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‘Doing well’ and ‘being well’—secondary school teachers’ perspectives

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Abstract

The mental health and wellbeing of young people is increasingly a concern in schools. This study explores how English secondary school teachers perceive and engage with the concept of wellbeing. By asking teachers to reflect on their practice, we can draw out their relational experience and knowledge about wellbeing in the classroom. Twenty teachers were interviewed about their practice in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic and during the academic year 2020–21. Reflexive thematic analysis reveals the challenges experienced by teachers. Specifically, we find a perceived role conflict for teachers between giving care and purveying knowledge. We draw on recent policy research and the work of Nel Noddings to account for this conflict in terms of conceptualisations of teaching practice and purpose. We illustrate how an emphasis within schools on ‘doing well’ academically undermines and marginalises a more holistic sense of ‘being well’, which contributes to a set of strains on teachers personally, professionally and relationally in terms of their interactions with students and colleagues. We propose that ‘doing well’ arises out of ‘being well’, rather than the converse, and should hence be an educational policy priority. Finally, we offer implications for how wellbeing may be woven into school culture.

KEYWORDS

secondary schools, teachers (mental health), wellbeing

Key insights

What is the main issue that the paper addresses?

This study explores how demands on secondary teachers in England to address mental health/wellbeing in their school practice are being experienced by teachers, in the context of the academic year 2020–21, mid-pandemic. We explore how teachers understood wellbeing and how this relates to the role of a teacher.

What are the main insights that the paper provides?

Teachers understood wellbeing as the web of relationships between teachers and students, and also between teachers. Teachers experienced role conflict between giving care to promote 'being well' and purveying knowledge to promote 'doing well'. The pressure to perform 'doing well' in schools was contradictory to teachers' ideas of promotion of wellbeing/flourishing.

INTRODUCTION

Evidence in this journal (Jerrim, 2022), and elsewhere (Solmi et al., 2022), indicates that adolescence is a critical time for the onset of adverse mental health experiences and schools now occupy the position of a frontline service. Current increased attention on issues of wellbeing at ground and policy level follow 20 years of growing concerns around youth and adult mental wellbeing in the United Kingdom and other Western countries (e.g., Department of Health & Department for Education, 2017). However, within the educational research literature there is uncertainty regarding the degree to which wellbeing should inform teachers' day-to-day practice (Brown & Dixon, 2020; Norwich et al., 2022; Willis et al., 2019). Furthermore, wellbeing in teaching practice may refer to medicalised/deficit concerns around mental health (Billington et al., 2022), or a strengths-based educational goal of 'flourishing' whereby students/teachers target learning for growth to one's full potential (Norwich et al., 2022). The latter is associated in policy with both character/virtues education guidance (Department for Education, 2019a) and 'personal development' (Ofsted, 2019) as approaches to curriculum content.

Through their praxis, teachers have a rich set of contextual understandings about how to meet students' needs and how these needs are changing; indeed, they have recently been described as 'the forgotten health workforce' (Lowry et al., 2022). Lowry et al. (2022) found students' relationships with teachers are the most impactful aspect of their school connectedness; the quality of such relationships is found to predict long-term physical health, and to impact mental health as much as academic outcomes. In order to understand how wellbeing may be facilitated and/or impeded by teaching practice, it is valuable to inquire into the conceptual and emotional conflicts that teachers encounter. Culshaw and Kurian (2021) examine the context of teachers' struggle with role conflict, whilst Ball et al. (2012) look at this issue through the lens of policy implementation in secondary schools. Both highlight the tendency for teachers to feel isolated and how they must conceal any difficulties or internal conflict relating to classroom management, in order to present an image of success and strength. The performance pressures on teachers are shown to favour a culture of 'unreflexive ease' (Ball et al., 2012), where teachers adhere to expectations of switching unproblematically between contradictory roles (e.g., Kelly et al., 2013), thus creating a difficult context for the cultivation

of compassionate awareness towards themselves and others. Whilst school policy levers may have moved on since Ball et al.'s (2012) research, the 'performance techne' of Ofsted inspections and competitive accountability mechanisms described in this research remain embedded in teachers' work, in spite of questions about their appropriateness in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic (Rolph, 2022).

LOCATING WELLBEING IN TEACHING PRACTICE

Brown and Donnelly (2022) describe three framings of wellbeing in the policy context of schooling and teaching:

1. A competency/skills-based approach focusing on objectifiable qualities such as courage/confidence or self-regulation, focused on the individual.
2. A morals/ethics-based approach, focused on identifying and providing the tools to address inequalities in society; morals here imply universal morality and ethics emphasise a relative, situated, whole-person perspective.
3. A capital-based approach, which sees wellbeing features as reflecting larger social structures.

