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Wellbeing and the importance of going “out of the realm of the classroom”: secondary school teachers’ perspectives

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ABSTRACT

Schools play a central role in supporting young people affected by mental health issues. This article reports a reflexive thematic analysis of focus group and interview data with English secondary teachers about their perspectives on mental health and wellbeing in schools. Data were collected during the pandemic year 2020–2021, with a research focus on evolving school practice for wellbeing. Our results show that although teachers recognised a shift towards school leadership and policymaking that acknowledged mental health, they also identified barriers that undermined attempts to embed wellbeing practices in their schools. Firstly, they expressed frustration with neoliberal education, and how it works against wellbeing, and specifically against relationality, which was seen to underpin good mental health. Secondly, teachers envisioned wellbeing education as breaking with the boundaries of the typical classroom space, structurally, physically and pedagogically. The boundaries described were shaped by an educational purpose logic of “doing well” in terms of performance measures, whereas teachers articulated solutions as stepping outside the traditional limits of the classroom and curriculum, a move corresponding to greater environmental and community awareness. In conclusion, we point to an expanded view of educational purpose and the application of a more ecological psychology to embolden wellbeing practice in schooling.

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Introduction

Neoliberal education poses a challenge to wellbeing education. It is an approach to designing education upon the logic of markets rather than care (Tronto, 2017). In this dominant paradigm, educational structures, actors and processes aim to enhance their market educational value via maximising their scores in national assessments and hierarchical league tables. The philosophy renders the individual as personally responsible for their success. Behind this is the idea that the market will determine “the good”, and competition will drive improved effectiveness (Maiese, 2022). Power structures and other impacting factors are reduced or made invisible to serve this standardised approach.

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The educational aims communicated to teachers and students therefore have a focus on “doing well” by the rules of neoliberal education. In our work, although teachers recognise many of the protective benefits of “doing well” for some, they also see that an emphasis on schooling’s narrow definition of success undermines teachers’ and students’ relationships and their capacity for inclusion and adaptation. Contradistinctively, these are the foundations of “being well” (Wilson et al., 2023a). Teachers in our recent study suggested that if the educational priority became “being well” then a broader definition of “doing well” would follow. “Being well” encourages “doing well” much more than the other way around, which is nonetheless assumed by the neoliberal approach (Becker et al., 2021; Finn & Phillips, 2023; Maiese, 2022).

These findings echo those of several previous scholars (e.g. Brown & Donnelly, 2022; Brown & Shay, 2021; Glazzard & Stones, 2021; McLellan et al., 2022) in pointing out that a view of wellbeing as a set of skills and competencies to be taught to the individual to enable them to cope with the alienating and competitive norms of neoliberal educational culture is flawed. It fails to account for the fact that the erosion of value for care, place and community inherent to neoliberal culture has sown the seeds for the global wellbeing crises to which young people and teachers are now subject (Weare, 2022).

School wellbeing policy in England

In the face of rising concerns around deteriorating quality of life and mental health in the two decades prior to the global Covid-19 pandemic, policy work to create national strategies and joint health-education approaches in England had been underway with particular fervour during the 2010s, coinciding nonetheless with austerity measures and widening inequality. Changes to school policy in England initiated in 2019 concerning the curriculum coverage of mental wellbeing alongside Ofsted’s (2019) new criteria to assess personal development as part of a change in their inspection approach were all a product of this process. Yet, in retrospect and acknowledging concerns expressed in this project’s data that wellbeing is “on a backburner” (Participant R, Wilson et al., 2023a, p. 994), it seems clear there has been an oversimplistic focus on symptom alleviation rather than addressing the root of rising mental health concerns within schools (Brito et al., 2021; O’Toole & Simovska, 2022).

Teachers and care for “being well”

Empirical research (Billington et al., 2022; Brown & Shay, 2021; Culshaw & Kurian, 2021; Graham et al., 2016; Wilson et al., 2023a) and, theoretical work, particularly that of Noddings (2003, 2010, 2012), provides an account of teachers’ practice that is foremost about care. In our research, “being well” was about being relationally embedded in a “web of care” (Noddings, 2013). Noddings illustrates how care is consciously cultivated and modelled by teachers, and culturally demonstrated to students and peers through four stages of practice: attention; listening; considered response; and carer acknowledgement.

Discussing the role of teachers in relation to care and wellbeing inevitably leads to wider discussions about the purpose of education and schooling. Care can apply to a

range of contexts, explored by Puig de la Bellacasa's (2017) scholarship, which draws upon Tronto's definition of care ethics as:

everything that we do to maintain, continue and repair "our world" so that we can live in it as well as possible. That world includes our bodies, our selves, and our environment, all of which we seek to interweave in a complex, life-sustaining web. (Fisher & Tronto, 1990, p. 41)

Yet following Puig de la Bellacasa, we are troubled by taken-for-granted notions that care is ethically unproblematic "because the work of care can be done within and for worlds that we might find objectionable" (p. 6). Teachers may care for their students and each other; when taking a wider definition of care, they also care for and sustain the structures of competition and high stakes performativity which they worry damage the students and the colleagues they wish to care for. Perhaps for some, it is necessary to avoid caring to survive.

