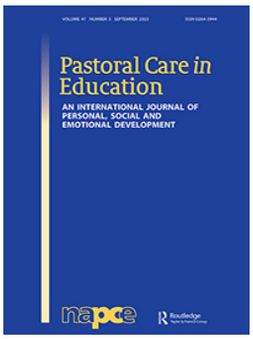

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Still surviving, rather than thriving - the need to reimagine post-pandemic wellbeing according to secondary school teachers

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ABSTRACT

In Spring Term 2021 following the second school closure and third lockdown in England, educational recovery and catch-up were key concerns for secondary schools. Following teacher interviews regarding wellbeing in secondary school teaching practice in Winter 2020–21, teachers from 10 schools ($n = 18$) took part in focus groups and interviews to explore their understandings of practice for wellbeing in the classroom, and how the circumstances of the school return were impacting these understandings and experiences, mid-pandemic. Teachers reported their perspectives for reflexive thematic analysis. As with other reports of school recovery post-disaster, re-establishing the safety of normality and routine was considered key. Yet promises of a 'new normal' sensitive to the already concerning landscape of youth wellbeing and mental health in the UK were soon re-prioritised as a focus on 'catch up' and re-establishing performance goals within-subject disciplines. Accounts of challenging student behaviour and teacher stress were elevated but met with a response that focused on the role of teacher as purveyor of subject knowledge rather than care-givers. The duty of schools in providing trauma-informed cultures was also under-recognized, though relevant to the needs articulated by teachers in this study.

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Introduction

The return to school following three lockdowns and two school closures in Spring of 2021 in England (mid-COVID-19 pandemic) represented an intense transition for students and their teachers interacting with a pre-existing landscape of poor mental health in young people (Jerrim, 2022; Solmi et al., 2022). The COVID-19 pandemic can be understood as a global disaster affecting all communities at the local level; schools encountered their own particularities, yet the ubiquitous nature of this transition means the lessons learned from this

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time are salient for most school contexts, with secondary schools across England undergoing comparable challenges simultaneously. The implications of this wrenching from routine and expectations for two years of schooling draw parallels with other disasters and provoke insights from trauma-informed (Emerson, 2022) and community-based approaches to recovery (Mooney et al., 2021).

Wellbeing in schools and the role of secondary teachers

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, there were elevated concerns about both the mental health of teachers (Jerrim et al., 2021) and that of students (Maiese, 2022). Neoliberal educational culture over the past 30 years provided a backdrop to high levels of teacher burnout and attrition (Acton & Glasgow, 2015; Jerrim & Sims, 2019), as well as youth depression and anxiety, linked amongst other factors, to high stakes exams and other accountability measures characteristic of performative school systems (Maiese, 2022; Perryman & Calvert, 2020; Timimi, 2010). In such a cultural environment teachers and students struggle to be authentic and to prioritise relationships, as our other research indicates (Wilson et al., 2023; Plust et al., 2021). This meant that good intentions for emotional recovery in Spring 2021 requiring care, empathy and compassion met with an education profession and student cohort habituated to instrumentalism, competition and standardisation.

Teachers in England have a significant responsibility for pastoral care and wellbeing via their policy context (Department For Education, 2019b; Department for Education [DfE], 2011; Department of Health & DfE, 2017; Ofsted, 2019; DfE, 2021). Teachers are frequently the first access point to adult mentoring and coaching available to young people beyond the home. Students' well-being needs to be understood within the wider 'web of care' (Billington et al., 2022; Noddings, 2013) of the school community and the cultures which inform how teachers interact to support each other through struggle (Culshaw & Kurian, 2021).

Through their professional classroom experience, teachers have unique and rich insights into how to meet students' needs. They also see first-hand how these needs are changing. Recently described as 'the forgotten health workforce' (Lowry et al., 2022), teachers experience their own mental health challenges (Jerrim et al., 2021). These are entangled with wider societal work trends and compounded by policy narratives from the past 30 years which limit the capacity for teachers' agency in their interactions with students as part of a larger project of de-professionalisation (Ball et al., 2012). Evidence suggests that students know when their teachers are 'struggling' (Glazzard & Rose, 2019; Mooney et al., 2021) and this has a knock-on impact on how safe and supported students feel in the classroom. It is therefore key that we understand how the school policy sphere

and the context of the pandemic, alongside multiple other unfolding crises, interact with teachers' understandings of wellbeing in their role.

