






## Research paper

# Conceptualising teacher wellbeing: A qualitative investigation with primary school teachers in England<sup>☆</sup>

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## ABSTRACT

The ongoing challenges in the teaching profession significantly affect teacher wellbeing, underscoring the need for a comprehensive understanding of it. There is a need to explore teacher wellbeing in depth to deepen our understanding of its conceptualisation in the field, in addition to understanding lived experiences by obtaining teachers' perspectives on the matter. This study explores how primary school teachers in England define, understand and experience wellbeing, aiming to uncover factors influencing their wellbeing. Semi-structured interviews with eight primary teachers underwent analysis using Hybrid Thematic Analysis (HTA), which integrates inductive and deductive approaches to interpret raw data. This methodology facilitated cross-comparison between theory and data, enabling the identification of consistencies and discrepancies with existing knowledge and generating new insights from the collected data. Findings revealed four main themes: perception of being a teacher, understanding of wellbeing by teachers, components of teacher wellbeing, and perceived contributors to teacher wellbeing. The findings highlight diverse dimensions of teacher wellbeing, including commonly acknowledged aspects such as workload, as well as less highlighted factors such as teachers' personal lives. This study enriches our understanding of teacher wellbeing, offering insights into teachers' perspectives and informing future research and policies while adding a further nuance to existing frameworks.

## 1. Introduction

Understanding teacher wellbeing is crucial due to its profound impact on both teachers and the educational ecosystem, highlighting the necessity for deeper exploration and comprehension of its intricacies. However, the field exhibits conceptual plurality (see Hascher & Waber, 2021; Ozturk et al., 2024b), resulting in diverse approaches to operationalising the term. In this conceptually confusing background, instead of relying on a selective combination of empirically informed variables related to teacher wellbeing, there is a need to understand the lived experiences of teachers. Thus, overcoming these limitations, this study seeks to contribute to a more precise and well-defined understanding of the concept of teacher wellbeing, by gathering primary school teachers' first-hand insights and perspectives in England, which, to date, have received limited empirical attention. By drawing on teachers' perspectives, we can gain a deeper understanding of the challenges they face and develop more effective strategies to support their wellbeing. In addition to the above practical and conceptual contributions, the present study makes a unique methodological contribution in combining both inductive and deductive analytical perspectives within a novel approach that will serve as a building block for further empirical and theoretical research within the field.

## 2. Background

### 2.1. The state of the profession

Currently, increased reports of mental health concerns within the teaching profession have rightly alarmed policymakers and researchers (Brady & Wilson, 2021). The Department for Education (DfE) has stated that poor 'general wellbeing' is a 'main contributing factor in [teachers'] decision to leave the profession' (DfE, 2018, p. 21). The COVID-19 pandemic has further exacerbated existing concerns regarding wellbeing of teachers, with significant impacts on the education sector (Jones & Kessler, 2020). The pandemic has led to increased job expectations, workload, and negative perceptions of the profession (Kim et al., 2022). According to a study by Savill-Smith & Scanlan (2019, p. 18), during the pandemic in the UK, 52% of all teachers (50% of all education professionals) reported that their mental health and wellbeing had declined either considerably or somewhat. Additionally, the Teacher Wellbeing Index 2022; Savill-Smith & Scanlan, 2022) revealed an overall wellbeing score of 44 for the education workforce, indicating a high risk of psychological distress and increased depression risk. Despite a slight decrease from pandemic-era scores, the 2022 score is higher than that of 2021 (43.90) but slightly lower than pre-pandemic levels in

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2019 (44.66), yet still signalling a chronic high risk. To effectively address this issue, a deeper understanding of teacher wellbeing as a construct is imperative.

## 2.2. Current understanding of teacher wellbeing

Currently, there exists a notable deficiency in a clear and universally accepted conceptual framework that comprehensively defines and encapsulates the multifaceted aspects of teacher wellbeing (Ozturk et al., 2024b). Historically, conceptualisations of teacher wellbeing have followed a negative discourse in that they have been studied and defined following a deficit approach (Roffey, 2012). In this regard, researchers have shown the prevalence of stress, burnout, anxiety and many other negative discourse elements in the education profession (see Gray, Wilcox, & Nordstokke, 2017; Molero et al., 2019; Redín & Erro-Garcés, 2020; Scheuch et al., 2015). However, as Ozturk et al. (2024a) suggested a focus on teacher wellbeing solely from a single viewpoint falls short.

Despite the growing application of positive psychology principles in research and education, some researchers still equate teacher wellbeing with stress, burnout, and mental health (Field, 2019). The issue of the interchangeable use of the term 'teacher wellbeing' with other related concepts also persists in the literature despite numerous studies on this subject. While exploring teacher wellbeing, solely adopting a deficit-based discourse or exclusively positive psychology approach is reductionist and limits our comprehensive understanding of the term, but also makes it difficult to determine the robustness of study findings situated in this discourse. For example, focusing solely on job-related factors such as workload or deploying a specific perspective without considering alternative views would fail to holistically understand issues like turnover, which is directly impacted by teacher wellbeing. This narrow approach could have dangerous implications for policy and practice, like developing ineffective strategies to promote teacher wellbeing. Thus, a comprehensive understanding and investigation of teacher wellbeing is needed.

Since teachers' wellbeing is influenced by multiple factors, including personal capabilities, socioemotional competence (Nwoko et al., 2023), and professional relationships (Mercer, 2020), some researchers take a multidimensional approach by considering both job-related and personal factors in their exploration of teacher wellbeing, often employing the Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) model (Bakker et al., 2014). For instance, Bermejo-Toro et al. (2016) sought to develop a comprehensive model of teacher wellbeing by examining burnout and engagement. Using the JD-R model as their theoretical framework, they found that both personal and job resources were significantly related to key wellbeing indicators - burnout and engagement. While this study moves beyond a solely negative conceptualisation of teacher wellbeing, it ultimately positions wellbeing along a continuum between burnout and engagement, which may not fully capture its multidimensional nature.

More recently, Bakker et al. (2023) revisited their foundational work on the JD-R model, highlighting key theoretical and empirical advancements over the past decade. Their review identified four major innovations: (a) the person  $\times$  situation approach to JD-R, (b) multilevel JD-R theory, (c) new proactive approaches within JD-R, and (d) the work-home resources model. A significant distinction from earlier versions of the JD-R theory is the growing recognition that personality moderates the daily effects of job demands and resources on wellbeing and outcomes (Bakker et al., 2023). This refinement partially addresses criticisms regarding the model's ability to account for individual differences. However, while personality factors are now integrated into the framework, other critical personal resources - such as coping strategies and resilience - still require greater emphasis to fully reflect the complexity of teacher wellbeing.

Thorough investigations of teacher wellbeing are essential to address its complexity and multidimensionality. Hascher and Waber (2021) underscore this in their systematic literature review, highlighting the nuanced nature of the concept. They emphasise the necessity of

integrating both positive aspects, such as positive affect and satisfaction, and negative aspects, including, negative affect, worries, and stress, in conceptualising teacher wellbeing. More recently, Ozturk et al. (2024a) echoed a similar sentiment in their systematic review with the aim of establishing a clear understanding of the concept of teacher wellbeing. They examined 61 articles and categorised them based on the primary framework used: negativity/deficiency, positivity/flourishing, and/or professionalism. Their findings revealed that the professionalism approach, which focuses solely on the work domain, is the predominant framework used to conceptualise teacher wellbeing. This contrasts with the previous body of literature that emphasised stress and burnout (negativity/deficiency approach) (see Split et al., 2011).

In their review, Ozturk et al. (2024a) also found that only a small number of studies (6 out of 61) considered all three approaches together which does not reflect the multidimensional nature of the term itself. The authors contend that neglecting alternative perspectives results in a loss of crucial information and that further attention is required to address teacher wellbeing holistically. These holistic approaches, made by Ozturk et al. (2024a) and Hascher and Waber (2021), offer a more comprehensive understanding of the complexities involved in supporting teachers' wellbeing.