In this journal, paralleling dominant themes in our data, Finn and Phillips (2023) argued for a theoretical turning in education and learning which engages the importance of place, space and materiality in accounts of teaching and learning. What does this have to do with wellbeing in schools? In our data (Wilson et al., 2023a, 2023b; present paper), in talking about wellbeing, teachers described parallel ideas with Phillips and Finn's (2022) articulation of ecological psychology as:

overcoming the constraints of classroom space to accommodate active, agentic learners (which is) beyond changes in design and aesthetics of classrooms, it is a pedagogical challenge for classroom teachers. (Phillips & Finn, 2022, p. 21)

In other words, we demonstrate here through our data that the pursuit of wellbeing in education appears closely associated for teachers with a desire to educate in ways that acknowledge the place, space, time and bodies in which we live (Wilson et al., 2023a). Frequently, within our data and within critiques of neoliberal education, there were calls for an education which enables authenticity and agency (Ball, 2003; Byrne, 2022; Plust et al., 2021) in the face of the performative and limited norms which have been established as possibilities for educational practices, present and future (Amsler & Facer, 2017).

Introducing this study: teachers envision educational practice for wellbeing

In this focus group and interview study with teachers in England, we explored the question of teachers' understandings of practice for wellbeing in secondary schools. As fieldwork took place in England, July 2021–February 2022, inevitably, the context of the Covid-19 pandemic, the school return of 2021 and the landscape of policy uncertainty around Teacher Assessed Grades, alongside the rhetoric of "catch up" at the time, shaped the nature of discussions (e.g. Harmey & Moss, 2021). Schools and individual teachers nonetheless reflected on innovations and shifts of focus towards wellbeing in schools as the year had progressed, and their reservations towards these.

Subsequently, teachers considered key issues for the sustainable future of schooling in the light of the changes that took place prior to and during the pandemic, as well as wider twenty-first-century shifts and crises which frame what we describe here as an "imaginary" for wellbeing in schools. We draw out this "imaginary" based on teachers' comments on desirable practice for wellbeing, from both experience, and their ideas from reading, sharing practice and discussion. We chose to bring together these ideas and label this as

an “imaginary” because, largely, teachers in the study were drawing on ideas or experience from extracurricular events, clubs, visits or alternative provision rather than their day-to-day practice. There was nonetheless a consistency in their “vision” for how an education more authentically oriented towards wellbeing would look and feel, and what sort of principles might guide it.

We next present the methodology and key results of reflexive thematic analysis of teachers’ discussions.

Methodology

At the time of this research study in England, schools were returning after the second of two periods of lengthy school closure and a rapidly changing policy landscape around high stakes assessment (Harmey & Moss, 2021). Discourse and policy focus on “wellbeing for education recovery” (DfE, 2021) was experienced by many teachers and schools to be subsumed by a focus on restoring normality and re-establishing nationally awarded grades (Wilson et al., 2023b). In previous focus group and interview studies, teachers had articulated how these forces shaped two contrasting articulations of school purpose in its aspirations towards wellbeing (see Figure 1 to summarise).

Research design

This focus group and interview study was designed as the third round of data collection for a three-part qualitative research project exploring teachers’ understandings of wellbeing, their practice for wellbeing, and barriers/tensions experienced around wellbeing

‘Doing well’ and neoliberal education	‘Being well’ and education for care/relationality
-Pressure to perform what it is to ‘do well’ in schools was consciously contradictory to teachers’ ideas of wellbeing and flourishing	- A ‘positive feedback loop’ was proposed between a teacher’s sense of satisfaction and student wellbeing
-According to teachers, ‘doing well’ should build from ‘being well’, yet instead the two were framed as in competition for resources	- Interbeing, interdependence and quality relationships were seen as key to teacher and student flourishing (hence a broader sense of ‘doing well’)
-A rigid system of decision-making impeded teachers’ capacities to proceed according to care ethics when neoliberal ‘doing well’ was the dominant educational purpose	-Decision-making based on the purpose of ‘being well’ pointed to an expanded view of relationality for teachers and students, considering the needs and lessons to be learned of the body, the community, and the environment

Figure 1. A summary of key implications from teachers’ views on “doing well” and “being well” (Wilson et al., 2023a, 2023b).

in secondary schools. The collection of data at three stages was to support the richness and validity of findings, so as to enable teacher reflection and connection within focus groups, to tell the story of the development of teachers' ideas through the project, to support participant validation (Birt et al., 2016) of research findings at each data collection point, and to enable us to consider the influence of changing circumstances in the policy and practice landscape throughout the project. Each study was distributed through the academic year, roughly lined up to one round of interviews/focus groups per academic term. The first and second studies are reported in previous articles (Wilson et al., 2023a, 2023b); findings for these two parts are not reported in detail here.

Teachers recruited for studies one and two were invited back to participate in this third study, which was positioned to provide a retrospective on the academic year 2020–2021; to enable teachers to consider and build on earlier findings from the research project; and to share practice for wellbeing in secondary schools. New recruits to the study were also invited. The focal questions of Study 3 were:

How do teachers understand wellbeing in school practice?

What barriers/tensions do they experience in the promotion of wellbeing in schools?