To understand what shapes teachers' perspectives of wellbeing, it is helpful to consider evidence of the conceptual and emotional conflicts apparent in teachers' lived experiences of wellbeing and teacher practice. Culshaw and Kurian (2021) explore this conflict through teachers' own experiences of struggle whilst Ball et al. (2012) present evidence through the lens of policy implementation in secondary schools. Both show the tendency for teachers to feel they are alone and must hide or suppress difficulties and internal conflict relating to classroom management, in order to present the appearance of success and strength. The performance pressures on teachers are shown to favour a culture of 'unreflexive ease' (Ball et al., 2012) in which teachers adhere to an expectation to switch unproblematically between contradictory roles (e.g. Kelly et al., 2013), dependent on which policy lens a teacher is enacting. This context presents a barrier to the cultivation of compassionate awareness and care towards both themselves and others.

Teacher care and wellbeing in practice

Noddings' (2002, 2003; Noddings, 2010, 2012) theoretical explanation of care ethics in teaching practice is useful in explaining the accounts given by teachers. Noddings (2012) account emphasises the importance of the reciprocal dialogue between 'carer' and 'cared-for' in teaching, not only for the benefit of the 'cared-for' being heard but also for the validation or confirmation, of the 'carer'. Thus, care ethics in education speaks to both student and teacher wellbeing. Noddings models five clear stages that can be practised: (1) a need is expressed by the cared-for, and (2) 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 judgment, the possibility of not being able to fulfil this need immediately, but with an acknowledgement and an explanation to the cared-for, (5) the cared-for acknowledges the receipt of care. As a process-oriented approach to ethical practice in education, each of the steps in the model is important. Noddings also emphasises how the modelling of care demonstrates relational behaviour between students, teachers and students, and teachers and teachers. This creates a ripple effect in behaviour and attitude, promoting a collaborative concern for listening to, and where possible, meeting each other's needs.

Attention to the role of teacher agency and care practice in the context of wellbeing in schools is, however, extremely limited to policy interpretations. Major policy on wellbeing practice in schools affecting teachers such as Health and Relationships Education within statutory PSHE (DfE, 2019b), and the Ofsted (2019) framework strand for personal development, frame wellbeing as an area of knowledge, skills, and competency. As found in our recent research with

teachers: 'wellbeing … seems to fall between the cracks of PSHE and safeguarding' (Wilson et al., 2023).

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

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

In terms of the relational care aspect of wellbeing within schools, responsibility often falls to additional staff rather than classroom teachers, such as pastoral and early help teams (Department of Health & Department for Education, 2017). Who provides elements of education also connects to issues concerning the purpose of education in the 21st century, and how these interact with policy. 'Personal development' (Ofsted, 2019), 'character education' (DfE, 2019a) or older terms such as Social Moral Spiritual and Cultural educational entitlement (Joseph et al., 2020) all refer to the role teaching and curriculum play in whole-person health and growth and with a focus on individuals rather than systems. In recent efforts to better integrate school policies in England with aims towards wellbeing in education, these strands of school purpose and practice have received renewed attention.

Yet, treatment in policy is indicative of the dominant culture in secondary school teaching, in which teachers are viewed as experts in their subjects and encouraged within their roles as teachers to initiate students into the knowledge and practice of those subject disciplines (Hordern, 2021; Noddings, 2003). This can then be understood as in conflict with an expectation to support the broad growth of students, and with seeing the role of teaching as developing the capacity of students to deploy subject learning and their relationship with their teacher as a means for a) healing and support through childhood adversity or trauma (Kurian, 2022) and b) agentic self-development (or individuation) (Biesta, 2009, 2020).

Challenges to relationships and care for 'Being well'

In a previous interview study (Wilson et al., 2022, 2023), we sought to establish how teachers were meeting changing expectations to do with their role in wellbeing on the ground. We asked how teachers saw wellbeing in regard to their practice, and how this mapped to policy framing

and structural approaches to wellbeing in schools. We found that the teachers in our study interviewed during the Autumn/Winter of 2020/21, viewed wellbeing in schools principally in terms of the quality of relationships between students and teachers, students and peers, and teachers with colleagues. Teachers considered care-giving to be a foundational aspect of their role in supporting 'being well' in school, but considered that this foundational aspect of teaching was overshadowed by an expectation to perform 'doing well' according to a set of standards/qualifications which are insufficiently flexible to the needs and strengths of individuals. As such, teachers experienced conflict and confusion about how to prioritise care and 'being well' within their relationships with students. The status of wellbeing in teachers' practice was experienced as inferior to academic performance, as reflected in school policy and culture.