The first emphasises an individualising approach, whereas the latter two are conceived as collectivising perspectives. Nonetheless, a distinction is made between morals and character education as dealing with individualising skills and competencies, and an ethics-based approach addressing the relational and situated nature of wellbeing. When the focus is on a competency/skills-based approach, students are expected to acquire a set of a-priori knowledge and skills, leaving limited scope for exploring the situated lives of students or questioning such knowledge through a dialogue rooted in relationship. Instrumental approaches like these are often taught as a discrete course within the curriculum and allocated limited time/resources, ultimately affecting their perceived status. Programmes falling under this bracket (e.g., mindfulness-based interventions) tend to be treated as secondary to academic subjects leading to formal qualifications (Sellman & Buttarazzi, 2020). The current dominant approach to wellbeing in the English school policy context is in the form of Health Education and Relationships and Sex Education, within statutory PSHE (Department for Education, 2019b). This approach lists a standardised set of knowledge to be acquired by learners (usually within a lesson lasting one hour per week), which contains limited acknowledgement of varying cultural and social contexts of school communities. Increasingly, however, this 'individualised' approach to the 'teaching' of wellbeing is being challenged, with wellbeing being understood at the relational and cultural level, between community members, as a 'web of care' (Noddings, 2013, p. xiii). Like ours, such research emphasises the relational nature of teachers' and students' experiences of wellbeing at school (Billington et al., 2022; Culshaw & Kurian, 2021; Graham et al., 2016).

WHAT IS 'TEACHING' FOR? CARE AND COMPETENCE

Noddings (2010, 2012, 2013) outlines how pedagogies of care in teaching can cultivate wellbeing, as the healthy growth of whole persons (Hordern, 2021). In addition to Noddings, Culshaw and Kurian (2021) emphasise the present orientation and critical professional judgement required of teachers in order to cater for the real needs of students as opposed to their 'presumed needs', termed 'virtue caring'. In Noddings' (2012) account of care in teaching practice there are clear stages which can be honed and practised by the teacher:

(1) a need is expressed by the cared for; (2) it is observed by the care giver/teacher; (3) the need is acknowledged; (4) a response is selected by the care giver/teacher, including (based on professional judgement) the possibility of not being able to fulfil this need immediately, but with an acknowledgement and an explanation to the cared for; and (5) the cared for acknowledges the receipt of care or explanation.

Noddings' account of giving care is not only relevant to an account of practice for cultivating student wellbeing. Teachers' experience of their own wellbeing/care is also integral to Noddings' care model, since we know that (1) teachers' professional wellbeing is improved by—and even comprised of—quality relationships and (2) the roles in the care model are not fixed; teachers may be care receivers in addition to being care givers in the 'web of care' (Noddings, 2003). For example, multiple studies have shown that positive teacher–student relationships buffer teacher wellbeing and mediate perceptions of classroom misbehaviour as well as teacher stress/exhaustion (Aldrup et al., 2017, 2018; Hascher & Waber, 2021; Spilt, Koomen & Thijs, 2011), in addition to informing teachers' understandings of wellbeing in practice (Billington et al., 2022). Further, collegiate relationships in which teachers engage in care between peers are shown to underpin components of school cultures where wellbeing is cultivated (Hascher & Waber, 2021).

An historic emphasis on qualifications as the purpose of schooling, and attentional neglect of how school socialises and builds self-understanding (Biesta, 2009; Brito et al., 2022; Noddings, 2006), seems to have underpinned the marginalising of wellbeing and care within contemporary approaches to the purpose of teaching and education. For example, pastoral care is separated from teaching and learning as an area of responsibility in schools. Still, research on teachers' perspectives on wellbeing (Graham et al., 2016; Willis, Hyde & Black, 2019) highlights how teachers simultaneously value, and struggle to prioritise, the personal and relational in their practice. Such issues inform the normative positioning of a teacher, who deliberates on practice decisions based on the best outcome for their students (Hordern, 2021) according to their vision of educational purpose. A question we must therefore ask is: how does wellbeing fit into teachers' views of their practice?

WHAT DO TEACHERS REPORT ON THESE ISSUES?

In order to explore these issues and tensions in relation to practice for wellbeing in secondary teaching, we present part one of a three-part study on English secondary teachers' perceptions of wellbeing in education from the academic year 2020–21. Specifically, we examine wellbeing through the lens of teacher practice, which means looking at perceptions of both student and teacher wellbeing and how the two interact. As noted, the fieldwork coincided with events as they transpired during the Covid-19 pandemic. In these interviews, we explored with teachers in regional, England-based state-funded secondary schools how they understood wellbeing at a personal and professional level, how they viewed wellbeing as part of their practice, and what tensions and barriers they saw as limiting the potential for the promotion of wellbeing in secondary education. Many of the interviews recorded took place during remote learning and lockdowns, thus filtering teachers' perspectives in the interviews with a certain reflexive distance. An analysis of these conversations using reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) is presented, exploring the dynamics of different understandings of educational purpose, policy positions and praxis with regard to how wellbeing in schools is shaped and constrained, through the experiences of teachers. Through this analysis, we gain insights into the frustrations caused by a belief that the educational purpose of 'doing well' in school should be privileged over 'being well'. This, in spite of the conflicting belief that focusing on 'being well' first is more likely to lead to 'doing well' than the other way around. We thus explore the contradictions and uncertainties inherent in

teachers' understandings of 'doing well' and 'being well' and suggest what these may mean going forward.

Methodology

Interview study design

During the terms of autumn 2020 and early spring 2021, individual interviews were conducted with a snowball sample of English secondary teachers in order to ascertain conceptualisations of wellbeing education in their theory and practice. We intended to inquire how policy shifts were being met and experienced on the ground from the perspectives of practising secondary teachers. The interview schedule was developed following an extensive review of the literature on wellbeing education in the English secondary school context. Note that the version of the literature review used in this paper is abbreviated for the purposes of paper length and clarity. The extensive review was used to create an interview schedule informed by Tomlinson's (1989) hierarchical focusing interview method, in which participants were encouraged to take the lead using a topic checklist rather than a prescribed set of questions followed in order.