Participants

Twenty secondary teachers from twelve schools took part in this study (part three of the research project). Fifteen teachers had joined from the outset of the project. Five additional teachers were new to the research project, having connected via other participants of the study/word of mouth, or contacting the lead researcher following advertisement on social media. The participants who discontinued involvement in the study after studies one or two did so for reasons of moving on roles, or a need to let go of additional commitments to balance workload.

One teacher was in a state-maintained secondary for special educational needs. All other participants' schools were state-maintained mainstream schools, one with on-site alternative provision.

Figure 2 shows the teacher roles and experience of participants.

Gender ratio: 80% female, 20% male.

By comparison to UK teaching workforce ratio (GOV.UK, 2023a): 76% female, 24% male (Secondary: 65% female, 35% male).

Ethics

The study was conducted in line with the University of Nottingham Ethical Review Process (approval Ref: 2020/2023) and meets the Taylor and Francis ethics guidelines. We aimed to provide an ethos in which professionals could discuss matters of wellbeing openly. We were also mindful of the potential threat posed to professional identities in neoliberal education when critically discussing tensions presented within the research so far. Further to asking participants to be aware of ground rules (commitment to confidentiality; listening openly; allowing everyone to contribute), it was important to highlight further support available for any wellbeing matters. The specialised Education Support¹ helpline was highlighted to participants.

Role	Number of participants	Years of experience (range) at start of involvement in project
Assistant Heads (Maths/Science)	2	7-19
Subject Leads (English; Languages; Science)	3	6-14
Teachers of English / English and Media (no additional role)	3	6-7
Teacher of Geography	1	<1
Teachers of Languages	3	1-7
Teacher of Maths	1	8
Teacher of Outdoors Education	1	3
Teacher of PE	1	18
Year Pastoral Lead (Specialisms: English, History, Science)	5	7-22

Figure 2. Teacher participant sample showing roles and years of experience.

Data collection

Teachers were invited to take part in focus groups or interviews (based on availability) between July 2021 and February 2022. Teachers were encouraged to take part in focus group formats where possible to promote collegiate conversation and the sharing of ideas, but where this was not possible, interviews were arranged. The focus groups and interviews were semi-structured. The first section of the discussions involved sharing responses to examples of practice for wellbeing provided by teachers in schools within the research project. The second section of the discussion involved a short presentation of the themes of the previous focus groups from Spring 2021, and used a hierarchical focusing approach (Tomlinson, 1989) to support a conversation around these themes. Teachers were encouraged to respond to themes according to areas they agreed, disagreed with or felt unclear on. The facilitation role was to support discussion and exploration of themes as natural to participants.

Part 1: “How do teachers understand wellbeing in school practice?”

Teachers were invited to share examples of practice for wellbeing in their own school settings ahead of the focus groups and interviews, via email or via Microsoft Teams groups. Two teachers came forward ahead of meeting with examples they wanted to share in

more detail, and these examples then became stimuli for discussion. The first example was a whole school mind–body practice introduced as a feature of daily afternoon teaching in one school setting, the only teacher participant in a fully SEN setting. The approach was introduced to address difficulties with classroom behaviour and students being unsettled in the afternoons. The second example selected was a whole school approach to teaching counselling skills to all staff. A document was shared summarising the approach of this training which was provided for all staff in the school. An additional list was created of salient examples of wellbeing practice mentioned throughout interviews and focus groups from the study. This list included:

- Forest School facilities within the onsite provision for a set of secondary schools
- Mental health first aid training to all pastoral staff
- Use of Anna Freud Centre training on Mental Health and Wellbeing for teachers, internally sharing within one school
- Colour zones of regulation used across the school (Kuypers, 2011), drawing on social, emotional learning and trauma-informed research

In addition, all participants were invited to come along with specific examples of programmes and approaches to discuss, whether small or larger scale within their school or Trust. Some examples of these are discussed in the results section of this article.

Part 2: “What barriers/tensions do they experience in the promotion of wellbeing in schools?”

Early themes emerging from Study 2 focus group and interview discussions (based on a first round of reflexive thematic analysis) were shared with participants and a summary list of themes was then provided in order to encourage participants to explore their understandings of these themes. The themes are shown in [Figure 3](#).

Data analysis

The data from the focus groups and interviews was recorded and transcribed for reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2019, 2020) using NVivo12. A process of manual coding at word and sentence level was undertaken on all data, resulting in 203 codes.

Wellbeing treated as an ‘add-on’
Expertise for cognitive <i>and</i> emotional growth
‘Catch up’ or ‘catch all’ – reviewing the role of teachers with teachers
Governance and teaching evaluation methods that reflect performance (doing well) and/or health (being well)
Moving with the times – adapting to a changing world

Figure 3. Themes from initial analysis of Spring 2021 focus groups/interviews discussed with participants.

Main-theme 1: Teaching in a neoliberal context in the 2020s
<i>Sub-theme i – Competing currents: ‘Old habits die hard’ – Wellbeing and the return to the old normal</i>
<i>Sub-theme ii – ‘We are just everywhere’ – What teachers do and what they ‘should’ do</i>
Main-theme 2: Reimagining priorities in school: Challenges and hopes
<i>Sub-theme i – Going ‘out of the realms of the classroom’</i>
<i>Sub-theme ii – Movement, opening and the outdoors</i>

Figure 4. Study 3 themes (present study).

