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Are schools doing enough? An exploration of how primary schools in England support the well-being of their teachers

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Abstract

Though teacher well-being (TWB) has been decreasing over time, there is an identified lack of awareness in schools across England on how settings can support TWB. To address this gap, this study provides teachers with a space to share their conceptualizations of well-being, evaluate current school-level TWB provisions, and provide recommendations for ways that existing TWB support could be enhanced. Semi-structured interviews and focus groups were conducted with 16 primary school teachers across England. Reflexive thematic analytic findings indicated that participants defined well-being in relation to their unique contexts, and cited some current school practices, including school and academy-wide support and social support, as being effective for TWB. However, participants emphasized that they perceived current TWB provisions as tokenistic, which was suggested to be accentuated by poor understandings of TWB and pressures from the Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted) and COVID-19. To address these issues, participants outlined the need for improvements in communication, the attitudes and approaches of Senior Leadership Teams toward TWB, increased provisions to both manage and decrease workload and increasing the amount of time that they have to meet

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expectations. Implications for policy and practice to enhance TWB are discussed.

KEYWORDS

England, primary school, reflexive thematic analysis, Senior Leadership Team, teacher mental health, teacher well-being

Practitioner points

- Teachers' definitions of well-being were rooted in their experiences of their school. Specifically, they explained their definition was informed by relationships with other staff and their perceptions of the organizational structures of their settings.
- Support from schools, academy-wide, and social networks was identified as the most beneficial for supporting teacher well-being (TWB) in primary schools across England.
- Future TWB support should include enhancing the quality of communication between teaching staff and Senior Leadership Teams, increasing provisions to both manage and decrease workload and providing sufficient time for teachers to meet demands.

1 | INTRODUCTION

Teachers are the “civic soil” for developing kind, innovative, and conscientious future generations—therefore, their well-being should be a globally shared interest (Liu et al., 2018, p. 129). However, teacher well-being (TWB) has declined significantly in recent years, alongside increases in rates of occupational stress and burnout (Aloe et al., 2014), lower levels of life satisfaction (Office for Standards in Education [Ofsted], 2019), and 4% increases in long-lasting mental health problems (Jerrim et al., 2021). Furthermore, it is suggested that one third of teachers leave the profession within their first 5 years because of the consequences of the role on their mental health and well-being (Ofsted, 2019), which, coupled with the global concerns of low teacher retention rates (Organization for Economic Co-operations and Development [OECD], 2018), highlights the importance of both policymakers and employers taking the well-being of teachers seriously to improve teacher retention (McCallum, 2021).

Effective TWB provisions have been found to have a positive influence on both the social and academic achievement of pupils, in addition to improving the mental health and well-being of teachers themselves (Briner & Dewberry, 2007; Roffey, 2012; Split et al., 2011; Turner & Thielking, 2020). However, many current TWB approaches have been found to be “tokenistic, reactive [and] designed for organizations that are not schools” (Dabrowski, 2020, p. 37), often ignoring the intricacies of individual settings and failing to consider the need for school-level well-being interventions (Naghieh et al., 2015). Furthermore, the COVID-19 pandemic has been suggested to have amplified the pressures on teaching staff (Dabrowski, 2020; Kim et al., 2021; McDonough & Lemon, 2022), with the number of school staff in England and Wales who cited the pandemic as a factor that contributed to their poor mental health and well-being rising from 33% to 62% between 2020 and 2021 (Education Support, 2021).

Therefore, this study contributes to existing TWB literature by building upon previous TWB studies (e.g., Brady & Wilson, 2021; McCallum & Price, 2016) and taking a qualitative approach that allows teachers in England to voice what they believe has been, and will be, helpful for their well-being. In line with previous qualitative studies (e.g., Kim & Asbury, 2020), an essentialist epistemology is adopted that enables the researcher to explore the experiences, meanings, and realities of participants (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Through this, practitioners are provided with space to discuss ways that they feel support for their well-being could be enhanced, providing meaningful recommendations for future TWB practices.

1.1 | Teacher well-being: Its decline and consequences

To provide context to this study, it is important to begin by defining and discussing both well-being itself and the current landscape of TWB, as well as the reasoning behind this study's particular focus on primary school teachers.

Well-being is defined as an essential component of a person's overall mental health (Iasiello et al., 2020; World Health Organization, 2022), and is presented throughout research as a multi-dimensional construct consisting of material (e.g., being economically comfortable), relational (e.g., having good interpersonal relationships), and subjective (e.g., feeling satisfied with life) factors (Disabato et al., 2016; Dodge et al., 2012; Heintzelman, 2018; Linley et al., 2009; White, 2010). However, due to the subjective nature of well-being, it has been suggested that it is neither tangible nor quantifiable (Bricheno et al., 2009; Dodge et al., 2012). Consequently, educational policies have often failed to both measure and account for well-being (Bricheno et al., 2009; Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2018; Fraillon, 2004; Frijters et al., 2020; McLeod & Wright, 2016; Selwyn & Wood, 2015).

A 2021 survey of school staff in England and Wales reported that 44% of teachers felt that their school failed to support their well-being, and 53% of teachers stated that they had thought about leaving the teaching profession due to pressures on their well-being and mental health (Education Support, 2021). It was also outlined that while organizations have improved staff awareness and implementation of well-being policies, levels of stress, anxiety, excessive workloads, and a lack of work–life balance remain unsustainable and increasingly damaging to TWB (Education Support, 2021). The figure *Comparison by Education Phase* (Education Support, 2021, p. 56) illustrates how primary school teachers and those working in early years settings reported the most significant decreases in their well-being between 2020 and 2021 in comparison to teachers in other educational phases, with the exception of those working in vocational education sectors. Therefore, in response to these conclusions, primary school teachers were chosen as the focus of this study.