## 2.3. Previous research approaches to teacher wellbeing

Previous literature investigates this phenomenon to measure teachers' wellbeing with intervention studies (Bower & Carroll, 2017; Evans et al., 2018) or its association with other concepts like student wellbeing (Harding et al., 2019), teacher-student relationship (Cui, 2022), and job characteristics (Huang et al., 2019). Nevertheless, the exploration of the components of this concept, particularly concerning teachers, lacks sufficient depth and breadth. In the context of the growing concern surrounding the wellbeing of teachers, acknowledging their viewpoints is imperative for effective intervention and retention strategies. Given the evidence tying our current understanding of teacher wellbeing to crucial educational outcomes, overlooking its significance may impede our ability to comprehensively tackle issues like teacher retention within the profession.

Without a thorough understanding of teacher wellbeing, policies may lack direction and fail to adequately address teachers' unique needs and challenges. Therefore, qualitative in-depth research is indispensable in achieving a comprehensive and nuanced comprehension of teacher wellbeing. Such an approach not only informs practice, policy, and future research but also unveils the intricate layers shaping teachers' overall wellbeing while helping to have conceptual clarity in the field. Furthermore, there remains a significant gap in the representation of teachers' perspectives in academic discussions, as emphasised by Rich (2017), who calls for increased utilisation of qualitative research methods to deepen understanding in this domain. Moreover, acknowledging the necessity of employing multimethod assessments to grasp the complexity of the concept and integrating teachers' viewpoints and experiences are essential for cultivating a holistic and genuine comprehension of teacher wellbeing.

More recently, Weiland (2021) explored teachers' voices concerning how teachers go about fostering positive wellbeing, through a positive psychology perspective. The data collected from three primary school teachers was therefore analysed by connecting narrative and wellbeing theories, namely Seligman's (2011) PERMA framework (Positive emotions, Engagement, Relationships, Meaning, Accomplishment). Although this is a highly significant study to explore teachers' voices in understanding teacher wellbeing, it deploys certain perspectives to conceptualise teacher wellbeing. Weiland (2021) concluded that a possible gap exists between theory around wellbeing (which is a positive psychology perspective here) and reality in terms of the way teachers' wellbeing is cultivated and supported in certain educational spaces. In the study, the prevalence of two elements of Seligman's (2011) wellbeing theory: relationships and positive emotion, were illuminated,

while three elements, meaning, engagement, and accomplishment, were generally absent.

While previous studies have often struggled to capture the full complexity of teacher wellbeing, particularly by not integrating both positive and negative aspects as well as professional dimensions, this study takes a holistic approach. By incorporating a comprehensive framework that accounts for the complex interplay of these factors, our research offers a more nuanced understanding of teacher wellbeing. This approach makes the study a valuable tool for providing a clearer, more complete picture of primary school teachers' wellbeing.

Furthermore, by focusing specifically on primary school teachers, our study highlights the unique demands and experiences within this educational setting. Primary teachers often navigate a complex interplay of emotional, social, and professional responsibilities, balancing intensive student interaction, curriculum delivery, and pastoral care. These challenges, combined with broader systemic pressures, shape their wellbeing in ways that differ from teachers in other educational stages. Research suggests that teacher stress is particularly intensified among primary school and special needs teachers, as they provide more support and input to students compared to their counterparts in other settings (Agyapong et al., 2022). This increased stress may stem from the additional time and energy required to support younger students, who often need more guidance and care (Ozturk et al., 2024a). Given the foundational role of primary education in shaping both student outcomes and teacher experiences, examining wellbeing in this context provides valuable insights. A deeper understanding of these dynamics contributes to a more nuanced perspective on teacher wellbeing, helping to inform policies and interventions that better support teachers at this crucial stage of schooling.

2.4. Rationale

In order to obtain a comprehensive and nuanced understanding of teacher wellbeing, this study employed Hybrid Thematic Analysis (HTA). Essentially, HTA is facilitated by overlaying inductive and deductive patterns, allowing for the identification of both similarities and differences. This is the juncture where concepts of abduction and retroduction come into play, involving the identification of unexpected or surprising gaps in explanation or theory (abduction) and the subsequent reformulation of theory to account for these gaps (retroduction) (Danermark et al., 2019; Meyer & Lunnay, 2013; cited in Proudfoot, 2023). In essence, this dynamic interplay between inductive and deductive elements within the analysis process enhances the capacity to uncover novel insights and refine theoretical frameworks.

In this study, this methodology was employed to examine the phenomenon from the perspective of teachers, integrating theoretical and empirical perspectives to enrich the analysis, thus providing a unique methodological contribution to the field. Given the significant attention paid to the poor mental health and wellbeing of teachers, it is crucial to take into account teachers' lived experiences and first-hand perspectives to gain a comprehensive and nuanced understanding of teacher wellbeing.

In sum, this exploratory research seeks to contribute to a more precise and well-defined understanding of the concept of teacher wellbeing, by gathering primary school teachers' first-hand insights and perspectives, which to date have received limited empirical attention. In doing so, the study aims to shed light on the complex factors that contribute to teacher wellbeing, by combining both inductive and deductive analytical perspectives. This methodological contribution will serve as a building block for further empirical and theoretical research within the field, in addition to informing the development of effective interventions and policies that support teacher wellbeing. To do this, online interviews with eight primary school teachers in England were conducted to examine the following research questions:

1. How do primary school teachers in England define teacher wellbeing?
2. What factors do English primary school teachers identify as influencing teacher wellbeing?

3. Method

Employing qualitative research methods can elicit sincere and comprehensive perspectives, which is especially important given that teacher wellbeing is a complex and multidimensional construct (Ozturk, 2023). To gather the most relevant data for this study, a qualitative methodology was employed, utilising semi-structured interviews, to investigate the deeper understating of teacher wellbeing by primary school teachers in England. Additional specifics regarding this approach are outlined in the subsequent subsections.

3.1. Participants

Eight teachers working at five different schools in Northwest England participated in the present research study, which surpasses recommendations that typically 6–7 interviews are likely to capture the majority of themes in a homogenous sample (6 interviews to reach 80% saturation) (Guest et al., 2020). Participants were recruited via convenience and snowball sampling techniques between October 2022 and January 2023. This period also served as the timeframe for data collection. As shown in Table 1, the participants represent a diverse range of year groups taught, seniority, and gender (pseudo names), which enabled a comprehensive and varied exploration of the perceptions and experiences related to teacher wellbeing.

3.2. Materials

Semi-structured interview questions were developed and trialled (with an early career lecturer who can empathise with teachers but also provide feedback as a researcher) to guide the discussions (see Appendix 1), which included prompts and follow-up questions (mainly 'Can you tell me more about that?') where necessary. The interview guide included five main questions. The first two questions were about participants' roles in the school and their professional experience in the field of education. This was followed by a general question about wellbeing, and then moved on to teacher wellbeing more specifically with two main questions. The last two questions were specifically developed to understand the structure of teacher wellbeing and the determinants of teacher wellbeing.

3.3. Procedure

Following ethical approval (given by the [university name removed] in June 2022) (Ref: 2022-13341-26343), primary school teachers were invited to participate in an interview via social media and email advertisement. Participants who indicated interest were then emailed an information sheet containing details regarding the interview, and a

Table 1  
Overview of participants.