A data-driven approach to coding was taken. Nonetheless, codes were inevitably informed by the themes from the previous two studies described in this research project (Wilson et al., 2023a, 2023b). These codes were then developed into an initial set of themes or “stories” of the data, before a shared review of the themes and data as a research team. The reflexive themes were subsequently refined to consolidate overlapping issues, and also to isolate sub-themes. The themes identified are shown in Figure 4.

Positionality

Our positions as educators inform and potentially shape the research; we highlight the capacity of these perspectives to enrich our insights into the data from lived experience. We are also mindful of the potential for our experience to influence our findings; nonetheless, we believe that the design of this research project which, throughout, has involved returning to review participants’ views on the analysis of findings and an invitation to deepen these, provides a useful strategy of triangulation which has deepened our capacity for drawing out meaning from the data.

Limitations

The design of this research project is in the tradition of small-scale qualitative studies. It provides a rich set of exemplar teacher experiences, as they pertain to the circumstances of time and place which shape this study (the English mainstream secondary context, schools regionally local to the University of Nottingham with which the researchers had connections or could travel to, the time period of the second academic year of the Covid-19 pandemic: 2020–2021). Participants on this project wanted to discuss the topic of wellbeing in schools, and therefore had an interest in the issue and how it relates to teachers. Consequently, the data we share is inevitably the product of a set of specific views and experience which cannot be applied to every teacher’s position on wellbeing. Participants in the study were more likely to be female, meaning gender differences are likely to influence our findings. This is pertinent given the roots of care research in feminist scholarship. Nonetheless, the gender ratio in the sample approaches the proportions in the wider teaching workforce in the UK (GOV.UK, 2023a). The design of the study, and the themes drawn out of the data from these discussions offer strong indicators around the concerns of teachers in a range of different school settings and roles,

and their needs and imaginaries for how the approach to wellbeing in schools is and could be shaped in the future. These analyses provide clues as to why recent policy measures to strengthen wellbeing provision in school teaching approaches result in barriers on the ground, pointing to further enquiry opportunities around the evidence base for such changes.

Analysis

During the reflexive analysis of this study's data, two apparently conflicting thematic strands became apparent. The first strand related to the reestablishment of neoliberal "business as usual". Entailed within this, was the way in which neoliberal conditions both seeded a need to address wellbeing and simultaneously entrenched barriers to practice for wellbeing: this seems to be the neoliberal-wellbeing paradox. The second strand demonstrated how teachers' vision for wellbeing (a) breaks with neoliberal norms and (b) is rooted in a re-emphasis upon relationships of care amongst people and place. We seek to directly point out these two contradictory forces and offer empirical evidence in support of such discussions whilst signposting implications for theory/practice.

Teaching in a neoliberal context in the 2020s

In this theme, we represent beneath one umbrella the fragmented issues and frustrations voiced by teachers when wellbeing is structured as an "add-on" to the neoliberal emphasis on "doing well".

Competing currents: "old habits die hard" – return to the old normal

Concurring with our focus group study undertaken at the return from school closures in Spring 2021, one teacher in this study summarised how an appetite for reset and recovery had been superseded by the dominance of the educational aim of performance of "doing well" (Wilson et al., 2023a). A policy focus on curriculum "catch up" was described as "problematic (and) unhelpful" (Participant V):

It's almost like we've just gone back to how we worked before without really ... learning anything. (Participant V, Teacher of English)

Teachers described the challenge of a policy history of "picking and choosing" (Participant I, Head of Languages), articulated as a means of communicating the apparent incoherence of education policy, as experienced by teachers over their careers, and exemplified at the particular moment in 2021, as schools returned from consecutive lockdowns. This incoherence was represented in the policy discourse around school return, so "recovery curriculum" and funds and resources allocated to schools following school return, such as the "Wellbeing for Education Return and Recovery Grants" (DfE, 2021) were overshadowed by a system that was ultimately focused on grades:

The problem ... is ... what we're measured on isn't it? ... We have to get a certain ... score ... we don't get measured on ... well we do a little bit but you know "are your children nice"? ... That's not the biggest priority. It's all ... "what grades have they got?" Until you get rid of league tables and things like that it won't change. (Participant F, Head of English)

So the return to “old normal” was immediately dominant in our participants’ accounts of school return in spite of a purported recovery focus.

Counter-current: wellbeing as an increasing focus of teaching and leadership practice

Nonetheless, teachers and leaders in this study described an increase in the salience of, and focus on, wellbeing both in their own practice and in the approach of school leaders. Examples included: full roll-out of mental health first aid training to all pastoral leads in one school; a whole school afternoon mind–body practice in another; adopting emotion coaching training for all staff; and an example of a Multi-Academy Trust investing in Forest School facilities and provision for secondary schools across the Trust (the second trust to do this in the study). These were all examples of new programmes and provisions being brought in over the course of the academic year 2020–2021. Thus, a counter-current to performativity was visible in the accounts.