The decline in TWB has clear consequences for both schools and students, negatively impacting teacher retention (Cooper Gibson Research, 2018; McCallum, 2021), teacher quality (Mingren & Shiquan, 2018), pupils' social and academic achievement (Briner & Dewberry, 2007; Roffey, 2012; Spilt et al., 2011; Turner & Thielking, 2020), and the organization of schools as a whole (Borman & Dowling, 2017). Thus, the need for why schools should be motivated to support the well-being of their teachers is clear. Fundamentally, school leaders are required to build prevention and support for teacher's mental health and well-being into daily practice (Office for Health Improvement and Disparities [OHID], 2022), which is suggested to be even more crucial in a post-COVID-19 environment (Dabrowski, 2020; Kim et al., 2021; McDonough & Lemon, 2022). An array of studies also outline the correlation between supporting TWB and the creation of positive environments for pupils, including promoting their academic successes (Spilt et al., 2011), enabling better recognition of their needs (Turner & Thielking, 2020), and maximizing their well-being (Harding et al., 2019; Roffey, 2012).

Studies also stress the positive correlation between TWB interventions and improvements in classroom environments (Carroll et al., 2021; Harding et al., 2019; Turner & Thielking, 2020). Conversely, a lack of TWB support has been found to result in teachers facing high levels of stress and burnout, resulting in them experiencing difficulties in forming positive relationships with pupils and effective learning environments (Collie et al., 2012; Jennings & Greenberg, 2009; Shen et al., 2012). Additionally, TWB has been suggested to be linked closely to teacher quality (Mingren & Shiquan, 2018); therefore, low levels of TWB have been cited as a factor that can affect the organization of schools as a whole (Borman & Dowling, 2017). However, teachers with high well-being have been suggested to be more likely to display increased commitment and remain in the profession (Collie et al., 2011; Viac & Fraser, 2020), which is a particularly noteworthy

conclusion in view of the large numbers of teachers that leave teaching (Education Support, 2021; McCallum & Price, 2010; OECD, 2018), and emphasizes the importance of increased TWB support to improve teacher retention (Cooper Gibson Research, 2018; McCallum, 2021; Ofsted, 2019).

1.2 | Support to enhance teacher well-being

TWB can be supported through various means, at a national policy-, school-, and individual teacher-level (Viac & Fraser, 2020). Following suggestions from theoretical models that highlight the role of school environments on TWB (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009; Liu et al., 2018; Viac & Fraser, 2020), this study gives particular attention to the school-level well-being support that is, or can be, provided to primary school teachers in England. Findings from across literature, policy and reports have highlighted multiple ways that TWB can be enhanced at a school-level, including through facilitating supportive, open and nurturing environments for TWB (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009; National Education Union [NEU], 2019; Viac & Fraser, 2020), promoting personal variables and positive relationships among school staff (Anna Freud National Centre for Children and Families, 2018; Bermejo-Toro et al., 2016; Education Support, 2021; Liu et al., 2018), and giving focus to teacher's individual beliefs, values and experiences (Department for Education [DfE], 2021a, p. 2; Liu et al., 2018; McCallum & Price, 2016).

Multiple studies have also reported on the significance of the levels of social support that are available in schools on TWB (Grenville-Cleave & Boniwell, 2012; Kinman et al., 2011; Turner et al., 2022), and out of the heterogeneity of results found in Hascher and Waber's (2021) systematic review, social support was found to have the most generalizability in supporting TWB. Additional studies have also highlighted the significance of teachers' perceptions of their school's culture on TWB (Brackett et al., 2010; Cohen et al., 2009; Collie et al., 2012; Ransford et al., 2009), and in Brady and Wilson's (2021) study, it was found that the most well-received TWB support was that which was embedded in school culture. Despite this, a literature review issued by the DfE (2019) highlighted a lack of evidence of schools taking a balanced approach toward TWB and a poor awareness in schools of how barriers toward TWB can be addressed. Therefore, the suggestions that are provided by literature, policy, and reports for TWB support are discussed in relation to the findings of this study.

1.3 | Present study

Three research questions (RQs) are explored throughout this study. These are: *How do teachers conceptualize well-being?* (RQ1), *What methods are in place to support TWB in primary schools in England at this time?* (RQ2), and *What support is needed to enhance well-being support for teachers?* (RQ3).

Before conducting this research, initial hypotheses (H) were also generated that aligned with each RQ. These were: teacher's conceptualizations of well-being will be rooted in the context of their schools (H1), current TWB support will include access to social support and school-wide policies for reducing demands (H2), and further provisions to enhance well-being support for teachers will largely focus on providing ways to decrease teacher workload and expectations (H3).

2 | METHODOLOGY

2.1 | Participants

Sixteen primary school class teachers in England (5 male and 11 female) volunteered to take part in a study exploring their perceptions of how their setting supports TWB. We specified that all participants should be active

TABLE 1 Characteristics of the participants.

Characteristic	% ^a	<i>n</i>
Age		
Aged 21–29	69	11
Aged 30–49	19	3
Aged 50+	12	2
Gender		
Male	31	5
Female	69	11
Geographical location ^b		
East	6	1
London	12	2
Midlands	18	3
North East	12	2
North West	6	1
South West	6	1
Yorkshire	40	6

^aNumbers have been rounded to the nearest integer for readability.

