What Makes Teachers Well? A Mixed-Methods Study of Special Education Teacher Well-Being

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ABSTRACT

Using a longitudinal convergent-mixed-methods approach, researchers explored how secondary special education teachers understand and experience well-being in their work as educators. Researchers were interested in how teachers' reported levels of well-being, as well as interpretations of well-being, shifted over the course of the school year. Evidence from this study suggests that teachers' subjective experiences matter, but the contexts in which they teach can shift their experiences, which may be connected to overall well-being. Simply reducing stressors and/or burnout will not necessarily result in improved well-being for teachers. School-wide efforts to improve relationships within the school building, providing space for teacher leadership, explicitly naming shared values, and recognizing the emotional calendar of the school year may facilitate teachers' well-being.

INTRODUCTION

Special education teacher attrition and teacher shortages are well-documented challenges that have continued to threaten the stability of K -12 school districts globally (Conley & You, 2017; Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2010. In the United States, for example, special educators have a particularly high risk of stress, burnout, and attrition, leaving the field at twice the rate of general education teachers (Boe, 2014). Burnout is associated with disengagement, exhaustion, and depersonalization, which leaves teachers emotionally unavailable to connect with students, negatively impacts student-teacher relationships, and is correlated with lower levels of self-efficacy (Brouwers & Tomic, 2000; Klassen & Chiu, 2010; Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2010). Teacher burnout leaves the most vulnerable population of students with the least stable, and often most inexperienced, population of teachers (Sutcher et al., 2016).

LITERATURE REVIEW

Consequences of Teacher Stress and Burnout

Solutions to burnout and high rates of turnover often look to systemic or administrative remedies such as improving the teacher pipeline, increasing pay, or loan forgiveness programs, but few consider the importance of teacher well-being or the relationship between teacher well-being and student well-being. While there has been significant attention to indicators of stress, burnout, or working conditions that lead to attrition, such as isolation, challenging student behavior, low salaries, or lack of administrative support, there has been little exploration of factors that significantly improve teacher well-being and retention (Brunsting et al., 2014; Kyriacou, 2001; Levine, 2013; Player et al., 2017; Schaefer et al., 2012; Sumsion, 2007). Even less attention has been paid to special educator well-being.

The persistence of burnout suggests the need for new approaches to support teachers that go beyond traditional reform measures and consider the relevance of well-being for teacher retention and student outcomes. The Dual Factor Model of Mental Health (DFM; Keyes et al., 2012) suggests that positive mental health occurs not only in the absence of psychopathology but also in the presence of optimal psychological functioning and well-being (Renshaw & Cohen, 2014). Cultivating positive well-being is not only valuable in and of itself, but can also serve as a protective buffer against stress, burnout, or mental illness (e.g., Seligman, 2004). Research on teacher well-

being has traditionally focused on negative indicators such as classroom management challenges or lack of administrative support and has not, until recently, considered *positive* facilitators, such as sense of belonging or positive emotions.

The purpose of this study was to investigate special education teacher well-being at an independent, secondary school serving students with learning disabilities and differences. Using a longitudinal convergent-mixed-methods approach, researchers explored how teachers understand and experience well-being in their work as educators. Additionally, researchers were interested in how teachers' reported levels of well-being, as well as interpretations of well-being, shifted over the course of the school year in response to changing demands, stress, and motivators.

What is Teacher Well-Being

Teacher well-being is critical for two reasons: (a) teacher stress and burnout impact teacher retention, and (b) teacher well-being has significant consequences for daily classroom activities, student-teacher relationships, and student outcomes (Brouwers & Tomic, 2000; Jennings & Greenberg, 2009). Broadly speaking, well-being includes both objective and subjective dimensions. Objective definitions of well-being are often associated with factors external to the individual (e.g., economic resources or political power) or those associated with discrete health measures. Subjective well-being includes internal factors such as authentic happiness, satisfaction, competence, or engagement.

Most teachers consistently cite external (i.e., objective) working condition factors, such as additional duties, lack of administrative support, pay, or increased accountability measures, as reasons for undue stress and ultimately for leaving the field (Sutcher et al., 2016). However, there has been growing interest in what subjective factors facilitate teacher well-being such as cognitive (mental) factors, community beliefs or values, individual experiences and culture, and perceptions of context, including school climate (Anderson et al., 2019; McCallum et al., 2017; Viac & Fraser, 2020).

Although interest in teacher well-being has grown dramatically in the past decade, there are few definitions of well-being that specifically relate to teachers (McCallum et al., 2017). Those that do exist range in interpretation but include both objective and subjective domains. For example, Burns and Machin (2013) draw from other organizational definitions of well-being that incorporate teachers' subjective feelings about their job or organization, attitudes towards work, and more objective measures of work performance,

absenteeism, or retention. Aelterman and colleagues (2007) define teacher well-being as "a positive emotional state, which is the result of harmony between the sum of specific environmental factors on the one hand, and the personal needs and expectations of teachers on the other hand" (p. 286). Acton and Glasgow (2015) define it as "an individual sense of personal professional fulfilment, satisfaction, purposefulness and happiness, constructed in a collaborative process with colleagues and students" (p. 101). However, current definitions of teacher well-being have been formulated and theorized by researchers but have not intentionally leveraged the voices of teachers themselves.

