years, research has begun to explore factors which help facilitate positive wellbeing for teacher at work. Research which explores the similarities and difference between primary and secondary school teachers is lacking. Understanding these similarities and differences will help develop ways to better support teachers in their educational sectors.

WHO CAN TAKE PART?

We are looking for teachers who teach in a mainstream primary or secondary setting in England. Teachers should not be part of the senior leadership team.

WHAT WILL BE INVOLVED?

- Complete a brief demographic information form.
- Participate in an in-person focus group at your school, with colleagues.
- Discussion Topics: Barriers and enablers of teacher wellbeing.
- Time Commitment: 30 mintues - 1 hour

- If you are interested please email emily.childs@uea.ac.uk for more information.

Research Lead: Emily Childs
Trainee Educational Psychologist, University of East Angla
Email: emily.childs@uea.ac.uk

Research Approved by: UEA School, of Education and Lifelong Learning Research Ethics
Ethics application no.: ETH2324-1787

University of East Anglia

Appendix 3: Email to Educational Psychology Services (Online FG)

<u>Participant Recruitment Emails (Gatekeeper: Educational Psychology Service) – when research was using online focus groups</u>

Subject: Research Recruitment: Exploring factor which impact teacher wellbeing

Attachment: Advertisement poster

Hello,

I am a Trainee Educational Psychologist, studying at the University of East Anglia. I am contacting you as I am currently recruiting participants for my thesis research which aims to explore the barriers and facilitating factors for teacher wellbeing.

I am looking for mainstream primary and secondary school teachers across all regions of England. I would greatly appreciate if you could share the text below including the attached poster to Headteachers in your local area.

Dear Headteacher,

My name is Emily Childs, I am a Trainee Educational Psychologist at The University of East Angelia.

I am currently working on my Doctoral Thesis, which aims to explore the variety of factors that support teacher wellbeing, the ways in which teacher wellbeing can be improved, and the similarities and differences in these factors between primary and secondary school teachers.

What does the study involve?

Teachers who take part will be asked to complete a brief questionnaire about their current role. Following this, they will be asked to take part in a single virtual focus group on Microsoft Teams (lasting up approx. 60 minutes) to explore the factors which impact teacher wellbeing.

I would greatly appreciate if the attached poster could be shared with staff in your school. Participation in this research is entirely voluntary and responses will remain completely anonymous.

Please do not hesitate to contact me (emily.childs@uea.ac.uk) if you have any questions or require any additional information.

Many Thanks,

Emily Childs, Trainee Educational Psychologist.

Appendix 4: Email to Educational Psychology Services (In-Person FG)

<u>Participant Recruitment Emails (Gatekeeper: Educational Psychology Service) – amendment to using in person focus group</u>

Subject: Research Recruitment: Exploring factor which impact teacher wellbeing

Attachment: Advertisement poster

Hello,

I am a Trainee Educational Psychologist, studying at the University of East Anglia. I am contacting you as I am currently recruiting participants for my thesis research which aims to explore the barriers and facilitating factors for teacher wellbeing.

I am looking for mainstream primary and secondary school teachers across all regions of England. I would greatly appreciate if you could share the text below including the attached poster to Headteachers in your local area.

Dear Headteacher,

My name is Emily Childs, I am a Trainee Educational Psychologist at The University of East Angelia.

I am currently working on my Doctoral Thesis, which aims to explore the variety of factors that support teacher wellbeing, the ways in which teacher wellbeing can be improved, and the similarities and differences in these factors between primary and secondary school teachers.

What does the study involve?

The research will involve a focus group of teachers from your school. It will take place in your school setting and last up to 1 hour. The research will explore the factors which impact teacher wellbeing. Please see the attached poster for more information.

Participation in this research is entirely voluntary and responses will remain completely anonymous.

If you are interested in supporting with this research in your school, please contact me via email (emily.childs@uea.ac.uk) to discuss arranging this.

Many Thanks,

Emily Childs, Trainee Educational Psychologist.

PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET AND PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM

Researcher:
Miss Emily Childs, Trainee Educational Psychologist
Faculty of Social Sciences
School of Education and Lifelong Learning
University of East Anglia
Norwich Research Park
Norwich NR4 7TJ
United Kingdom

Email: Emily.Childs@uea.ac.uk
Web: www.uea.ac.uk
Ethics application code: ETH2324-1787

* Required

What is this study about?

You are invited to take part in a research study about the barriers and facilitating factors for teacher wellbeing. The research is seeking to explore the differences and similarities in these factors between Primary and Secondary School teachers. You have been invited to participate in this study because you are understood to be a teacher working within a mainstream primary and secondary school setting. This Participant Information Sheet tells you about the research study. Knowing what is involved will help you decide if you want to take part in the study. Please read this sheet carefully and ask questions about anything that you don't understand or want to know more about.

Participation in this research study is voluntary. By giving consent to take part in this study you are telling us that you:

- Understand what you have read.
- Agree to take part in the research study as outlined below.
- Agree to the use of your personal information as described.

Who is running the study?

(2) Who is running the study?

The study is being carried out by the following researcher: Miss Emily Childs

(emily.childs@uea.ac.uk), Trainee Educational Psychologist, University East Anglia.

This will take place under the supervision of Dr Chris

Clarke (Christopher.D.Clarke@uea.ac.uk), Educational Psychologist and Professional Tutor, University East Anglia

What will the study involve for me?

You will be asked to complete a short 5 minute questionnaire which will be provided via email. This will involve answer short questions related to your job role to help place you into the appropriate focus group.

You will then be asked to participate in an online focus group (via Microsoft Teams) with teachers from across England. The focus group will have up to 6 participants from the same educational sector (e.g., Primary or Secondary). For your anonymity, you will not be placed in a group with someone from the same workplace as you. The questions asked will be open-ended (e.g., what do you think about X) in order to facilitate discussion between the group. The focus group will last approximately 60 minutes. The online focus group will be arranged at a time that is most convenient to participants. The focus group discussion will be audio and video recorded. Participants will have the option to join the focus group without their camera and using a pseudonym if they wish to do so.

How much of my time will the study take?

It is expected that answering the online survey will take up to 5 minutes.

It is expected that the focus group will take 60 minutes.

If you wish you review information generated about you, you may request this via email (emily.childs@uea.ac.uk). You will be able to request to review transcript data until March 2025.

Do I have to be in the study? Can I withdraw from the study once I have started?

Being in this study is completely voluntary and you do not have to take part.

Your decision whether to participate will not affect your current or future relationship with the researchers or anyone else at the University of East Anglia now or in the future.

If you wish to withdraw prior to the start of the focus group, your data from the questionnaire will be deleted. If you participate in the focus group, you are free to stop at any stage. You can do this by emailing the research or leaving the call. You may also refuse to answer any of the questions. However, as it is a group discussion, it will not be possible to withdraw your individual comment from our records

What are the consequences if I withdraw from the study?

If you take part in the questionnaire and focus group, you are free to stop participating at any stage or to refuse to answer any of the questions. However, it will not be possible to withdraw your individual comments from our records once the focus group has started, as it is a group discussion.

Are there any risks or costs associated with being in the study?

