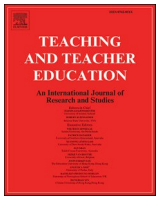
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Research paper



# Australian teachers' conceptualisations of wellbeing at work: A prototype analysis

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ABSTRACT

Defining teacher wellbeing is a complex task, and the relative importance of its components remain unclear. Employing a three-phase prototype analysis, we investigated whether there was an ideal representation of wellbeing at work according to Australian teachers; and if so, which components were considered more important than others. Phase 1 ($n = 138$) generated wellbeing features. Phase 2 ($n = 438$) identified central and peripheral components while Phase 3 ($n = 418$) confirmed recognition of central components in a cognitive task. Analysing linguistic units and measures of reliability, findings revealed a prototypical organisation of the teacher wellbeing at work concept with central components including feeling safe, supported, valued, and trusted, and achieving work/life balance. The results of this study may help inform schools and policy makers design interventions and develop policies to foster thriving educational environments for all teachers.

## 1. Introduction

Teacher wellbeing (TWB), characterised by positive feelings and effective functioning in teachers' professional roles (Collie & Martin, 2023; Huppert & So, 2013), is vital for the overall functioning of education systems. TWB impacts the individual (e.g., their mental, emotional, and physical health, see Stapleton, 2019; Zhou, 2021) and students (e.g., student wellbeing, the quality of education and students' academic outcomes, see Glazzard & Rose, 2019; Zee & Koomen, 2016). Furthermore, TWB has far-reaching impacts on the teaching workforce, such as teacher recruitment, attrition, and retention (see Hastings & Agrawal, 2015; Heffernan et al., 2022).

Despite research indicating that high levels of employee wellbeing in schools are associated with greater job satisfaction and organisational commitment (Kern et al., 2014), stress, anxiety, and burnout among teachers are high and widespread (Carroll et al., 2022; Hastings & Agrawal, 2015; Longmuir et al., 2022), exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic (Reupert et al., 2021). For example, recent research in Australia shows that more than half of 749 surveyed teachers reported experiencing very or extremely high levels of stress, with many expressing health and wellbeing concerns as primary reasons for considering leaving the profession (Carroll et al., 2022; Longmuir et al., 2022). This situation has sparked considerable interest from researchers, schools, and other stakeholders to better understand the wellbeing of teachers and investigate how best to support them.

To further advance research in the area, and before meaningful interventions can be developed, there is a need to define and conceptualise teacher wellbeing. Several reasons explain why a rich understanding of the concept of TWB is required. First, concise conceptualisations support targeted action (Huppert, 2017). If the aim of research is to support the wellbeing of teachers, then a fundamental question becomes, what constitutes TWB? Conceptualisations of TWB help answer this question by identifying important components, which could inform the development of interventions. Second, conceptualisations have important implications for measuring TWB (Forgeard et al., 2011). An accurate understanding of the concept helps to define how TWB is measured, and thus, effectively benchmark TWB, evaluate the outcomes of interventions, or compare different interventions. Finally, conceptualisations enable a shared understanding between researchers, teachers, and other stakeholders to work towards a common goal (Wessels & Wood, 2019).

Despite these reasons and extensive studies in the area of TWB (e.g., Collie, Shapka, Perry, & Martin, 2015a; McCallum, 2021; Soini, Pyhältö, & Pietarinen, 2010a; discussed below), it is clear that defining the concept remains a challenge (Hascher & Waber, 2021a,b). Given this, the current study aims to provide a robust and novel approach to

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understanding the concept of teacher wellbeing at work from teachers' perspectives.

### 1.1. Conceptualising teacher wellbeing

There are diverse approaches to conceptualising teacher wellbeing, with many researchers employing a general wellbeing perspective (Aelterman et al., 2007; Hascher & Waber, 2021a,b; McCallum et al., 2017). For example, Aelterman et al. (2007) used a general definition in their study which aimed to develop an instrument to identify school factors that affect teachers' wellbeing. Their definition emphasised wellbeing as a positive emotional state, achieved when there is harmony between an individual's environment and their personal needs (Aelterman et al., 2007). Similarly, focusing on wellbeing in a positive way, McCallum et al. (2017) suggested a broad all-encompassing definition of wellbeing in their systematic review of the TWB literature, emphasising the positive, personal, and unique nature of wellbeing that considers the individual's "values, experiences, culture, opportunities and contexts" (p. 2).

More recently, Hascher and Waber's (2021) systematic review of 98 TWB studies, conducted between the years 2000 and 2019, found the theoretical backgrounds of most studies were predominantly based on the general concept of wellbeing. A large body of research conceptualised TWB utilising Diener's subjective wellbeing model (1984). Another commonly used theory was PERMA ( Seligman, 2011), located in the field of positive psychology (Hascher & Waber, 2021a,b). Other TWB studies in Hascher and Waber's (2021) systematic review were based on general approaches to wellbeing related to the fields of work and organisational psychology, and health science.