Even without a clear definition, there is general consensus that the well-being of teachers is important — as a value in and of itself, as related to the health and performance of students, and as an economic imperative (Coleman, 2009; McCallum & Price, 2010; Roffey, 2012; Sutcher et al., 2016; Viac & Fraser, 2020). Given this, there has been ample interest in identifying what factors facilitate the well-being of teachers and how teacher well-being relates to student outcomes. Teachers who have high degrees of well-being are more likely to have positive relationships with students and report a greater sense of self-efficacy (Herman et al., 2018; Warren, 2013; Warren & Hale, 2016), and students with high degrees of well-being have higher academic performance and lower psychological distress (Adler, 2017). Teachers who work in positive school climates report less stress, better organization, and more time focused on instruction (Billingsley, 2004; McLean et al., 2018). Preliminary international research suggests teacher well-being can enhance schools' ability to retain teachers in the field and serve diverse student populations (e.g., Roffey, 2012). Thus, improving special education teacher well-being may help mitigate teacher turnover, and simultaneously improve outcomes for students with disabilities.

However, few studies have explored teacher well-being over the course of time. Given the cyclical nature of the school year, it is important to understand if teacher well-being fluctuates or if there are particular times during the year in which well-being is either high or low, or if current measurement scales are stable over time. At the same time, efforts to investigate teacher well-being are complicated, because there is also no consensus as to how to *measure* teacher well-being. Yet, researchers and practitioners tend to agree that teacher well-being is an outcome variable of interest, and thus have taken many different approaches to measure it. These approaches have primarily made use of questionnaires and surveys (e.g., Renshaw et al., 2015), with few studies investigating teachers' qualitative experiences of professional well-being. Current teacher well-being scales have not been paired with qualitative

interviews to identify if they adequately capture the core components of teacher well-being or if there are other factors teachers feel are more salient to their lives as teachers. Thus, the purpose of this study was to explore the construct of teacher well-being over time using a mixed-methods approach.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework for this study was informed by the Person-Environment-Occupation Fit Model (PEOF; Jansen & Kristof-Brown, 2006). Drawing upon this framework, we propose a strength-based psychosocial model of teacher well-being. A PEOF model capitalizes on individual strengths as well as environmental contexts, and provides a framework for understanding how the interactions between the person and the environment promote or inhibit optimal functioning and work-related outcomes (Jansen & Kristof-Brown, 2006). This multidimensional model suggests that both individuals and the environment they inhabit include internal factors (e.g., personality, values, attitudes, emotions, and goals) and external factors (e.g., job requirements, behavior, organizational culture, and pay; Edwards & Billsberry, 2010), which widens the interactions and influences that each domain may exert on one another. Understanding how individual teacher traits interact with environmental variables to produce or inhibit optimal occupational experiences can provide insight into environments that promote school-based well-being. Framing teacher well-being within a person-environment-fit framework suggests that variations in well-being can be accounted for by a number of driving factors, including personal and environmental domains, and that these factors often interact with one another.

RESEARCH METHOD

Study Purpose and Research Questions

This study aims to investigate facilitators of and influences on special education teacher well-being. The purpose of this study is to increase teacher voice in understandings of teacher well-being, and to compare changes to teachers' quantitative experiences and qualitative interpretations of well-being over the course of one academic year by investigating the following research questions:
1.   Quantitative: What are levels of special education teacher well-being at a school serving students with learning disabilities/differences at

the beginning and end of the school year, and do levels of well-being change over time?

2. Qualitative: How do secondary special education teachers define and characterize school-based well-being, and how do those definitions change over time?
3. Integrated/Mixed: How do quantitative levels of teacher well-being compare to teachers' qualitative interpretations of well-being?

Context

The school of focus in this study is a small, independent (private) school serving approximately 385 students in grades K-12. The school specializes in serving students who exhibit language-based learning differences, learning disabilities, and/or Attention Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD). The school uses a college-preparatory, arts-centered curriculum across all subject areas. Researchers partnered with secondary (9th-12th grade) teachers at this school.

At the time of this study, the school had been working in partnership with the researchers for four years and had a shared interest in school-based well-being for students and teachers. This school was also selected for participation in the present study as it represents a positive outlier in terms of teacher retention and student outcomes; school administrators report high levels of teacher retention, and over 90% of graduates continue to postsecondary education. Research of positive outliers can help identify what works in functional school environments and may enable other schools to adopt best practices (LeMahieu et al., 2017).

School administrators were interested in ways to further support staff and, in partnership with researchers, designed a year-long professional development program to promote teacher well-being. Teachers met with researchers twice per month in two groups of 10-12 to learn about and discuss strategies to promote individual and school-wide well-being. Researchers introduced a wide variety of topics including optimism, self-compassion, resilience, and mindfulness, among others, to teachers. Participants had the opportunity to practice well-being strategies and provide feedback as to how the construct or intervention may be adapted to better suit the needs of teachers. This participatory pilot project facilitated the creation of a Teacher Well-Being Resource Guide to be used in future studies and professional development sessions.