Rogers' (1945) classic paper on non-directive methods in interviews was consulted and an opening statement developed for interviews, which stated key principles for the dialogue. These were: an ethic of non-direction; non-judgement; a constructionist approach to knowledge about wellbeing; and care and responsibility for personal wellbeing. The principals were key to promoting the transparency, authenticity and trust needed in conversation to enable honest dialogue around the challenging and complex topic of wellbeing in school.

Online interviews were conducted via Microsoft Teams, and transcribed. Additional data was also collected on teachers' schools, gender, subjects taught, roles and years of teaching experience to inform our sampling strategy and provide insight into whether differing patterns in the data varied according to the above criteria. We found no evidence of variance in views across these variables in the data presented here however.

Recruitment

Participants were recruited via teacher networks and local schools and trusts with which the lead author had links as a practising teacher. Networks included regional National Education Union groups and Teach First. Participant teachers self-identified as having an interest in wellbeing and/or sustainability in schools as per links to the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals 3 and 4 (United Nations, 2015).

Purpose of study as explained to teachers

It was communicated to potential participants that the study aimed to bring together secondary subject teachers to share views and practice in relation to what wellbeing means in education. As stated, this paper focuses on a first set of individual interviews with teacher participants. We stated that through the three-stage study, we would explore the subject in the context of curriculum, pedagogy and personal development. After the interview stages, the project aimed to allow teachers to reflect, share resources and insights via focus groups on Microsoft Teams, as well as to consider the impact of recent events on how teachers addressed wellbeing with their students. Results from post-interview aspects of the fieldwork are not shared in this paper. Few

studies had yet taken place to explore teachers' views on new models of wellbeing in schools in England from 2019 policy changes (Department for Education, 2019a, 2019b; Ofsted, 2019). This was an opportunity to contribute to new knowledge on this important topic.

Interview schedule—themes underpinning questions

The interview schedule, informed by hierarchical focusing as an approach (Tomlinson, 1989), consisted of four core areas:

1. What does wellbeing mean to you as a concept (personally/professionally)?
2. In your view, what do you think is the relationship between education and wellbeing?
3. How do you engage with wellbeing in school? (As a teacher, around school, in the classroom, in specific teaching practice.)
4. What are some of the challenges or tensions in promoting wellbeing in school?

Each question enabled further exploration of pertinent issues; however, it was not an expectation in this methodological approach that all sub-topics were covered, rather that each theme could emerge organically from the natural direction of the interview.

Participant sampling

Twenty teachers from 11 English secondary state-funded schools in the Midlands, North West and Yorkshire took part in the study. Participants ranged in experience and included trainees, newly and recently qualified teachers, middle leaders (subject and pastoral) and assistant heads (see Table 1 for complete list). Years of experience ranged from the first year of teaching to 22 years in the classroom; the average was 9 years.

Data analysis

Reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2016, 2019) was applied to the data. Initially, all transcribed data was manually coded at phrase and sentence level using NVivo12 to organise the codes compiled. Codes were developed as they emerged from the data.

TABLE 1 Teacher participant sampling.

Role (subject specialism)	Number of participants	Range of years of teaching
Assistant Head (Maths/Science)	2	7–19
Mental Health Lead (Humanities)	1	4
Subject Lead (English; Languages; Science)	3	6–14
Teacher of English/English and Media	5	1–10
Teacher of Geography	1	2
Teacher of Languages	2	1–7
Teacher of Maths	1	8
Teacher of Outdoors Education	1	3
Teacher of PE	1	18
Year Pastoral Lead (all English)	3	7–22

Once a first stage of coding had been conducted on all interview data, codes were iteratively organised into groups by relation to three research questions:

1. How do English secondary teachers view wellbeing?
2. What aspects of their practice relate to wellbeing?
3. What barriers or tensions to wellbeing in school are experienced?

A procedure of building up domain summaries was then conducted. These categories were intentionally explored for overlap across the questions before themes were developed and agreed.

In a second, separate but linked study, these findings then informed late spring focus groups with participants (study two), which allowed respondents to check themes, reported separately to this paper. The five themes from this phase are listed in Table 2.

Validity and research position

Thanks to existing connections and networks (see above), this sample represents a skew towards the region local to the University of Nottingham. Whilst this was not an intent of the study, the geography of the sample does have potential to frame the experiences outlined in the findings. Nonetheless, all teachers were working within the English policy framework of wellbeing in secondary schools and hence likely to be representative of many other regions.

This study does not claim to present the views of a representative sample of the teaching profession in England, but offers exemplar positions and experiences, which can inform a richer understanding of the contexts in which English secondary teachers are being asked to respond to and 'teach' wellbeing. We hold to an ethic of professional engagement, consultation and collegiality around the implementation of approaches to, and research in, wellbeing in schools. Taking a critical look at Ball et al. (2012), the position of this research is a commitment to 'policy with' and 'education with', not 'policy to' teachers and school communities, since the former places distance between teachers and their sense of ownership over their roles. When it comes to wellbeing, we feel that closing this distance is critical to the health of both teachers and their pupils.