In regard to focused conceptualisations of wellbeing specifically related to teachers, many were derived from researchers' own review of the literature or operationalisations (Collie et al., 2015a,b,c; Soini et al., 2010a; Spilt et al., 2011). For example, Spilt et al. (2011) highlighted the importance of relationships in their conceptualisation of TWB after exploring various theories and empirical studies in their literature review. TWB was described as a construct involving teachers' internalised models of relationships, particularly with their students, which guide daily affective and behavioural responses and thus, have an impact on TWB in the long term (Spilt et al., 2011).

Linking teachers' professional practice with wellbeing, Soini and colleagues (2010) coined the term *pedagogical wellbeing* (PW) in their study which aimed to identify the teaching and learning processes and incidents that promote or hinder teacher wellbeing. Specifically, the researchers conceptualised PW as comprising the elements of autonomy, relatedness, competence, and belonging (Soini et al., 2010b). Thus, according to Soini and colleagues (2010), wellbeing is a result of positive teaching and learning experiences.

Other studies which aimed to address the specific challenges and tasks associated with the profession, operationalised the concept of TWB in order to measure it (Collie et al., 2015a,b,c; Renshaw, Long, & Cook, 2015a,b). Developing and validating the Teacher Subjective Wellbeing Questionnaire, Renshaw and colleagues (Renshaw, Long, & Cook, 2015a,b) conceptualised TWB according to three factors: school connectedness, joy of teaching, and teacher efficacy. These factors were determined by the researchers' synthesis of the literature, and were operationalised to develop items on the questionnaire (Renshaw, Long, & Cook, 2015a,b). Collie and colleagues (2015) also explored a practice-oriented TWB scale, identifying three common factors related to teachers' work by reviewing studies in the area of teacher stress. These significant factors included workload, and interactions with the organisation and students.

In the literature, conceptualisations of TWB have been operationalised by deficit as well as strengths-based perspectives (Burić et al., 2019; Edinger & Edinger, 2018; Hascher et al., 2021). For example, extensive research has focused on concepts such as teacher stress and burnout (Burić et al., 2019; Cancio et al., 2018; Kim et al., 2020), while others have emphasised individual and collective strengths, capabilities, and positive attributes, such as teacher resilience and efficacy (Edinger & Edinger, 2018; Hascher et al., 2021; Zee & Koomen, 2016). Indeed, in the field of psychology, a substantial body of work acknowledges both positive and negative affect in TWB (Hascher & Waber, 2021a,b).

In sum, although extensive research has been conducted, conceptualisations of the construct of TWB are predominantly general and derived from researchers' perspectives (i.e., top down), either reviewing the literature within the scope of their own studies and/or specifying how the construct will be measured (Collie et al., 2015a,b,c; Renshaw, Long, & Cook, 2015a,b; Soini et al., 2010a). Relatively less attention has focused on how teachers themselves conceptualise wellbeing at work (i.e., bottom-up approach) (Hascher & Waber, 2021a,b). To develop interventions that are best tailored to teachers' needs and context, it is important that they are grounded in teachers' professional realities and preferences. With teachers' input, future development of interventions will likely be more accessible and acceptable. The next section reviews the existing literature, exploring the concept of wellbeing from teachers' perspectives.

### 1.2. Teachers' perspectives on conceptualising wellbeing

Predominantly employing qualitative methodology in the form of individual interviews and focus groups, research into conceptualisations of wellbeing from teachers' perspectives provide an understanding of which factors or components of wellbeing are important. The significance of interpersonal relationships emerged as a vital factor across many studies (Cherkowski et al., 2018; Hobson & Maxwell, 2017; Simmons et al., 2019). In the United States of America (USA), Weiland's (2021) research aimed to understand the perceptions of wellbeing through the narratives of three elementary teachers. The study found that positive *relationships* played a significant role, particularly with colleagues and school leaders. Another recurrent theme was positive *emotions*, with teachers describing joy, excitement, happiness, and satisfaction as being most conducive to their wellbeing. Similarly, identifying positive *relationships* as an important theme, Cherkowski et al. (2018) found that collegial and principal support were central to Canadian teachers' wellbeing. Adding to these insights, Simmons et al. (2019) brought together a diverse group of K-12 teachers, schools counsellors, social workers, and principals in the USA, who identified "*relationality*" as a significant component in conceptualising TWB (p. 862). Relationality was described as how wellbeing is linked to others, especially relationships with students, school leaders, and the wider school community.

In Australia, researchers identified three themes in relation to educators' definitions of workplace wellbeing (Jones et al., 2019). In-depth interviews with 22 early childhood educators indicated the importance of a *sense of belonging*, both to the early childhood centre and the educator's room, where staff share common pedagogical values and recognise each other's individual strengths. Specific mention of organisational structure, roles and responsibilities, and work conditions were also mentioned by educators under the theme *workplace equity*, while the theme of *workplace flow* described the running of smooth and effective classrooms.

*Belonging* was also found to be a central factor in Wigford and Higgins' (2019) study into teachers' and teaching assistants' perceptions of wellbeing in international schools across 72 countries. Through surveys and subsequent semi-structured interviews, Wigford and Higgins (2019) found that a strong sense of belonging played a compensatory role. Together with *appreciation* of colleagues and leaders, *collaborative,* and *respectful relationships*, the authors argued that belonging helped mitigate negative factors such as weak leadership, workloads, and a lack of resources (Wigford & Higgins, 2019).