Methodology

In this current study, we aimed to examine our interview findings with teachers, to explore how the changing circumstances of the pandemic and the progression of the school year influenced their views. As such, from March to May 2021, 18 teachers from our first interview study took part in either a focus group ($n = 11$) or where a participant was not able to attend one of the available focus group sessions, a follow-up interview ($n = 7$). They were invited to hear about the main findings from the analysis of the first set of interviews (reported in Wilson et al., 2023), to consider the accuracy of how wellbeing was described in teachers' practice and to discuss together the implications of these findings considering their current circumstances in schools.

Specifically, we wished to:

- First, explore the initial findings (Wilson et al., 2022) from teacher interviews collected in Autumn 2020, in order to allow member checking of themes and to enable professional reflection via which we could enrich and improve the validity of the study findings.
- Second, understand how perspectives shifted over the course of the school year, in particular, the timing of the study offered a unique opportunity to explore the impacts of the return to school after the second school closure of the COVID-19 pandemic in England in Winter 2021. Additionally the research project aimed to provide benefits to participants by enabling them to share practice, approaches and discuss challenges around wellbeing in school, in the context of professional development. Teachers reported they had little opportunity to discuss these issues in depth within a professional context.

The over-riding questions of the study were the same as for our initial interview study. These were:

- How do English secondary school teachers' view wellbeing?
- What elements of English secondary teachers' practice relate to wellbeing in schools?
- What barriers or tensions are experienced in promoting wellbeing in schools?

From the initial findings of the interview study, we used the headlines of the themes to stimulate reflection and discussion. These headline themes (see Figure 1) were generated from the reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) of the interview data set (Wilson et al., 2022). The themes were:

Teachers were asked to reflect on those themes/findings that most stood out to them, or with which they most agreed or disagreed.

In order to achieve a balance between the covering of theme content and participant-directed responses within focus groups, a hierarchical focusing approach (Tomlinson, 1989) to questions was used. As focus groups/interviews were conducted, a set of sub-topics per theme was used to tick off areas covered, to determine which directions had been sufficiently explored, and which could be covered further. Drawing on the Rogerian non-directive approach to interview technique (Rogers, 1945) utilised in the interviews conducted with the same participants in Winter 2020–21 (Wilson et al., 2023), participants were encouraged to participate and let responses arise organically, rather than to expect a list of questions to be asked as in a traditional interview. It is recognised that the overall approach cannot be described as truly Rogerian, but the guiding principles informed a more authentic discussion. The role of the researcher was more assertive in focus groups than in interviews in order to encourage the involvement of all participants and to seek to balance the discussion dynamic where-in some voices dominated (often those with more senior roles or more teaching experience).

Teachers were informed that this second stage of the study was to be followed by a third and final opportunity to take part in focus groups (or follow-up interviews) at the end of the academic year 2020–21, allowing reflection back over the full school year and the opportunity to focus on sharing practical approaches to wellbeing.

Data collection approach

Focus groups and interviews were conducted and recorded largely via Microsoft Teams with a small number of follow-up interviews conducted in person and recorded via MP3 recorder. Full transcriptions were then imported to NVivo 12 for analysis. The focus groups took place between the end of March (end of Spring Term 2021), and early May (2021) clustering around the Easter holidays.

Theme
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 adapting 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

Figure 1. Table of discussion themes (developed from Winter 2020–21 teacher Interviews).

1. **The need to reimagine 'doing well' in school**
2. **Conflict around the concept of care in teaching**
3. **Teachers 'surviving rather than thriving'**
4. **The importance of listening/dialogue to rebuild trust and community for wellbeing**

Figure 2. Themes from Easter 2021 teacher focus groups and Interviews.

As such, the build up to the usual exam season and the uncertainty around Teacher Assessed Grades for exam years formed a backdrop to the discussions.