The participatory pilot project served as the backdrop for the data collected and analyzed in this particular study. While data were collected

throughout the school year to inform well-being sessions and the resource guide, this particular study will report on the teacher survey, focus group, and interview data from two distinct time points: in late summer of 2018 prior to teacher well-being sessions and in late spring of 2019, after well-being sessions had been implemented. As the central focus of this study is how teachers define well-being and how that definition shifts over time, researchers were not interested in teacher responses to targeted professional development sessions, but rather in teachers' global understandings and experiences of well-being in a school environment that explicitly promotes a focus on well-being.

This project was conducted by a team of four researchers, all of whom identify as White women and have prior experience as Special Education teachers at the early childhood, elementary, and secondary levels. The researchers were keenly aware of how their personal experiences might influence interpretation of participants' experiences so were careful to interrogate findings with participants through member checks and also together as a research team.

Participants

Teacher participants were affiliated with the secondary school. According to school administrators, participants were highly trained, with over 80% holding advanced degrees, most in special education. Of the 29 teachers who reported years of experience, 82.7% ($n = 24$) had over 9 years of teaching experience, 13.8% had 4-8 years ($n = 4$) of experience, and 3.5% ($n = 1$) had 1-3 years of experience. Additional demographic data was not provided per the request of school partners, to protect the confidentiality of teacher participants. All secondary teachers were required to participate in the sessions on teacher well-being as a component of their professional development for the school year. However, teachers were given the option to opt out of having survey or focus group data included in the study or analysis. Although no teachers who participated in the survey or focus groups opted out of including their data, teachers who were absent during data collection sessions did not all participate in later opportunities to make up sessions. Thus, participation numbers for survey respondents, focus groups, and data collection time points varied.

Research Design

This study used a longitudinal convergent-mixed-methods design involving two sets of parallel data collection (Figure 1; Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). Convergent-mixed-methods design involves simultaneous collection of quantitative and qualitative data followed by separate analyses of each data set. The data sets are then merged for interpretation to compare and contrast results. In the current study, surveys of teacher well-being were used to quantify well-being and determine average levels of teacher well-being among secondary staff. The qualitative data explored how teachers interpret and experience well-being and how this changes over time. Quantitative surveys and qualitative focus groups and interviews were conducted at two time points: fall of 2018 and spring of 2019. As this study was considered to be part of existing educational practice (teacher professional development), it was deemed exempt from review by the university's Institutional Review Board.

Quantitative Survey Instruments

Quantitative data was collected in the fall of 2018 and again in the spring of 2019. In the fall of 2018, 100% of participating teachers responded to the survey ($n = 29$). In the spring of 2019, 59% of participating teachers responded to the survey ($n = 17$). Participants were assigned an identification number to confidentially link their fall and spring responses. Participants responded to two survey measures: The Teacher Well-Being Scale (TWBS; Collie et al., 2015) and the Teacher Subjective Well-Being Questionnaire (TSWQ; Renshaw et al., 2015).

The Teacher Well-Being Scale (TWBS) is a 16-item instrument that assesses three factors of teachers' work-related well-being: (a) workload well-being, related to teacher workload and associated pressure; (b) organizational well-being, including perceptions of school leadership and culture; and (c) student interaction well-being including teachers' perceptions of student motivation, behavior, and relationships (Collie et al., 2015). Participants are asked to rate their well-being as a teacher from negatively (1) to positively (7) with respect to different aspects of their work. High scores reflect high levels of well-being. Researchers adapted the scale to (1) low and (5) high in response to school-administrator feedback to reduce participant burden. In previous studies, internal reliability estimates (Cronbach's alpha) ranged from .82–.90 on the TWBS (Collie et al., 2015). Internal reliability estimates on the full-scale TWBS were acceptable in the fall (.87) and in the spring (.92).

Note. Quantitative and qualitative data were collected and analyzed concurrently at Time 1 and Time 2. Following data analysis at Time 2, results were merged to identify meta-analyses, or themes and patterns, across the quantitative and qualitative data.

Figure 1
Convergent Mixed Methods Data Collection
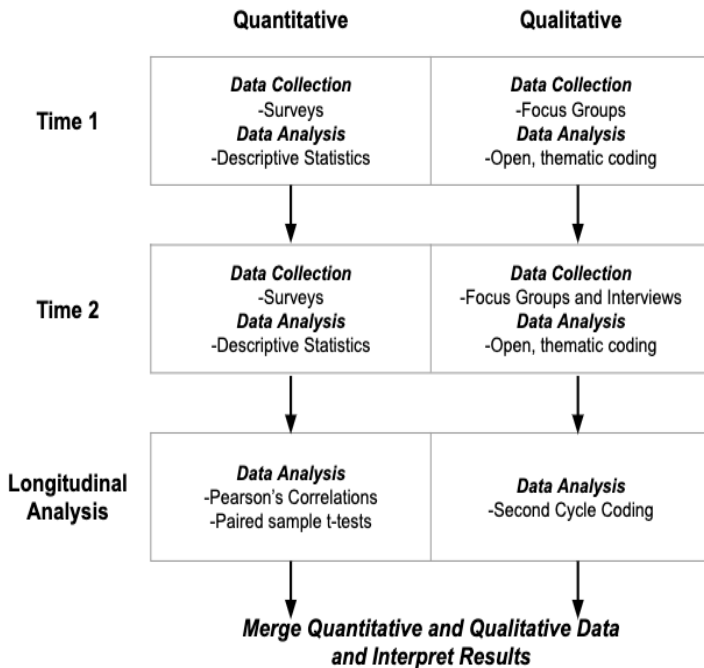
The Teacher Subjective Well-Being Questionnaire (TSWQ) is an 8-item instrument that assesses two factors of teachers' work-related well-being: (a) teacher self-efficacy (e.g., "I am a successful teacher"), and (b) a teacher's sense of school connectedness (e.g., "I feel like I belong at this school"). Participants were asked to rate on a 4-point Likert-type scale (1 = almost never, 2 = sometimes, 3 = often, 4 = almost always) their well-being with respect to different aspects of their work as a teacher. High scores reflect high levels of well-being. In previous studies, alpha levels were .86 on the TSWQ (Renshaw et al., 2015). For our sample, internal reliability estimates as measured by Cronbach's alpha on the full-scale TSWQ were acceptable in the fall (.95) and in the spring (.92).