It is anticipated that there will be minimal risks participating in the study. However, themes around factors that impact your wellbeing at work will be discussed. This may elicit some discomfort or emotional response related to your personal experience. You will be able to leave the video call at any time if you require a break from the discussion. If you require support regarding

these issues, please seek support from your line manager or visit the organisation signposted in the debrief that will

Are there any benefits associated with being in the study?

This research will provide the possible benefit of providing you with a safe and containing space to discuss factors around teacher wellbeing.

Additionally, the information gathered from the research hopes to provide greater insight into the factors that impact teacher well-being, thus, supporting the development of systems in place to support teacher wellbeing.

What will happen to information provided by me and data collected during the study?

Data collected during the questionnaire will only be used to ensure participants meet the inclusion criteria and to support with focus group allocation. Audio and video recordings will be taken during the focus group and will be used for analysis. Electronic data will be stored on a password-protected laptop during the study, which will only be asked by the researcher.

Your personal data and information will only be used as outlined in this Participant

Information Sheet, unless you consent otherwise. Data management will follow the

Data Protection Act 2018 (DPA 2018) and UK General Data Protection Regulation

(UK GDPR), and the University of East Anglia's Research Data Management Policy.

The information you provide will be stored securely and your identity will be kept strictly confidential, except as required by law. Study findings may be published and may also be used for other scholarly and educational purposes such as in teaching. Although every effort will be made to protect

your identity, there is a risk that you might be identifiable due to the nature of the study and/or results if you

What if I would like further information about the study?

When you have read this information, Miss Emily Childs (emily.childs@uea.ac.uk) will be available to discuss it with you further and answer any questions you may have.

Will I be told the results of the study?

You have a right to receive feedback about the overall results of this study.

You can tell us that you wish to receive feedback by ticking the relevant box on the consent form.

This feedback will be in the form of a brief one page summary

This feedback will be after the research has been submitted, marked and returned to the researcher.

What if I have a compliant of any concerns about the study?

If there is a problem please let me know. You can contact me via the University of East Anglia at the following address:

Miss Emily Childs

School of Education and Lifelong Learning

University of East Anglia

NORWICH NR4 7TJ

emily.childs@uea.ac.uk

If you would like to speak to someone else you can contact my supervisor:

Dr Chris Clarke

School of Education and Lifelong Learning

University of East Anglia

NORWICH NR4 7TJ

Christopher.D.Clarke@uea.ac.uk

If you are concerned about the way this study is being conducted or you wish to make a complaint to someone independent from the study, please contact the

Head of School of Education and Lifelong Learning: Yann Lebeau

How do I know that this study has been approved to take place?

To protect your safety, rights, wellbeing and dignity, all research in the University of East Anglia is reviewed by a Research Ethics Body. This research was approved by the EDU S-REC (School of Education and Lifelong Learning Research Ethics Subcommittee).

What is the general data protection information I need to be informed about?

According to data protection legislation, we are required to inform you that the legal basis for processing your data as listed in Article 6(1) of the UK GDPR is because this allows us to process personal data when it is necessary to perform our public tasks as a University.

In addition to the specific information provided above about why your personal data is required and how it will be used, there is also some general information which needs to be provided for you:

· The data controller is the University of East Anglia.

· For further information, you can contact the University's Data Protection Officer at dataprotection@uea.ac.uk

· You can also find out more about your data protection rights at

OK, I want to take part - what do I do next?

You need to fill in the online consent form in section 17 and submit it. Please download a copy of the information sheet and consent form for your own information.

Further information

This information was last updated on 09 August 2024.

If there are changes to the information provided, you will be notified by email where these changes will be outlined. You have the right to withdraw following any changes.

This information sheet is for you to keep. Please download a copy.

PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM

In giving my consent I state that:

- I understand the purpose of the study, what I will be asked to do, and any risks/benefits involved.

- I have read the Participant Information Sheet, which I may keep, for my records, and have been able to discuss my involvement in the study with the researchers if I wished to do so.

- The researchers have answered any questions that I had about the study and I am happy with the answers.

- I understand that being in this study is completely voluntary and I do not have to take part. My decision whether to be in the study will not affect my relationship with the researchers or anyone else at the University of East Anglia now or in the future.

- I understand that I am completing a non-anonymous questionnaire I can withdraw from the study at any time.

- I understand that I may leave the focus group at any time if I do not wish to continue. I also understand that it will not be possible to withdraw my comments once the group has started, as it is a group discussion.

1. I, (state name in answer box), **am** willing to participant in this research study *

2. I consent to completing a questionnaire   *

    ○   Yes

    ○   No

3. I consent to taking-part in an online focus group *

    ○   Yes

    ○   No

4. I consent to audio and video recording *

    ○   Yes

    ○   No

5. Would you like to receive feedback about the overall results of this study *

    ○   Yes

    ○   No

6. If you answered **YES**, please indicate your preferred form of feedback and address Options: 1) Postal

2) Email

[   ]

7. Signature *

[   ]

8. Email Address *

[   ]

9. Date *

[📅]

Appendix 6: Participant Information Sheet (In-Person FG)

Miss Emily Childs
Trainee Educational Psychologist

Faculty of Social Sciences

School of Education and

Lifelong Learning

10 August 2025

University of East Anglia

Norwich Research Park

Facilitating Factors and Barriers to Positive Teacher Wellbeing: A Comparison between Primary and Secondary School Teachers.

<center>**PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET**</center>

(1) What is this study about?

You are invited to take part in a research study about the barriers and facilitating factors for teacher wellbeing. The research is seeking to explore the differences and similarities in these factors between Primary and Secondary School teachers. You have been invited to participate in this study because you are understood to be a teacher working within a mainstream primary and secondary school setting. This Participant Information Sheet tells you about the research study. Knowing what is involved will help you decide if you want to take part in the study. Please read this sheet carefully and ask questions about anything that you don't understand or want to know more about.

Participation in this research study is voluntary. By giving consent to take part in this study you are telling us that you:

✓　　　　Understand what you have read.
✓　　　　Agree to take part in the research study as outlined below.
✓　　　　Agree to the use of your personal information as described.
✓　　　　You have received a copy of this Participant Information Sheet to keep.

(2) Who is running the study?

The study is being carried out by the following researcher(s): Miss Emily Childs.

This will take place under the supervision of Dr Matt Beeke (matt.beeke@uea.ac.uk,).

(3) What will the study involve for me?

You will be asked to complete a short 5 minute questionnaire regarding demographic information.

You will then be asked to participate in a focus group in your school setting with colleagues also interested in this research. The focus group will have up to 6 participants. The questions asked will be open-ended (e.g., what do you think about X) in order to facilitate

discussion between the group. The focus group will last approximately 30-60 minutes. The focus group will be arranged at a time that is most convenient to participants. The focus group discussion will be audio recorded. Participants will be read a set of group rules which include discussion of confidentiality within the group.

You will have the opportunity to review information generated about you prior to publication.

(4) How much of my time will the study take?

It is expected that answering the online survey will take up to 5 minutes.

It is expected that the focus group will take 30-60 minutes.

If you wish you review information generated about you, you may request this via email (emily.childs@uea.ac.uk). You will be able to request to review transcript data until March 2025.