Findings

Research question: What does wellbeing mean?

Theme 1a: 'Being well' in the classroom is seen as (1) foundational and (2) relational, rather than a process of qualification in knowledge and skills

Multiple participants considered that they lacked knowledge or focused practice time on specific 'strategies' for teaching wellbeing as a subject discipline in PSHE and sometimes

TABLE 2 Table of themes.

1. 'Doing well' and 'being well'—what's the difference?
2. Relationships are the foundation but we need clarity and more training on how to grow them
3. We need ways to recognise the role of the body and adapt to students' contexts as part of wellbeing
4. Knowing 'the self'—being authentic, self-regulating and making decisions
5. The school community and culture as the 'soil' for flourishing and wellbeing

drew upon interventions they had learned in other areas of training (e.g., for supporting students with Special Educational Needs, SEND). They also referred to the opportunity to introduce exercises/content found in positive education and wellbeing curricula—such as gratitude diaries and forgiveness letters—within formal classroom teaching, as recommended by research in this area (see Boniwell et al., 2016). Examples were introduced in one school as an extracurricular opportunity via *The Art of Being Brilliant* programme. Still, teachers interviewed felt that wellbeing was foundational to learning (generally conceived as knowledge acquisition). Wellbeing was about the active process of learning about and celebrating students' individual strengths. It was simultaneously viewed as (a) formative to teaching and learning and (b) in tension with teaching to dense, rigid curriculum and standardised assessment structures. Teachers in this study also described wellbeing in terms of relational experience, as highlighted by Billington et al. (2022) and Noddings (2012), and they were cautious of assigning wellbeing in teaching to PSHE lessons or extracurricular areas, indicating that this 'boxing off' of wellbeing as an area of study led to treating wellbeing as an 'add on'. Rather than being '*in the everyday curriculum*', it was '*almost on a backburner*' (Participant R). The main practice of wellbeing was about

> *… building relationships without* [pupils] *even knowing… I think unless you're feeling good about yourself, you're confident you're interested in things then why are you ever going to do anything? … If something that… happened at school or at home is in your mind, you're not in the right mindset… Or if you've got a bad relationship with a student or a teacher, that's going to be at the forefront of your mind rather than what you're going to learn that day.* (Participant R, Outdoors Education Teacher)

Participants felt that, although structures and requirements existed to support teachers in knowing students and their social worlds well, these elements of a teacher's role that provide time to build relationships—learning via pastoral, tutor or form group activities and PSHE—in reality were not given time, training or priority in terms of messaging from leadership or policy. Rather, relationship building and working with individuals was a priority, in competition with a system based around standardisation and grades:

> *I think sometimes because we are so… focused on… teaching our students that content that they need in order to achieve grades and things… we forget about the personal side of each individual, maybe we don't really know what things they are interested in.* (Participant H, Languages Teacher)

Theme 1b: 'Doing well' as exterior mastery and performance; 'being well' as interior emotional and psychological health, and experience of balance

A notable element of uncertainty in the positions of teachers in the study was the perceived connection between 'doing well' in terms of academic success, productivity and performance and 'being well' which related to health in the sense of the whole person: emotions, the body and a sense of alignment with one's inner awareness, values or sense of purpose.

Teacher accounts suggested measures of 'doing well' in school veiled issues of 'being well'. They explored the difference between extrinsic markers of 'doing well' and those students who they saw as authentically flourishing. Participants gave examples of students who were top 'performers' but who experienced deep distress, particularly in exam years:

> *I used to be the form tutor… to a young girl who is a national* [sports] *champion. In terms of how she was performing, she was up there… on paper just the perfect student. And then she knocked on my door after break time and I had a lesson. She said 'Miss, can I speak to you?' … She burst into tears and… it was as if it just all came out… 'I have no idea what my purpose is. I have no idea why I'm even alive.' So you get so taken aback by something like that and you think she is somebody who to us, seems like a perfect student, a perfect person. She's obviously performing at the top of her game and yet she's feeling such emptiness…* (Participant D, English Teacher, Sixth Form Pastoral)

This discrepancy between extrinsic indicators to do with performance or 'doing well' and authentic wellbeing was a foundational thread running through the themes and examples explored in the interviews, and they drew from the range of teachers' experiences (whether in the context of the pandemic or beforehand). There is also a question to be raised here about the assumptions made by teachers through embracing policy definitions about achievement/excellence in terms of the 'perfect student', thus illuminating a clash between a lens which embraces the concept of 'performing' and a 'perfect student', whilst simultaneously questioning the value system this represents and an awareness of its inadequacy, suggesting the enduring relevance of Ball et al.'s (2012) critique of 'unreflexive ease'. Teachers shared their own experiences of 'doing well' whilst not 'being well', and the split this created in their experience. They described a lack of space to acknowledge negative experience and a pressure to outwardly always be 'doing well':

> *You're having to do this set of things… to call yourself successful. … The majority of teachers are feeling under pressure, overworked… a lot of people wouldn't consider themselves to be in touch with themselves* [or] *experience a sense of wellbeing and then you are kind of replicating this spiral of… a stress-inducing environment*. (Participant E, Languages Teacher, Subject Lead)

Research question: What is wellbeing in classroom practice?