Qualitative Focus Groups and Interviews

In August 2018, teachers participated in semi-structured focus groups ($n \cong 10$ per group, 3 groups). Individuals were asked to describe what a "well school" meant to them, to describe and define teacher and administrator well-being, and to discuss how their school climate could facilitate teachers' well-being. Due to time constraints during professional development days prior to the first day of school, the three focus groups took place in three rooms at the school, simultaneously. For each focus group, one researcher (first, second, and third authors) asked questions and took extensive, verbatim notes on teacher responses. Per administrators' request, sessions were not audio recorded and responses were anonymous so that teachers felt they could speak freely. Following focus group sessions, the researchers compared notes to check for consistency.

In the spring of 2019, teachers participated in semi-structured focus groups ($n \cong 10\text{-}15$ per group, 2 groups, total $n = 24$) to revisit their perceptions of teacher and school-wide well-being at a different point in the school year. Two focus groups took place during the teachers' regularly-scheduled professional development sessions, one before school and one after school. Teachers who were unable to join the focus group, or felt they had more to say in response to focus group questions, opted into additional one-on-one interviews. Six teachers participated in individual interviews. Individuals in the focus groups and interviews were asked to once again describe what a "well school" meant to them, to describe and define teacher and administrator well-being, and to discuss how their school climate could facilitate teachers' well-being. Additionally, teachers were asked if their original definitions and thoughts regarding teacher well-being had changed over the course of the school year. Teachers were provided with a summary of previous statements regarding teacher well-being from August sessions.

As was the case in August, school administrators requested sessions not be audio recorded. Focus groups and interviews were facilitated by one researcher (first author) while another researcher took extensive notes on teacher responses (third or fourth author), noting verbatim responses as much as possible while ensuring confidentiality of responses. Following focus groups and interviews, researchers compared notes for consistency.

Data Analysis

Quantitative Analysis

In response to the first research question (i.e., What are levels of special education teacher well-being at a school serving students with learning disabilities/differences at the beginning and end of the school year, and do levels of well-being change over time?), researchers analyzed responses to the two teacher well-being surveys. Analysis was conducted using SPSS Statistics Version 25. Descriptive statistics were conducted for Time 1 and Time 2. Paired sample t-tests were used to determine if there were differences across sub-scale factors within each time period. Pearson's correlations and paired sample t-tests were also conducted to compare scale subscale mean differences across time. The assumption of equal variance at Time 1 and Time 2 was met. At Time 1, 29 teachers participated. At Time 2, 17 teachers participated. Given our interest in comparing teacher well-being across time, only participants who completed the survey at both Time 1 and Time 2 were included in this analysis ($n = 17$).

Qualitative Coding and Theme Development

Data analysis was conducted by four members of the research team (four authors). Researchers first analyzed teacher data from fall focus groups using descriptive, thematic, and in vivo codes to summarize words and chunks of text (Miles et al., 2014). Researchers then developed consensus around major categories of descriptive, thematic, and in vivo codes and associated subcodes. Six key categories emerged (e.g., "school policies and procedures" or "values"). These categories were then used for secondary coding, which was conducted by one member of the research team (first author). Member checks were also conducted; researchers shared overarching categories with teacher participants during fall professional development sessions. During these sessions, teachers had the opportunity to comment on how well the identified categories resonated with their own experience of school well-being; at the time, all teachers indicated the categories accurately reflected factors that affected their school well-being. To analyze spring focus groups and interview data, researchers used existing categories and sub-categories from the fall and also identified any new, emergent descriptive, in vivo, or thematic codes that were not captured in earlier sessions. All four members of the research team coded teacher responses from spring sessions. A consensus-building process was then used to transform categories into

overarching themes. This process of theming allowed researchers to connect data sources from the two time points and helped develop inter-rater reliability among team members. All researchers contributed to all phases of the coding and theming process, resulting in 100% consensus across all codes and themes.

Integrated Analysis

Integration in a convergent design involves merging quantitative results with qualitative results (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). Data were integrated using a parallel-database variant in which two parallel strands of data are collected and analyzed separately and then brought together during interpretation. Integrated analysis involved a joint display to array the quantitative and qualitative data side-by-side and to note where results converged or diverged (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). The research team also independently memoed and routinely reflected together about how findings converged, diverged, and changed over time.