(5) Do I have to be in the study? Can I withdraw from the study once I have started?

Being in this study is completely voluntary and you do not have to take part.

Your decision whether to participate will not affect your current or future relationship with the researchers or anyone else at the University of East Anglia now or in the future.

If you wish to withdraw prior to the start of the focus group, your data from the questionnaire will be deleted. If you participate in the focus group, you are free to stop at any stage. You can do this by letting the researcher know or leaving the room. You may also refuse to answer any of the questions. However, as it is a group discussion, it will not be possible to withdraw your individual comment from our records once the group has started. All data will be anonymised using pseudonym's prior to analysis.

(6) What are the consequences if I withdraw from the study?

If you take part in the questionnaire and focus group, you are free to stop participating at any stage or to refuse to answer any of the questions. However, it will not be possible to withdraw

your individual comments from our records once the focus group has started, as it is a group discussion.

(7)   Are there any risks or costs associated with being in the study?

It is anticipated that there will be minimal risks participating in the study. However, themes around factors that impact your wellbeing at work will be discussed. This may elicit some discomfort or emotional response related to your personal experience. You will be able to leave the video call at any time if you require a break from the discussion. If you require support regarding these issues, please seek support from your line manager or visit the organisation signposted in the debrief that will be emailed to you following the study.

(8) Are there any benefits associated with being in the study?

This research will provide the possible benefit of providing you with a safe and containing space to discuss factors around teacher wellbeing.

Additionally, the information gathered from the research hopes to provide greater insight into the factors that impact teacher well-being, thus, supporting the development of systems in place to support teacher wellbeing.

(9) What will happen to information provided by me and data collected during the study?
Data collected during the questionnaire will be used to ensure participants meet the inclusion criteria and to support with focus group allocation. Audio recordings will be taken during the focus group and will be used for analysis. Electronic data will be stored on a password-protected laptop during the study, which will only be asked by the researcher.

Your personal data and information will only be used as outlined in this Participant Information Sheet, unless you consent otherwise. Data management will follow the Data Protection Act 2018 (DPA 2018) and UK General Data Protection Regulation (UK GDPR), and the University of East Anglia's Research Data Management Policy.

The information you provide will be stored securely and your identity will be kept strictly confidential, except as required by law. Study findings may be published and may also be used for other scholarly and educational purposes such as in teaching. Although every effort will be made to protect your identity, there is a risk that you might be identifiable due to the nature of the study and/or results if you decide to participate in this study. The data will be kept for at least 10 years beyond the last date the data were used. The study findings may be deposited in a repository to allow it to facilitate its reuse. The deposited data will not include your name or any identifiable information about you, but there is a risk that you might be identifiable due to the nature of the study and/or results.

(10) What if I would like further information about the study?

When you have read this information, Miss Emily Childs (emily.childs@uea.ac.uk, n/a) will be available to discuss it with you further and answer any questions you may have.

(11) Will I be told the results of the study?

You have a right to receive feedback about the overall results of this study.

You can tell us that you wish to receive feedback by ticking the relevant box on the consent form.

This feedback will be in the form of a brief one page summary

This feedback will be after the research has been submitted, marked and returned to the researcher.

(12) What if I have a complaint or any concerns about the study?

If there is a problem please let me know. You can contact me via the University of East Anglia at the following address:

Miss Emily Childs

School of Education and Lifelong Learning

University of East Anglia

NORWICH NR4 7TJ

emily.childs@uea.ac.uk

If you would like to speak to someone else you can contact my supervisor:

Dr Chris Clarke

School of Education and Lifelong Learning

University of East Anglia

NORWICH NR4 7TJ

Christopher.D.Clarke@uea.ac.uk

If you are concerned about the way this study is being conducted or you wish to make a complaint to someone independent from the study, please contact the Head of School of Education and Lifelong Learning: Yann Lebeau (y.lebeau@uea.ac.uk, 01603 592757).

(13) How do I know that this study has been approved to take place?

To protect your safety, rights, wellbeing and dignity, all research in the University of East Anglia is reviewed by a Research Ethics Body. This research was approved by the EDU S-REC (School of Education and Lifelong Learning Research Ethics Subcommittee).

(14) What is the general data protection information I need to be informed about?

According to data protection legislation, we are required to inform you that the legal basis for processing your data as listed in Article 6(1) of the UK GDPR is because this allows us to process personal data when it is necessary to perform our public tasks as a University.

In addition to the specific information provided above about why your personal data is required and how it will be used, there is also some general information which needs to be provided for you:

- The data controller is the University of East Anglia.
- For further information, you can contact the University's Data Protection Officer at dataprotection@uea.ac.uk
- You can also find out more about your data protection rights at the Information Commissioner's Office (ICO).
- If you are unhappy with how your personal data has been used, please contact the University's Data Protection Officer at dataprotection@uea.ac.uk in the first instance.

(15) OK, I want to take part – what do I do next?

You need to fill in the consent form provide to you prior to the focus group and return to the research the day of the focus group or via email: emily.childs@uea.ac.uk. Please keep a copy of the information sheet and consent form for your own information.

(16) Further information

This information was last updated on 10th January 2025

If there are changes to the information provided, you will be notified by email where these changes will be outlined. You have the right to withdraw following any changes.

This information sheet is for you to keep. Please download a copy.

PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM (First Copy to Researcher)

I, ... [PRINT NAME], **am** willing to participate in this research study.

In giving my consent I state that:

- I understand the purpose of the study, what I will be asked to do, and any risks/benefits involved.
- I have read the Participant Information Sheet, which I may keep, for my records, and have been able to discuss my involvement in the study with the researchers if I wished to do so.
- The researchers have answered any questions that I had about the study and I am happy with the answers.
- I understand that being in this study is completely voluntary and I do not have to take part. My decision whether to be in the study will not affect my relationship with the researchers or anyone else at the University of East Anglia now or in the future.
- I understand that I am completing a non-anonymous questionnaire I can withdraw from the study at any time.
- I understand that I may leave the focus group at any time if I do not wish to continue. I also understand that it will not be possible to withdraw my comments once the group has started, as it is a group discussion.
- I understand that the results of this study will be used in the way described in the information sheet.
- I understand that personal information about me that is collected over the course of this project will be stored securely and will only be used for purposes that I have agreed to. I understand that information about me will only be told to others with my permission, except as required by law.

I consent to:

Completing a questionnaire YES ☐ NO ☐

Audio-recording YES ☐ NO ☐

Video-recording YES ☐ NO ☐

Would you like to receive feedback about the overall results of this study?

YES ☐   NO ☐

If you answered **YES**, please indicate your preferred form of feedback and address:

☐ Postal: _____

_____

☐ Email: _____

....

Signature

....

PRINT name

....

Date

PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM (First Copy to Researcher)

I, ... [PRINT NAME], **am** willing to participate in this research study.