^bFor brevity, the geographical location that participants provided has been grouped into geographical regions of England.

class teachers and should not include out-of-class staff including nonteaching members of Senior Leadership Team (SLT) and support staff. The average age of the participants was 29.94 years old (SD = 10.04), ranging from 22 to 54 years old. Participants taught in various geographical locations across England. The characteristics of each of the 16 participants can be found below in Table 1.

Recruitment was conducted through a combination of both purposeful and snowball sampling to ensure that all participants had a shared interest in TWB, which would therefore enable them to provide in-depth reflections on the subject (Crouse & Lowe, 2018; Palinkas et al., 2015). Purposeful sampling describes a technique where participants who can provide detailed information on a given phenomenon are selected (Palinkas et al., 2015), and snowball sampling explains the process of recruiting additional participants through the recommendation of initially recruited participants (Naderifar et al., 2017; Parker et al., 2019). This process enables typically harder to reach groups—including busy professionals such as teachers (Rezabeck, 2000; Stewart et al., 2007)—to be reached in a more time-efficient manner. Although snowball sampling is not ideal for obtaining representative samples for statistical purposes (Sharma, 2017), it is appropriate for small-scale qualitative research projects (Naderifar et al., 2017) such as the current study. Although qualitative research cannot be representative of entire populations (Hammarberg et al., 2016), the number of participants recruited for this study is in line with the minimum recommended sample size of 12 to achieve data saturation (Braun & Clarke, 2013) and other qualitative studies on teachers (Kim & Asbury, 2020; Kim et al., 2021, 2022).

2.2 | Materials

A combined approach of semi-structured interviews and focus groups was used for this study to enable a deep insight into TWB (Burton et al., 2018; Morgan, 2019). Semi-structured interviews were chosen to give participants space to discuss

their own experiences while still enabling the researcher to examine a specific topic (DeJonckheere & Vaughn, 2019; Riessman, 1993), and focus groups were chosen as a supplementary method of data collection to explore participants' views through group interaction (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Litosseliti, 2003). Overall, three focus group sessions took place, which is identified as being sufficient to identify themes within a data set (Adler et al., 2019; Guest et al., 2017).

Both interview and focus group sessions began with a brief script to outline the study. Once the focus group session questions had been discussed, a link to a Padlet (2022) document was provided that enabled participants to document their responses alongside their verbal contributions. This was a significant addition to the sessions as, due to the nature of focus groups, it is often impossible to achieve complete anonymity (Sim & Waterfield, 2019). Therefore, the use of this medium gave participants the chance to provide comments that they may have been otherwise uncomfortable sharing.

2.3 | Procedure

Semi-structured interviews and focus groups took place on Zoom (2022) over a 3-week period throughout June and July 2022. Semi-structured interviews were scheduled to take no longer than 30 min and focus groups were scheduled to last approximately 45 min. Interviews consisted of three main questions: "What is your school's approach to teacher well-being?," "What has your experience been of your school's support for your well-being?," and "Are the current approaches that your school is taking to support your well-being effective for you?." Focus groups provided participants space to discuss the following two questions in a group format: "What school-level strategies are effective in supporting teacher well-being?" and "How could current well-being support for teachers be enhanced?."

Intelligent verbatim transcripts were produced from both interview and focus group sessions. All participants were provided with a code number (P1–P16) for anonymity, and focus group sessions were coded as FG1–3. Padlet (2022) documents from focus group sessions were coded as FG1–3P. All participants were given a copy of their transcripts to provide comments on if they wished.

2.4 | Data analysis

Data analysis followed a Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA) approach. RTA is defined as "an easily accessible and theoretically flexible interpretative approach" that emphasizes the influence of the researcher throughout the data collection and analytic processes (Byrne, 2022, p. 1392). RTA was conducted by collapsing interview and focus group data which enabled the researcher to triangulate the data by examining whether the findings were similar across the data set (Morgan, 2019).

To ensure rigor throughout the analysis, Braun and Clarke's (2012) six-phase process was followed. The researcher was also mindful to adopt a recursive and iterative approach and move between the phases as necessary (Braun & Clarke, 2020). Initially, interview and focus group sessions were transcribed and then checked for accuracy against initial recordings (Braun & Clarke, 2022). Next, data were read multiple times to increase familiarity (Braun & Clarke, 2012). All transcripts and additional Padlet (2022) documents were then uploaded to NVivo (QSR International, 2022) for coding. In line with previous studies that gave focus to participants' experiences (e.g., Kim & Asbury, 2020), coding was conducted at a semantic rather than latent level. The decision to code at a semantic rather than latent level was made to ensure that data were analyzed as it was communicated by participants (Byrne, 2022), as it was deemed important by the researchers that the information presented included themes and meanings that were discussed readily and explicitly by participants to provide clear focus on their experiences of TWB support. Although initial codes were brief, they offered sufficient detail to inform data items (Braun et al., 2017).

Following this, candidate themes were generated. This involved shifting focus from individual data items to shared meanings across the data set and bringing together codes that shared similar concepts (Byrne, 2022).

2.5 | Positionality and reflexivity

In line with previous studies on TWB (e.g., Brady & Wilson, 2021; Kim & Asbury, 2020), this study adopted an essentialist epistemology that aimed to describe teachers' expressed lived experiences of TWB support in their schools (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The focus on lived experiences also offered a clear choice of thematic analysis as the study aimed to explore participants' contextually situated understandings and subjective experiences of TWB support, as well as provide the rich detail that is often presented from qualitative research (Barrett & Twycross, 2018).