RESULTS

Quantitative Results

Teacher Subjective Well-Being Questionnaire

Of the 29 total participants, 17 completed the TSWQ at both time points and thus were included in analysis. According to the Teacher Subjective Well-Being Questionnaire (TSWQ; scale of 1-4, 1 = low well-being), teachers reported medium to high levels of well-being in the fall ($M = 3.07$, $SD = 0.71$) and in the spring ($M = 3.04$, $SD = 0.66$). Teachers reported medium to high levels of self-efficacy in the fall ($M = 3.01$, $SD = 0.75$) and in the spring ($M = 3.06$, $SD = 0.74$). See Table 1.

Teacher Well-Being Scale

As with the TSWQ, 17 of the 29 participants completed the TWBS in the fall and in the spring. According to the Teacher Well-Being Scale (TWBS; scale of 1-5, 1 = low well-being), teachers reported medium to high levels of well-being in the fall ($M = 3.82$, $SD = 0.47$) and in the spring ($M = 3.63$, $SD = 0.74$). However, differences across sub-scales were observed at both Time 1 and Time 2. Organizational well-being was statistically significantly higher than workload well-being in the fall ($p < 0.001$) and in the spring ($p < 0.001$). Student interaction well-being was also statistically significantly higher than workload well-being in the fall ($p < 0.001$) and in the spring ($p < 0.001$).

Table 1

Teacher Well-Being Levels Across Time

	Time 1 Mean (n = 17)	Time 1 SD	Time 2 Mean (n = 17)	Time 2 SD
TSWQ	3.07	0.71	3.04	0.66
TSWQ SE	3.01	0.75	3.06	0.74
TSWQ SC	3.13	0.73	3.03	0.71
TWBS	3.82	0.47	3.63	0.74
TWBS Org	4.24	0.58	3.85	0.98
TWBS Work	3.16	0.69	3.15	0.88
TWBS Student	4.19	0.53	4.00	0.66

Note. TSWQ = Teacher Subjective Well-being Questionnaire (1-4). SE = Self-efficacy, SC = School Connectedness. TWBS = Teacher Well-Being Scale (1-5). Org = Organizational well-being, Work = Workload well-being, Student = Student interactions well-being.

Longitudinal Findings

While the TWBS (fall) and TWBS (spring) were not significantly correlated ($r = .26$, $p = .31$), the TSWQ (fall) and TSWQ (spring) were significantly correlated ($r = .57$, $p = .02$). Paired sample t-tests were conducted to compare teacher well-being across time on both scales and all subscale factors. Teacher well-being according to the TSWQ was consistent over time ($p = .85$) and consistent on both the self-efficacy and school connectedness subscales ($p = .77$ and $p = .62$). The TWBS was also consistent over time ($p = .30$). Workload well-being was very similar in the fall and in the spring ($p = .97$). While Teacher Organizational Well-Being and Student Interaction Well-Being were lower in the spring as compared to the fall, these differences were not statistically significant ($p = .15$ and $p = .27$).

Qualitative Results

From the analysis of teacher focus groups and interviews, three major themes emerged: (a) teacher well-being is a balancing act, (b) resources help,

but relationships are most important to well-being, and (c) teacher well-being is active and requires sustained intentional action.

Theme 1: Teacher Well-Being is a Balancing Act

Though teachers had overwhelmingly positive things to say about school-level factors that facilitated their well-being, when asked about their individual well-being, there was a sense that it is a delicate balancing act. Balancing was sometimes a literal "act," often favoring teaching responsibilities over personal ones, and teachers felt boundaries slip away when external demands conflicted with personal values.

Balancing as a literal act. Some teachers reported a high sense of skepticism that individual well-being was even possible as a teacher. One teacher said, "I don't know any 'well' teachers," while another shared, "I can't think of someone who fits that description entirely – I'm suspicious of people who are always great." The need to put aside personal challenges in order to perform the job was a common sentiment. Some felt this was because "a huge part of teaching is acting; your personal life is on fire, but it's show time." Another agreed that their "well-being as a teacher is mostly an act," sharing, "my personal life is a wreck. I often feel overwhelmed, frightened to lose my job, or worried about my students reflecting negatively back to me."

Balancing external pressures with individual values. Individuals felt extreme pressure to balance the demands of teaching with personal responsibilities. The external demands that teachers felt the most cumbersome included highly-involved or upset parents, feelings of administrative micro-managing, and pressure to meet academic standards. These demands stood in sharp contrast to teachers' need for autonomy and control over their work. To one teacher, "there is a certain amount of material to get through and that puts pressure [on us]" but student needs make that even more challenging. There is "pressure from the state. . . parents' implied pressure to 'fix' their children, and admin[istration] in turn feels pressure from both avenues, and [that] puts pressure on the teacher." One teacher shared that "there's autonomy until a parent complains and then autonomy is taken away and you're micromanaged." Many teachers felt there was a "shift" once parents became more involved. Another stated, "I need as a teacher to feel trusted that I'm a professional and a specialist - and the parent is not the specialist. . . . I need admin to defend that. . . believe you hired me because I'm good at my job, trust that I'm good at my job." In sum, when teachers felt their autonomy was challenged (e.g., by administrators or parents) and that they had limited

control over their work (e.g., standards-based-curricula), they felt the most unwell.