McCallum (2021) compared definitions of TWB with a large sample of teachers in Australia and Canada, and found some similarities across both contexts. Asking a diverse sample of Australian teachers ($n = 806$)

with differing personal and professional backgrounds to define well-being in an open-ended survey question, McCallum (2021) was able to categorise responses into four themes. These included *health*, *life/work balance*, feelings of *happiness*, and being *free of stress*. Similarly, the Canadian sample of teachers, leaders, and non-teaching staff ($n = 183$) frequently mentioned the words *balance*, *feeling positive*, and *well*.

Another study aimed to explore Australian teachers' perspectives regarding their workplace wellbeing (Hine et al., 2022). Purposefully involving a distinctive sample of teachers to reflect the diversity of the Australian population, the researchers found '*thriving*' was one common theme when describing wellbeing. Even though comments around the theme *struggling* were also identified, educators associated wellbeing with *purpose* at work and *engagement* in meaningful activities beyond the workplace, such as the family. *Feeling capable* and having the *ability to cope* were also frequently mentioned.

In sum, despite extensive research in the area of TWB, there is little consensus on the concept of TWB, its definition, core elements, and characteristics (Hascher & Waber, 2021a,b). Investigating the conceptualisation of wellbeing from teachers' points of view helps clarify understanding of wellbeing and therefore optimise support in a meaningful and purposeful way. However, the literature suggests numerous TWB conceptualisations exist, with teachers identifying a diverse number of components in a diverse number of contexts. Although *relationships* (e.g., (Cherkowski et al., 2018; Simmons et al., 2019; Weiland, 2021) is a central theme across many studies, teachers have also indicated a wide range of other components, from positive *emotions* (e.g., McCallum, 2021c; Weiland, 2021) to *belonging* (e.g., Wigford & Higgins, 2019), *workplace equity* (e.g., Jones et al., 2019) to *purpose* and *engagement* (e.g., Hine et al., 2022). This raises the question of whether some of these components of wellbeing are considered more important than others across a population of teachers. In other words, do teachers typically think of some wellbeing components as being more representative of the construct of TWB than others? A prototype approach may help provide some answers.

### 1.3. The prototype approach

The prototype approach can be described as a process of categorising concepts based on a prototype or best example (Rosch, 1975). Rosch (1975) introduced the method to investigate the nature of cognitive representations and structure of natural language categories or concepts. Cognitive representations describe the mental image we generate when thinking of a category, while the concept structure refers to whether that mental image is a concrete representation or whether we commonly think of a set of representative features.

According to Rosch (1975), there are two distinguishing approaches when defining a category or concept. A *classical approach* takes an "all-or-nothing" position (Weiser et al., 2014, p. 657); that is, to be classified in a particular category, an item must meet all conditions of a set of clearly defined criteria. In the case of the concept of wellbeing, for example, a classical approach may contend that the category must include components such as positive emotions, engagement, relationships, meaning, accomplishment, and health, as suggested by Kern's PERMAH model (2022). A *prototype approach*, on the other hand, assesses the degree of resemblance to the concept, ranking features or components as central (i.e., important) or peripheral (i.e., less important) (Fehr, 1988). Therefore, drawing on the previous example, wellbeing may be represented by the central components of relationships, engagement, and meaning, while all others are considered peripheral. Rosch (1975) argued that certain features or components of natural language categories are more closely associated to a concept than others, thus making them prototypes.

To be considered a prototype, a concept must meet two key criteria (Rosch, 1975). First, individuals must be able to list the components relevant to the concept and then consistently agree on the features that are important and peripheral (Kearns & Fincham, 2004). Second, when thinking about the concept (cognitive process), individuals must be able to associate or recognise the central features with that concept more than the peripheral features.

It has been argued that the prototype approach is particularly suitable to concepts that have "fuzzy boundaries" (Lakoff, 1973); that is, in situations where there is little agreement on how to define or conceptualise a concept using a clear set of components. For this reason, the prototype analysis has been used to investigate concepts such as love and commitment (Fehr, 1988), forgiveness (Kearns & Fincham, 2004), gratitude (Lambert et al., 2009), and virtue (Gulliford et al., 2020). Increasingly in the area of wellbeing science, the prototype analysis has shed light on conceptualisations of wellbeing among different population groups including nurses (Jarden et al., 2018), New Zealand workers (Hone et al., 2015) and adolescents (Bharara et al., 2019), and international students (Huang et al., 2022). Notably, past studies have not examined the concept of teacher wellbeing; therefore, the present study seeks to address this gap.

Identifying the need to accurately conceptualise wellbeing to support engagement with interventions, Jarden et al. (2018) undertook a prototype analysis to understand Intensive Care Unit (ICU) nurses' conceptualisations of wellbeing. The study required nurses to freely list (without prompting from researchers) the features they considered to be associated with wellbeing, rating them in order of importance, and then identifying the central features in hypothetical scenarios. The results suggested that for ICU nurses, workload, work/life balance, feeling valued, respected, and supported were considered to be important to the concept of wellbeing (Jarden et al., 2018).