Researcher bias is an inherent part of RTA (Braun & Clarke, 2022; Rajendran, 2001), and is particularly relevant to this study given that the first author is a former primary school teacher who has both a personal and professional interest in the topic of TWB and the lived experiences of teaching professionals. However, the authors were mindful in ensuring that the pre-conceptions had minimal impact on the analysis and reporting of the study by constantly monitoring and checking that the focus of the study was on the experiences of the participants and not those of the first author. The first author also regularly discussed candidate themes and final themes with the second author to avoid individual bias.

3 | RESULTS

After reflection and evaluation of the candidate themes, eight final themes and two subthemes were produced, defined, and appropriately named (Braun & Clarke, 2020). The final themes, subthemes, and relationships between themes are illustrated below in Figure 1. Figure 1 demonstrates that participants' interpretation of their *Well-being in context* is central to TWB. Other relationships that have been found between the generated themes are shown, highlighting the interconnected and complex nature of TWB at a school level and the factors that contribute to this.

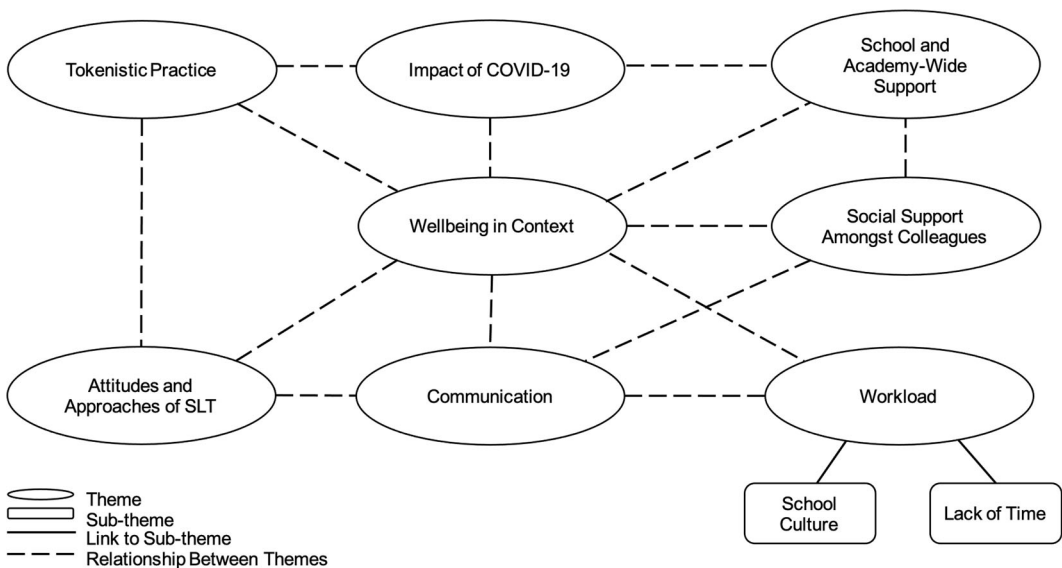


FIGURE 1 Themes, subthemes, and relationships between themes.

Direct relationships between the themes are presented in Figure 1. To avoid overcomplicating the figure that may result in confusion, all associations are not depicted in their entirety.

The themes and subthemes are discussed below in order of the research question: RQ1: *Well-being in context and Impact of COVID-19*; RQ2: *Social support among colleagues, School and academy-wide support and Tokenistic practice*; and RQ3: *Communication, Attitudes and approaches of SLT and Workload*, and the subthemes *School culture* and *Lack of time*.

3.1 | Theme 1: Well-being in context

This theme reports on participants' conceptualizations of well-being and offers an understanding of well-being from an educational perspective.

First, participants discussed the significance of well-being in relation to managing demands; including it being "massively linked in with not being stressed and overloaded and being able to cope" (P13) and "feeling like you have the capacity to come to work and do your job properly without feeling immense external pressure" (P15). Throughout all interviews and focus groups, participants acknowledged workplace demands, however, stressed that support for TWB should be about ensuring that teachers have "the ability to cope with the conditions that they're working in" (P8).

Second, feeling comfortable in their settings was repeatedly found to be an essential element of TWB. For example, one participant outlined how well-being is about "feeling comfortable that you can turn up to work and be yourself and be like an authentic version of who you are and not have to hide anything, change anything or be something different" (P10).

Having access to support was a further crucial part of participants' definitions of well-being. One participant discussed how well-being is about knowing "you've got a team around you that's going to build you up and support you" (P10). Many participants also outlined the mutual benefit of receiving support for both them and their pupils, suggesting that while feeling supported was significant for their own well-being, it also meant that they were "able to support [their] children better [and] provide a better learning environment" (P8).

Finally, participants voiced feelings of ambivalence between their definitions of well-being and those of their SLT. In particular, one participant stated, "I think that SLT would have a very different definition of well-being to what teachers have, and I think we need to agree on a definition to improve it" (P14). This contribution outlines the perceived disconnect between teachers' outlooks regarding well-being and those of SLT. It also suggests that future TWB support needs to begin by reaching a shared definition of well-being among staff.

3.2 | Theme 2: Impact of COVID-19

The second theme that was generated from the data is *Impact of COVID-19*, outlining the positive, negative, and temporary effects of the pandemic on TWB support.

Some participants discussed how "since the lockdown [their] school's put a lot of thought into well-being" (P13). However, the more predominant discussion around the pandemic was the negative impressions that it has left on TWB.

Participants frequently discussed having pupils in their classes who were "affected by the pandemic" (P13), which directly increased their workloads. Similarly, COVID-19 was discussed by participants as having "blurred the lines [...] offering an expectation now that if you're off sick that you're still working" (FG1). Participants also discussed the increases in expectations post-pandemic, describing it as a "kind of a gray area now [that they would] like to be a bit more prescribed" (FG3).