In giving my consent I state that:

- I understand the purpose of the study, what I will be asked to do, and any risks/benefits involved.
- I have read the Participant Information Sheet, which I may keep, for my records, and have been able to discuss my involvement in the study with the researchers if I wished to do so.
- The researchers have answered any questions that I had about the study and I am happy with the answers.
- I understand that being in this study is completely voluntary and I do not have to take part. My decision whether to be in the study will not affect my relationship with the researchers or anyone else at the University of East Anglia now or in the future.
- I understand that I am completing a non-anonymous questionnaire I can withdraw from the study at any time.
- I understand that I may leave the focus group at any time if I do not wish to continue. I also understand that it will not be possible to withdraw my comments once the group has started, as it is a group discussion.
- I understand that the results of this study will be used in the way described in the information sheet.
- I understand that personal information about me that is collected over the course of this project will be stored securely and will only be used for purposes that I have agreed to. I understand that information about me will only be told to others with my permission, except as required by law.

I consent to:

Completing a questionnaire   YES   ☐   NO   ☐

Audio-recording   YES   ☐   NO   ☐

Would you like to receive feedback about the overall results of this study?

                                   YES   ☐   NO   ☐

If you answered **YES**, please indicate your preferred form of feedback and address:

☐ Postal: _____

            _____

☐ Email: _____

…………………………………………………………

Signature

…………………………………………………………

PRINT name

....

Date

Appendix 7: Pre-Focus Group Questionnaire

Questionnaire

Welcome.

My name is Emily Childs, a Trainee Educational Psychologist at the University of East Anglia. I am currently working on a piece of research for my thesis, which aims to explore factors which impact teacher wellbeing.

The research will involve taking part in a 60-minute virtual focus group on Microsoft teams with other teachers from the same school sector (Primary or Secondary). In the focus group we will discuss the challenges towards teacher wellbeing and the factors that support teacher wellbeing.

Should you wish to take part in the focus group, I would greatly appreciate your participation in this short questionnaire to support with the organisation of the groups. Participation is entirely voluntary, and your responses will remain confidential.

Demographics

Job Title:

School Sector (e.g., Primary, Secondary):

Number of years qualified:

Please provide your contact details to enable the researcher to arrange a time for the focus group:

Name:

School:

Email Address:

Phone Number:

<div align="center">

End of questionnaire.

Thank you for your participation.

</div>

Appendix 8: Focus Group Questions

Focus Group Verbal Introduction and Questions

<table>
<tr><td colspan="2">

Introduction:
Hi everyone,
Thank you so much for offering your time to take part in this research.
Before we start, I would just like to go over some ground rules for the group:

- Please remember that you should be using a private space and headphone if appropriate to help maintain the privacy of our discussion today. Please let me know if you need a moment to get headphones or change rooms. (for online only)
- All participants in this focus group are expected to maintain the confidentiality of any information shared during the session. This includes, but is not limited to:
  - Personal information e.g., names, identities or others person detail of participants, students or the school setting
  - Discussion content: Insights, opinions or others information shared in the group should be repeated or shared outside of the session.
  - Please try and use phrasing within examples in a way which protects identity (E.g., do not use job titles, year groups etc). – (in person)
- If descriptions unintentionally identify an individual (E.g., you are aware of the situation being discussed), please let the staff member know privately prior to end of the group and do not discuss further outside of the group context. Discuss with research if appropriate at the end of the FG.
- Throughout the process of this focus group, if there is a question you do not feel comfortable answering, you can remain silent as part of your right to withdraw.
- If any topics arise that are emotive, please be aware an email will be sent out following this study containing various charities and organisation you can contact in terms of wellbeing.

The focus group will last up to 60 minutes. The first part of the focus group we will discuss the challenges for teacher wellbeing and in the second half of the group we will discuss the supporting factors.
</td></tr>
<tr><td>**Questions:**</td><td>**General prompts**</td></tr>
<tr><td>As a group, could you please talk about three things from your last work day that have negatively or positively impacted your wellbeing?</td><td rowspan="4">Why....?
Can you tell me more about...?
Could you expand on.....?
What did you mean by....?
Is there anything else you would like to add?
Could you give me an example of....</td></tr>
<tr><td>**The department of education has asked you to develop a list, in priority order, on the things that impact teacher well-being. What would you put on this list?**</td></tr>
<tr><td>What would the ideal *primary/secondary* school look like when it comes to supporting teacher wellbeing?</td></tr>
<tr><td>**Imagine a ''bad day''. What might happen during this bad day? Think about the stressors and barriers you may face.**</td></tr>
</table>

End/Debrief:

Thank you so much for your time today.

Once all focus groups have been completed, the data will be analysis to help develop the understanding of factors which act as barriers and facilitating factors and understand the differences and similarities between Primary and Secondary School teachers.

If you feel that you have been adversely affected by any of the topics discussed today and would like further information please feel free to contract or alternatively, an email will sent out shortly with national services that can provide advice and help.

Appendix 10: Generating Initial Codes Example

adults in there. But I think to have, say, 20 students in your class would transform things, I think.

P2 22:40

Again, like I said, I still think it's curriculum based. I think that would really improve teacher well-being if teachers were trusted to deliver what they knew their classes needed and their children needed. And I think if it reduced it and it had more like these are the core skills to need to have with the core basic knowledge. But then you can broaden that in the way that you see fit your children and to meet their needs. I think to teachers to be trusted to use their professional judgement as well.

P3 23:26

More PPA time half a day is not enough to put together like if you went into any other profession and you said OK, so you're doing presentations from 8:30 until 3:00. non-stop and you kind of get a lunch break. But you don't really because some staff members are going to have issues that you're going to have to talk through with them and like, if you told someone they were going to have to deliver 8 presentations a day and they have Half a day to prep them.

They just wouldn't do it. And then we have to do all this like adaptive teaching or, you know. And then we've got a mark everything and assess it and then we've got through the data and then we've got to do the parent emails and then it's just ridiculous. So, I think if you had a day out a week to prep your week, it would give you a breather, which

Handwritten notes:

Gov. policies prevent.
Teachers to be trusted.

Teachers as experts of class
+ needs (individual needs)

↳ Teachers trusted w/ professional judgement on learning

↑ PPA
No breaks
↳ Teachers
↳ Unrealistic expectation
on amount of work to do.
↳ Work not contained
Breaks offer breather

you need because of the intensity of teaching. And you would have more time to prepare your week and there wouldn't be so much pressure at the beginning and end of the day and.

I think I think that would help a lot.

P1   24:28

Yeah.

P2   24:29

It's with also meeting age children's needs. Those I'm. I find it quite tricky that when we have children with challenging behaviours, you clearly see that they need some extra support. It's trying to get support for them as well, isn't it? And then like, you're doing the best that you can with your experiences as much as you can. But I'm not a trained professional for dealing with children who are self harming. And what I don't want to do things that are going to cause more damage for those children.

P3   24:30

Mm hmm.

P2   24:54

But they're trying to get any support for them. You go to one place, it gets rejected. Oh,

Handwritten notes (right margin):

Teaching as intense

More prep time, reduced pressure.

Deskilled

Anxiety of causing harm.
↑ mental health - not trained
Pro : helpless.

External systems at capacity - stuck.