Sampling

Eighteen teachers from an original sample of 20 from our Winter 2020–21 interview study took part in this study. In the Autumn Term of 2020 teachers were recruited to take part in interviews and focus groups in three stages, so most teachers from the original study were able to be part of this focus group and follow-up study. Workload was cited as the reason for withdrawing after study one in just two cases. Teachers participating in this study were recruited to the whole research project based via network contacts with schools in the Midlands, Yorkshire and the North West (geographically close to the University of Nottingham, and network links of the lead researcher, a practising teacher). Networks included the regional National Education Union and Teach First ambassador groups for these regions, as well as via colleagues and their contacts.

Limitations

The accounts in this study do not represent the views of a proportionately representative sample of the English secondary teaching profession, due to the small scale qualitative design and self-selecting nature of participation. The context is also England specific, though parallels can be drawn with some other international settings. The accounts offer a set of exemplary experiences and interactions that can nonetheless offer rich accounts of teachers' views and experience at a key moment during the pandemic recovery, offering insights which can support further research in understanding the long-term effects of the pandemic on schooling, and specifically teacher and student wellbeing.

Ethical approach

Space to speak openly about wellbeing in the school context can be extremely limited both due to time pressures but also because such discussions are potentially threatening to professional identities in the performative, neoliberal educational setting. The ethical positioning of this study is informed by the rationale that it is important that teachers have time and opportunity to discuss matters of wellbeing as professionals in an honest and authentic environment, with other teachers.

It was thus important to establish an ethos of professional trust, and in addition to assuring anonymity for participants within data dissemination, all participants were asked to maintain professional confidentiality about the content of the focus groups/interviews, a commitment shared by the researchers. It was also important to consider the potential for matters to come up in conversation requiring further wellbeing support: all discussions began with an opening

statement reiterating the ethical commitments of the project and signposting to further wellbeing support, in particular highlighting the Education Support[1] specialised helpline.

Analysis

The analysis of the data was conducted in NVivo 12 using a reflexive thematic analysis approach (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Initial codes were developed based on the close analysis of the transcripts. These codes were developed as driven by the data before relating the first code set back to the research questions and the development of domain summaries (categories by which to group inter-related codes). Following this, two stages of theme development occurred: initial themes were developed and discussed as a research team before the refining of themes to form the following list:

In the following section, we present the analysis behind these findings and suggest implications.

Findings

The need to reimagine 'doing well'

In our preceding interview study (October 2020-February 2021) (Wilson et al., 2023) teachers identified the uncertainty they felt about 'doing well' and 'being well' within the purpose of education. We concluded that although sometimes 'doing well' in education may lead to 'being well', a focus on 'doing well' conceived as academic performance within neoliberal educational culture has led to 'being well' as an educational aim becoming an 'add-on' all whilst the pressures of educational and wider culture generate a context for strained or worsening mental health and wellbeing particularly amongst children and young people (Glazzard & Stones, 2021; Sellman & Buttarazzi, 2020). We therefore suggested that focusing on 'being well' and attendant skills, mindset and decision-making practices in the classroom, are more likely to lead to 'doing well' authentically than the other way around.

In this set of focus groups, teacher participants explored the uncertainty they and colleagues felt toward the vision of 'doing well' they experienced in school:

> '(The) school environment doesn't really let you do well because it limits … it sets parameters of … what it is to be to be doing well'. (Participant I, Languages Teacher)

Teachers problematised how dominant economic thinking has led to certain stories lacing their way through school discourses, leading to questions for teacher ethics and values:

> 'I've been in Assembly; they've said:'if you want a nice house and a big car, you need to get this many As' … so if that's the 'doing well', that's going to cause poor mental health' *(Participant B, Maths Teacher).*

Concepts of 'performance', 'outcomes' and 'process' come to the fore in accounts of this issue. 'Doing well' as performance can be extremely nuanced: teachers were habituated to thinking of performing as associated with quantitative outcomes or lesson observation gradings (in spite of these being de-emphasised within the new Ofsted inspection framework in England – Ofsted, 2019). Nevertheless, in the Venn diagram between 'Doing well' and 'being well', relationships were considered to be at the core.