Finally, participants suggested the somewhat temporary impact of COVID-19 on TWB support. One participant outlined how the only TWB support that was in place in their setting was training that was offered "a couple of years ago in the pandemic [...] but that hasn't been followed through" (P14). Similarly, another participant recalled a "well-being

afternoon or day that [was given] during COVID in the second lockdown [...], but that was a one-off" (P8). This suggests that despite some changes that have positively impacted TWB emerging from the pandemic, they are outweighed by the feelings of temporary support and the negative implications that the pandemic has had, and continues to have, on TWB.

3.3 | Theme 3: Social support among colleagues

Next, when asked about factors that support their well-being, participants outlined the significance of social support, outlining how they "would rely on staff members like [their] TA" (P12), and citing how they felt "really lucky [having] made a good group of friends with the other teachers at school" (P15). Participants outlined how having access to social support was:

One of the reasons why I stay there [...] even if sometimes we feel like Senior Leadership might not be as supportive, I know that there's somebody in that school that I can go to and open up to and they'll be there to help me and offer that support. (P3)

However, participants explained that accessing support through colleagues "was more on a ground level" (P13), and "[should not be] their responsibility" (P7), suggesting that support should "come from top down" (P7). Ultimately, responses suggested that while social support was an important provision for TWB, it would be strengthened by being provided from SLT in addition to colleagues.

3.4 | Theme 4: School and academy-wide support

Building on the importance of social support, the fourth theme produced from the data, and the second current provision that participants felt was effective for TWB, was *School and academy-wide support*.

Some participants outlined school-wide support, including "a little well-being box [that] once a term [is taken] to the Headteacher" (P10) and an "open-door policy to speak to SLT when you need extra support" (FG3P) as being effective for TWB. However, a greater focus was placed on the significance of the support that was provided at an academy-level. Participants spoke about having "really good things available Trust-wise" (P7) including "counseling, legal advice [and] a whole host of things that you can access for support" (P3) and "centralized planning" (FG3) that helps to reduce workload "because we're kind of able to use things across the MAT [Multi-Academy Trust] or follow schemes, [...] so you're not having to create everything from scratch" (FG3).

Interestingly, participants suggested that well-being provisions were primarily in place because of their Academy Trusts. For example, one participant stated: "I would say it's probably come from our Academy chain that we should have that [well-being support]" (P4). This suggests that while participants acknowledged that academy-wide support was effective for TWB, they felt that support was given because it was directed from their Academy Trust, instead of being informed by individual teacher needs.

3.5 | Theme 5: Tokenistic practice

Despite the mention of some effective TWB provisions, many participants outlined the tokenistic and "tick box" (P15) nature of existing TWB support, explaining how "we say a lot about well-being [...], but we don't do a lot about well-being" (P4).

Although it was noted by some participants that they felt that their SLTs did care about TWB, an acknowledgment that the support that was in place had become tokenistic due to job demands was found to be a recurring theme. For example, one participant outlined how:

Sometimes it does feel like you go and say that you're struggling with something, and you might be pulled off it for a couple of days but then it's back to business as usual and has anything actually changed? [...] Sort of like, they want to try and help but then what is it that they can actually do [...] with the demands of the job. (P11)

Several participants also attributed tokenistic practices to pressures from Ofsted, citing how, due to the expectations of their framework, “the actual purpose of teacher well-being seems almost a secondary thought to them because you're doing that much anyway” (P10). Additionally, when discussing how Ofsted ask teachers about their well-being under their current framework, it was suggested by one participant that schools have a “moment where they realize [...] but] nothing changes from that, the deadlines are still there, the amount of work to do is still there” (P9).

Overall, when reflecting on current TWB practices, participants concluded that improving TWB should be treated as “a systematic approach that removes barriers, obstacles and unnecessary workload, rather than just ‘gimmicks’ such as biscuits or yoga” (FG3P).

3.6 | Theme 6: Communication

The next theme that was generated from participants' responses, and the first theme that was produced when discussing ways that TWB support could be enhanced, was *Communication*.

Participants repeatedly labeled communication within their settings as something that is not “always that good which then adds to [the] stress [of] everything else” (P4). One participant highlighted how opportunities for effective communication are currently lacking, stating how their SLTs “will always say that [they have] got your well-being at mind [...] but there's not a set time really where well-being is like an open discussion” (P9). Interestingly, another participant commented how:

I'm on SLT and I know that is how the consistency of communication just doesn't necessarily work because it drops down, and it's really hard to make sure the same message and the right message gets back to people, [...] often that leads to certain members of staff doing far more work than others because maybe the expectations not been clear. (FG2)

Here, it was made clear that even from an SLT perspective, communication is a factor that is necessary to enhance TWB.

Participants outlined how communication should be about prioritizing: “not telling me everything, telling me what needs to be done” (P7). They spoke about how improved communication between SLTs and teaching staff should consist of “allowing staff to share their voice—if and when appropriate” (FG2P).

3.7 | Theme 7: Attitudes and approaches of SLT

Building on the theme of *Communication*, a further theme that was generated regarding future enhancements for TWB support was *Attitudes and approaches of SLT*.

Participants discussed how they felt that TWB “wasn't really valued” (P10) by their SLTs and noted how although provisions to improve pupil's well-being were emerging, there remained minimal facilities in place for teachers. Participants regularly discussed how SLTs are “putting in stuff for the kids but then it almost felt like it was ‘Oh yeah, the staff will be fine’” (P3).