Appendix 11: Code Cluster Example

Code/Similar Code	Data Extract (Not Exhaustive)
Children as responsibility	P14 ''Everything to do with them [children] is for me to do'' P12 ''When they [the children] are finding it hard to work and I can't, I'm not doing what I can'' P1 ''You feel a sense of guilt...like oh man...that's my fault'' P3 ''It's out of your control'' P2 ''My children'' P13 ''It's the impact it has on the children'' P3 ''I am not doing the best by them''
Working additional time	P12 ''I think for me I got here earlier than I usually do because I knew I had lots to do'' P13 ''I got in sort of half 7 to do it all'' P12 ''I use to run, now I have no time for that I just work''
Lack of respect from public	P12 'There still very much a culture of...they're working at 9, they're finishing at half three'' P12 ''We're a profession if you compare us to you know doctors and solicitors, you know that respect isn't there'' P2 ''Like with the media and things like that, you don't feel like anyone's really on your side'' P3 ''It would be so nice if people understood like, why we're in the profession and how hard the profession is'' P2 ''You just want people to understand how much you care''

Appendix 12: Theme Generation Example

Fragmentation

Work not contained

Cog burden of juggling multiple demands

Competing practices

Pulled away from classroom has knock-on effect

Flexibility in teaching approach

Child : Teacher ratio

Small class sizes Supportive

Multiple things all need to happen to keep up

Urgency of safeguarding

Distractions from one responsibility

Expectations that don't align w/ teaching

Repetitive work/system

Parent expect immediate + exhaustive response

Direct confrontation from parents

Role misalignment + emotional impact

Duty of care

Sense of guilt due to responsibility for class

Moral obligation for CYP

Unable to be effective/do job they want due to the —

Lived experiences empathy

Feeling of letting student down

Sense of responsibility for CYP achievement

Feelings of achievement in supporting CYP +ve

Pledge hold responsible to the future

CYP not engaging creates self doubt/blame

Thankfulness + appreciation from CYP

Need more time to help CYP

Pupils actively engaged

Sense of relationship

Praise from student

Exhaustion time in task w/ task class

Not able to control in - students are of chaos

Lack of capacity to breeder Student S—

Set targets

SLT southern

SLT not meeting BAU

SLT autonomy to me pressured

Respect diff needs of —

Supportive teaching misophy—

Good communication with colleagues

Personal + professional connection

Support staff helpful for behav.

Responsive leadership

Firefighting

Minor hassle build up

Lack of routine Unpredictable day

Bureaucratic overload

Time consuming processes

Errors in meaningless work = waste of time

Too much to cope from circumstances

Questioning decision to reach page problem

Inbox/email arrest

PPA

efficiency through systems

Tech issues disrupt work flow

Tedious process + time consuming

Time wasted chasing up

Unclear comms time wasted

Unclear comms of responsibility on task

Duplication of work

Unrealistic expectation on WL

face pace change

Constant problem solving

Guilt over absence

Self-care + autonomy in time management

Gratitude for assistant

Work environment + productivity

Bullying away + inability to reduce hassles

Peer Support

Experienced peers

Motivated peers

Lack of tech support organisation

Erosion of flexibility capac due to time pressure

Task over environment

Task environment + pressure

Increase workload stressful

Appendix 13: Reflexive Diary Entry Example

Today I noticed when working through transcripts, I was connecting more easily with the primary school teachers. I found the way they described situations and the children resonated more strongly with my own values and professional identity. This made their accounts feel more familiar to me and found myself engaging more readily with their narratives. This ease of connection may shape my analysis, leading to me giving more depth and attention to primary school data over secondary data.

To manage this, I will continue to keep short diary entries of when I notice myself relating more to one group than the other. I will ask myself questions such as ''why does this feel easier? What assumptions might I be bringing?''. I will also note times secondary data feels harder to interpret and how I am making sense of that.

Appendix 14: Ethical Approval (With Amendments)

University of East Anglia

Study title: Facilitating factors and barriers to positive teacher wellbeing: A comparison between Primary and Secondary School Teachers.

Application ID: ETH2425-1287 (significant amendments)

Dear Emily,

Your application was considered on 15th January 2025 by the EDU S-REC (School of Education and Lifelong Learning Research Ethics Subcommittee).

The decision is: **approved**.

You are therefore able to start your project subject to any other necessary approvals being given.

This approval will expire on **1st August 2025**.

Please note that your project is granted ethics approval only for the length of time identified above. Any extension to a project must obtain ethics approval by the EDU S-REC (School of Education and Lifelong Learning Research Ethics Subcommittee) before continuing.

It is a requirement of this ethics approval that you should report any adverse events which occur during your project to the EDU S-REC (School of Education and Lifelong Learning Research Ethics Subcommittee) as soon as possible. An adverse event is one which was not anticipated in the research design, and which could potentially cause risk or harm to the participants or the researcher, or which reveals potential risks in the treatment under evaluation. For research involving animals, it may be the unintended death of an animal after trapping or carrying out a procedure.

Any amendments to your submitted project in terms of design, sample, data collection, focus etc. should be notified to the EDU S-REC (School of Education and Lifelong Learning Research Ethics Subcommittee) in advance to ensure ethical compliance. If the amendments are substantial a new application may be required.

Approval by the EDU S-REC (School of Education and Lifelong Learning Research Ethics Subcommittee) should not be taken as evidence that your study is compliant with the UK General Data Protection Regulation (UK GDPR) and the Data Protection Act 2018. If you need guidance on how to make your study UK GDPR compliant, please contact the UEA Data Protection Officer (dataprotection@uea.ac.uk).

I would like to wish you every success with your project.

On behalf of the EDU S-REC (School of Education and Lifelong Learning Research Ethics Subcommittee)

Yours sincerely,

Dawn Corby

Ethics ETH2425-1287 (Significant amendments): Miss Emily Childs

Ethics ETH2425-1287 (Significant amendments): Miss Emily Childs

Date Created	10 Jan 2025
Date Submitted	10 Jan 2025
Date forwarded to committee	15 Jan 2025
Researcher	Miss Emily Childs
Category	PGR
Supervisor	Dr Christopher Clarke
Faculty	Faculty of Social Sciences
Current status	Approved

Ethics application

Amendment type

Type of amendment

Change to research protocol

Is this amendment related to Covid-19? No

Change research protocol

Change your original application submitted in Ethics Monitor

Select the relevant tab(s) from your original ethics application to edit:

Applicant and research team

Project details

Research categories

Human participants - selection and recruitment

Human participants - consent method

Human participants - information and consent

Human participants - method

Health and safety - participants

Health and safety - researcher(s)

Risk assessment

Data management

If other, fully describe the changes below.

Attach any documentation which relates to the changes described.

Applicant and research team

Principal Applicant

Name of Principal Applicant

Miss Emily Childs

UEA account

xsd22cvu@uea.ac.uk

School/Department

School of Education and Lifelong Learning

Category

PGR

Primary Supervisor

Name of Primary

Supervisor Dr Christopher Clarke

Primary Supervisor's school/department

School of Education and Lifelong Learning

Project details

Project title

Facilitating factors and barriers to positive teacher wellbeing: A comparison between Primary and Secondary School Teachers.

Project start date

15 Sept 2024

Project end date

01 Aug 2025

Describe the scope and aims of the project in language understandable by a non-technical audience. Include any other relevant background which will allow the reviewers to contextualise the research.