In fact, having good relationships was described as absolutely central to 'performing' or 'doing well' in the classroom: 'the glue' (Participant D) which enables the teacher to be a good leader of learning. In this sense, building relationships for 'doing well' was much more about attention to practice and process (the 'methods' underpinning both 'doing well' and 'being well') in the classroom.

Whilst there remained a good deal of uncertainty about the nature and relationship of 'doing well' to 'being well' in teaching, what seemed most important was the need for a common vision for 'doing well', greater clarity on educational purpose. In particular, this speaks to the need for 'doing well' either as a teacher, student or class, to be underpinned by authenticity and flexibility since teachers need to draw on their deep self and social awareness to craft curriculum and learning content to the group's needs. Nonetheless, the volatility of individual student needs (particularly following the third Lockdown in England), a lack of teacher expertise on emotional wellbeing and mental health, and a pressure for standardised approaches suggest teachers felt the classroom was not a place where authentic 'doing well' could occur:

> 'I believe (teachers) are - should be - care-givers. In terms of whether that's a priority, it will depend on context but overall in my experience, in every school that I've worked in I would not say that as an English teacher, it's emphasised. We didn't discuss it at any of our meetings. It doesn't form part of our performance management, it doesn't form part of our INSET days. I think rather than care, we talk a lot about performance management and it shouldn't really be framed in that way.' (Participant D, English Teacher and Pastoral Lead)

Why is care so important and yet marginalised?

> 'I think the two main barriers are the perception that they are competing so that they're mutually exclusive. You either focus on wellbeing, divert resources to that, or you do … academic. So I don't think that enough understanding is there around how it is kind of essential as a precursor that you support wellbeing. ' *(Participant C, Humanities Teacher + Mental Health Lead)*

As stated by a teacher in Study 1: 'teaching is caregiving' (Wilson et al., 2022). Reported spikes in poor and difficult relational behaviour, alongside transitional issues in schools following the return from the school closure in Spring 2021 in England at the time of fieldwork, emphasised the need for comprehensive ways to support teachers with these added challenges. Speaking to mental health and behaviour leads it was apparent that there was a perceived divide between teachers who see care and relationship – building as central to their role, and those who foreground a 'distant . . . very professional' (Participant T) attitude to students, potentially at odds with observing and responding to students' care needs around social and emotional challenges when the view was: 'I'm a teacher; I'm here to teach' (our own summary wording). Such concerns were contextualised with understanding, as rooted in concerns around 'doing too many things badly' (Participant C), again raising questions about the central purpose and conceptualisation of the teaching role.

The caring role within teaching was sometimes seen as a capacity that either came naturally, or not, as opposed to a skillset to be acquired and honed as can teaching techniques for knowledge acquisition. There is no reason to understand skill in care practice for teachers as less learnable than practices for memory and subject knowledge acquisition since they are learned through domain knowledge acquisition, habits, culture and approaches such as those described by Kurian in her account of trauma-informed teaching (2022). The perception that care should be the specialist domain of those in education with a predisposition to this skillset (and often to those with a specific pastoral additional responsibility) seems to indicate a reason why secondary teachers' access to training on mental health and wellbeing in schools remains limited.

Two contrasting experiences stand out as exemplars: one Assistant Head saw upskilling teaching staff on emotional awareness and wellbeing as a holistic need and part of the whole school development plan for all staff; another Assistant Head at a different school reported that their school turned down a request for her to undertake mental health first aid training when she identified it as an important area for her own development in supporting staff she line managed. Instead, in this school and in others, pastoral leads (sometimes teaching staff, sometimes non-teaching) were allocated the majority of responsibility for wellbeing concerns. This in turn led to concerns being raised about the sustainability of teachers managing heavy responsibility for emotional support and safeguarding issues, yet simultaneously still being expected to manage routine teaching expectations when critical events occurred. For example, one Head of Year described a CSE (Child Sexual Exploitation) disclosure which led to spending much of the school day in several hours of police interviews regarding a deeply distressing situation. She then described coming out of this interview and being expected to go straight into teaching a lesson. Such accounts simultaneously highlight the often under-recognised workload of care responsibility that teachers take on as significant adults in the lives of young

people, and the lack of accounting for the energy, time and toll taken on teacher workload and wellbeing where supportive and robust, collegiate structures are not available due to reliance on a small number of individuals when it comes to supporting wellbeing concerns. We argue that this evidence shows a need for greater distributed expertise and responsibility amongst teachers when it comes to all aspects of wellbeing in the profession, so that support and flexibility can be provided for colleagues when teachers are called on to address immediate wellbeing concerns whether for colleagues or children.