Pseudonym	Year group taught	Years of teaching
1 Sue	Year 3	11 and a half years
2 Kate	Reception and Year 1	10 years
3 Sarah	Year 1 (used to)	2 and a half years
4 Ann	Year 3	14 years
5 Tina	Year 1	13 years
6 Martin	Reception	4 and a half years
7 Tom	Year 3	1 and a half years
8 Oliver	Year 5	4 years

convenient time and date were arranged. Prior to the interview, participants were asked to complete a consent form. Interviews were conducted virtually at a time convenient to participants using an online video platform and recorded, taking approximately 30 min each. Upon completion, participants were thanked, debriefed, offered the opportunity to ask questions, and, if necessary, pointed to sources of support.

To ensure confidentiality, participants were given assurance that any information they shared would be kept confidential and only accessible to authorised members of the research team. Additionally, each participant was assigned a unique participant pseudonym to enable the researcher to identify their experiences.

3.4. Data analysis

Automatically generated transcripts by the tool we used to conduct online interviews were revised using verbatim transcription. For analysing data, Hybrid Thematic Analysis (HTA) was used, which combines an inductive, data-driven approach with a deductive, empirical and theory-driven approach to interpreting raw data (Xu & Zammit, 2020). As briefly explained by Proudfoot (2023), this approach involves the utilisation of pre-ordinate codes, employing an explicit theoretical framework developed through engagement with the literature—representing the deductive element. Simultaneously, the approach incorporates the generation of codes from the data, representing the inductive element. Crucially, these themes are then hybridised or combined, fostering a mutually enhancing relationship between deductively derived codes and those emerging organically from the data (Proudfoot, 2023). This process was particularly important for the current research as it allowed for the identification of both similarities and differences between pre-existing knowledge within the field, as well as the generation of new insights from the data (Bagnall et al., 2024). Therefore, the study aimed to provide a robust and comprehensive examination of primary school teachers’ perspectives on teacher wellbeing, ensuring a balanced consideration of both existing theories and emergent themes from the interviews.

As the intent of the analysis was to describe, summarise, and interpret surface-level patterns in semantic content from the sample, data were analysed using HTA within a contextualist framework. Therefore, the authors followed Braun and Clarke’s (2019) six stages of Thematic Analysis. Firstly, data familiarisation and immersion were conducted, where semantic similarities and differences were identified, compared and noted across all of the transcripts.

The first author developed the coding framework and predefined codes as a priori based on the research questions, theoretical and empirical underpinnings, and prior research in the area. The second author then conducted deductive coding, applying the coding framework to the data to identify meaningful units. The second author also noted new units of meaning not confined by the preliminary codes within the coding framework, which served as a data management tool for organising segments of similar or related data and provided a clear trail of evidence for the credibility of the study. The third author conducted inductive coding by systematically analysing the data without predefined categories. This process involved multiple readings of the transcripts to identify recurring patterns and meaningful data features relevant to the research questions. Initial codes were generated based on these emergent patterns and were iteratively refined through comparison to ensure they accurately captured the nuances of the data. This stage was conducted blind, as the third author had not seen the coding framework and predefined codes which the first author developed a priori. To ensure consistency among coders, the first author also developed a rough coding strategy (see Appendix 2) and shared it with both parties. The coding plan mainly states that a flexible approach is taken while coding and also explains how coding should be done (by meaning or sentiment). Having this type of plan helped to have consistency among different coders and also served as evidence for the credibility and quality of the study.

The first author then closely scrutinised the data, sorted and organised inductive and deductive codes across the transcript groups clustered under headings directly relating to the research questions; it was shown that inductive codes assigned to segments of data were either separate from the predetermined codes or they expanded a code from the coding framework. The first author then connected, corroborated, and combined deductive and inductive codes at a broader level to develop initial themes. Themes’ external homogeneity and internal homogeneity were then reviewed and refined by all authors to ensure that they were accurate and valid representations of the data set, exhibiting clear and identifiable distinctions between groups but also cohered meaningfully. Theme and sub-theme names and definitions were refined through discussion between authors, and thematic maps were created (see Table 2). Upon completion of the HTA process, there were no themes and sub-themes sections untouched, meaning that themes were fully hybridised. Moreover, the idea of leaving the profession under the perception of being a teacher theme and the personal life under the perceived contributors to teacher wellbeing theme emerged as data-driven subthemes, which were not part of the theory-driven codes. Also, it should be stated that, in reporting the findings, we provide frequency indications only when a (sub)theme was mentioned by less than half of the participants. This approach ensures that less common but still meaningful perspectives are contextualised while maintaining the qualitative depth of the analysis. Rather than quantifying each theme, we focus on the richness of participants’ experiences and the interpretative insights they offer. During the data analysis process, NVivo 12 and Microsoft Word were used.

4. Findings

This research aimed to explore primary school teachers’ understanding of teacher wellbeing in England. Four main themes were identified across the interviews, namely: Perception of being a teacher, Understanding of wellbeing by teachers, Components of teacher wellbeing, and Perceived contributors to teacher wellbeing. As shown in Table 2, each theme has corresponding sub-themes, which are explored separately below using illustrative quotes from participants.

1. Perception of being a teacher

Teachers’ perceptions of being primary school teachers were consistently discussed within the interviews, as paramount to their experiences of the job role as either challenging and/or rewarding: “it is really rewarding. But it is difficult, very difficult. Um, I’m. Not a job that I think many people could do.” (Oliver). The nuanced exploration of this delicate balance unfolds through the identification of sub-themes, namely, 1a. Challenging vs Rewarding and 1b. The idea of leaving the profession.

Table 2  
A Thematic table to show themes and subthemes.

1. Perception of being a teacher	2. Understanding of wellbeing by teachers	3. Components of teacher wellbeing	4. Perceived contributors to teacher wellbeing
1a. Challenging vs Rewarding	2a. Self-care and Emotional labour	3a. External elements	4a. Work-life balance and workload
1b. The idea of leaving the profession	2b. Work-life balance and Job demands 2c. Positive emotions	3b. Internal elements	4b. Roles of environment and others 4c. Health, self-care, and personal wellbeing practices 4d. Autonomy and competence 4e. Feeling valued 4f. Personal life



### 1a Challenging vs Rewarding

When talking about the challenges associated with their profession, teachers consistently highlight various negative aspects, such as workload, public perception, and the demanding nature of the job both emotionally and physically. Responsibilities were often described as wearing different hats and encompassing a multitude of facets. For example, one participant with ten years of working experience vividly captures the complexities, stating,

*“It’s draining and especially because I teach such young children. and it’s like it’s exhausted. ... not only do we have to think I have to think of each child’s learning abilities. I also have to think of their care, what they’re eating, how they’re feeling. If they’re comfortable, their emotional needs and any medical needs, if they’re feeling like, if they’ve got any at learning differences. and at the same time as thinking about whether they’ve just done a rough morning rather than you know the small picture as well as the big picture, and that’s for lots of different lots of different children.”* (Kate).

Moreover, the public perception and misconceptions surrounding the teaching profession are addressed by Oliver, a mid-career teacher, who points out the stereotype of extended holidays with an observation:

*“I know the such a stereotype of Oh, you get thirteen weeks holiday. Yeah. And oh, that’s not. So many people say it and they do jokes about it. But it’s [not] a job that you leave the classroom. When you leave the classroom you’re still having to do more.”*

This emphasises the continuous and demanding nature of the teaching role beyond the classroom setting, shedding light on the misconceptions prevalent in public discourse about the profession.