Theme 2: Relational practice and care

'Being well' in teaching and learning was constituted by the quality of relationships amongst staff and between staff and students. Within the 20 interviews, by far the most frequent theme was relationships and care. As identified when exploring the meaning of wellbeing, teachers reported that wellbeing was not reducible to specific activities and content, rather the cultivation of relationships was central, which allowed space for both attentiveness and spontaneity.

There was a focus on the need for 'interaction', maintaining the practice of a respectful interest in who students are and what their home context is like, with an attitude and practice of giving care. As such, a teacher's job in relation to wellbeing was conceptualised around this attentiveness, this role of care:

[Education is] *all about people looking after people and as we know… as practitioners, it's so much more than just standing in a classroom and imparting knowledge… because we give care all day.* (Participant E, English Teacher, Head of Year)

This conception of wellbeing as 'care' speaks to the degree of teachers' work which is around this practice of attentiveness to students' present states and needs. Examples include noting students' demeanour, initiating conversations to one side when they are upset or seem in need of support, and generally practising an authentic emotional awareness and interest in students' needs and inner experiences.

Teachers identified how their own wellbeing rested on relationships and connection with support networks, especially with colleagues and other teaching staff, as well as family. A desire to both offer and seek support without being judged was emphasised.

Simultaneously, teachers raised the issue of tension, whereby teacher training and professional development provides limited work on the theory and practice of this care:

> *I was thinking about my own teacher training and… how it was always said how we need to be aware of students' wellbeing and our own wellbeing, and the only kind of real strategies we were given was just to maintain effective relationships with students and colleagues. And obviously that is important, but I don't know if that's… a real strategy.* (Participant N, NQT, Geography Teac)

Relationships were considered foundational for teachers, but teachers stated that as their roles are conceived principally in terms of being purveyors of subject knowledge and curriculum content, often their practice in terms of care for wellbeing '*falls through the cracks*' (Participant C, Humanities Teacher). Teachers described constantly having to grapple with other priorities, which took away time, space and support mechanisms to grow those foundational relationships, and as such to act as agents for wellbeing education. Yet, this relational aspect of a teacher's role was inevitable and this labour of care in a teacher's work was considered to be an essential but under-recognised juggling act in the classroom.

Notably, some participants in the study had considerable responsibility for student pastoral support, whilst others' roles focused on curriculum subject areas. An ongoing tension is observed around whether teachers felt they needed more time themselves for the pastoral focus of their role, or whether it was more appropriate that the role be looked after by a separate pastoral team. Such questions speak to divergent conceptions of the role of the teacher. Put bluntly, as care giver/nurturer versus purveyor of knowledge. Nonetheless, if matters of student wellbeing are treated outside students' timetabled day, and beyond the reach of their subject teachers, concerns are raised about how teachers can be aware enough of students' contexts to build sufficiently strong relationships, or truly prioritise care. Furthermore, there is an implication that one can teach without care, which is in direct contradiction to the conclusions of this study.

Theme 3: Engaging with students' context (time, place, body)

Acknowledging the present realities of students' context (home, community, society, world) and the body was seen as providing opportunities to integrate 'being well' (interior experience) and 'doing well' (exterior behaviour/activity) as dual aspects of educational experience, nested in the real, lived world. Participants emphasised the need to adapt learning to the changing context of the immediate world around them, whether this be home and community, or in response to national and international events, of which the pandemic was one of many mentioned. Others included examples from alcohol and relationships education, poignant for many students' home contexts, to the inauguration of Jo Biden as President of the United States, the Black Lives Matter movement and developments around the climate crisis. Teachers expressed their frustration that they frequently felt prevented from exploring these topics to their full educative potential with students due to the rigid nature of curriculum content and the challenges of workload.

One participant in the study was a trained teen yoga instructor who taught science to SEND groups. She talked in detail about the value of movement for emotional awareness and regulation, due to the somatosensory system's impact on the whole body and the way this affects memory, attention and emotion. A successful daily afternoon yoga activity in one school resonated with discussions with many participants about the challenges of adapting to students' emotional needs in a cramped classroom, particularly under the restrictions

of the pandemic, and the value for relationship building and emotional regulation found in sports and outdoors education teaching.

We note that observations in this section warrant exploration of embodiment science and new materialism in the context of our data; however, we are unable to scope out this substantial additional branch of theory within this paper. This is thus an area for further theoretical and empirical work.

Research question: What conditions promote or prevent practice for wellbeing in the classroom?

Theme 4: Self-knowledge and space for agency as an important condition for wellbeing

Where teachers valued achievement or 'doing well' as underpinning 'being well', this was contextualised to specific situations and individuals, for example, a shy, uncertain student became an active and skilled player in her sport. It was seen as important to celebrate and praise all the little successes that students made, for example in relation to accessing and participating in online learning, as a means of consolidating growth and success in other areas. Flourishing was envisaged as an alignment of 'being' and 'doing well', and was therefore about the capacity of students to reflect and develop on their own particular strengths and to grow in independence and agency as a result of this:

> *I think if you were to ask staff to say OK, can you identify a child who is flourishing? … I hope that they would pick the kids who have identified something that they're really good at, and that they're really pushing into. So you know, maybe it's an artistic ability, a musical ability… or… not necessarily to do with school… Do they have something that helps them feel valued and feel that they're contributing something? That's… what I would say is flourishing… I certainly don't see it as the ones who are achieving high academic success necessarily.* (Participant T, Assistant Head)

Note that discussions of flourishing did not lead to discussions of character and virtues education (see Norwich et al., 2022) in this study, though prompts were offered. Rather, this theme resonates with Brown and Shay's (2021) student voice research in conceptualising wellbeing as '… the power of knowing who you are, where you come from, where you belong, and how you are connected' (p. 263).