Teachers concurred with the literature (e.g. Brady & Wilson, 2021; Weare, 2022) that whole school approaches which were pro-active, well-resourced, and where both training and provision were allocated time within the timetabled day, were key, yet not the norm. Teachers described their complicity in the culture of performativity. As one teacher put it: “teachers make work for teachers!” (Participant I, Head of Languages). Still, participants emphasised the need to reclaim time and space from other pursuits to develop embedded routines for wellbeing for staff and students within the school day, rather than leaving an expectation for teachers to develop this area beyond their timetabled days on top of their other responsibilities:

... just allowing teachers ... within their work hours ... because sometimes I think here comes the problem: you have to do your CPDs as well outside your work hours, and that’s where it does affect your wellbeing ... (Participant H, Teacher of Languages)

So teachers and schools reflected the importance of wellbeing but as with other research (e.g. Brady & Wilson, 2021; Creagh et al., 2023), wellbeing training and opportunities for schools which seemed to be “extra” to work focused on “doing well” academically were seen as self-defeating.

“We are just everywhere” – what teachers do and what they “should” do

The focus groups in this study reflected back over an extraordinary academic year. From a preceding set of focus groups in the Spring of 2021, a central theme for discussion in the end-of-year focus groups became evident: discussing wellbeing in secondary schools led directly to questions of the role of the teacher. This, in turn, was shaped by the role of the teacher as determined by the neoliberal landscape.

Contextualising this issue, teachers described how well before the pandemic, schools were becoming a sort of “catch all” (from theme wording generated in Spring focus groups – Wilson et al., 2023b) for students’ concerns in and beyond the school environment. Teachers shared their frustrations that, due to an emphasis on dense subject content, the space for creativity, spontaneity and group work in teaching had been long lost, yet:

Schools are picking up things (where) perhaps there are, or have been in the past, people better placed to do that ... and that’s now being the responsibility of ... schools generally ... I think that’s been exacerbated by the pandemic. (Participant W, Head of Year)

So according to these accounts, the role of the teacher and school is now necessarily about wider matters of care for “being well”, rather than a sole focus on performance, despite a system which inadequately acknowledges this.

Teachers discussed a variety of approaches being taken in schools to address challenges to wellbeing, with the focal discussion around a counselling skills course offered to all staff in one school, as an example of practice to cultivate a culture of listening and support. One Head of Year reflected on the merits of such an approach as being around building teachers’ confidence and agency to engage with students’ needs directly, rather than consistently passing them on to dedicated pastoral teams:

there’s almost a culture that’s flourished now of “that is somebody’s job in an office to deal with”. And my job is this ... It’s almost staff feeling that ... they’re not specialized enough to deal with stuff when actually all you need to do is listen. (Participant X, Head of Year)

Yet as one teacher put it:

at the moment, we are just everywhere. It’s just coping right? We were coping with what we’ve got, coping with the times and the fact that all the teachers just want the kids to be okay, and doing our best, and muddling through. And we’re not counsellors or therapists ... we’re just trying. (Participant M, Teacher of Languages)

Teachers contrasted the view of teacher as purveyor of academic knowledge with practice that emphasises:

embedding wellbeing into everything you do and the way you deliver. And to look after students ... talk about how you’re in “loco parentis” so ... you are caring for them. It’s about not just focusing on the end goal. It’s about the process and making the process nice for students and staff. (Participant S, Science Lead)

Questions were raised about how much was falling to teachers and schools in terms of child-rearing matters traditionally handled in the home/community, alongside the challenge of reducing obligations that have gradually accumulated, as more health and wellbeing responsibilities have been allocated to schools. The pressure experienced by teachers because of being pulled in contradictory directions appeared counterproductive, either in enabling teachers to feel a sense of efficacy (to “do well”), or in enabling them to authentically practise care and compassion towards themselves and others (to “be well”).

Reimagining priorities in school: challenges and hopes for the future

Going “out of the realms of the classroom”

The benefits for students and staff of going “out of the realm of the classroom” were highlighted repeatedly in our data, in terms of relational benefits and skills:

There’s so much more to it ... getting to spend that time with those kids and see them in a different light to how you see them in the classroom ... seeing kids who perhaps aren’t academically the most able and aren’t really that bothered about the academic side of things, but then they’re a really good leader, and they’re really good at encouraging people in their groups and it’s just really lovely to be able to see all that, to get out of the realm of the classroom and remind yourself that there’s more to these kids than just when they’re sat in rows facing the front trying their best to learn about energy (etc). (Participant W, Head of Year)

This point is one of many examples of references to the spaces in which teaching takes place, and its relationship to wellbeing practice. Indeed, one P.E. teacher spoke of her own discomfort at being enclosed within classrooms when not teaching practical PE lessons, and reflected: “if I feel like that, how do they feel after five lessons?” (Participant J). The suggestion that the traditional classroom space limits the possibilities for skill development and relationship building is a frequent motif.

It was emphasised repeatedly in this study, as in previous studies (Wilson et al., 2023a; 2023b) that the outdoors, extra-curricular activities or youth leadership elements of students’ education are being marginalised to emphasise subject knowledge acquisition and grade attainment. This effect is not only in terms of physical constraints. Teachers described the constraints they experienced from curriculum density and limited time with students as a key barrier in enabling them to deepen the quality of interaction with their students, to build relationships of care. As Noddings’ (2012) emphasises in her philosophy of care ethics in teaching practice, the role of conversation between teachers and students, imbued with authenticity and genuine emotional awareness is central to building the relational culture that underpins wellbeing, a sense of safety and promotion of emotional learning in the classroom:

We’re not teaching them ... what we need to be teaching them, which I know is a massive statement to make ... in terms of the curriculum itself ... I sometimes teach the lesson and I think: how am I actually preparing you for life outside of here? And I ... feel the conversations I have with them that aren’t necessarily linked to the lesson, that’s when we have the most important conversations that actually link to life outside of the classroom. (Participant L, Teacher of English)

Repeatedly, discussions in the focus groups recognised the need for what we define here as eco-psychological education, with opportunities for students to move and explore the natural world building connections with the needs of local and global communities.