Teacher wellbeing is of rising concern within the UK, where 72% of teachers have reported feelings stressed by the role (Education Support Partnership, 2022). Research that explore improving teacher wellbeing remains sparse (Liu et al., 2018).

Additionally, recent research has begun to explore similarities and difference in the causes of teacher stress based on school sector (e.g., Primary and secondary). For instance, Primary school teachers have a constant need to supervise young children (Nwoko et al., 2023). To the best of the researchers knowledge there has been limited research exploring the similarities and differences in exploring facilitating factors and barriers to positive teacher wellbeing.

Evidence relating to the wellbeing of teachers in different phases of education remains limited. This research project aims to further explore and characterise the differences and similarities between wellbeing in primary and secondary schools and how wellbeing may be best supported in systemic context.

The proposed research will seek to answer the following questions:

1. What factors act as facilitators and barriers to class teacher wellbeing in primary schools?

2. What factors act as facilitators and barriers to class teacher wellbeing in secondary schools?

3. What are the differences and similarities in factors that act as facilitators and barriers between class teacher wellbeing in primary and secondary schools?

Provide a brief explanation of the research design (e.g. interview, experimental, observational, survey), questions, methodology, and data gathered/analysis. If relevant, include what the participants will be expected to do/experience.

The research will conduct qualitative research online and in-person, allowing responses from a wider number of participants, across multiple contexts. The research will seek to recruit teachers across England.

Participants will:

- Be asked to complete a 5-minute questionnaire (MS forms - for online FG, or by email/in person - for in person FG) to ensure participants meet the inclusion criteria and help allocate participants to focus groups. Participants will be selected through a first come, first served basis. Once the desired number of participants for the focus group are collected (approximately 24-36 participants) recruitment will close.

Online focus groups will take place using MS teams, in-person focus groups will take place in the school setting and last up to 1 hour. There will be two defining characteristics which the focus groups will be separated into; primary class teachers, and secondary class teachers. Each group, will have 3 FG with approximately 4-6 participants.

The study will ask participants a set of questions to explore factors impacting their wellbeing. For questions, including potential prompts please refer to Human Participant – Method section, under supporting materials.

FG will be recorded and use the MS teams transcription function to transcribe; this will be quality assured by the research. Data will be anonymised to ensure that the participant and their place of work cannot be identified from comments made.

Data will be stored securely in an encrypted and password protected UEA one drive folder on the researcher's laptop. Transcripts will not be made available to anyone outside of the project.

Thematic analysis will be used to analyse the data from the focus group transcripts.

Detail how any adverse events arising in the course of the project will be reported in a timely manner.

If an adverse event arises, I will take the following steps within the first 24 hours.

- Consult with primary research supervisor

- Report to the EDU ethics committee using Ethics Monitor.

- If necessary, the research will be suspended or cancelled.

In case of a severe adverse event, the Head of School of EDU will be contacted immediately.

Will you also be applying for Health Research Authority approval (HRA)?
No

Indicate if you are applying for approval for an experiment to be conducted in the School of Economics' Laboratory for Economic and Decision Research (LEDR).
No

Is the project?: none
of the options listed

Does the project have external funding administered through the University's Research and Innovation Services (RIN)? No

Will the research take place outside of the UK?
No

Will any part of the project be carried out under the auspices of an external organisation, or involve collaboration between institutions?
No

Do you require or have you already gained approval from an ethics review body external to
UEA?
No

Does this new project relate to a project which already has ethics approval from UEA?
No

Research categories

Will the project include primary data collection involving human participants?
Yes

Will the project use secondary data involving human participants?
No

Will the project involve the use of live animals?
No

Will the project have the potential to affect the environment?
No

Will the project have the potential to affect culturally valuable, significant or sensitive objects or practices?
No

Will the project involve security sensitive research?
No

Will the project involve a generative Artificial Intelligence (AI) tool?

No

Human participants - selection and recruitment

How many Participant Groups are there who will receive tailored participant information?: Two

Name of Participant Group 1.
Primary School Teachers

Name of Participant Group 2, if applicable.
Secondary School Teachers

How will the participants be selected/recruited?
Purposive sampling will be used. Primary and secondary class teachers will be recruited through two methods.

First, advertisements will be posted on online platforms that teachers may use such as Facebook and LinkedIn. In cases where these online platforms require permission to post in relevant groups, the group admin will be contacted as the gatekeeper.

Second, recruitment emails will be sent to Educational Psychology Service across the country via the contact emails provided on Local Authority websites. The respondents of these emails will be asked if they consent to act as the initial gatekeeper and pass the information for this study onto

Headteachers of schools they work with. Headteachers will be asked to email the researcher if they are interested in the research. This will then make the headteacher a gatekeeper (if they consent to this). From this:

- Online FG; headteacher will pass relevant information onto staff.
- In-person FG; research will arrange to speak to staff e.g., online during staff briefing

This research will seek to gain approximately 24-36 participants. Selection criteria will work on a first come, first serve basis until there is an even number of participants in each group.

If appropriate, upload a copy of the proposed advertisement, including proposed recruitment emails, flyers, posters or invitation letter.
How and when will participants receive this recruitment material?

Following the approval of this project by the ethics committee initial posts on social media (e.g., linked in, facebook) and contact to relevant gatekeepers will be made. This is anticipated as being from September 2024.

In terms of UEA participants only, will you be advertising the opportunity to take part in this project to?:

None of the above (i.e. UEA's Student Insight Review Group (SIRG) does not need to be informed) **What are the characteristics of the participants?**

This research hopes to gain a range of teachers' experiences to help build a collective understanding. Therefore, participants age, gender and ethnicity will not be contributing factors for inclusion/exclusion criteria.

Participants will meet the inclusion criteria if:

- They are a mainstream secondary or primary school teacher

- They have passed their probation period

Exclusion criteria will include:

- Teachers who are classed as Newly Qualified Teachers (Teachers who are yet to experience an induction period of 2 years of teaching).

- Trainee Teachers.

Will the project require the cooperation of a gatekeeper for initial access to the individuals/groups to be recruited? Yes

Who will be your gatekeeper for accessing participants?

Head of educational psychology service will be asked to pass information about the study to schools and social media group admins will be key gatekeepers for accessing participants.

How and when will a gatekeeper permission be obtained?

Gatekeepers will be recruited through methods outlined above in participant recruitment. This will happen following ethical approval.

Permission from gatekeepers will be recorded electronically on a spreadsheet outline if they consent or not. Any emails or direct messages on online platforms will be saved and stored securely as well. This will be kept in a password-protected folder on the UEA one drive. Data kept will comply with GDPR guidelines.

Provide any relevant gatekeeper documentation (letters of invite, emails etc). How will you record a gatekeeper's permission?

Copies of any form of contact from any gatekeepers permissions will be stored securely on a password protect laptop within a password protected file on UEA OneDrive.

Is there any sense in which participants might be 'obliged' to participate?
Yes

If yes, provide details.
Participants are being asked by the headteacher of their school whether they would like to take part. Given the power dynamic of the headteacher role, participants may feel pressure to take part. The researcher will emphasise at the start and end of her focus group that there is no obligation to participate in the research as well as making this clear in the PIS. For in person FG the research will arrange to speak to staff (E.g., staff briefing) to gain their consent so that there is limited risk of pressure from headteacher.