Theme 2: Resources Help, But Relationships are Most Important to Well-Being

Teachers described a number of school-level factors that supported or hindered their individual well-being. Physical resources were beneficial, but feeling connected to colleagues, feeling supported by administrators, and sharing values as a community were more important to teachers.

Physical Space and Resources. The secondary school's facilities had been recently renovated and offer state of the art classroom technology, shared learning spaces, a design lab, an art studio, and a plethora of natural light and bright, clean aesthetics. Participants reported that the "openness of space" allowed teachers to collaborate more frequently and have "space [for] sharing." Teachers reported they had the physical resources needed to teach and that nice facilities and space allowed them to "focus on more high-level interactions" and teaching. Some teachers contrasted this ambiance to other schools with more limited resources or out-of-date facilities.

Sense of Community. While the physical climate was conducive to supporting teaching, teachers reported that a sense of community and positive emotional climate were more critical to their well-being. One teacher commented that there is a "feeling you get when you walk into any school that is welcoming or not welcoming" and that this school always felt "welcoming." Another teacher shared that the school is the "most collegial school I have ever taught at" while a colleague stated that teachers "are never isolated here. I never have to think alone or be the sole expert on something." Many teachers described informal social gatherings with fellow staff members and positive talk about their work. Teachers also felt generally supported by the administration, indicating that "they will look for ways to help you with what you need" and that this contributed to a stronger sense of openness and support within the school community. Relationships with students similarly contributed to this strong sense of community; one teacher shared, "a sense of family among staff and students" while another said there are "intimate relationships between teachers and students; teachers get to know students really well." One went as far as to say, "if I didn't have my people, there's no way I would have lasted here."

Aligned Values. The alignment of a teacher's individual values with broader school values contributed to a sense of meaning, purpose, and connection to the school. Teachers talked about these values as being distinct and different from other schools' values in a very positive way. Three core values emerged as fundamental to teachers' well-being: (a) diversity and inclusion, (b) autonomy and creativity, and (c) a continuous improvement orientation.

Diversity was cited as "very important to the school" as it contributes to positive learning environments for students who "need to see themselves reflected in the staff and share classes with other students who are diverse." Teachers described the school as inclusive and accepting, but did note that the school could be "more direct about nurturing of diversity" to ensure all community members felt valued.

The ability to "be creative" was also seen as a strong facilitator of well-being. Teachers felt the school encouraged intellectual freedom and autonomy and allowed for flexibility to adapt to "student wishes and needs without fear of reprimand." One teacher shared, "I think it helps when you are in a place . . . where there are nice people, creativity, [and] laughing." As a school that works with students with learning disabilities and differences, art and visual methods are highly valued in the curriculum as a supplement to traditional academic disciplines.

Finally, an improvement orientation was repeatedly referenced as a core value of the school. Teachers felt "striving for continual change" supported an atmosphere that is "not stagnant." This "growth mindset" approach to teaching and learning was seen as a facilitator of well-being. One participant shared "teachers and students know it is a good place to fail," suggesting the culture encourages "learning from failure." Teachers valued the sense that the school was willing to "take risks in reorganization [and] take chances to make things better."

Theme 3: Teacher Well-Being is Active and Requires Action

Teachers recognized that cultivating well-being is an active and ongoing process that requires diligent and supportive school processes and policies. This includes involving teachers as active and valued partners in community decision making and pushing back on policies that may be outdated.

Teachers as Valued Partners. Teachers felt strongly that more transparency from leadership and greater teacher involvement in decision making processes was critical to their well-being at work. One teacher shared "I want a justification [about changes]. I may not agree, but I want a

justification." Another commented that "When I feel less well, it's not as much about if I belong here or if I am in my place - I think it's more about transforming hierarchical structures." Many wanted "staff members' hand in the decision-making process" and that they needed more "avenues for staff to be active in decision making." Another shared, "we aren't privy to everything admin deals with, but often that feeling of 'do you remember what it is like to be in the classroom? Why are you not understanding what I'm asking?'" These sentiments reflect teachers' desires for greater transparency in decision-making and more active involvement in decisions that impact their work and their students.

Challenging "Tradition." While teachers felt that "logistically . . . things run smoothly" at the school, there were a number of policies that were cited as barriers to well-being. The strict structure of the school day and "20th century model of punching the time clock" threatened teachers' sense of trust. Sick-leave policies were considered to be a significant problem for teachers: "the idea of sick days feels a bit negative. Teachers don't fake being sick. Ninety percent of the time they come in anyways" and there is "teacher guilt about not coming in if you don't feel well." One teacher stated, "one of the most impactful stressors on my well-being are meetings outside of the 7:45[a.m.]-3:45[p.m.] school day and needing to use time during lunch or a prep" for non-teaching responsibilities. Others agreed that as work encroached on teachers' personal time, their well-being suffered, particularly when this work was not compensated. The "slow creep of technology in our lives" allows for late-night emails and an expectation of nearly constant availability. Some teachers felt that a lack of consistency in implementing school-policies across departments also potentially threatened their sense of well-being.