As noted particularly in the discussion of 'being well' and the role of relationships, teachers often felt that the capacity to get to know individual students' preferences and interests was strongly limited by the need to cover dense curricula within tight time constraints. Furthermore, teachers felt that they lacked scope within their time with students to really help them to hone in on individual strengths and areas within which they could flourish; rather, teachers felt that although they would love to offer this kind of support, the structure of learning and demands to cater for other needs and standards meant working in an in-depth way with individuals was often beyond the scope of normal classroom practice, and down to the students as individuals to seek out.

Theme 5: Culture for wellbeing—purpose and relationships before measures and content

In their interviews, teachers started by exploring what wellbeing meant to them personally or professionally. They talked about how their own wellbeing rested on relationships and connection with support networks, especially with colleagues and other teaching staff, as well as family. Emphasis was placed on trust, on the feeling of being able to confidently seek and

receive support with a sense of mutual respect, so that when challenges arose—whether personal, in the classroom, or professional practice—there was a sense of trust in finding a solution together. A professional support network was a frequent topic, and in one school, counselling skills training was offered to all staff to support this culture: '*that actually there is someone there that I can talk to*' (Participant T).

So, the connection between building trust and being available and genuinely open to listen to others' needs was considered important to creating a culture in which relationships were high quality and supportive of a sense of wellbeing, both for teachers and students. The indicator here in this particular assistant head's experience is that teachers are seen to be seeking and offering listening, support and guidance to each other voluntarily and organically, as opposed to via a formal structure in which parameters of who to go to and when are pre-defined. In an honest and generous account of one participant's own struggles with their mental health, they recounted how support from colleagues was complemented by more formal mental health provision in the form of counselling paid for by the school, but the support and acceptance of colleagues remained key:

> *I had a good support network, amazing, especially from* [my] *department. And you know, we just have to get on with things. And I think if you've been at work for a long period of time and you've known a lot of people, when something bad like that happens, that you can… you know you're going to come out of it, you know you are*. (Participant J)

A desire to both offer and seek support without being judged was also considered a key part of wellbeing in school. Where this was in place, teachers described being able to overcome personal and professional difficulties and find support in times of mental distress or adversity.

Within teacher–student classroom interaction, strengths building through celebrating student success was given high importance. Teachers valued creating a safe, respectful environment in which to engage in discussion, for example, on issues of wellbeing and current affairs in English or PSHE. These were considered implicit and integrated ways in which culture for wellbeing occurred, but teachers did not feel enabled to make the most of these opportunities: '*the curriculum is planned to sort of teach those skills but I feel like they need to be… more explicit*' (Participant F, English Teacher).

Teachers' accounts suggested a lack of creative scope to envision how these topics were brought out in the curriculum, and severely constrained time to explore such topics in depth due to the pressure of dense schemes of work. Teachers described a need to be prepared adequately to utilise subject teaching as a tool for building meaningful conversations with students and that, as it stood, such work represented an 'add on' rather than an integrated aspect of classroom teaching:

> [Wellbeing] *does seem to fall in between the cracks of PSHE and safeguarding… it doesn't feel that it's clicked that if you do have a whole school approach where everyone's responsible where it's a preventative approach in terms of we encourage people to talk about wellbeing, encourage resilience, try and reduce… assessment anxiety, trying to encourage people… if we can embed that, that means that actually we'll reduce a lot of those crises from happening*. (Participant C, Geography Teacher, Mental Health Lead)

Although participants expressed that both 'doing well' and 'being well' were important to the work of schools, they stated that wellbeing, and the caring role of teaching, was underrecognised in favour of standardised measures of performance: an inauthentic measure of 'doing well'. They considered talk of wellbeing in school to often be an 'add on', or inconsistent.

Examples of good practice conveyed wellbeing as an essential and embedded priority within teaching practice and school culture, but it was reported that this is not the area for which teachers and schools are judged or held accountable.

DISCUSSION

'Being well' in school as relationships

This study points to relationships as the basis for how teacher participants see wellbeing in school practice, corresponding to other recent research with teachers and practitioners (Aldrup et al., 2017, 2018; Billington et al., 2022; Graham et al., 2016). For these teachers, relationship building, through practices of care, are central to day-to-day practice for wellbeing; therefore, relationships themselves are a core purpose of education, and specifically of teaching practice. It would seem, therefore, that it is a striking omission in policy informing school practice that wellbeing is not recognised as relational within teaching practice (Brown & Shay, 2021); rather, it is conceptualised as knowledge, skills and competency content alone.