As the researcher is using her own social media accounts to advertise there is a risk participants who know the research may feel obliged to participate. Should the researcher discover that there has been any previous contact/relationship with a potential participant, the relationship between research and participant will be declared to the participant and the appropriateness of including them in the study will be considered. They will not be included if the researcher believes that the participant feels obliged to participate.

What will you do to ensure participation is voluntary?
There will be an emphasise that this is a voluntary process. The research will share the PIS to ensure informed consent in gained.

The details in the participant information sheet will ensure they are aware of what they are consenting to take part in, as well as understanding their rights to withdraw from the research.

They will be made aware if a question makes them feel uncomfortable they do not have to answer.

Will the project involve vulnerable groups?
No

Will payment or any other incentive be made to any participant?
No

Include any other ethical considerations regarding participation.
The advertisement will include a QR code that directs potential participants to the information sheet and consent form (online FG) or they will be presented with email/physical

copies of PIS and consent (in person FG), facilitating the acquisition of written consent. Any questions that arise before, during, or after the research will be answered satisfactorily to ensure informed consent is obtained.

Focus groups present additional ethical difficulties regarding withdrawal. Participants will be made aware that they are free to stop participating at any stage and not answer questions they do not feel comfortable with, without consequences. It is not possible to withdraw individual comments from records once the group starts due to the research being a group discussion. This will be clearly stated in the PIS.

Participants will be fully informed of the ethical implications associated with focus groups, particularly regarding anonymity and privacy, as other members of the focus group will be aware of their participation. This level of transparency will be detailed in the participant information sheet.

Online FG participants will also be informed about the possibility of joining the focus group anonymously, recognizing that they may not know each other and may feel uncomfortable sharing personal information on the topic of wellbeing in a group setting. The participant information sheet will clearly state that participants can choose to share only what they are comfortable with or join anonymously if online.

Clear rules regarding confidentially and not sharing or discussing topics outside of the group will be made clear to support staff who participant in in-person FG with peers in feeling more comfortable

Human participants - consent options

By which method(s) will consent to participate in the research be obtained?:
Participant Information Sheet and Consent Form
Online Participant Information and Consent

Human participants - information and consent

Participant Information and Consent

You can generate a Participant Information Text and Consent Form for this application by completing information in the Participant Information Text and Consent Form Generator tab. Alternatively you can upload your Participant

Information Text and Participant Consent Form which you have already prepared. Confirm below:

Upload prepared Participant Information Text and Consent Form.

Upload the Participant Information Text and Consent Form.

Enter participant group number and name.

Focus group (online)

Enter participant group number and name.

Focus Group (in person)

When will participants receive the participant information and consent request?

Once ethical approval has been granted, relevant gatekeepers will be contacted and advertisements shared. From this point participants will have access to the participant information and consent through the QR code/link on the advertisement - please scan code on poster or visit:

https://forms.office.com/Pages/ResponsePage.aspx?id=lYdfxj26UUOKBwhl5djwkD0qojl WmSVLin_f RnzMQEhUOVpHQTgzUVZXUzhOUTlUMUZQMUNQWE1VSy4u

If participants have difficulties accessing this, they will be emailed a word document version.

How will you record a participant's decision to take part in the research?

Digital consent form will act as a form of written consent for any consent completed via MS forms (see link above) or email.

Any written consent forms will be scanned onto the research laptop and stored in a secure file.

Following this, consent forms will be shredded.

To ensure personal data (e.g., name and contact email) is stored securely, consent forms will be saved on a password protected computer in a secure file on UEA password protect one drive account.

Human participants - method

Which data collection methods will be used in the research?:

Focus group

Non-anonymous questionnaire

If your research involves any of the methods (including Other) listed above, upload supporting materials.

How have your characteristics, or those of the participants influenced the design of the study or how the research is experienced by participants?

All participants will have been working within an educational setting, who would have adapted to online practices following the covid-19 pandemic. This should allow for online data collection methods to be accessible.

I do not anticipate my position as a researcher will impact or compromise interactions with participants as I hold an additional position as a trainee educational psychologist, thus I have regular experience interacting with teachers in a mainstream setting. If any concerns such as holding a dual role were to arise I would consult with my supervisor for support.

Will the project involve transcripts? Yes

Select ONE option below:
Transcription software

If yes provide details.
Mircosoft Teams transcription software will be used to provide an initial transcription for the focus groups. These transcriptions will then be reviewed and edited by hand to assure that data has been transcribe correctly.

Will you be capturing photographs or video footage (digital assets) of individuals taken for University business? No

Is this research using visual/vocal methods where respondents may be identified? Yes

If yes, confirm what safeguards are in place for participants who are vulnerable or underage. Participants are adult professions and unlikely to be considered vulnerable. Within the participant information sheet, participants will be made aware that focus groups will take place online where audio and video recording will take place. Or in-person where only audio recording will take place.

Will it be necessary for participants to take part in the study without their knowledge and consent at the time? No

Will deception or incomplete disclosure be used? No

Will the participants be debriefed after data collection?
Yes

If yes, how will they be debriefed and what information will be provided?
At the end of the focus group participants will be debriefed. This will be both verbally and a written email sent out following the study. The written debrief will contain signposting for mental health and well-being charities to reduce the risk of harm if a sensitive topic arises.

If yes, upload a copy of the debrief information.
Will substances be administered to the participants?
No

Will involvement in the project result in, or the risk of, discomfort, physical harm, psychological harm or intrusive procedures? Yes

If yes, provide details.
Participants will discuss factors which night negative contribute towards their wellbeing. This places participants at risk of discomfort.

This will be managed through:

- Inform consent; a detailed information sheet will provide comprehensive details about the study, including potential risks. It will emphasise participation is entirely voluntary and they can withdraw from research or not answer questions they do not feel comfortable to.

Support structures will be in place including a debrief which provides signposting to relevant mental health and wellbeing resources/services.

The environment for the focus group will be one which is safe for participants (see health and safety - participants for more details).

Will the project involve prolonged or repetitive testing?
No

Will the project involve potentially sensitive topics?
Yes

If yes, provide details.
There is a risk that participants may find discussing work in relation to their wellbeing emotive. To minimise the risk of harm during these discussion clear ground rules will be set prior to the start of the study. This will remind participants that they have the right to withdraw at any

point during the focus group. There will also be signposting to relevant support charities through the written debrief.

Will the project involve elite interviews?
No

Will the project involve any incitement to, encouragement of, or participation, in an illegal act (by participant or researcher)?
No

Will the research involve an investigation of people engaged in or supporting activities that compromise computer security or other activities that may normally be considered harmful or unlawful? No

Does the research involve members of the public in participatory research where they are actively involved in undertaking research tasks?
No

Does the research offer advice or guidance to people?
No

Is the research intended to benefit the participants, third parties or the local community? Yes

Provide an explanation.
It is hoped that the research will help develop a more in-depth understanding of teacher wellbeing and the barriers and facilitating factors. Through comparing Primary and Secondary school teachers wellbeing, it will provide a greater insight into the differences and similarities in their experiences. It is hoped that this will benefit relevant professionals in developing effective wellbeing policies for teachers and provide a better understanding of the needs of different settings so that wellbeing can be addressed in a more targeted way.