When delving into the rewarding aspects of their profession, teachers often touch upon the joy derived from witnessing children’s development, experiencing an ego boost, fostering relationships with their students, and cultivating positive feelings. Sue, a late-career teacher, articulates the profound satisfaction that comes with being a class teacher: *“The most rewarding thing is that when you are based in class as a class teacher. You develop those really incredible relationships with like 30 individuals and see for me the biggest satisfaction is what you can do in terms of that personal development throughout the year, seeing the characters develop, see, like those the streets of bravery and the courage and the risk taking, and that enthusiasm just shining through.”*

Martin, a mid-career teacher who works at the reception level, sheds light on the unique rewards found in teaching the youngest learners: *“for me in early years, which is the smallest, the youngest part of a primary school. Um, you can often get kind of all, or you’re only you know. So you play in sand, and that’s and that’s your sort of role. So you can get a little bit undermined. ... if you want an ego boost become a primary school teacher because you walk past the class that you taught last year, and everybody’s just shouts your name, and it feels wonderful. So yeah, great, wonderful, hard work uh underrated Um, uh, but delightful overall.”* Martin’s perspective while underscoring the intrinsic rewards embedded in the connections forged with young students, the validation received, and the overall sense of fulfilment derived from the teaching profession, also touches upon the public perception of the role - undermined/underrated. In sum, these varied reflections underscore the participants’ role perceptions, capturing both the challenging and rewarding aspects.

### 1b The idea of leaving the profession

Three participants, particularly those with extensive experience in the profession, reflect on the evolving nature of teaching and express a notable increase in stress over the years. One participant, Tina, compares her experience over the past thirteen years, stating: *“It was a lot easier when I started like thirteen years ago. Um! As the years gone on. I definitely say it’s got a lot harder. Um, there’s a lot more demand. Um! A lot more about data. A lot more about paperwork. (...) when I first started. It was*

*more about the children. What the children enjoyed. (...) But now it’s just so focused on the children’s progress.”* and she concludes with the idea of wanting to leave the profession because of stress.

*“I just know that talking to other teachers. We just find a lot the job a lot more stressful. Um, I find that a lot more teachers are wanting to leave um, you know, through discussions, and I don’t feel like I have a lot, teacher, friends, and when we all talk to each other we all seem to be in the same boat. Um, we all find it quite a stressful kind of job.”* (Tina)

The challenges are not exclusive to late-career teachers, as highlighted by Sarah, an early-career teacher, who recounts a challenging experience early in her career, contemplating not returning to teaching. However, a change in school and circumstances led to her prolonged engagement in the profession: *“And I remember after leaving that school it was the closest I’ve ever been to not going back to teaching, and my mum that she honestly thought I wasn’t going to go, because if that was my first proper experience of it, and I was. If that’s what teaching’s like. I don’t I didn’t want it. but I was really lucky that I got into this school for one week on supply, and I stayed. They put me on contract, and I stayed for years so”.* Sarah’s experience underscores the importance of a work environment for teachers’ decision to stay in the profession.

Even mid-career teachers like Oliver express concerns about the sustainability of a long-term teaching career: *“It’s massive in comparison to all the jobs. I mean, I feel like all the jobs you’ll go into it, and you’ll stay in it for thirty-four years, whereas I think personally, I know I probably won’t be able to be a teacher for more than ten-fifteen years max.”*

In sum, these reflections shed light on the changing dynamics and perceived challenges within the teaching profession, as shown in the previous sub-theme. This sub-theme demonstrates how these perceptions contribute to feelings of needing to leave the profession, which affects primary-level teachers across different stages of their careers.

## 2 Understanding of wellbeing by teachers

Teachers’ understanding of wellbeing is a multifaceted and deeply personal concept that emerged as a crucial theme during the interviews. This intricate understanding is reflected in several key areas: self-care and emotional labour, work-life balance and job demands, and positive emotions such as happiness, kindness, comfort, and safety. The nuanced exploration of this complex term unfolds through these sub-themes, providing a comprehensive picture of the aspects that influence teachers’ understanding of wellbeing.

### 2a Self-care and Emotional labour

Teachers highlighted the importance of looking after both their mental and physical health as foundational to their sense of wellbeing: *“I think it’s about looking after your mental health and physical health.”* (Sue). This underscores the holistic nature of wellbeing, encompassing both mental and physical dimensions. This sub-theme also encompasses the emotional labour involved in teaching, where managing emotions and building resilience are vital: *“wellbeing is where you feel you can do your job”* (Ann). This encapsulates the connection between professional competence and overall wellbeing, highlighting the importance of feeling capable in one’s role.

### 2b Work-life balance and Job demands

Balancing professional responsibilities with personal life emerged as a critical aspect of teacher wellbeing. Teachers expressed the necessity of feeling capable of meeting job demands while also setting boundaries to ensure a healthy work-life balance: *“wellbeing is a person’s feeling of being able to meet the demands around them that balance of feeling like you’re doing enough. and you’re comfortable with it”* (Kate) and *“being able to have a work life balance to be able to turn off”* (Tina). This draws attention to the challenges of maintaining a boundary between

professional and personal life, a crucial factor in teachers' wellbeing. Coupled with the *Components of teacher wellbeing* theme which will be explored in detail next, this captures the dynamic interplay between external demands and internal comfort, a key component of teachers' wellbeing.

## 2c Positive emotions

The presence of positive feelings such as happiness, comfort, and safety in the workplace was consistently mentioned as integral to teachers' understanding of wellbeing. Teachers associate wellbeing with experiencing a supportive and secure environment: *"it's making sure you're happy and in what you're doing. You're comfortable in the situation. You feel safe"* (Oliver), which contributes significantly to their overall sense of satisfaction and contentment.

Overall, these varied perspectives highlight the multifaceted nature of wellbeing for teachers, incorporating physical and mental health, job demands, emotional experiences, and the pursuit of positive feelings within their professional and personal lives.

## 3 Components of teacher wellbeing

While discussing teacher wellbeing, diverse notions were raised by teachers within the interviews, as paramount to their experiences and understanding of wellbeing. The nuanced exploration of this complex and multifaceted term unfolds through identifying sub-themes, namely, *3a. External elements* include notions such as workload, emotional and physical labour, autonomy, job performance, management, government, work-life balance, trust, and support; and *3b. Internal elements* include notions such as job satisfaction, accepting your capacity, personal life, self-efficacy, competence, and positive feelings.

Together, these two sub-themes provide a comprehensive framework for understanding teacher wellbeing, encompassing both external and internal elements that collectively contribute to the intricate tapestry of teachers' experiences in their professional roles.

### 3a External elements

Participants in the study highlighted various notions that fall under the category of external elements, representing a spectrum of factors external to teachers individually that significantly influence their wellbeing. One notable aspect that emerged from the interviews was the participants' reflections on the level of autonomy, a factor affected by both school management and government policies. As expressed by Tina, the influence of management at the school level and government policies plays a crucial role in shaping teachers' wellbeing: *"It's all down to management as well, because a lot of what we have to do comes down from the top doesn't it? ... I think government plays a big part of it because the Government dictates how we run our school."* This perception of limited autonomy has broader implications, intertwining with the other sub-theme of internal elements and impacting elements like self-efficacy and job performance, which are integral components of teachers' overall wellbeing. Ann's observation demonstrates this point clearly and further underscores that having autonomy in one's job is crucial because it influences how teachers perceive their ability to perform effectively: *"if you don't have that level of autonomy, it's really difficult to really impact your self-efficacy that because it really impacts on how you think you can perform and do your job, and that is always going to impact negatively on wellbeing"*. Together, these observations point to the interconnectedness of external and internal elements (see *3b. Internal elements* for further demonstration), where constraints on autonomy contribute to a negative impact on teachers' wellbeing.

The reflections from participants underscore the intricate relationship between external factors, such as management and government policies, and internal elements like autonomy, self-efficacy and job performance. This interplay emphasises the need for a holistic

understanding of teacher wellbeing, recognizing the complex ways in which various factors converge to shape teachers' experiences in the profession.