Through Health Education and Relationships and Sex Education in PSHE (Department for Education, 2019a, 2019b), wellbeing in school practice in England is conceptualised in terms of a skills and competency area of the curriculum, as identified by Brown and Donnelly's (2022) review. This contrasts with our findings, which see wellbeing in terms of relationships and relational practice across curriculum subjects (e.g., Noddings, 2002, 2012). To recap, Brown and Donnelly outline three approaches to wellbeing within school policy, denoting three distinct conceptualisations. Of the three forms (competency/skills, an ethics-based approach and a capital-based approach from the sociology of education), seemingly the conceptualisation of wellbeing in our data fits most closely with an ethics-based approach, corresponding well with Noddings' (2010) conceptualisation of care practice in education as moral education. Rather than focusing on universal morality systems (as in character education), the ethics approach emphasises the relative nature of ethics in young people's specific contexts and cultures, and takes a complex, whole-person approach. Our data also offer some support to Brown and Shay's (2021) third conceptualisation of wellbeing as a form of social capital and identity building. According to participants in this study, wellbeing is about giving students and teachers access to relationships in which they are recognised, cared for and allowed to grow as individuals, enmeshed in an ecosystem (as evident from the third theme, on the importance of the environment and social context). Yet there is a lack of acknowledgement within the policy landscape as to the centrality of relationships, found both in policy analysis research (Brown & Shay, 2021) and in the teaching practice of wellbeing as conceived by teachers in this study. We suspect that the emphasis on skills and competencies within wellbeing on the one hand, and a recent policy emphasis on a knowledge capital-based approach to the purpose of education on the other hand (Gibb, 2015, 2017; Ofsted, 2019), may in part account for this.

Care for being well versus pedagogy for doing well? Conceived as a conflict

Another key issue that arises from these data is the perceived conflict between a focus on care in the classroom (to promote 'being well') versus a dominant framing of academic performance as the purpose of teaching (to promote 'doing well'). The message in the study is that the priorities are either confused, or the wrong way round in school practice, due to the

way in which policy has embedded a focus upon teachers' roles in subject performance. Yet the view in this study entails a shift in perspective: the rationale here is not that practice for wellbeing is pitted as competing against practice for 'doing well', but that practice for wellbeing supersedes practice for performance, since pupils who are well, and cared for, will 'do well' as a consequence. This is indicated by the quote from the assistant head, who stated that students who are flourishing are those who: '*have found something that they're really good at… they have something that helps them feel valued and… that they're contributing*.' In other words, students who *are* well and *do* well are empowered to participate actively in their community and feel valued as such.

Though arguably we have taken a rather straightforward approach to contrasting 'doing well' and 'being well' in teachers' conceptions of educational purpose and practice as they relate to wellbeing, it appears that teachers are not always conscious of these competing narratives, and where they are symbiotic versus in tension with each other. As alluded to by Ball et al. (2012) in their description of 'unreflexive ease' and later by Sellman (2020), teachers are subject to conditioned attitudes and behaviours from within the dominant normative structures of Western education. This is particularly so in their conceptualisation of the self, for example we might see the description by one teacher of '*a perfect person, a perfect student*', who is yet '*feeling such emptiness*' (Participant D), as reflecting this inherent contradiction. Teachers and society hold a set of expectations around success or 'perfection' at the individual level, in this case as it pertains to 'doing well' in school. These attributes or achievements are things *to do* or *to have*, which are widely and easily recognised by teachers, and yet which mask or distract from educational attention to the way in which students and teachers encounter their own *being*, in an interplay of relationships with others. Thus, the tendency is to disregard the 'being', the inner experience of the individual, and to focus on the exterior, or performance in terms of outputs (grades, achievements in extracurricular activities, etc.). From such observations, it is all too easy for an appearance of 'doing well' to be interpreted as all there is to be concerned with. This issue has been characterised, for example by Ergas (2019) and Sellman (2020), as a missing educational entitlement which is coming to the fore via the current polemic around wellbeing in schooling.

As detailed in the Introduction, Noddings (2012) describes the relation of care in teaching in terms of stages of interaction: a need is expressed, the teacher attends, responds and finally there is a response from the 'cared for'. Noddings contrasts this caring relation, as based on care ethics, with 'virtue care', where a conscientious attitude of care is applied but based upon 'assumed needs' rather than 'expressed needs'. Central to the care ethics approach in teaching is the action of modelling and dialogue (Noddings, 2010); while the teacher is still generally conceived as having more authority, as the carer, teachers model caring relations and place students' voices as central in determining the decision-making of the teacher, with students providing further feedback to the teacher to communicate that care has been received. The receipt of this response is as important for affirming (or confirming, in Noddings' language) the teacher as carer as it is for the student as 'cared for'. Yet from this study we know that this approach is hard to prioritise: teachers can be '*so… focused on… teaching students that content that they need in order to achieve grades and things… we forget about the personal side of each individual*' (Participant N).

Supporting teachers to practise awareness, flexibility and dialogue in the classroom is thus central to practice for care/wellbeing. It seems there is a parallel between the philosophies of education for 'doing well' and education for 'being well', and Noddings' (2012) critique of 'virtue care'. Education for 'doing well' (as divorced from 'being well') is like that of the 'virtue carer', over-riding the lived experience and present expressed needs of students with the 'assumed needs' of a prescribed curriculum or set of pre-meditated outcomes. The subsequent practice approach therefore lacks space for responsiveness and dialogue. Accounts in this study position education for 'being well' as attending pro-actively to the real

lived experience and needs of both students and teachers. Yet the former requires a greater degree of flexibility in the way learning is designed, and the insight on the part of the teacher to determine what kind of response is appropriate in the case of an 'expressed need'. This is a teaching skill difficult to transfer other than through experience and reflection, and runs against approaches to curriculum coverage which standardise content delivery to the day and time in order to ensure all students meet comparable milestones at the same time.