Participants outlined how, at current, SLTs within their schools are seen to adopt a “‘Deal with it. You've got to get it done’” (FG3) approach to factors that affect TWB. They also suggested that there was a lack of emotional skills among their SLTs, stating how: “sometimes SLT don't really have that sort of empathy because a lot of [...] SLT members aren't classroom-based so aren't on a daily basis in the classroom, understanding what's going on” (FG2).

Participants outlined how moving forward, “those issuing tasks and expectations [need] to think whether they are needed and purposeful for the children” (FG2P) and suggested that there needs to be “an acknowledgment from higher ups [...] in how difficult the job can be and providing strategies that can alleviate [the] pressure” (FG3P).

3.8 | Theme 8: Workload

All participants discussed *Workload* as the most significant factor that impacted their well-being. They outlined it as a fundamental issue that needed to be addressed to enhance TWB. Due to the prominence of this theme, it has been separated into the subthemes *School culture* and *Lack of time*.

Overall, participants discussed how TWB “comes down to the workload and the expectations of what needs to be done” (P2), including “a lot of form filling [and] menial stuff that has no impact on [...] anybody” (P7). An agreement was reached that there needs to be more of “an awareness of pinch points and not overloading” (FG1P) to increase TWB support. This consensus was epitomized by one participant's response in particular, as they stated:

I think the best well-being strategies are when something is taken away. I don't think there's any point in saying ‘For your well-being, we're giving you the responsibility of planning an activity’ or something. It has to be something that takes the workload away. (P15)

3.8.1 | Subtheme 1: School culture

As mentioned previously, *School culture* was cited frequently in relation to both TWB and workload. One participant discussed the “culture of fear that is unfortunately in [their] school” (P14) and outlined how their current school culture prevents staff from approaching SLT and voicing their concerns. Interestingly, a few participants also discussed the correlation between workload and career progression that was embedded in their school culture. This was summarized by one participant's response in particular as they explained:

The thing that I find the hardest is that to progress within the school you have to take on more work essentially [...], so sometimes it's like, well if I do go to my Head and say that I'm struggling with this, it's not necessarily that I want things taking off me because I need those roles to progress. (P9)

Hence, *School culture* was discussed as a factor that inherently increased workload. It was stated to be the “biggest issue to overcome before anything can really happen to improve well-being” (P14).

3.8.2 | Subtheme 2: Lack of time

Finally, *Lack of time* was presented as a significant contributor to both workload and low TWB. Participants discussed the need for “more structured time and planning [...] for the things that we're expected to do” (P11), outlining how “some of the issues could probably be solved through other things like [...] having a particular time for a slot of PPA [Planning, Preparation and Assessment time] and making sure that isn't taken away” (P5).

Although some participants stated that their schools “are good at trying to carve out as much time as possible” (P7), “the time is never anywhere near enough” (P7). Participants also outlined how they are not “given time for things to be completed” (FG2P) and that having time, “even if it was just what's actually expected and what we are supposed to have [...] would be a good start” (FG3).

4 | DISCUSSION

This study aimed to build upon previous TWB studies (e.g., Brady & Wilson, 2021; McCallum & Price, 2016) by investigating teacher's perceptions of TWB support in England. Overall, the results from this research outline a number of factors that teachers have found to impact their well-being at the school-level. Although participants outlined the protective nature of some factors, including social and school and academy-wide support, the majority of participant responses discussed factors that decreased TWB, including the impact of events such as COVID-19 and tokenistic practice, and the negative effects of communication, the attitudes and approaches of SLT and workload. Findings in response to the three RQs that have framed this study are discussed in detail below.

4.1 | Research Question 1: How do teachers conceptualize well-being?

Following a gap in existing research (Hascher & Waber, 2021; McCallum, 2021), RQ1 aimed to allow primary school teachers to define what the term well-being meant to them. This RQ was discussed through the themes *Well-being in context* and *Impact of COVID-19*.

Overall, participant responses aligned with the literature and recognized that well-being was a multi-faceted construct (Disabato et al., 2016; Dodge et al., 2012; Heintzelman, 2018; Linley et al., 2009; White, 2010). For participants, the term was found to consist of three main factors: (a) feeling comfortable, both with other colleagues and in their school environment overall; (b) having access to support, specifically from SLT; and (c) being able to cope with the demands of the job. These responses aligned with conclusions from charities including Education Support (2021) and theoretical models of TWB and emphasized the significance of the quality of school environments, participants' access to resources, and overall school contexts, on TWB, alongside the negative impacts of excessive workloads and poor work-life balances (Bermejo-Toro et al., 2016; Education Support, 2021; Jennings & Greenberg, 2009; Viac & Fraser, 2020). Participant responses also corresponded with suggestions throughout the literature and suggested TWB to be broadly operationalized by levels of burnout and engagement (Bermejo-Toro et al., 2013; Collie et al., 2012; Jennings & Greenberg, 2009; Shen et al., 2012).

A further significant finding in relation to RQ1 was the Impact of COVID-19. Participants were clear that the pandemic had created a sense of temporary support for TWB, suggesting that it had altered the means of TWB support, school expectations, and SLT's understanding of TWB itself. In line with suggestions from previous studies (Dabrowski, 2020; Kim et al., 2021; McDonough & Lemon, 2022), participants outlined how TWB support should be reviewed and given additional focus in light of the pandemic; however, participants stated how this had not happened. Instead, COVID-19 was suggested to have become an additional contributory factor to poor TWB.