### 3b Internal elements

The second set of sub-themes encapsulates internal factors that are intrinsic to the teachers individually. It delves into the internal dynamics and perspectives that shape how teachers perceive their own wellbeing. Notably, one of the most intriguing notions within this category is the impact of teachers' personal lives on their wellbeing, highlighting that teacher wellbeing is not solely tied to their professional roles. As articulated by Sarah, a participant in the study, teachers' personal lives play a significant role in influencing their wellbeing:

*"teachers' personal lives ... if your personal life is there's stuff going on your personal life that's not helping it wellbeing that it's obviously going to knock on your job. So kind of school leadership being aware of teachers are people. ... we're people with our own feelings, and that kind of needs to be respected as well before kind of coming down heavy on the teacher side of things."* (Sarah)

Sarah's perspective emphasises the interconnectedness of personal and professional aspects of teachers' lives, which recognises teachers as individuals with personal challenges and feelings.

Another data quote given below also offers valuable insights into the multifaceted nature of teacher wellbeing, highlighting the range of components both internal and external elements that affect teacher wellbeing, which also relates to the previous point made above (see *3a. External elements*) the interconnectedness of external and internal elements clearly. The provided quote from Sue emphasises the significance of job satisfaction as a major component of wellbeing and also draws attention to the critical role of workload and how systems within schools can manage workloads effectively.

*"the biggest one is obviously job satisfaction, I guess, is a really big term. because this is an ultimately very satisfying job. But I think that if you have good satisfaction in your job that's more likely to make you feel better in the workplace and better as a teacher. And but I think that encompasses like a really a really huge range of things. Because. yeah, like job satisfaction is one thing. But again, that element, that element of workload, and how systems within schools work to manage workloads effectively, so that teachers can use that time really well. like, for example, is a school scheduling lots of meetings outside of directed time."* (Sue).

Findings of the *Components of teacher wellbeing* theme reinforce the notion that teacher wellbeing is a complex construct influenced by many factors both within and outside the teacher's control. It underscores the interconnectedness of internal elements, like job satisfaction, with external elements, such as workload, school practices, and funding. This holistic understanding is vital when addressing and improving teacher wellbeing.

## 4 Perceived contributors to teacher wellbeing

Under this theme, the various aspects and factors that teachers perceive as contributors to their wellbeing are brought together. While there are notable overlaps with the preceding theme, *Components of teacher wellbeing*, there are also distinct differences. Within this thematic exploration, 6 subthemes surfaced during the interviews, shedding light on the intricate structure and determinants that shape the wellbeing of teachers.

### 4a Work-life balance and workload

Participants underscore the significance of maintaining a work-life balance as a key factor in ensuring good wellbeing for teachers, while they also express significant concerns and preferences regarding

workload and time management as factors influencing their wellbeing. According to teachers in the study, achieving a work-life balance is essential for cultivating overall wellbeing. Similarly, as emphasised by Oliver, for teachers in the UK, good wellbeing is closely tied to the ability to balance work and personal life effectively: “Good wellbeing for teachers in the UK is work-life balance, being able to balance your work life”. This perspective underscores the pivotal role of work-life balance in promoting the wellbeing of teachers.

Conversely, teachers emphasised the critical issue of time constraints hindering the completion of required paperwork, highlighting the need for either dedicated time to address these tasks or a reduction in the volume of paperwork: “I’d have time to do all the paperwork that’s required of me. That’s a big one, not having the time to do the paperwork that’s required. Oh, just no paperwork or less paperwork, so either give me the time or for the paperwork they want me to do or reduce the amount of paperwork they want me to do” (Kate).

Some of them underscored the importance of a lighter workload as a fundamental aspect of teacher wellbeing, and work-life balance: “teacher wellbeing, lighter workload to be a nice start. Um, because as much as I am looking after my own wellbeing like this weekend. I’m not doing much of the way of work uh I do find that I know for a fact that when I get in on Monday I’m going to have a lot to do, and I’m sort of like already stealing myself and Monday to be able to go right.” (Tom).

As teachers strive to balance personal wellbeing and professional responsibilities, the demand for a manageable workload emerged as a prevalent theme.

#### 4b Roles of environment and others

Teachers emphasise the pivotal role of support from significant others (namely colleagues, family and friends) in shaping the experience of teaching and ultimately their wellbeing. This also encompasses diverse insights into relationships with students, parents, and the broader school community. For example, Sarah highlights the transformative impact of being in a good school with strong support systems, where teaching can be an amazing and fulfilling career. In contrast, she acknowledges that a lack of support in some schools can drastically alter the teaching experience: “So if you get a good school, teaching can be amazing. But if you’re in a school, that kind of doesn’t offer amazing support. it can be a completely different career” (Sarah).

Similarly, another participant stressed the importance of feeling supported in various aspects, from practical assistance to emotional support: “if you feel supported, and you know people are gonna have a laugh, have a joke with you, be able to support you practically when you need it, you have to support your emotion and when you need it, then yeah, you’re able to work far better in that regard” (TOM). According to him, when teachers know they have a supportive environment where colleagues are not only helpful but also provide emotional support, they can perform their roles more effectively.

On the other hand, one participant highlights the intricate relationship between behaviour management and effective teaching, emphasising the impact on wellbeing when dealing with challenging behaviours in the classroom: “if the behavior is not in place, good learning behaviors are not in place. Then the teaching isn’t it can’t go ahead as effectively. So and again that has another layer of impact on your well-being, because you’re thinking not only about dealing with these behaviors.” (Kate). The effective implementation of good learning behaviours is seen as foundational for the overall effectiveness of teaching, adding an additional layer of complexity and potential stress for teachers.

Some participants expressed gratitude for the positive relationship with parents, underscoring the importance of supportive and respectful partnerships between teachers and parents in contributing to their wellbeing: “I think i’m very lucky with the respect that my parents give me.” (Martin). This aspect of professional relationships and support from parents play a role in shaping the teacher’s experience and sense of fulfilment.

In another example, Tom sheds light on the physical environment within the school, particularly the staff room: “our mental health and wellbeing leaders, completely rearrange the staff room so that you can actually use the sofas, and you can sit in a circle, and you can have a conversation with people, and it works, and it’s. It’s so much nicer, and people use it more often as a as it room for the staff.” (Tom)

The deliberate effort to create a more conducive and comfortable space reflects the acknowledgement of the influence of the physical surroundings on wellbeing. This example underscores the significance of both considering the physical work environment and the efforts that can be made by wellbeing leaders in promoting positive teacher wellbeing.

Overall, teachers emphasise the profound influence of the environment and others on their professional experience and overall wellbeing, contributing to a deeper understanding of the multifaceted factors influencing teacher wellbeing, ranging from classroom dynamics to positive relationships with parents and the impact of the physical work environment.

#### 4c Health, self-care, and personal wellbeing practices

Participants highlighted the importance of teachers having time for activities and aspects of life outside of teaching, such as self-care and personal wellbeing practices, while also highlighting both physical and mental health as a perceived contributor to teacher wellbeing during the interviews. Regarding the physical aspect, one participant’s insight into her sleep patterns sheds light on a common challenge faced by teachers — the impact of work-related thoughts on sleep quality.

*“I mean my sleep. I wake up in the middle of the night, and I’ve got a pad by my bed, and I wake up, and i’m thinking things about school, and I am. I’ll write down whatever i’m thinking about, and then I try and go to sleep again. I don’t my sleep is atrocious. I don’t sleep”* (Kate)

Kate’s experience of waking up in the middle of the night with school-related thoughts reflects the potential toll that work-related stress can take on sleep patterns. Her struggle with sleep underscores the broader theme of the impact of job-related stressors on the wellbeing of teachers. Together, perspectives under this subtheme contribute to a nuanced understanding of the multifaceted nature of teacher wellbeing, encompassing both physical and mental health considerations.

On the other hand, Ann emphasises the need for teachers to have time to enjoy pursuits separate from their professional responsibilities, emphasising the avoidance of continuous marking and planning at home: “I think they need time to um enjoy other aspects of their life that are completely separate from teaching and not be marking and planning at home.” This perspective, coupled with the previous subtheme, underscores the significance of work-life boundaries for teachers once again. Similarly, other perspectives under this subtheme demonstrate the value of incorporating personal wellbeing practices into daily routines like as engaging in activities such as going to the gym before work to enhance the overall teaching experience and teacher wellbeing.