Surviving rather than thriving

As data collection took place, it became clear that pressures owing to recovery from three lockdowns and two school closures were at high intensity. With associated social, emotional and domestic challenges thrown up, alongside the expectation for teachers to redesign and adapt assessment schemes (as one Head Teacher was quoted: 'we've done the exam boards' jobs for them' – Participant K), and circumstances which generally meant supporting organisations around education such as youth organisations were remote or non-existent, a stark pressure was placed on teachers to do what we describe as 'catch all' as much as 'catch up' (a dominant discourse around education at the time – Sibieta & Cottell, 2021).

Reflecting on wellbeing for the majority of participants felt ever relevant, and yet completely out of line with their day-to-day experience:

> 'for me, it's not about doing well, being well … it's just about survival at the moment' (Participant E, English Teacher and Head of Year)

Any concept of thriving was beyond reach even for teachers with decades of experience.

After a period of time in which routines and social habits for positive school experience/behaviour had been eroded or lost (both for teachers and students), concerns about mental health and challenging in-school behaviour were elevated. It seemed that despite the fact challenges for pupil mental health and wellbeing were anticipated, and attempts to implement whole school strategies were sometimes present, accounts frequently indicated that support and adaptation time for teachers and staff members were lacking. This was stated to be a particular issue in cases where there were prevalent numbers of early career teachers (in a particular subject department) or in cases where teachers were new in team leadership roles. One teacher described the challenges faced in her department as a 'mental health crisis' (Teacher G, Teacher of English). It is likely the subsequent effect on teacher–pupil interaction would be felt by both teachers and pupils as evidence indicates pupils are highly sensitive to the stress states of their teachers (Glazzard & Rose, 2019). We suggest this is likely to have led to a vicious circle where elevated concerns around pupil behaviour

were reported. Indeed, several middle and senior leaders in the research project commented that they were seeing some of the most challenging behaviours from pupils of their career. One Assistant Head described the challenges that continued for tackling the behaviourist paradigms in managing this behaviour:

> 'The whole relationships thing is very much on my mind personally at the moment because of the context we were in coming out of lockdown trying to re-establish routines. With my responsibility for behaviour in the school, I'm coming across a lot of incidents of . . . just you know, poor behaviour in certain contexts. And I'm really, really keen that we don't just react to that purely from a punitive, behaviourist way, that actually we remember that the relationships are a really, really important part of behaviour management. And I'm struggling I guess with getting the balance of that message across because of the whole often polarized view of behaviour: you see that either punish them or look after them (view) to put it in very crude terms. Whereas of course it's more complex and we have to pay attention to both rules/routines (and) relationships. If any of those is missing or is deficient then, then I'm not sure you can achieve what you're after.' (Participant T, Assistant Head)

It seems from these interviews and focus groups that although schools and teachers were attempting to put recovery and care at the centre of school return, the dominance of existing paradigms such as the prioritising of high stakes assessment, and an insufficient emphasis on collaborative, collegiate support often meant teachers and departments defaulting to working individually in silos on collective challenges. As a result, intentions or desires to take a careful, staged return to school routines were overcome by a reactive culture, characterised by challenging and stressed behavioural responses from students, and high reported teacher stress.

Listening to rebuild trust and community

The data from this study was clearly flecked with frustration. Within the previous 12 months teachers had taken a step back during consecutive lockdowns. During data collection for a Winter 2020–21 interview study (Wilson et al., 2023), teachers had collectively conceptualised a vision for education that sits in line with a purpose of 'being well' and care as a foundation for 'doing well', yet in Spring 2021 teachers in this study appeared to meet head on with the ground-level conflicts which make a vision for wellbeing difficult to achieve in practice. This is not to say that teachers felt best intentions were absent amongst the multiple stakeholders involved in setting the direction for education post lockdown, but rather that this time seemed characterised by the consequences of the inherent confusion in educational priorities within the system: a constant tug of war between '*we need to make sure we are taking care of children and colleagues' wellbeing now*' and '*we need to ensure we restore order and children perform well in their high stakes tests so that their futures are secure' (*our own wording).