Teachers described the view that the future of schooling rests on the framing of subject knowledge in the context of solving local and global problems:

I think things could be framed differently, so instead of the way I was in secondary school, I was just scared all the time it was “oh no, if I want a nice life ... I have to get these really, really good grades”. It was never ... “I need nice friends and a solid network” ... So ... I think if you framed all the subjects in a different way and put them into a context of: what global issues are there at the moment and how could we use these skills to help solve them? ... what can we do to be ... Kind, helpful citizens to create a nicer, better world instead of “how can you get the highest grade so you can get the biggest house and the biggest car?” ... that would be really helpful. (Participant B, Teacher of Maths)

Yet one organiser of the Duke of Edinburgh award cited the challenges of getting teachers involved in active citizenship work on top of their other commitments:

the main barrier that we have to (it) in school is staffing, and part of that is because it’s yet another thing that staff are being asked to come and do ... (Participant W, Head of Year)

Teachers highlighted the challenge of including students who are disadvantaged or lacking access to transport and parental support for extra-curricular activities when they are, as the name implies, extra, both in terms of time and resources.

... with these clubs ... are we targeting the right people, because we want the people that want to do it, but what about Johnny, who you know will never go to that club, and why isn't he going?

1. He's never experienced it ... and

2. He can't use the internet to log on ... (to order kit)

... because Dad doesn't know how to use the internet ... (Participant SC, Teacher of PE)

Questions were raised here, as elsewhere, in terms of addressing wellbeing practices at school that provision of outdoors and community-based opportunities be integrated in teachers' and students' timetabled days, available to all. Acknowledged, rather than being an extra. Yet time, money and policy were all considered factors of why this is not the case in mainstream schools:

I got an email today from a (parent) ... Her point was ... Can we set aside time for them to have a half termly trip for each year group and my short answer was no ... because of risk assessments and staff time and so on, but the deeper level that she was trying to get at is: there's so much thrown at them, especially later on in school and school life about performance and academic rigor. Have they not just got the time to enjoy themselves now?

... We need to have the ability and the confidence to ... relieve the top down pressure ... that would increase the sustainability in wellbeing ... (Participant X, Head of Year)

Movement, opening and the outdoors

Teachers in this study talked enthusiastically about Forest School as a provision seeing new uptake at secondary schools included within the research project, whether that be for the purpose of supporting inclusion and student resilience, persisting through wild weather, engaging in making, building or problem solving outdoors, or for:

providing those students with something different that perhaps suits them a bit better ... if that encourages greater buy-in in the wider things in school I can see how that would have a really positive impact on their wellbeing. (Participant T, Assistant Head)

The valuing of outdoors provision outside the classroom was seen in the significant commitments of time and resources in two secondary schools participating in the project, one of which was to be used for all students across a Multi-Academy Trust. Teachers spoke of the perception that Forest School was increasingly available at Primary level, but not a provision widely adopted in secondary education, reinforcing the notion that there is a narrowing of educational provision around secondary exam subjects and performance measures (Maguire et al., 2019):

This is not big in secondary. Definitely a primary school thing. (Participant F)

two out of the 8 feeders that we've got at (our school) are Forest schools so effectively that support has been ripped away the second they've transitioned up into secondary. (Participant X)

Nonetheless, an Assistant Head within one such Trust emphasised the need to carefully consider the framing of these provisions, highlighting the ever pervading current towards treating education solely as a training ground for academic attainment:

This is the first thing that our school jumped up to do with it: oh, we could take them there and they could learn Maths and English for two days in a different environment ... I worry that you know they've built this facility and they're losing some of what's amazing about it. (Participant A, Assistant Head)

A challenge is faced in promoting the outdoors here, when neoliberal education requires that such approaches/resources be justified in terms of "doing well".

Teachers talked about how the scope for moving and making creative use of spaces was inherently linked to their capacity to adapt to their students and build relationships, as well as to build students' agency rather than restrict it:

I think it's a massive thing because every single room is set up with that whiteboard or these chairs; it's same, same, same until you get out to PE or cooking ... (Participant J, Teacher of PE)

Movement and going outdoors stimulated the imagination and afforded opportunities to work with students' moods. They were associated with creativity, positive feeling and relationships: thus fostering "being well". For most classroom teachers of academic subjects, flexibility in movement and space was an aspiration rather than core to practice. Teachers spoke of their hopes for educational practice for wellbeing:

using imagination loads more and being in nature more, and living with less. Like I think that would be so beneficial if we could expose kids to that in schools, get them to open their minds a bit about how we can live differently. (Participant B, Teacher of Maths)

(to) develop their own sense of who they are and their place in the world and how they want the world to be around them. (Participant V, Teacher of English)

"Being in nature" and developing "a sense of their place in the world" again speaks to a place-based, ecopsychological understanding of wellbeing practice. Building on this notion of greater flexibility in the use of affordances offered by spaces, and avenues within (or beyond) the curriculum, teachers' descriptions implied an authentic engagement with "being well" as entailing connectedness to community and place, both as individual practitioners, and as a school:

we need to be a bit more outward looking and accept that there are other things around us that we need to tap into ... we're not just here for bits of paper ... that say grades on them. It's ... a case of ... a more sustainable, well sort of broader ... aspect of sustainability, saying that actually we're here to serve the local community. And what does that need? ... it can't be doing much good for kids who are realising that actually it comes to school and it's becoming more and more different to the world they're seeing outside. (Participant X)

These examples point to a growing awareness of the importance of taking learners outside the traditional classroom, engaging the "web of care" and lessons from interactions with the immediate community, nature and place around them.