#### 4d Autonomy and competence

Teachers bring attention to autonomy, control over work, self-efficacy, and competence as perceived contributors to their wellbeing. For instance, Tina emphasises the top-down nature of decision-making, where directives come from individuals at the top who may not have a background in education: “They dictate a lot of that, but a lot of the people that work at the top might not work in education or um, and then it’s just filtered through, and then it’s passed The headteachers and headteachers had to just passed on to SLT and SLT to teachers and support staff, so we end up, taking it all and having to implement it all and do it all, and it’s, and it’s a lot.” (Tina). Participants express the strain that this process places on teachers, noting the substantial workload involved in implementing these directives. Reduction in perceived autonomy within the professional realm can have a detrimental impact on teachers’ wellbeing. The

diminishing sense of control over work decisions and practices is identified as a significant factor contributing to implications for teacher wellbeing.

Participants in the study also highlighted various perspectives related to self-efficacy and competence. One participant highlighted the crucial connection between autonomy and self-efficacy, emphasising that having a certain level of autonomy is vital for impacting how teachers perceive their ability to perform effectively in their roles. The lack of autonomy, according to Ann, can negatively impact self-efficacy, thereby influencing overall wellbeing: *“if you don’t have that level of autonomy, it’s really difficult to really impact your self-efficacy that because it really impacts on how you think you can perform and do your job, and that is always going to impact negatively on wellbeing”* (Ann). This perspective, coupled with the previous observations mentioned above, underscores the intricate relationship between professional agency and teachers’ beliefs in their own competence.

On the other hand, another participant’s reflection offers insight into the emotional challenges teachers may face when lessons don’t go as planned.

*“If I have a day where I feel like the children. I’ve just not understood anything. Maybe they’ve been acting up um. Maybe they’ve not been listening, or I feel like the for whatever reason my teaching in my lessons have not gone to plan. Um, which is just a horrible feeling, an absolutely horrible, it can really sink you right down and you can just say able to what’s the point of me doing and why, what’s going on and I’ve got to the point now, and I was like Well hang on. That’s one day.”* (Martin)

He describes the feeling of disappointment and self-doubt that can arise from a difficult day in the classroom. However, Martin also shares his realisation that such challenging days are just part of the broader teaching experience, emphasising the importance of resilience and perspective in navigating the highs and lows of the profession. These perspectives contribute to a deeper understanding of the nuanced connections between autonomy, self-efficacy, and the emotional dimensions of teaching, all of which are integral components of teacher wellbeing.

#### 4e Feeling valued

Participants emphasise the significance of feeling valued, encompassing job satisfaction, recognition and appreciation for work as a pivotal element in shaping teacher wellbeing. For instance, one participant characterises teaching as an ultimately satisfying profession, highlighting the positive aspects that contribute to this satisfaction: *“the biggest one is obviously job satisfaction, I guess, is a really big term. because this is an ultimately very satisfying job. But I think that if you have good satisfaction in your job that’s more likely to make you feel better in the workplace and better as a teacher.”* (Sue). She suggests that a high level of job satisfaction is not only conducive to a positive workplace experience but also enhances the overall sense of wellbeing for teachers. In contrast, another participant expresses a personal connection and passion for teaching, conveying a desire for students to share that same enthusiasm: *“I’m passionate about it. I want them to like it and love it. Um! And they don’t. That can be very disheartening at times.”* (Martin). The potential challenge of not seeing students fully embrace and enjoy the subject matter can be disheartening for teachers. This emotional investment and aspiration for student engagement are integral components of the broader theme of job satisfaction.

Having said that, one participant talked about recognition and appreciation for work regarding contributors to teacher wellbeing, which is an important aspect of it. The stated perspective sheds light on the importance of specific and labelled praise within the professional context, emphasising the need for acknowledgement and recognition for the hard work that teachers invest in their roles: *“I feel like there needs to be a bit more specific labelled praise with the staff as well. ... I’m doing all of this hard work, and I’m not feeling seen for it. I’m not getting it not. I’m not*

*getting the acknowledgement.”* (Tom). Participant’s sentiment reflects a desire for more explicit and targeted appreciation, suggesting that the absence of such acknowledgement can impact how teachers perceive their efforts and contributions. All of these insights point out that feeling valued is a significant perceived contributor to teacher wellbeing.

#### 4f Personal life

Participants emphasise the significant impact of teachers’ personal lives on their wellbeing, pointing out that challenges or stressors in personal life can extend to affect one’s professional life.

*“teachers’ personal lives so. ... if your personal life is there’s stuff going on your personal life that’s not helping it wellbeing that it’s obviously going to knock on your job.”* (Sarah)

This perspective underscores the interconnectedness of personal and professional dimensions in shaping the overall wellbeing of teachers. Another participant echoed this sentiment by expressing the importance of having good wellbeing and finding happiness both within and outside the teaching profession: *“having a good wellbeing, and obviously just generally being happy whilst you with the job that you’re doing outside of the job.”* (Oliver). This perspective suggests that a positive state of wellbeing is not only influenced by the job itself but is also contingent on one’s overall happiness and fulfilment in various aspects of life. This holistic approach to wellbeing aligns with the understanding that personal and professional spheres are intertwined, contributing to the overall satisfaction and contentment of teachers. These viewpoints, coupled with the subtheme of *work-life balance*, highlight the interplay between personal and professional dimensions in shaping teacher wellbeing.

### 5. Discussion

This study explored teachers’ perspectives on their wellbeing through semi-structured interviews, aiming to capture its holistic nature and the interplay of various factors within and beyond their control. A notable strength of this research lies in its thorough and nuanced examination of the concept, directly from the perspective of teachers themselves, which has received limited empirical attention to date. The use of HTA allowed for the identification of consistencies and discrepancies with existing knowledge while generating new insights from the collected data. Also, this study contributes methodologically by demonstrating a structured application of HTA, ensuring analytical rigour through the use of separate coders for inductive and deductive stages, alongside a predefined coding strategy for all coders to enhance consistency and credibility.

The findings of this study reinforce the notion that teacher wellbeing is a complex and multifaceted term. Teachers perceive their profession as both challenging and rewarding, but many contemplate leaving due to various stressors and changes compared to the past in the role and educational context. They emphasise the importance of self-care, managing job demands, and experiencing positive emotions, as crucial in understanding wellbeing. External elements such as workload, emotional and physical labour, autonomy, job performance, management, government, work-life balance, trust, and support, as well as internal elements like job satisfaction, accepting your capacity, personal life, self-efficacy, competence, and positive feelings, collectively contribute to their experiences and understanding of wellbeing as a component. Moreover, work-life balance, workload, supportive environments and relationships, alongside personal health practices, autonomy, feeling valued, and things related to their personal lives are recognised as crucial contributors to their wellbeing. A detailed summary of themes and subthemes, along with explanatory notions, can be seen in [Appendix 3](#).

Foremost, while teacher wellbeing is often conceptualised from a professional perspective, our findings support the call for a more holistic approach that incorporates both the positive and negative aspects of



teacher experiences (Ozturk et al., 2024a). Teachers not only discussed the pressures they face but also emphasised strategies such as self-care, setting personal boundaries, and fostering supportive networks as essential to maintaining their wellbeing. This resonates with research suggesting that adaptability and reflective practices can enhance teacher resilience and long-term wellbeing (Davis et al., 2024).