Integrated Results

The integration of quantitative and qualitative data allows for a more complete understanding of teacher well-being than that provided by either data set alone (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). Integrated analysis often involves looking for areas of convergence (where quantitative and qualitative results support one another) and for areas of divergence (where quantitative and qualitative results are discordant; Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). Where data diverge, there is often space for new understandings. In the case of this study, two themes emerged from points of divergence of quantitative and

qualitative data across time: (a) an emotional calendar may affect teacher well-being and (b) teacher well-being is a psychosocial phenomenon.

Integrated Theme 1: An Emotional Calendar May Affect Teacher Well-Being

Although teacher well-being levels according to the TSWQ and TWBS did not change significantly from the fall to the spring, qualitative focus groups and interviews suggested that teachers felt particular pressures according to the time of year. An "emotional calendar" may explain the ebbs and flows of teacher well-being over the course of the school year. During qualitative focus groups and interviews, teachers reported feeling more stressed and "unwell" during the spring as compared to the fall: "Part of it is the time of year - the boundaries between school and life are not feeling balanced" because of the "pressures of the end of the school year." Others felt strongly that spring "is traditionally a terrible, stressful time of year. Lots of paperwork due. Students who are at risk of not getting all their credits." Another teacher similarly shared, "this is just a terrible time of the year to gauge teacher wellness - we are all so crabby - [you] would think the end of the year would be exciting but instead [there is a] desperate feeling of what didn't get done and what needs to get done." Thus, although quantitative measures revealed no differences in teacher well-being, focus groups and interviews suggested that teachers experienced their well-being to be qualitatively different in the fall and spring.

Despite these intense feelings of stress and time urgency, most participants recognized that this is just "part of the job" and "ebbs and flows" are to be expected in teaching. Being able to distinguish between the time-of-year stress and school-specific stress may have impacted teacher responses to the TSWQ and TWBS. While teachers complained about springtime deadlines and the pace of work, survey participants may have responded to scales with a general acknowledgement that their feelings towards organizational climate, staff connectedness, or self-efficacy had not changed and stress was mostly predictable based on the time of year. One commented, "as the year goes on, people do get tired."

Integrated Theme 2: Teacher Well-Being is a Psychosocial Phenomenon

How an individual responds to a particular environment varies according to personality, disposition, experience, and circumstances. As suggested by the person-environment-occupation fit framework, well-being at work is related to how an individual interacts with the larger system or school. There is a psychological component (teacher characteristics) and a social component (school characteristics and relationships). This psychosocial phenomenon

involves a series of cumulative individual experiences and perceptions mediated by school staff and administrators, the school's emotional environment, families and parents, and even the broader policy context.

Although there was not a wide range of responses to the TSWQ and TWBS, there was variability across the 17 teachers who participated in the survey at both time points. Average full-scale scores on the TSWQ ranged from 1.75 to 4.00 in the fall and from 2.00 to 4.00 in the spring. Average full-scale scores on the TWBS ranged from 2.69 to 4.50 in the fall and from 2.36 to 4.93 in the spring. Most scores did not vary much over time, but some individuals showed dramatic increases or decreases in their overall well-being over the course of the school year. While average changes on the TSWQ were -0.02 from the fall to the spring, one teacher reported a 1.00 increase on the TSWQ from the fall to the spring whereas another reported a -0.63 decrease from the fall to the spring. On the TWBS, average changes from the fall to the spring were -0.19. However, one teacher reported a 1.5 increase, and another reported a -2.13 decrease on full-scale scores from the fall to the spring. Interestingly, the individuals with the greatest changes from the fall to the spring on the TSWQ were not the same as the individuals with the greatest change from the fall to the spring on the TWBS. Because interviews did not specifically link participants to survey responses, the researchers were unable to further inquire about these changes in response on an individual basis.

While we acknowledge the interdependent nature of teachers within school systems, it is not enough to assume that if the system is well, individuals within it must be too. One teacher commented, "there's been a lot of turmoil in other divisions, they have been very unhappy" while another stated, "I teach in two radically different spaces," suggesting that even for the same individual, well-being shifts depending on their role, department, or what physical space they are in. Some individuals were able to recognize the health of the school, yet still feel they are barely hanging on as individuals or that their "well-being as a teacher is mostly an act." One teacher shared, "I suspect that if you talk to 10 individuals you'd get 10 different answers. It depends." Unhealthy school systems may be more likely to contribute to early burnout and unwell individuals, but a "well" school may not always be enough to support all individuals.

DISCUSSION

This study aimed to explore facilitators of special education teacher well-being, in addition to barriers. Evidence from this study suggests that teachers' subjective experiences matter, but the contexts in which they teach can shift

their experiences, which may be connected to overall well-being and/or mental health. Additionally, the collection and integration of quantitative and qualitative data allowed for a richer and more complete picture of well-being than either data set would have provided alone.

Supporting a Strengths-Based Psychosocial Framework

The person-environment-occupation fit model conceptualizes teacher well-being as an interaction between the teacher and the school environment (Jansen & Kristof-Brown, 2006). The application of this framework facilitated a theory-driven investigation of how individual teacher traits interact with environmental variables to produce or inhibit optimal experiences and provide insight into school-level factors that promote teacher well-being.