Therefore, findings from this research agree with previous literature (Dabrowski, 2020; Kim et al., 2021; McDonough & Lemon, 2022) and reinforce the importance of reviewing and enhancing TWB support in light of COVID-19. Specifically, findings suggest that schools should be mindful of their expectations and demands in light of teachers' increased workloads as a result of having pupils in their classes that are "affected by the pandemic" (P13), being more "prescribed" in their expectations and ensuring that lines are not "blurred" (FG1), and ensuring that they are continuing to offer similar levels of well-being support that they were throughout the pandemic, including considering offering a "well-being afternoon or day" (P8) and staff training to increase awareness of the existing well-being support that is available across settings.

Finally, coinciding with guidance from both teaching unions and charities (Anna Freud National Centre for Children and Families, 2018; Education Support, 2021; NEU, 2019), discussions around teacher's conceptualizations of well-being outlined the importance of reaching a shared definition of well-being between teachers and SLT and creating regular opportunities for open dialogues.

4.2 | Research Question 2: What methods are in place to support teacher well-being in primary schools in England at this time?

RQ2 aimed to explore the current provisions that are in place to support TWB in primary schools across England. The three themes that were generated from the data that discussed this RQ were: *Social support among colleagues*, *School and academy-wide support*, and *Tokenistic practice*. Mirroring Liu et al.'s (2018) conclusions regarding international TWB support, current TWB support in England was found to vary greatly across settings. However, aligned with reports from the United Kingdom (UK) government (DfE, 2019), all participant responses outlined a lack of balanced approaches toward TWB and a poor awareness in schools of how TWB could be effectively addressed. Throughout, participants also expressed feelings regarding a lack of autonomy and discussed how they felt that TWB support was approached "like a one-fit for everyone" (P6) instead of being tailored to individual staff needs.

One of the key suggestions from the models of TWB that are discussed in this paper is the importance of access to, and the promotion of, social support (Liu et al., 2018; McCallum et al., 2017; Viac & Fraser, 2020). Although participants' responses agreed with literature and cited social support as being the most effective provision for TWB (Hascher & Waber, 2021; Kinman et al., 2011), this was discussed as a factor that was primarily provided by colleagues and not necessarily promoted by the wider school environment, as research suggests it should be (DfE, 2021a; Grenville-Cleave & Boniwell, 2012; Turner et al., 2022). Participant responses agreed with literature and stressed that social support should not just be provided by their peers; specifically, they emphasized how SLT need to play an active role in the provision of this to enhance TWB.

The second theme that was produced from the data when discussing effective TWB provisions was *School and academy-wide support*. Literature has highlighted the importance of school environments and teacher's perceptions of their school contexts on TWB (Brackett et al., 2010; Cohen et al., 2009; Collie et al., 2012; Liu et al., 2018; McCallum et al., 2017; Ransford et al., 2009), therefore, it was expected that school-level support would have a significant impact on TWB. However, academy-wide support was an unexpected theme that was produced from the data. Perhaps this reflects the change from Local Authority-run schools to the promotion of Academy Trusts (DfE, 2021b), and presents academy-wide support as equivalent to school-level support. This is a particularly worthwhile theme to consider following the recent publication of the UK government's plans for all schools to be part of an Academy Trust by 2030 (Great Britain. HM Government, 2022). Although academy-level support could be a positive mechanism for TWB practices moving forward by facilitating greater collaboration between settings, some participants discussed how being part of an Academy Trust had resulted in overarching TWB policies remaining largely ineffective at individual school-levels. Therefore, participants suggested a disconnect between the provision of well-being policies by Academy Trusts and their implementation at a school-level.

A final theme that was produced that contributes to the understanding of current TWB practices is *Tokenistic practice*. In line with existing literature (Dabrowski, 2020; Naghieh et al., 2015), the tokenistic nature of current TWB practices was found to be a recurring theme. Moreover, it was suggested that TWB support had become increasingly tokenistic because of COVID-19 and increased pressures from Ofsted. Despite participants discussing how Ofsted's (2019) recent requirement for TWB support should promote TWB, the regulatory body was instead cited to be a factor that increased the tokenistic nature of TWB support. Participants suggested that many practices were seen "from an Ofsted point of view rather than well-being" (P16), which meant that any considerations for TWB were surpassed if schools felt pressure to meet Ofsted deadlines.

4.3 | Research Question 3: What support is needed to enhance well-being support for teachers?

Finally, following an identified gap in research, this RQ built on previous studies (e.g., Brady & Wilson, 2021; McCallum & Price, 2016) and gave teachers the opportunity to discuss enhancements that could be made to existing TWB support. This RQ was discussed through the themes: *Communication, Attitudes and approaches of SLT and Workload*, and the subthemes *School culture* and *Lack of time*.

Discussions from participants surrounding ways to enhance TWB support agreed with current research and guidances and outlined the requirement for open dialogues, reduced workloads, and the promotion of work-life balances (Anna Freud National Centre for Children and Families, 2018; DfE, 2021a; Education Support, 2021; McCallum & Price, 2016; NEU, 2019). Although responses also supported suggestions from charities and outlined the importance of having an up-to-date well-being policy (Anna Freud National Centre for Children and Families, 2018; Education Support, 2021), participants shared concerns that current policies were "wishy washy" (P13). A further noteworthy reflection to make is in response to the guidance provided by teaching unions that staff should be encouraged to "go home shortly after the end of the [school day]" (NEU, 2019, p. 3). Here, one participant discussed how, although this was a policy that was implemented in their setting, it failed to have the positive impact that was intended, because "if the content of work is staying the same then cutting the hours doesn't actually change anything" (P9).