The relationship between teacher and student wellbeing

Finally, it is worth considering where there is symbiosis and where there is conflict in approaches to teacher and student wellbeing. Teachers' accounts express a degree of demotivation in their work, especially because of a lack of possibility to adapt learning to students' contexts or coach individual students according to their specific strengths. Teachers express a belief that the way things are done in education, and the approaches teachers are expected to take, do not correspond to the best development opportunities for their students. Again, what seems apparent in accounts of this frustration is a lack of scope for dialogue between students and teachers and between students, teachers and curriculum, due to a rigid system of decision-making. In this context, it seems that another inconsistency arises, when we think of teacher wellbeing largely around workload. These teachers expressed concerns around their workload, but it was also about permission to prioritise the overall development of students as opposed to standardised approaches to content, delivery and assessment.

Yet where teachers felt their work had been particularly helpful and beneficial to their students' development as a unique individual, they enthused about their work and had a sense of positivity about their practice, which imbues a sense of wellbeing. It is striking here that the description of 'being well' appears to be reciprocal, for student and teacher. For example, the teacher recounting how a shy child became exceptionally involved and successful in their sport through the support of their relationship resonates once again with the argument that children flourish when they have found '*something they are really pushing into*', enabling them to feel they are contributing and are valued. These examples suggest a positive feedback loop between sense of teacher satisfaction and student wellbeing through having had support in their unique development and having acceptance in the relationship to speak openly to teachers when adversity occurs. Yet an activity, or a skill, cannot be the whole of it, as indicated by the outwardly '*perfect student*' who is feeling '*such emptiness inside*'. Teachers' intimate knowledge of students and ability to see past appearances also matter here.

As such, we conclude that approaching teacher wellbeing through a workload lens alone—in which decisions about practice are taken away from teachers—fails to capture the centrality of professional judgement, freedom to act to support and respond to students' specific situations and how this mutually reinforces wellbeing. Collegiality between teachers also remains central—in sharing strategies and knowledge to tackle problems together, whether personal or professional. In this case, the capacity of teachers to do their own 'self' work, to reflect, dialogue and develop their awareness of their own responses to students, becomes more central.

Thus, we suggest common features of the nature of teacher practice for wellbeing promotion. These are an approach which is present oriented, individualised and yet interconnected, in which teachers are enabled to listen and respond to the situation rather than having to drive home a rigid and pre-ordained plan (although this provides a core structure; curriculum was often characterised as being too rigid to invite adaptation). Such implications suggest contributions to the puzzle of how schools can support a sense of 'being well' as a foundation to, rather than as an appendage to, 'doing well'—both in terms of teachers and students.

CONCLUSION

For teachers and school cultures, we suggest there remains great uncertainty about the interconnection between achievement, or 'doing well', and 'being well', as connection (to self and others) through relationships. Accounts from this study suggest teachers' awareness of an outer and inner life for students, and that a student who is 'performing well' by schools' markers of success does not necessarily equate to a sense of wellbeing. This appears true from teachers' observations of students, but also from their reflections on their own experiences in performing what it is to be a successful teacher: '*having to do this set of things… to call yourself successful… replicating this spiral of a stress-inducing environment*' (Participant E). This all matches with articulations of the 'terrors of performativity' established in the literature on neoliberal education (Ball, 2003; Sellman & Buttarazzi, 2020; Willis et al., 2019), but specifically in the case of this study we see accounts of how the pressure to perform what it is to 'do well' in schools is consciously contradictory to teachers' ideas of promotion of wellbeing and flourishing, and evidence of the strain this generates for them in their day-to-day practice as a barrier to genuine 'being well'. We suggest that an over-emphasis on individualised conceptualisations of wellbeing in policy plays a part in this dynamic, and thus join with calls for a greater emphasis on a relational understanding of wellbeing (Billington et al., 2022; Brown & Shay, 2021).

Teachers in this study recognised that 'being well' looks different for each individual and requires flexibility of the curriculum in addition to being facilitated by the attentiveness of teachers. If 'doing well' builds from 'being well', then teaching should be open to learning about, and practices of, care: modelling, dialogue and confirmation of students' *and* teachers' individual differences and strengths, within a relational 'web of care' (Noddings, 2010). This entails a particular emphasis on relationship, inclusion and recognising/celebrating difference, and exploration of the self. In an education which prioritises 'being well' or flourishing, these are foundational features, rather than an addition on top of 'doing well' in the mastery of content. Such inferences, of course, have implications for how teacher training and development is shaped.

A refocus on care offers teachers, and in particular leaders, licence to shift the direction of decision-making in practice to 'what is best for the wellbeing of this class?', rather than 'what is best for their performance?'. Teacher accounts in this study suggest that 'being well' (both for teachers and students) does not emerge simply from the achievement of knowledge or performance standards, but the agreement in this study is that 'doing well' will follow for students and teachers if allowed to genuinely prioritise the relationships underpinning 'being well'.

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ETHICS STATEMENT
The research was conducted in alignment with BERA ethical guidelines and approved by the University of Nottingham Research Ethics Committee.

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