Discussion

Although this study asked teachers to reflect about their practice for wellbeing, participants' responses were deeply entangled with constraints imposed by neoliberal education structures juxtaposed with both relational and eco-sensitive ideas as alternatives. The data in this study described once again how a focus on progress

measures and “academic attainment”, conceptualised within our work as “doing well” by performance indicators, overshadowed a well-meaning focus on wellbeing within education recovery during 2021, where wellbeing is conceived by schools in the neoliberal system as an “add-on” to attainment. As such, teachers’ and students’ care-giving, and need for care-receiving was experienced as running against the prevailing current. Yet, in correspondence with advocates of embodied and ecological understandings of education (Finn & Phillips, 2023; O’Toole & Simovska, 2022) via work “outside the realm of the classroom”, teachers pointed to the importance of building relationships with community, place and “the world” for student development, and wellbeing practice in teaching.

Matters of care undermined

Teachers conveyed how the dominance of “doing well” as the established, and oft-unquestioned axiom in educational policy and purpose is well-rooted in a nexus of established power structures and histories which teachers and schools feel coerced into upholding. This culminates in a logic of following “what we’re measured on” (Participant F) to become an agenda of “we must compete for the best grades” above all else (our own wording). Teachers understood that this was a paradigm shaped at an international level, by economic logic of competition between nation states. This set of circumstances has not gone away post-pandemic, despite efforts to prevent the “gamifying” and injustices of such a system (Maguire et al., 2019).

As with other literature, it is important to trouble the taken-for-granted notion that schooling exists to serve greater equity, opportunity and wellbeing within communities and society (Ball & Collet-Sabé, 2022; Francis et al., 2017; Phillips & Finn, 2022). Furthermore, whilst care for wellbeing and the “in loco parentis” role (Participant S) are considered pillars of the teaching role (Hordern, 2021; Noddings, 2003), we see evidence of the pertinence of Puig de la Bellacasa’s caution that care as maintenance, repair and attention “can be done within and for worlds that we might find objectionable” (Puig de la Bellacasa, 2017, p. 6), as evidenced by Participant F above. This, particularly given that opportunities for reset and refocus on trauma-informed cultures of care (Emerson, 2022) during education recovery have reportedly been swept aside in favour of the return to an attainment focus. In such a dynamic, the space for Noddings’ (2003, 2012, 2013) emphasis on listening, conversation and responsiveness is squeezed out of practice.

Teachers were ultimately concerned that their care was in service of a system which asks “what grades have they got?” (Participant I) over and above questions like “what are children’s capacities for agency, relational support, and work on the self?” (our wording). Rather teachers described ethically problematic messaging around how to live well, and in relation to what a good life looks like: “how can you get the highest grade so you can get the biggest house and the biggest car?” (Participant B). These conditions, characteristic of the neoliberal era, are widely critiqued for undermining relationality and care (Phillips & Finn, 2022; Tronto, 2017). Here we demonstrate how these forces are played out in secondary school classrooms in England as they came through the pandemic. We hence strongly question the claims made in policy guidance (e.g. DfE, 2019) that a focus on attainment, in its current form, aligns with education for “being well”.

Participants described how they considered much of the most important learning in their job came through “those conversations” (Participants L) that happen spontaneously

in relational interactions, in the space between highly structured content and delivering objectives, and through learning “out of the realm of the classroom” (Participant W). In spite of this conviction, teachers voiced frustration that the key priorities they were exposed to in returning from the school closures of the pandemic continued to be centred around the “unhelpful” (Participant V) notion of “catch up”, with a focus on “all this cognitive stuff” (Participant I) whilst the emotional and relational was a grey area, acknowledged but ultimately swept aside. This seems highly regrettable given increasing post-pandemic rates of Special Educational Needs diagnoses (GOV.UK, 2023b), significant rises in adolescent mental health needs (Garratt, Kirk-Wade & Long, 2024) and increased rates of non-attendance/elected opting out of mainstream education (e.g. Burtonshaw & Dorrell, 2023; Long & Danechi, 2023). Surely this is the time to reprioritise care in education.

The future is relational, embodied and turned towards the world

Repeatedly, teachers talked about the importance of space “out of the realm of the classroom” for wellbeing, and the value of breaking from the constraints of classroom spaces. Space was both to do with exposure to the outdoors, acknowledgement of the body in the learning process (as opposed to brain/cognition only) and to the opportunity to learn from dynamic environments centring neither teacher nor student. It was also about the capacity to exercise agency. In the context of extra-curricular and outdoor learning, teachers described seeing students come into their confidence and developing leadership skills, alongside making connections for themselves between different knowledge domains. Thus, teachers demonstrated the role of these broader, embodied and contextualised learning experiences for a broader conception of “doing well” underpinned by “being well”.