Preliminary evidence from this study demonstrated that the nature of teaching is very much an interpersonal job, and that context matters greatly in understanding the well-being of special education teachers. Thus, researchers found that teacher well-being is best understood as a psychosocial model in which teachers' subjective experiences interact with the contexts in which they teach, and this interaction may be connected to their overall well-being and mental health.

Implications for Measuring Teacher Well-Being

Based on the integrated analysis, researchers found divergence between the quantitative and qualitative data over time. Given these differences, it is important to consider what measures would best help researchers understand teachers' individual well-being over the course of the school year. While the scales used in this study were stable over time, teachers' qualitative responses suggested well-being may have been lower in the spring. Future measurement studies should explore scale stability with a larger sample of teachers and include multiple timepoints (e.g., beginning, middle, and end of school year). The TSWQ and TWBS may not be sensitive enough to teachers' changing perceptions from the fall to the spring. Item and person-level analysis over time may also provide insight as to what areas of teacher well-being may be more vulnerable to time-of-year stressors. Given the complexity of well-being and school contexts, researchers and practitioners should consider the benefit of using discrete measures in addition to open, on-going conversations with staff.

Recommendations for Practice

Recommendations for practice, based on quantitative, qualitative, and integrated findings are listed below.

Open Communication and Transparency

Open communication between leadership and teachers is critical to individual teacher well-being and to the overall culture of the school. Teachers reported that communication was not always transparent, particularly around decisions involving parents, and this lack of transparency threatened their sense of autonomy. Administrators need to understand and respect teachers' professional role and expertise, and teachers need to understand administrators' decision-making processes. When school-wide decisions were made that changed existing policy, there was not always a clear avenue for teacher input. While administrators may be trying to protect teachers' time, having clearer guidelines in place for communication that apply to all school-wide decisions may help reduce confusion and frustration.

Building Upon School Values

Teachers reported that having aligned values was a facilitator to their well-being. Shared school-wide values made individuals feel as though they were a part of a mission larger than themselves and that they had intentionally chosen to work in a place that prioritized diversity and inclusion, celebrated creativity and autonomy, and encouraged learning from failure. To foster well-being, administrators can routinely come back to these core values and also acknowledge that there may be friction when decisions do not align with these values.

Create Opportunities for Teacher Leadership

Creating more opportunities for teacher leadership and involvement in school-wide decision making would allow teachers to feel as though they are valued partners in the school. Teachers and administrators can work together more effectively when there are opportunities for all partners to engage in decision making. Opportunities for teacher leadership that allow teachers' choice, connection with others, as well as connection to their school will ultimately strengthen teacher relationships and may increase teacher well-being. Leveraging expertise within the school community could also encourage greater buy-in from veteran teachers to support newer staff.

Help Teachers Prepare for the "Emotional Calendar" of the School Year

Being able to help identify times of the year when teachers feel more stressed and burned out may help teachers (a) become more aware of these emotional cycles and (b) help in preparing proactive strategies that can decrease feelings of stress during those emotional times, such as before breaks and towards the end of the year. Administrators or veteran teachers can help by providing support to teachers before and during these times or lessen the burden of other non-essential tasks to help teachers manage their workloads. Being aware of these cycles is the first step, and creating proactive strategies as a school that is inclusive of all staff members' values are essential.

LIMITATIONS

This study has a number of limitations worth noting. As this study involved a small sample of 29 teachers from one independent school serving students with disabilities and learning differences, findings may not be generalizable. Although participation was limited to special education teachers, the school is both unique in its arts-based approach to education and in its abundance of resources. As mentioned previously, this school represented a positive outlier. Because this case was not compared to other school settings, it is not possible to determine how other factors, such as pay or student needs, may also contribute to teacher well-being. Furthermore, only 17 of the 29 teachers participated in *all* quantitative and qualitative components of this study. Though we emailed the survey to all participants, not everyone completed them, possibly as the result of multiple demands on teacher time at the end of the school year. Due to administrator preferences, demographic data beyond years of teaching experience were not collected. There may have been important differences across gender, department, or race that researchers were unable to explore. Administrators also requested that interviews not be recorded and names not collected to ensure confidentiality. Additionally, the sensitive nature of this topic may have made those who do not experience high degrees of well-being as a teacher more reluctant to share their experiences. Future research should investigate whether this limitation could be addressed using different study designs. While researchers took extensive notes and compared them after data collection, some data may have been missed. Due to the request to avoid collecting names during interviews and focus groups, individual qualitative responses could not be linked to quantitative findings. Given these limitations, researchers are aware that what

has been presented is unique to a particular group of teachers, in a particular school, at a particular time.

CONCLUSION

Special education teachers' experiences in schools are shaped by interactions among individual, contextual, and systems-level factors as well as their personal fit in their school environments. The person-environment-occupation fit model (Jansen & Kristof-Brown, 2006) contributes to a holistic understanding of the factors that facilitate teacher well-being, including characteristics and actions of schools that are able to effectively retain special education teachers. Simply reducing stressors and/or burnout will not necessarily result in improved well-being for teachers. It is important to investigate teacher well-being as a construct distinct from teacher stress and/or burnout to understand what contributes to and are components of teacher well-being, and how well-being may change over time.

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