Beyond professional factors, personal life emerged as a critical yet often overlooked component of teacher wellbeing. There is limited or no space for teachers to bring their own lives into the discussion while talking about their wellbeing as teachers. While prior research tends to focus on work-related determinants, our study acknowledges teachers' personal lives as integral to their wellbeing suggesting that effective support and leadership should take into account the broader context in which teachers operate, fostering an environment that respects and addresses both personal and professional dimensions. Teachers are not immune to external stressors beyond their job, and these can significantly impact their performance and wellbeing within the school environment. Warr (1999) emphasises that job-specific and context-free wellbeing influence each other in a mutual fashion, reinforcing the need to account for teachers' broader life contexts. Despite the well-documented impact of life circumstances on subjective wellbeing (Diener et al., 2003), this dimension remains underexplored in the literature on teacher wellbeing. As discussed earlier, most of the time, researchers explore the concept with a selective combination of various variables or by deploying a single perspective (such as a negative viewpoint or positive viewpoint), which falls short of understanding this complex term holistically. By offering teachers the opportunity to express their perspectives more holistically, this study contributes not only to the understanding of teacher wellbeing but also to the broader debate on how it should be conceptualised.

One of the critical subthemes emerging from our findings is the role of professional relationships in shaping teacher wellbeing. Trusting relationships with school leadership, for instance, were highlighted as fundamental to fostering a supportive work environment. This is consistent with Buchan et al.'s (2021) research in Scotland, which found that school management practices, particularly trust between teachers and their managers, significantly influence primary teacher wellbeing. Our study similarly underscores the importance of school leadership in mitigating workplace stressors, suggesting that management strategies promoting autonomy, support, and professional respect may be key to sustaining teacher wellbeing.

Beyond professional relationships, teachers also highlighted structural aspects of their work - particularly workload, autonomy, and control over their responsibilities - as critical to their wellbeing. Brady and Wilson (2020) discovered that teachers preferred school policies and practices that facilitated meaningful workloads, thereby reducing burdensome tasks and enhancing feelings of autonomy, connection, and proficiency. These findings underscore the importance of addressing key factors like workload and autonomy in fostering the wellbeing of educators and are also crucial for informing strategies aimed at enhancing teacher satisfaction and retention in educational settings.

Emotional labour emerged as a reappearing topic in this study, reflecting the complex and often taxing nature of teaching, particularly in primary education. Teachers' emotional experiences were shaped not only by the demands of the job but also by institutional expectations and the need to manage their emotions in response to students, parents, and colleagues. The findings suggest that emotional labour is not merely an individual experience but is also influenced by the broader work environment, including the display rules set by the school system and societal perceptions of the teaching profession. This aligns with previous research that conceptualises emotional labour as an integrative process involving both internal emotional regulation and external contextual factors (e.g., Smith et al., 2025). All of these underscore the intense demands of the profession and highlight the need to recognize emotional labour as a significant aspect of teacher wellbeing. This recognition has important implications for support and interventions aimed at

promoting teacher wellbeing.

Regarding perceiving their profession as both challenging and rewarding, although research typically suggests that student teachers perceive teaching as offering intrinsic rewards, fostering self-realisation, instilling a sense of purpose and mission, and facilitating lifelong development (Ezer et al., 2010), the participants in this study offer a contrasting perspective. They acknowledge rewarding aspects of teaching but typically conclude by emphasising its challenges. This contrast underscores once again the complex nature of the teaching profession, where both rewarding and challenging aspects coexist and shape individuals' experiences and perceptions in diverse ways over time.

Evidence suggests that teaching is a highly demanding profession, with stress and workload driving some teachers to consider leaving - an alarming trend given the current state of the profession in the UK (DfE, 2018). Primary school teachers in our study echoed these concerns, highlighting increasing stressors, shifts in their roles, and evolving educational expectations as key reasons for contemplating departure. This aligns with broader research demonstrating the strong connection between teacher wellbeing and critical professional factors, such as sleep quality, retention rates, and teacher-student interactions, all of which ultimately influence student outcomes (Dreer, 2023). While these associations are well established, further research is needed to clarify the causal mechanisms underlying these relationships.

According to See et al. (2020), focusing on continuing professional development and providing early career support could be promising strategies for retaining teachers in the profession. This approach could benefit teachers across all career stages, as the decision to leave the profession is not necessarily correlated with career level. Both older and younger teachers face distinct challenges: older teachers may experience heightened stress, while younger teachers may grapple with issues stemming from their relative lack of experience (Bricheno et al., 2009). Consequently, investing in continuing professional development and early career support can be advantageous for teachers of all ages and experience levels.

Overall, taken together, these findings contribute to the growing understanding that teacher wellbeing is not a singular or static concept but rather a dynamic interplay of various influences. Enhancing school leadership practices, fostering collaboration, and recognizing the emotional and physical demands of teaching are crucial steps in promoting sustainable teacher wellbeing and retention. Future research should continue to explore how personal and professional wellbeing interact and develop interventions that support teachers in a more holistic manner.

## 6. Limitations

The present research is not without its limitations. The research took place more than a year after the COVID-19 pandemic, and interviews were conducted virtually to accommodate participant preferences. This made it difficult to build initial rapport to put participants at ease and encourage them to share their experiences honestly and openly, as a lot of non-verbal aspects of communication are lost in the virtual world. Furthermore, interviews were conducted at a relatively difficult period for teachers due to the ongoing impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, which may have influenced their perceptions and discussions surrounding mental health and wellbeing. However, the decontextualised nature of online mediums also facilitated greater honesty and openness in sharing personal and sensitive experiences and reduced social desirability bias. This was demonstrated in Bagnall et al.'s (2020) online focus group study and was also noted by Nelson et al. (2021) and Vales et al. (2021). Additionally, the virtual interview format may have provided interviewees with a degree of space and detachment to reflect more deeply on their experiences.

One must also keep in mind that the findings of this study should be interpreted with caution regarding generalizability. As a single study

conducted in a specific region - primary school teachers in northwest England - the results may have limited generalizability due to the unique geographic, cultural, and contextual factors of the sample population. While the study offers valuable contextual insights, its findings may not fully capture the experiences of teachers in other regions or educational settings. In other words, the specific context constrains the broader applicability of the results. Moreover, given the differing interpretations of wellbeing across cultures - for instance, the variations between Western and Eastern perspectives (see Uchida et al., 2015) - it is essential to investigate teacher wellbeing in diverse cultural and educational contexts. Such research would advance our global knowledge on teacher wellbeing, accounting for the diversity of teachers' experiences.

Furthermore, the research used convenience sampling, which made it difficult to access a varied participant sample. Although the participants of the study showed some homogeneity (gender, coming from five different schools, teaching at different key stages, and having varying levels of experience), a potential limitation was that all male participants were recruited from the same school. Whilst this study does not seek to make suggestions/comparisons between gender groups, the research could have been improved by exploring a more diverse range of voices.

## 7. Conclusion

Investigating teacher wellbeing is a multifaceted endeavour that involves probing into the various layers of teachers' experiences and perspectives. This paper is centred around the pursuit of a deeper comprehension of the concept of teacher wellbeing, along with its constituent components and influential factors. Given current concerns about the role of stress and workload in teacher retention, it is imperative that we obtain a more holistic understanding of how to enhance

teacher wellbeing. Our study endeavours to make distinct contributions across conceptual and empirical dimensions. Conceptually, we seek to elucidate the nuanced dimensions of teacher wellbeing, moving beyond surface-level analyses to uncover underlying complexities. Empirically, our research delves into the lived experiences of teachers, providing rich insights into the factors that shape their wellbeing. By incorporating hybrid analysis, we aim to offer a comprehensive understanding of teacher wellbeing dynamics. Moreover, our study seeks to offer practical implications for policymakers and educational institutions. Drawing from the insights gained, we advocate for proactive measures to address systemic factors contributing to teacher wellbeing. As highlighted by Birchinall et al. (2019), engaging in professional consultations and advocating for policy changes are crucial steps towards alleviating pressures within the profession. Ultimately, our endeavour holds the potential to transform the teaching profession by empowering teachers to create nurturing learning environments, foster positive student outcomes, and fully dedicate themselves to the noble mission of education.