## 2. The current study

Despite a growing number of studies in the field (see Hascher & Waber, 2021), there is little agreement among researchers regarding the conceptual structure of teacher wellbeing at work (TWW). Previous research investigating teachers' conceptualisations of wellbeing has identified a diverse range of components in a diverse range of settings. This finding suggests that the concept of TWW may not be defined by a strict set of criteria (i.e., a classical approach). A robust alternative method of understanding conceptualisations, the prototype analysis (Bharara et al., 2019; Fehr, 1988; Gulliford et al., 2020; Hone et al., 2015), is potentially suited to investigating the nature of TWW, as it may highlight the components that are most important and considered to be the closest or ideal representation of the concept from teachers' perspectives.

The overall aim of this study was to investigate how teachers conceptualise wellbeing at work and to what extent their conceptions are prototypically organised. In other words, do teachers think of some components of wellbeing at work as being more representative of the concept than others? If so, what components do teachers consider central and peripheral when thinking about wellbeing at work?

## 3. Method and results

### 3.1. Research design overview

According to Rosch (1975), for a concept such as wellbeing to be considered prototypical, individuals must: 1) list the associated components and consistently agree on those that are central and peripheral, and 2) be able to recognise the central components more than the peripheral ones in a cognitive task. Considering Rosch's (1975) two key criteria and the methodology used in previous prototype analyses, three inter-related phases were conducted in the current project to investigate Australian teachers' conceptualisations of positive wellbeing at work (see Fig. 1). In Phase 1, participants were asked to freely list items they considered to be associated with the construct of positive wellbeing at work. In Phase 2 the components that participants considered to be central/important and peripheral to wellbeing were identified. In Phase

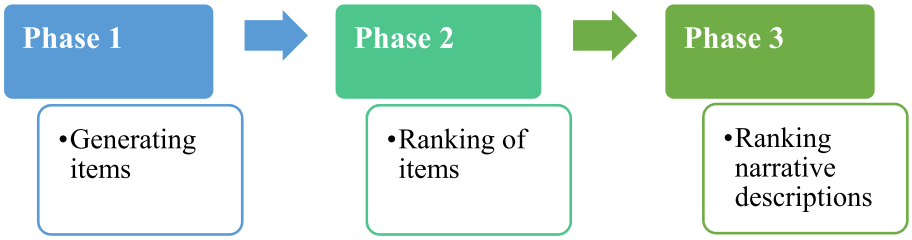



**Fig. 1.** Summary of phases in the prototype analysis.

3 an assessment was undertaken to ascertain whether the identified central components of wellbeing were recognised more than the peripheral ones.

Each phase involved an anonymous online survey, completed at a time convenient to participants. There were no time limits on the completion of each survey, however participants were informed that involvement would take approximately five to 10 minutes, and that they could withdraw at any time. To ensure a large representation and, thus, the ability to draw reliable conclusions about common conceptualisations, a different sample of the population group (i.e., teachers) was sought for each phase, in line with other prototype analyses (Fehr, 1988; Hone et al., 2015; Morgan et al., 2014). The project was approved by and conducted according to the standards established by Monash University's Human Ethics Research Committee (projects 34897, 36208, and 37605).

It is interesting to note that despite a growing number of published prototype analyses (Bharara et al., 2019; Huang et al., 2022; Kearns & Fincham, 2004; Luo et al., 2022), there are little, if any, guidelines, evidence of calculation, or justification regarding sample sizes. This could possibly be due to the inductive nature of the studies which appear to focus on the generation of items (Jarden et al., 2018), particularly for Phase 1. Recognising the need to improve the methodology, this prototype analysis details and documents a rationale for sample sizes in each phase.

### 3.2. Recruitment of participants

To be eligible, participants in all three phases had to be currently working in Australia as a primary and/or secondary teacher. Participants in all three studies were recruited using snowball sampling, instead of through their workplaces directly, to protect anonymity and to reach a broad population. Recruitment was generated through social media (Facebook, Instagram, and LinkedIn) and the personal and professional networks of the research team. Considering the relatively large sample required in Phases 2 and 3, participants were encouraged to complete the online anonymous survey and go into a draw to win a voucher. Given the aim of the study was to seek broad representation, as well as time constraints, convenience sampling was employed to recruit participants during each phase. Consequently, the overlap of participants in each phase may exist, which has been observed in previous prototype analyses with similar sampling strategies (Fehr, 1988; Gulliford et al., 2020; Luo et al., 2022).

### 3.3. Phase 1: generating items

#### 3.3.1. Sample size and participants

Three principles guided the sample size, which aimed to generate items or characteristics of the concept of wellbeing at work. First, considering the broad scope of the topic and the relatively 'shallow' data collected at one point in time, a somewhat large number of participants was necessary (Morse, 2000). Second, although this phase focused on the generation of items, this needed to be balanced with practical considerations such as time and resources (Vasileiou et al., 2018). Finally, consistent with the number of participants in many existing prototype analyses conducted after the year 2000, which ranged from 23 to 208 (with an average of 143), for participants in the first phase (Bharara et al., 2019; Hone et al., 2015; Jarden et al., 2018; Kearns & Fincham, 2004), a sample size of 150 participants was sought.