Nonetheless, accounts in the data reflect frustrated optimism with regard to the disconnect between aims and outcomes, or policy and practice. Participants saw themselves as central actors in this landscape, and yet they described a need for space and an opening up of the power structures, between teachers and students, between teachers and policy-makers. One teacher puts it simply:

> 'Our job is to listen'. (Participant H, Teacher of Languages)

We argue this means something more than what appears to be the dominant approach for gauging staff and student voice on wellbeing: 'they put a survey out' (Participant _), an approach criticised in focus group dialogue by teachers in this study:

> 'they ask you the question, but people don't want to know the answer'. (Participant E)

The period of this fieldwork was a time marked by wellbeing surveys as measures and metrics for leadership and accountability structures, in an attempt to gain a clearer picture (and a point of evidence collection for justification of action and decisions), yet frequently these approaches were experienced as 'a tick box exercise' and even dismissive of genuine concerns raised through the process:

> 'We put surveys out and we ask, and we want feedback and we almost want feedback so we can go "okay, everyone's fine".' (Participant A, Assistant Head)

> When I'm asked these questions in surveys about my wellbeing, and you know, that 20% is ignored, and the comments that that people have made are ignored . . . Well, it feels like it's been ignored for me, I still can feel the same intensity of . . . I'm going to say it, anger. I thought why did I bother filling this thing in if you're just going to throw a whole load of numbers at me? (Participant E)

Despite these efforts then to collect teachers' views, there was a persistent message in this study of frustration at not being heard.

This is a key issue across different sets of stakeholders in education, between government and school leaders, between teachers and pupils. It seems a strong conclusion of this research is a question about finding better ways of tackling this issue of communication and understanding between teachers, school community members and other educational actors.

Discussion

In the accounts in this study, we see a conflict met by teachers within English secondary schools wherein an emphasis on the importance of care and relationships in the work of the secondary school teacher was met with a somewhat unexamined attitude of 'my job is to teach'. In English schools, pastoral care responsibilities feature as a part of every teacher's professional remit (DfE, 2011; DoH & DfE, 2017). Nonetheless, the extent of this expectation

varies by school. It is commonplace to have a small team of specialised teachers with pastoral responsibility (for example, Heads of Year, often ostensibly responsible for year group performance even if the role is essentially regarding student pastoral needs and behaviour) alongside a team of non-teaching support staff as pastoral specialists. This responsibility structure can engender an ethos in which curriculum teaching and pastoral care are viewed as separate. Participants described such views as sometimes characterized by a 'distant . . . professional style' (Participant T) which appeared at odds with the increasing demands of secondary school children (and teachers) for care. Secondary teacher training has historically focused attention on the centrality of the teacher's role in subject knowledge. Whilst the love of the knowledge discipline is certainly key to inspiring and modelling a curiosity and interest for subject learning, the message in this study was that a love and interest for knowledge of one's students need be as, if not more, central to the success of a secondary school teacher.

Teachers express that the source of many of their struggles is a feeling of isolation in their care responsibilities and of being ignored or unacknowledged when data about wellbeing is collected by school leaders or decision-makers. Following Noddings' (2003; Noddings, 1992, 2012) care model and trauma-informed practice knowledge (Emerson, 2022; Kurian, 2022) we may understand the challenging behaviour seen in schools as a 'crying out' for acknowledgement or recognition of an unmet need. Indeed, trauma-informed approaches emphasise this issue, and provide a lens through which to tackle the 'polarised view of behaviour' as 'either punish them or look after them' articulated by one Assistant Head's challenges with teacher understandings of behaviour in school. In this account, we see how the value of routines, rules, and the kind of normality and familiarity that school and classroom practice can offer are able to provide a context for building strong relationships, enabling students to feel safe.

It seems that at the time of the pandemic, the tendency was to re-establish the safety of routine (according to former neoliberal norms), as it was in Mooney et al. (2021) post-disaster research with schools. Our data lead us to conclude that teachers, leaders and decision-makers would find value in re-focusing attention on the 'acknowledgement' stage and 'response' stages of Noddings' care model in teaching, whereby the carer or teacher listens, acknowledges the response so the cared-for knows their needs are being considered, the carer provides a response or explanation for choosing not to respond at this time (contextual factors may apply) and finally, the care response is acknowledged by the cared-for. These stages of the model highlight the centrality, circularity and reciprocity of dialogue in determining the effectiveness of care practice for relationship building, the underpinning of 'being well' in school.