What procedures are in place for monitoring the research with respect to ethical compliance?
Key guidelines for ethics will be followed and monitored throughout the research by the researcher (BERA, BPS code of ethics and conduct, HCPC standards of conduct and UEA research ethics policy).

Project will be overseen by the researchers research supervisor and university tutor.

Regular research supervision will take place which will allow for the ethics of the research to be regularly discussed and monitored.

If any questions around the research arise, the research will seek supervision and consult with relevant professionals to ensure ethical standards and compliance are met throughout.

If a breach was to occur, the researcher will contact the research supervisor within 24 hours to seek advice and take appropriate action going forward.

Does the study involve the use of a clinical or non-clinical scale, questionnaire or inventory which has specific copyright permissions, reproduction or distribution restrictions or training requirements? No

Include any other ethical considerations regarding data collection methods.

Focus groups create a unique ethical challenge in this area, whereby, privacy cannot be ensured as members of the group are aware of others participation (Sim & Waterfield, 2019). This can make it difficult to guarantee anonymity to participants, this research will ensure participants are made aware of this so that informed consent that be made (BERA 9; 41, 2018). To ensure anonymity for those outside of the focus group, groups will be asked to not disclose names of their schools, local authorities, or any individuals' names (i.e., colleagues, students).

Focus groups can also be viewed as less predictable than research methods such as interviews (Sim & Waterfield, 2019). This can be a key challenge especially in the discussion of a sensitive topic such as wellbeing. Participants may be faced with uncomfortable topics, where they may feel obliged to express difficult feelings within the group. It will be ensured that participants are fully aware of their right to withdraw until the point of data anonymisation and they will also be informed they do not have to answer questions which they feel uncomfortable with (BERA 31, 2018). Furthermore, a clear debrief will be provided including signposting to relevant support websites for wellbeing (BERA 34, 2018).

To protect participant anonymity (in online FG), participants will be informed that they can choose to not display their name or use a pseudonym. Participants will also be informed they do not need to have their camera on if they do not wish.

Clear ground rules around confidentially of discussion will be presented prior to focus group.

Health and safety - participants

Is there a possibility that the health and safety of any of the participants in this project including a support person (e.g. a care giver, school teaching assistant) may be in question? Yes

If yes, describe the nature of any health and safety concerns to the participants and the steps you will take to minimise these.

Online: Participants will be asked to ensure they are in a safe and private space. This will include the use of a private room or headphones. This will be to ensure that if any sensitive information is shared, this will remain private to the group.

Participants will be asked to make use of having a background rather than showing their personal home/work environment to others whom they may not know. This will reduce the risk of personal information being shared due to background space.

In person: Focus groups will be arrange to take place a quiet room in the school building. A sign will be placed on the door to let others know they cannot enter during the discussion.

General:

The research will talk about the sensitive topic of well-being. This places the risk of bringing up difficult feelings for the participants. The context of the focus group seeks to help normalise these experiences and create a contained space for discussing shared experiences. There may be a risk of participants feeling exposed by sharing some experiences. To support with this there will be tight expectations around confidentially and right to withdraw. During the debrief participants will also be sign posted to relevant wellbeing support websites and contact points.

What procedures have been established for the care and protection of participants? The above will be communicated the participants in advance via email, during the start of the focus as part of the contracting ground rules.

Participants will be sent a written debrief which will include sign posting to relevant wellbeing and mental health charities which they can contact if the research brings up any difficult feelings.

Describe your safeguarding protocol. What procedures are in place for the appropriate referral of a participant who discloses an emotional, psychological, health, education or other issue during the course of the research or is identified by the researcher to have such a need?

Participants will be sent a written debrief which will include sign posting to relevant wellbeing and mental health charities which they can contact if the research brings up any difficult feelings.

What is the possible harm to the wider community from their participation or from the project as a whole? N/A

What precautions will you take to minimise any possible harm to the wider community? N/A

Health and safety - researcher(s)

Is there a possibility that the health and safety of any of the researcher(s) and that of any other people (as distinct from any participants) impacted by this project including research assistants/translators may be in question? Yes

If yes, how have you addressed the health and safety concerns? Describe any safeguards included and relevant protocols.

To ensure my safety and privacy as a researcher in an online space I will ensure I use a background on my display screen so prevent the risk of personal information being shared through visual of my home space. The researcher will ensure focus groups will take place in a safe and secure location and headphones will be used to ensure conversations are kept private.

Research will seek supervision if ant personal health and safety concerns arise.

The UEA lone working and online safe working policy will be followed.

In person: The research will ensure that school policies around visitors are followed (e.g., sign in, visitor badge). The research will ensure they are aware of fire exits. The research is DBS checked and will bring relevant documents on the visit.

Risk assessment

Are there hazards associated with undertaking this project where a formal risk assessment will be required?

No

Data management

Will the project involve any personal data (including pseudonymised data) not in the public domain?

Yes

If yes, will any of the personal data be?:

Anonymised and pseudonymised

If using anonymised and/or pseudonymised data, describe the measures that will be implemented to prevent de-anonymisation.

Name of participants, their organisations and any other personal data that arises will be anonymised and pseudonymised. The research will redact any specific details that they feel could reveal identities.

Given nature of focus groups careful planning will take place to ensure participants privacy this will include:

- anonymity options e.g., using pseudonyms during focus group or having camera turned off.

- setting clear understanding within the group for confidentiality to ensure participants agree not to disclose information shared in the group.

If not using anonymised or pseudonymised data, how will you maintain participant confidentiality and comply with data protection requirements?

Will any personal data be processed by another organisation(s)?
No

Will the project involve access to records of sensitive/confidential information?
No

Will the project involve access to confidential business data?
No

Will the project involve secure data that requires permission from the appropriate authorities before use? No

Will you be using publicly available data from the internet for your study?
No

Will the research data in this study be deposited in a repository to allow it to be made available for scholarly and educational purposes? No

Provide details.

The UEA School of Education do not have the facilities for storing data in a repository.

Who will have access to the data during and after the project?

Data will be accessible by the researcher (myself) and my research supervisor.

In line with GDPR guidance all data will be be anonymised during transcription. Every effort will be made to protect participants' identity.

Where/how do you intend to store the data during and after the project?

Data will be stored on a password protected laptop, where data will be saved on a password secure UEA OneDrive account. On this laptop there will be a dedicated folder for research data where all files will be encrypted.

The laptop will either be in the research possession or stored in a secure location.

How will you ensure the secure storage of the data during and after the project?

As above.

How long will research data be stored after the study has ended?

The University's Research Data Management Policy requires that the Research Data underpinning publications remain accessible for a minimum of 10 years from its publication

How long will research data be accessible after the study has ended?

The University's Research Data Management Policy requires that the Research Data underpinning publications remain accessible for a minimum of 10 years from its publication

How are you intending to destroy the project data when it is no longer required?

Once data has been transcribed, all identifiable data (e.g., email address, participants names) will be deleted from the laptop. This will not include participants email who have requests to be contacted about the research results.

All data will be deleted after 10 years from submitting this research for publication. This will involve deleting data from laptop including the laptops recycling bin.