A total of 161 survey responses were received, however 23 were incomplete, leaving 138 participants. As shown in Table 1, most teachers were Caucasian (72.54%), identified as women (81.82%), and working in an urban secondary (70.55%) and Government/public school setting (64.79%).

#### 3.3.2. Procedure

The purpose of Phase 1 was to generate prototype items. This was achieved by asking participants to freely list all the items or characteristics they considered to be associated with the concept of positive wellbeing at work. Given the authors were specifically interested in the wellbeing components that teachers perceive as supporting them to "feel good" and "function well" (Huppert & So, 2013), the study adopts a strengths-based lens with a focus on positive aspects of wellbeing. Furthermore, the current study makes a distinction between wellbeing at work and overall TWB to acknowledge that teachers' overall wellbeing may be influenced by both work-related factors and factors outside the workplace (Bronfenbrenner, 1977; Hine et al., 2022). Adapted from Hone and colleagues' (2015) and Jarden and colleagues' (2018) prototype analyses, participants were given the following instructions:

> We are interested in what teachers working in Australia think of when they consider the word 'wellbeing'. For example, if you were asked to list the characteristics of fear, you might write: possible danger occurs, attention is focused on the threat, the heart beats wildly, the person runs as fast as they can. In the current study, we are not interested in fear but in exploring the characteristics of positive wellbeing at work. Imagine that you are explaining this term to someone who has no experience of wellbeing and answer the following question: What, in your professional opinion, are the key characteristics of positive wellbeing at work? Please feel free to think specifically and broadly, and list as many characteristics as you can in words or short descriptions.

Collection of data in Phase 1 occurred between August and October 2022.

#### 3.3.3. Analysis

Phase 1 invited participants to freely-list the characteristics they thought of when considering the concept of positive wellbeing at work. Three panel members (the first and second authors, and a Master's degree student) were involved in judging and coding items. Consistent with Huang and colleagues' (2022) approach, the first author initially screened all response items, coded them into linguistic units, grouped units to categories, and finalised categories into representative components. The second panel member reviewed the categories and representative components, while the third member resolved any discrepancies between the two panel members and reviewed the final list of components. All analytical stages were recorded using Microsoft Excel.

**Table 1**
Demographic information.

| Field | Category | Phase 1 *n* = 138 (%) | Phase 2 *n* = 438 (%) | Phase 3 *n* = 418 (%) |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Gender [a] | Woman | 81.82 | 70.32 | 85.17 |
| | Man | 16.78 | 26.71 | 13.40 |
| | Non-binary/gender diverse | 0.70 | 1.60 | 0.72 |
| | Gender identity not listed | 0.00 | 1.14 | 0.24 |
| | Prefer not to say | 0.70 | 0.23 | 0.48 |
| Age | Under 30 years | 13.29 | 7.55 | 7.42 |
| | 30–39 years | 27.97 | 18.76 | 18.90 |
| | 40–49 years | 31.47 | 21.97 | 25.12 |
| | Over 50 | 27.27 | 51.03 | 48.33 |
| | Prefer not to say | 0.00 | 0.69 | 0.24 |
| Ethnic background [b] | Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander | 0.70 | 1.63 | 0.72 |
| | African | 0.00 | 0.93 | 0.00 |
| | Asian – Eastern | 4.23 | 3.26 | 1.20 |
| | Asian – Indian | 2.11 | 1.86 | 0.48 |
| | Asian – South-eastern | 7.04 | 3.50 | 1.20 |
| | Caucasian | 72.54 | 80.19 | 85.65 |
| | Hispanic | 0.00 | 0.93 | 0.48 |
| | Middle eastern | 0.00 | 0.47 | 0.48 |
| | Mixed race | 3.52 | 1.63 | 3.35 |
| | Other | 7.75 | 4.20 | 3.83 |
| | Prefer not to say | 2.11 | 1.40 | 2.63 |
| Place of work [a c] | Primary school | 29.45 | 44.03 | 44.29 |
| | Secondary school | 70.55 | 55.97 | 55.71 |
| Role at work [a] | Classroom teacher | 52.60 | 43.74 | 55.76 |
| | Year level coordinator/ Discipline Coordinator | 11.98 | 8.89 | 7.36 |
| | Leading teacher | 11.46 | 10.34 | 7.55 |
| | Assistant Principal | 1.04 | 5.63 | 3.40 |
| | Principal | 1.56 | 4.72 | 0.57 |
| | Specialist teacher | 8.33 | 13.07 | 11.89 |
| | Learning support | 4.17 | 4.72 | 3.77 |
| | Pastoral care | 3.65 | 2.72 | 3.58 |
| | Other | 5.21 | 6.17 | 6.04 |
| School sector [d] | Catholic | 11.97 | 19.44 | 18.90 |
| | Government | 64.79 | 60.65 | 62.44 |
| | Independent | 23.24 | 19.44 | 17.46 |
| | Other | 0.00 | 0.46 | 1.20 |
| Location of work | Australian Capital Territory | 2.82 | 4.12 | 2.15 |
| | New South Wales | 5.63 | 20.82 | 32.06 |
| | Northern Territory | 0.00 | 5.49 | 0.96 |
| | Queensland | 2.82 | 16.93 | 16.51 |
| | South Australia | 2.11 | 7.55 | 7.89 |
| | Tasmania | 1.41 | 5.72 | 4.07 |
| | Victoria | 83.80 | 29.98 | 28.95 |
| | Western Australia | 1.41 | 9.38 | 7.42 |
| School setting [e] | Regional | 17.61 | 24.83 | 23.68 |
| | Remote | 0.70 | 3.91 | 1.44 |
| | Urban | 81.69 | N/A | N/A |
| | Metropolitan | N/A | 48.51 | 60.05 |
| | Rural | N/A | 22.76 | 14.83 |
| Employment status [a f] | Full-time | 59.78 | 64.23 | 61.21 |
| | Part-time | 13.97 | 14.02 | 17.98 |
| | Permanent/ongoing | 19.55 | 12.80 | 11.92 |
| | Contract/temporary | 6.70 | 8.94 | 8.89 |
| Teaching experience [g] | 0–5 years | 16.20 | 8.03 | 9.33 |
| | 6–10 years | 28.17 | 17.20 | 17.94 |
| | 11–15 years | 19.01 | 19.04 | 16.99 |
| | 16–20 years | 13.38 | 12.84 | 12.44 |
| | 21 years and over | 23.24 | 42.89 | 43.30 |