## CRedit authorship contribution statement

**Mumine Ozturk:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Visualization, Resources, Project administration, Methodology, Investigation, Funding acquisition, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Michael Wigelsworth:** Writing – review & editing, Supervision, Formal analysis. **Charlotte Bagnall:** Writing – review & editing, Methodology, Formal analysis.

## Declaration of competing interest

The authors have no known conflict of interest to disclose.

## Appendix 1. Interview Guide

### *Semi-structured interview guide*

The interview data is needed for: to obtain understanding of how primary level teachers make sense of their experiences and the world around them on teacher wellbeing.

### *Preamble*

1. Check that the interviewee has received the information sheet and consent form and understands the project and his/her role in it.

Ask: Have you any questions about the research?

2. Emphasise that:

- I am interested in individual thoughts about teacher wellbeing...“this is your opportunity to make your voice heard ... your comments may be helpful to others in your position at other schools at a later date”
- However, I combine all the data I collect to provide an overall picture and its implementation and any comments in the report are attributed very generally, for example, as “A (Year 3) teacher commented that ...”. Any comments/opinions will not be reported back to schools.

Ask: Have you any questions about how we use your comments?

### *Ethics*

Remind interviewee:

- The interview will take about 30 min.
- You do not have to answer any questions that you are not comfortable with.
- You can stop at any time, no explanation needed.
- If any question doesn't make sense, please ask for an explanation.

Ask, Ask: Is it alright to record the interview? The transcript will only be seen by those working on the project. I will send you a copy too if you wish.

Ask, Ask: Are you able/willing to sign the consent form?

Explain procedure:

I will begin the interview with my name, the date, time and the identifying code we have assigned to you/your school - this is just to keep the recordings organised. All your details will be anonymised when the data is transcribed.

The first question will be about your role in the school, your professional experience in the field of education, followed by general questions about wellbeing, then moving on to teacher wellbeing more specifically.

Ask: Have you any questions before we start?

Ask: Is it okay for me to start recording now?

### Interview schedule

State researcher's name, date, time, participant identifying code (for data management)

**Table 3**

Interview schedule

Dimensions	Questions	Purpose/RQ	Listening for
Introduction and Personal Background	1 Tell me about yourself please.//Could you tell me about your professional experience in the field of education? 2 How would you describe being a primary level teacher in the UK to someone unfamiliar with it?	Warm-up Background information Entrée into what they see as most important about being a teacher	Name and role/position Working experience Working level Education status Challenging Rewarding Something about mental health and wellbeing?? "You mentioned that ... Can you say a little bit more about that?"
Consistency	3 In a similar vein, I'm wondering how would you describe wellbeing who had never heard before, what would you tell them about wellbeing?//Could you tell me about what you understand by the "wellbeing"? a Could you talk about your views/any experience you have in identifying wellbeing as a teacher? 4 How would you compare having good wellbeing to poor wellbeing for teachers in the UK?//I want you kind of jump into a hypothetical world with me, where there are many teachers with good/poor wellbeing in the UK. What would things be like for those teachers? 5 People have shared with me lots of different opinions related to what would be included in 'teacher wellbeing'. Tell me about your view on this topic.	Perspectives on wellbeing Example/Experience related to wellbeing Understand the structure of teacher wellbeing Determinants of teacher wellbeing	Listen for the presence/absence of: -Frameworks (e.g. flourishing/deficit/professionalism ...) Prompts (things to nudge about if not explicitly discussed): [here are items from frameworks e.g. professionalism, wellbeing, anxiety, etc., space them out so you can 'tick them off' or note to follow up in more detail during an interview.] ● Burnout ● Positive emotions o Fulfilment o Happiness ● Negative emotions o Anxiety o Stress ● Support ● Relationships/Interactions o Colleagues o Students o Principals o Family/partner o Social o Parents of students ● Workload ● Self-efficacy ● Accomplishment ● Recognition ● Meaning ● Relatedness ● Job satisfaction ● Engagement ● Autonomy ● Competence ● Health o Mental o Physical ● Resilience
Closing	In closing, would you like to add any comments on what we've discussed or add anything that you think was left out of the conversation?//Is there anything that you think I should have asked you about, or missed out? Thank you very much for your help and time.		

### Probes

"Anything more?"

"Tell me more about that."

"Could you go over that again?"

"What's that been like for you?"

"What is your own personal view on this?"

"Can you offer an example?"

"You said '...'. What do you mean?"

## Appendix 2. Coding Strategy

### Teacher Wellbeing Coding Strategy

Research question: How primary school teachers define teacher wellbeing in the UK context?

Some notes on analysis:

- 1) A flexible approach is taken, where codes can be generally or specifically related to the allocated code, depending on the context and meaning of the data.
- 2) Coding should be done by meaning or sentiment, and not necessarily by paragraph or question. This means that one answer may have many different codes within it, and that codes may or may not correspond with the question being asked.
- 3) The focus is on capturing the ideas and sentiments of the answer, rather than the question itself. This allows for a more comprehensive understanding of the themes that emerge from the data.
- 4) Not everything needs to be coded if it is not relevant to the research questions. However, data that may be tangentially relevant or interesting can be coded under “Other” for future analysis.
- 5) Multiple coding of the same text is fine, as different codes may emerge from the same data depending on the context or perspective.
- 6) Any important or relevant quotes from participants that align with the research questions can be labelled as “Illustrative quotes” for use in the write-up.

## Appendix 3. Summary of themes and subthemes along with explanatory notions

**Table 4**  
Summary of themes and subthemes along with explanatory notions

Themes	Subthemes
1. Perception of being a teacher	1a. Challenging: intense, draining, exhausted, massive <u>Notions:</u> ●Workload ●Public perception ●Demanding (emotionally & physically) ●Responsibilities (different hats) ●Pressure ●Working w/young children ●Feeling of inadequacy ●Work-life balance ●Need to think each of child ●Focused on children progress 1b. Rewarding: satisfying, privilege, delightful <u>Notions:</u> ●Seeing children development ●We're everything (ego boost) ●Relationships w/children ●Positive feelings 1c. Wanting to/Idea of leave ... <u>Notions:</u> ●A lot more stressful ●Difficult as a profession (physical and emotional demands) ●Negative experience early in career 2a. Self-care and Emotional labour <u>Notions:</u> ●Looking after yourself (mental & physical health) ●Emotional labour 2b. Work-life balance and Job demands <u>Notions:</u> ●Work-life balance ●Demands of the job (demand vs. ability) 2c. Positive emotions <u>Notions:</u> ●Positive feelings (happiness, kindness, being comfortable, safe)
2. Understanding of wellbeing by teachers	3a. External elements <u>Notions:</u> ●Workload ●Emotional labour ●Autonomy ●Job performance ●Management ●Government ●Work-life balance ●Trust ●Support ●Physical labour
3. Components of TWB	

(continued on next page)

Table 4 (continued)

Themes	Subthemes
4. Perceived contributors to TWB	3b. Internal elements Notions: •Job satisfaction •Accepting your capacity •Personal life •Self-efficacy •Competence •Positive feelings
	4a. Work-life balance and workload Notions: •Work-life balance •Workload •Time management
	4b. Roles of environment and others Notions: •Support from colleagues, family, and friends •Relationships with students, parents, and school community
	4c. Health, self-care, and personal wellbeing practices Notions: •Health (mental & physical) •Self-care and personal wellbeing practices
	4d. Autonomy and competence Notions: •Autonomy and control over work •Self-efficacy and competence
	4e. Feeling valued Notions: •Job satisfaction •Recognition and appreciation for work
	4f. Personal life Notions: •Interconnectedness of personal and professional dimensions

Data availability

The data that has been used is confidential.

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