The first theme that was produced from the data when discussing ways to enhance TWB support was *Communication*. In line with literature, participants outlined the importance of open discussions and interpersonal relationships for TWB (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009; Liu et al., 2018; McCallum et al., 2017; NEU, 2019). Participants also explained the influence of poor communication on workload and demands, which negatively impacted their well-being. Participants provided recommendations for future enhancements for communication, including better channels for feedback and the prioritization of tasks.

Second, the *Attitudes and approaches of SLT* were discussed frequently by participants as something that needed to change to enhance TWB. Despite studies highlighting the importance of schools protecting the well-being of their staff (Brady & Wilson, 2021; Carroll et al., 2021; Collie et al., 2012; DfE, 2021a; McCallum et al., 2017; OHID, 2022; Turner et al., 2022), the majority of participants stated that they felt that their SLTs failed to take TWB seriously. In line with theoretical models (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009; Liu et al., 2018), participants outlined how SLTs should be providing supportive networks, enhancing social opportunities, and avoiding individual prominence. However, participants discussed how there was a sense of hierarchy in their settings which often provided a perception of "SLT and the rest of us" (P14).

Finally, *Workload* was the most prominent theme that was produced from the data and was frequently discussed as a factor that needed to be revised to enhance TWB. Although participants emphasized the importance of reducing their workloads for their well-being, they presented a sense of hopelessness when discussing provisions for this, stating how an increased workload "comes with the job" (P11). Participants agreed with government policies and highlighted the importance of taking "action on teachers' workload" (Great Britain. Dept. of Health &

Social Care & Dept. for Education, 2018, p18), stating how excessive workloads are unsustainable (Education Support, 2021).

The subthemes of *School culture* and *Lack of time* highlighted the significance of school cultures on both TWB and workload. In line with findings from previous studies (e.g., Brady & Wilson, 2021), participants discussed how TWB practices must be embedded in the culture of their school; however, they stated that this was not the reality of current TWB support. Furthermore, *Lack of time* was cited as one of the biggest inhibitors to TWB, which was exacerbated by increased demands because of COVID-19 (Dabrowski, 2020; Kim et al., 2021; McDonough & Lemon, 2022) and fueled by expectations that were embedded within school cultures. In line with literature (DfE, 2021a), participants provided recommendations for ways that workload, school culture, and time could be enhanced, commenting how, ultimately, future TWB support needs to come from an SLT that “genuinely cares” (P7).

In summary, this research has highlighted the importance of future research, policy, and practice continuing to facilitate conversations between teaching staff to provide effective mechanisms to support TWB moving forward.

4.4 | Limitations and directions for future studies

Although this paper has provided worthwhile conclusions for both current and future TWB practices, it is important to acknowledge the limitations of the research. The primary limitation of the current project is its small-scale nature and time constraints. Most significantly, this presented barriers regarding the inability to provide alternative times for interview and focus group sessions, which resulted in a number of participants having to withdraw from the study. Additionally, while reduced sample sizes are an innate feature of qualitative research (Braun & Clarke, 2013; Marks & Yardley, 2004), it would be useful for future studies to be conducted with larger data sets and therefore more representative samples. Moreover, the analysis conducted was interpretative and was therefore informed by the researcher's biases and subjectivity (Braun & Clarke, 2022; Braun et al., 2017; Byrne, 2022; Rajendran, 2001), and, as mentioned previously, coding was conducted at a semantic rather than latent level, which could leave this research open to criticism regarding a lack of a deeper, more conceptual analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2022). Future studies may also consider using a mixed methods approach that can triangulate the qualitative research findings with its quantitative counterparts.

One particularly noteworthy finding that has been produced from this research is the notion of academy-wide support. Hence, it would be interesting for future research to explore this finding further in light of the change in school systems (DfE, 2021b) and pay particular attention to how a shift toward Academy Trusts may impact TWB over the following decade. Research should also continue to discuss the impact of COVID-19 on TWB and consider how TWB support can be enhanced in light of the pandemic.

5 | CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

Overall, this qualitative research study has provided substantial recommendations for both future TWB policy and practice. Although this research has given particular focus to the school-level support that is available for primary school teachers across England, participant responses have also provided several suggestions for policy-wide changes that could be made to enhance TWB. Primarily, participants discussed how moving forward the overall attitude of the UK government toward the teaching profession needs to be revised, including reviewing the expectations that are placed on schools at a government level and from regulatory boards such as Ofsted. Participants stated that future policies need to come from a place of genuine care and have meaningful implications for TWB.

This research has highlighted significant implications that SLTs could take in practice to enhance TWB. These include: providing consistent and appropriate communication that gives teaching staff the opportunity to voice their concerns; improving their attitudes and approaches toward TWB by ensuring that meaningful well-being provisions are in place, such as offering additional time out of class and increased staff training to raise awareness of available well-being support; and increasing provisions to reduce teacher workload by making use of centralized planning resources from MATs (if available), reviewing whether tasks that are provided to teachers are necessary, and providing sufficient time to meet demands.

SLTs could begin by reflecting on the current dynamics of their school and considering whether a hierarchical nature exists within their setting. Next, in efforts to create a culture that supports TWB, a shared definition of well-being among SLTs and teaching staff could be jointly reached. Participants outlined how this would create a mutual understanding of TWB, ensuring that SLT views TWB in the same way as their teaching staff, offering a sense of empathy between SLT and teaching staff and a mutual understanding of the demands of the job and pressures on TWB.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

ETHICS STATEMENT

Ethical approval was granted by the Department of Education, University of York.

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