Teachers considered that activities and approaches that took students outdoors, out of school settings and into new environments were undervalued and yet should be integrated far more consistently into secondary school provision. Notably forthcoming National Nature Education Park and Climate Leaders Awards may provide opportunities for English schools to prioritise such approaches (DfE, 2022) as they prioritise embedding the educational right of all children to a connection with nature/the environment in spite of the UK’s status as one of the most nature depleted countries in Europe (State of Nature Partnership, 2023).

We described in our first study within the project that teachers identified the role of the body and its relationship to space (e.g. classroom space, outdoor learning contexts, and the environment – extending to the community, national and global environment) as central to their conceptualisations of wellbeing and teaching practice (Wilson et al., 2023a). Teachers also spoke about the need to better address self-development and our relationship to the world through the curriculum via framing learning as solutions to global (and local) problems. All this supports Biesta’s (2022) recent proposal to the problem of subjectification in education, as world-centred education, in which teachers turn the attention of their students to what “the world” has to teach them.

What ties together these conceptions, and also the centrality of relationships and care in teaching that prioritises being well, is an educational philosophy of interconnectedness centred on relationships and place (e.g. White, 2017). We therefore return to this finding

to consider its relevance to applications of ecological psychology to education. Alongside others (e.g. Billington et al., 2022), Phillips and Finn (2022) problematise the way learning is conceptualised within the school system via constructivist traditions which treat the learner and the world as separate. Emphasising that learning is relational, as does our research, but to the environment around us as well as to other humans, they consider how pedagogy may reflect the realities of emergent learning from the environment and the body's actions and perceptions within it, to conceive of a simultaneously more relational and agentic understanding of pedagogy and learning.

They emphasise the observation from eco-behavioural science that humans and other species “perceive to learn and learn to perceive” (p. 21) highlighting the role of the sensory, the body in its environment, and of learning through building awareness of what are known as “affordances” – perceiving possibilities for action and agency through relationship with one's environment. In a time when the average young person in England (as internationally) has a notably higher proportion of “screen time” than “green time” (Oswald et al., 2020), it seems the educational need that schools must fulfil needs to shift. This would entail offering more opportunities to engage with the non-cognitive, relational and environmental, thus prioritising “being well” and enabling “doing well” as a by product, through the intellectual and motivational development that subsequently occurs.

Bringing this back to the classroom, wellbeing and the frustrations and hopes of teachers in our study, we conjecture that frustrations with the classroom, and conversely, positivity about learning opportunities “out of the realm of the classroom” are suggestive of the limits that the decontextualised classroom environment places on students' and teachers' agency to cater to such needs. Equally, this is not simply a limitation embedded in the spaces but in the perceptions, understandings and worldviews of teachers, their pedagogical practices and the curriculum. We suggest from our data that going “outside the classroom” cultivates this relationality and capacity for agency in learning in a way that the classroom space and the territorial organisation of the school environment may not.

Within the limits of this article, we acknowledge that the implications of these theoretical directions are under-explored. We nonetheless point to lessons to be learned from environmental and place-based education and, in this study, have pointed to evidence that these practice traditions should be examined both in terms of approaches to embedding sustainability and wellbeing in education.

Concluding remarks

Through the analysis of these in-depth focus groups and interviews with teachers on perspectives of wellbeing in English secondary schools during the academic year 2020–2021, we highlight the paradoxical nature of wellbeing approaches implemented within a neo-liberal system. This context limits the capacity for agency, trust and collaboration between teachers. Yet, highlighting the paradox, neoliberal norms appear accompanied by a growing openness and awareness amongst teachers of the importance of the world beyond the classroom, and breaking with the constraints of the exam-driven curriculum. We point to recent empirical and theoretical work which draws parallels between this conception of wellbeing as educational purpose and a realisation of the need to see

wellbeing, in concept and practice, as a product of a deep relationship with the world. This entails developing embodied self-awareness, and strong connections to community, place and environment.

Teachers talked about the need to better accommodate relationships in balance with the delivery of the curriculum, also highlighting the role of neoliberal educational culture in constraining attempts to embed wellbeing, as they occur through piecemeal initiatives shouldered by individuals in under-resourced contexts. In this scenario, “being well” is instrumentalised to attain “doing well” rather than the other way around. Nonetheless, we also see an acknowledgement that the culture is made by teachers and leaders, as well as policy-makers: “teachers make work for teachers!” (Participant I). As teachers and leaders are increasingly alert to the reconfiguration of priorities entailed in a secondary education that aims at wellbeing, they have the power to play an important role in reshaping constraining structures and policies. Nonetheless, they emphasise the need for support “from the top”.

Still, as one Head of Year put it, “bravery” (Participant X) and conviction of will are entailed to let go of previous priorities. Teachers’ views indicate that this move is required, for the necessary allocation of time to embedding a school experience which builds a web of care in and beyond the classroom, alongside high-quality opportunities for young people to connect with the world, and through it, themselves.

Note

1. <https://www.educationsupport.org.uk/>.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Data availability statement

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

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