Note.
*allows multiple responses.
[a] 1 incomplete field.
[b] 8 incomplete fields.
[c] 3 incomplete fields.
[d] 4 incomplete fields.
[e] 2 incomplete fields.
[f] 1 incomplete field.
[g] 1 incomplete field; N/A was not an option.

A total of 778 response items was generated. After screening, the list was reduced to 736, excluding negative features (e.g., "minimal stress", "anxiety", and "pressure") and example statements of negative features (e.g., "having my priorities dictated", "dreading going to work", and "juggling a million balls"), given the focus of the study was on positive wellbeing characteristics at work. An average of 5.3 response items was generated by each participant, consistent with previous prototype analyses (Bharara et al., 2019; Fehr, 1988).

The response items were then coded into linguistic units, which means that items were organised into meaningful and manageable groups based on the language used. Following Fehr's (1988) approach, the first stage of coding involved extracting all easily identifiable monolexemic units, such as *respected*, supported, and *valued*. Words which were preceded or followed by modifiers or attributive words were coded by their main feature (Huang et al., 2022). For example, "enjoyment at work" was coded as *enjoyment*, "feeling trusted" as *trusted,* and "manageable workload" as *workload*. For short phrases, judgements had to be made regarding the main distinct feature. Although some were coded as constituting one feature (e.g., "strong relationships within the workplace" as *relationships*), others were recognised as having two or more (e.g., "feel valued at work as though my concerns are heard" as both *valued* and *heard*). In line with previous prototype analyses (Bharara et al., 2019; Hone et al., 2015; Huang et al., 2022), the judging panel aimed to maintain the fullness and diversity of responses as much as possible. In other words, we were interested in creating a larger set (or more detailed codes) rather than a limited number of broad ones (Huang et al., 2022).

The next step was to organise linguistic units to category components. This involved grouping together units that were grammatically different but had the same meaning. For instance, "supportive", "supporting", and "supported" were categorised as "support". Linguistic units such as "equilibrium" and "balance" were combined into the category "balance". Judgements were made about the balance between maintaining authentic representation of responses while avoiding unnecessary repetition (Huang et al., 2022). For example, the panel maintained the distinct units that described positive emotions (rather than categorising them as one group) to capture the extensive emotions listed by participants. As such, "content", "joy", "flourishing", and "calm" were maintained as independent categories.

Through this process, 103 category components were identified. It is important to note that the judging panel was conservative in its coding approach to ensure participants' voices were represented. Therefore, the language used by teachers was maintained whenever possible. For instance, both "heard" and "listened to" were coded separately, as were "happy" and "content".

The frequency of component categories mentioned by participants was calculated. This process involved reviewing the raw data and identifying how many times a category component was mentioned. The counting process was done manually and by using the 'find' option in software applications, including Microsoft Excel and Word. If a participant mentioned a category multiple times, each instance was counted accordingly. This approach helped to quantify and understand the prevalence of different categories in the data, which was deemed important to the research aims.

The list of categories was then further reduced, discarding those that were mentioned by less than 3% of the sample (i.e., less than 5 mentions). The aim of reducing the number of categories was to minimise the burden on participants in Phase 2, in line with other prototype analyses (Bharara et al., 2019; Hone et al., 2015), who were invited to rank them. The chosen threshold of less than 3% of the sample appeared well-suited considering the final list of categories. That is, the category *joy* had a participant percentage (i.e., the number of participants who mentioned the category) of 3.62 (5 in frequency), while *input* registered 2.90 (4 in frequency), making the cut-off point both pragmatic and reflective of the distribution among identified categories. Many categories ($n = 29$), such as *excited*, *spiritual,* and *loyalty* were mentioned by only one participant,

and thus, were excluded from the final list. Comparable to existing published prototype analyses (Bharara et al., 2019; Hone et al., 2015; Huang et al., 2022), a total of 31 representative components were identified.