An increasing focus on seeing teachers and students in the context of a network of relationships would seem to illuminate issues created by leaving individual teachers to manage wellbeing challenges and incidents in isolation,

on top of their academic responsibilities. Our conclusion here would be to encourage practices in which teachers step in for each other, debrief and check-in after distressing or high-intensity events and recognise the knock-on effects of care labour.

Finally, we propose a reconsidering of the meaning and importance of 'normal' as a role of school and teachers. The power of 'normal' in the form of routines, familiar relationships, space and a sense of belonging, connectedness and 'home' has been documented both in this study and in the disaster recovery research (e.g. Mooney et al., 2021). Nonetheless, for schools and leaders, returning to what has been normal for approximately the last 30 years of the teaching profession also means performativity, a disproportionate focus on exam outcomes and a 'push on through' approach to resilience and wellbeing for students (Brown & Dixon, 2020) as a means of enabling students to manage intensive school behaviour and performance expectations which may jar with the needs of students and may well re-traumatise those who have experienced adverse childhood events (Kurian, 2022). This 'old normal' is clearly something that has contributed to the current circumstances of mental ill-health and not something really deserving restoration; an opportunity to restore balance has initially been lost. Meanwhile, without universal access to training and development for tackling the complex demands of addressing wellbeing in the 21st century post-pandemic classroom, teachers are unsupported and overstretched to provide the care students are crying out for. We therefore conclude with a call for teachers, and all those involved in pastoral care culture including leaders and other education stakeholders to question the kinds of normal they seek to establish.

Conclusion

We have shown through focus groups and interviews with teachers at the moment of the school return, Easter 2021 (Figure 2), that aspirations to prioritise relationships and being well as an educational foundation were undermined in reality by a lack of scope for dialogue between teachers, leaders and policy-makers and a lack of room to consider the role of teachers as carers, particularly in the secondary classroom mid-pandemic. The policy landscape that shaped the expectations of teachers and leaders at the time indicated educational purpose was perceived by policy-makers as 'learnification' (Biesta, 2009) or 'doing well'; that is to say, focus on qualification in pre-ordained knowledge and skills, above and beyond the purpose of promoting 'being well' (Wilson et al., 2022).

Our findings suggest that the promise of opportunities in education hinted at by the 'new normal' instead slid towards an emphasis on re-establishing problematic, pre-pandemic standards in schools. This whilst the context of the situation called for an emphasis on rebuilding strong

relationships and supporting students and teachers through the transition with an emphasis on a culture of care in education, as the underpinning of educational success. Our data indicate this 'normal' slid back into a 'survive rather than thrive' pattern that failed to allow teachers and educational communities scope to capture the possibility of the moment for adapting educational approaches to a changed and changing world. If wellbeing is to become truly embedded in school cultures in schools, then teachers need scope to emphasise care as underpinning 'being well' through teacher practice. Teachers in this research project saw 'being well' as essential to 'doing well' in school; yet there must be room to debate the performative approach to 'doing well' which has dominated schools throughout the neoliberal policy era and which has led to school becoming a place that 'doesn't really let you do well because it limits … it sets parameters of … what it is to be to be doing well' (Participant I). From the evidence in this study, we argue that reimagining 'doing well' as rooted in the becoming which occurs in nurturing, trauma-informed contexts is key. For secondary schools and classrooms to become places of care; then, we emphasise the importance of the reciprocal, networked responsibility between teachers and education colleagues, which is in turn modelled and adopted amongst students. Through this, a cultivation of relationships and achievement based on love and affirmation of individuals rather than a negation of their being could be foundational features of a normal that puts wellbeing first as an aim of teaching and education.

Note

1. https://www.educationsupport.org.uk/get-help/

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Data availability statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author [RW]. The data are not publicly available due to ethical restrictions [their containing information that could compromise the privacy of research participants].

Ethics statement

The study was conducted in alignment with the Taylor and Francis Author Ethics guidelines and approved by the University of Nottingham Research Ethics Committee.

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