#### 3.3.4. Results

A significant number of the participants (41.30%) indicated that feeling supported was a key characteristic of the concept of positive wellbeing at work, as shown in Table 2. This was followed by feeling *safe* (19.57%), having positive *relationships* (18.84%), feeling *valued* (13.77%), and *work/life balance* (15.94%). Of the 103 categories, some of the least mentioned characteristics included *clarity* (1.45%) and *accountability* (0.45%).

### 3.4. Phase 2: rating components

#### 3.4.1. Sample size and participants

Given the large population under investigation, Cochran's (Cochran, 1977) formula for determining an appropriate sample size was utilised in Phase 2. Four variables were considered, including population size, margin of error, confidence level, and standard deviation. Based on a confidence level of 95% and a maximum variability of ± 5% (determined as the variability of the population is unknown), a sample size of 385 was sought. For comparative purposes, the sample size of Phase 2 participants in previous prototype analyses published after the year 2000 ranged from 25 (Jarden et al., 2018) to 434 (Luo et al., 2022).

A total of 438 responses was received, exceeding the target sample size. As shown in Table 1, 70.32% identified as women and 26.71% as men, with approximately half of participants over 50 years old (51.03%). 44.03% were working in a primary school, 55.97% worked in a secondary school setting.

#### 3.4.2. Procedure

The aim of Phase 2 was to determine the centrality of components identified in Phase 1, meeting the first criterion for a prototype construct outlined by Rosch (1975); that is, after individuals list the components relevant to the concept (Phase 1), they must consistently agree on the components that are central and peripheral (Kearns & Fincham, 2004). This is often referred to as the 'internal prototype structure' (Fehr, 1988; Gulliford et al., 2020; Hone et al., 2015). Thus, in this phase, participants were invited to rate the emerging list of components established in Phase 1 using a 10-point Likert scale. The following instructions were given:

In a previous study we asked teachers to list what they thought of as the key characteristics of wellbeing at work. The most frequent responses, as described by teachers, are listed below in random order.

> Instructions: 1. Read through the entire list. 2. Rate how central (or important) you think each characteristic is to the concept of wellbeing at work by selecting a number between 0 (not at all central/important) and 10 (extremely central/important). Think about the concept of wellbeing at work. In your opinion, how central/important is each characteristic to the concept of wellbeing at work for teachers?

The collection of data in Phase 2 occurred between November 2022 and January 2023.

#### 3.4.3. Analysis

The mean centrality rating and standard deviation for each component was calculated, as shown in Table 3. Two measurements were used to determine the reliability (i.e., internal consistency) of these ratings; namely, split-half reliability with the Spearman-Brown correction, and Cronbach's alpha (Savage, 2017), using IBM SPSS Statistics for Windows, Version 28 (2021). Splitting items into odd and even parts, a Spearman-Brown Coefficient of 0.975 was generated, indicating

**Table 2**
Phase 1: Wellbeing components as freely-listed by participants.

| Component | Frequency | Total participants | Total participants (%) |
|---|---|---|---|
| supported | 63 | 57 | 41.30 |
| safe | 27 | 27 | 19.57 |
| relationships | 26 | 26 | 18.84 |
| valued | 26 | 19 | 13.77 |
| work/life balance | 23 | 22 | 15.94 |
| physical health | 20 | 17 | 12.32 |
| happy | 19 | 19 | 13.77 |
| connection | 19 | 19 | 13.77 |
| trust | 18 | 16 | 11.59 |
| interactions | 18 | 11 | 7.97 |
| time | 17 | 17 | 12.32 |
| mental state | 17 | 17 | 12.32 |
| respected | 15 | 15 | 10.87 |
| collaboration | 15 | 12 | 8.70 |
| balance | 14 | 12 | 8.70 |
| care | 12 | 12 | 8.70 |
| heard | 10 | 8 | 5.80 |
| listened to | 10 | 10 | 7.25 |
| development | 9 | 9 | 6.52 |
| positive | 8 | 8 | 5.80 |
| positive impact | 8 | 7 | 5.07 |
| achievement | 8 | 8 | 5.80 |
| appreciated | 7 | 7 | 5.07 |
| growth | 7 | 6 | 4.35 |
| self-care | 7 | 6 | 4.35 |
| calm | 7 | 7 | 5.07 |
| recognised | 6 | 6 | 4.35 |
| belonging | 6 | 6 | 4.35 |
| content | 6 | 6 | 4.35 |
| acknowledged | 6 | 6 | 4.35 |
| joy | 5 | 5 | 3.62 |

Note. $n = 138$. Frequency = number of times a component was mentioned. Total participants = number of participants who mentioned the component.

**Table 3**
Phase 2: Centrality mean and standard deviation.

| Component | *M* | *SD* |
|---|---|---|
| Safe | 8.14 | 2.25 |
| Trust | 8.09 | 2.22 |
| Respected | 8.08 | 2.17 |
| Supported | 8.06 | 2.26 |
| Valued | 7.98 | 2.21 |
| Mental state | 7.93 | 2.17 |
| Listened to | 7.93 | 2.24 |
| Work-life balance | 7.92 | 2.36 |
| Appreciated | 7.89 | 2.11 |
| Time | 7.81 | 2.31 |
| Relationships | 7.76 | 2.14 |
| Heard | 7.75 | 2.23 |
| Interactions | 7.67 | 1.94 |
| Positive | 7.64 | 2.09 |
| Connection | 7.64 | 2.08 |
| Belonging | 7.59 | 2.12 |
| Positive impact | 7.59 | 2.09 |
| Acknowledged | 7.54 | 2.27 |
| Physical health | 7.47 | 2.24 |
| Self-care | 7.44 | 2.21 |
| Balance | 7.44 | 2.18 |
| Care | 7.44 | 2.09 |
| Recognised | 7.43 | 2.10 |
| Happy | 7.42 | 2.07 |
| Calm | 7.24 | 2.13 |
| Achievement | 7.22 | 2.04 |
| Collaboration | 7.19 | 2.11 |
| Content | 7.17 | 2.17 |
| Growth | 7.12 | 2.07 |
| Development | 7.07 | 2.02 |
| Joy | 6.94 | 2.16 |

Note. $n = 438$; $M$ = Mean; $SD$ = Standard Deviation. The minimum rank for all components was 0, and the maximum rank was 10.

excellent reliability (Koo & Li, 2016). Cronbach's Alpha analysis, using listwise deletion for missing items, also showed very high reliability ($\alpha = 0.978$).

#### 3.4.4. Results

Results indicated that teachers considered *safe* ($M = 8.14$), *trust* ($M = 8.09$), *respected* ($M = 8.08$), *supported* ($M = 8.06$), and *valued* ($M = 7.98$) as central or important components of wellbeing at work. Notably, *joy* ($M = 6.94$), *development* ($M = 7.07$), and *growth* ($M = 7.12$) were considered the least important components.

A quadrant matrix was created to analyse the relationship between component rankings in Phase 1 and Phase 2. To create the matrix, the mean centrality ranks were sorted from largest to smallest. The same was done for the frequency of components from Phase 1. The actual number of mentions was used instead of the percentage of participants because it provides a more practical and precise understanding of the significance of the components. Next, a ranking was assigned from 1 to 31 for components in each phase accordingly. Some components were equal in ranking, for example, *belonging, acknowledged, recognised, calm,* and *content* were all ranked 16 in frequency mentions while *belonging* and *positive impact* were both ranked 14 in centrality.

As shown in Fig. 2, components that ranked in the top 10 in both centrality and frequency included *safe*, *supported*, *valued*, *trust*, *respected*, *work-life balance*, *relationships*, *time*, *connection*, and *mental state*. It is interesting to note that feeling *joy, content, growth*, and *development* were ranked as less important in both frequency (Phase 1) and centrality (Phase 2).

### 3.5. Phase 3: rating narrative descriptions

#### 3.5.1. Sample size and participants

The sample size sought for Phase 3 was consistent with the sample size in Phase 2 and therefore 385 responses were sought. A total of 418 responses was received. As shown in Table 1, 85.17% identified as women and 13.40% as men, with almost half of participants over 50 years old (48.33%). Most participants worked in secondary schools (55.71%) while 44.29% worked in primary schools. A total of 60.05% were working in a metropolitan school setting, 23.68% in regional areas, and 14.83% in rural areas.

#### 3.5.2. Procedure

Results of Phase 1 and Phase 2 confirmed that participants were able to list the components relevant to the concept of teacher wellbeing at work and agree on those that were central and peripheral, meeting Rosch's (1975) first criterion for a prototype construct. The purpose of Phase 3 was to validate the results of the previous phases (the second criterion established by Rosch, 1975), assessing whether participants recognised the central wellbeing components more than the peripheral ones when thinking about the concept of wellbeing at work. To achieve this, four narrative descriptions were created to describe fictional teachers' experiences of wellbeing using the components identified in previous phases.

To determine the components used to create central and peripheral narrative descriptions, a *sum of ranks* was calculated based on Morgan and colleagues' (2014) work. The sum of ranks was calculated by combining the frequency rank of wellbeing components in Phase 1 with the centrality ranking of components in Phase 2 (see Appendix A for the *sum of ranks* for all wellbeing components). Such a method aimed to account for both participants' instinctive (i.e., free listing in Phase 1) and more thoughtful (i.e., explicit rating in Phase 2) considerations of wellbeing components. (For a detailed explanation of the *sum of ranks*, see Morgan et al., 2014.) The top ten components were featured in two *central* narrative descriptions. That is, the first five components were used to write narrative 1, while components 6 to 10 were used to develop narrative 2. The ten middle components were used to write two *peripheral* descriptions (components 11–15 for narrative 3 and components 16–20, narrative 4). Table 4 shows the components used to develop the four narratives according to the *sum of ranks*. It was hypothesised that if conceptualisations of teacher wellbeing at work was indeed prototypically organised, then participants will distinguish the

**Table 4**
Wellbeing components used in narrative descriptions.

| Description 1 (central) | Description 2 (central) | Description 3 (peripheral) | Description 4 (peripheral) |
|---|---|---|---|
| safe | respected | connection | happy |
| supported | relationships | interactions | balance |
| valued | mental state | physical health | positive |
| trust | time | appreciated | care |
| work/life balance | listened to | heard | positive impact |

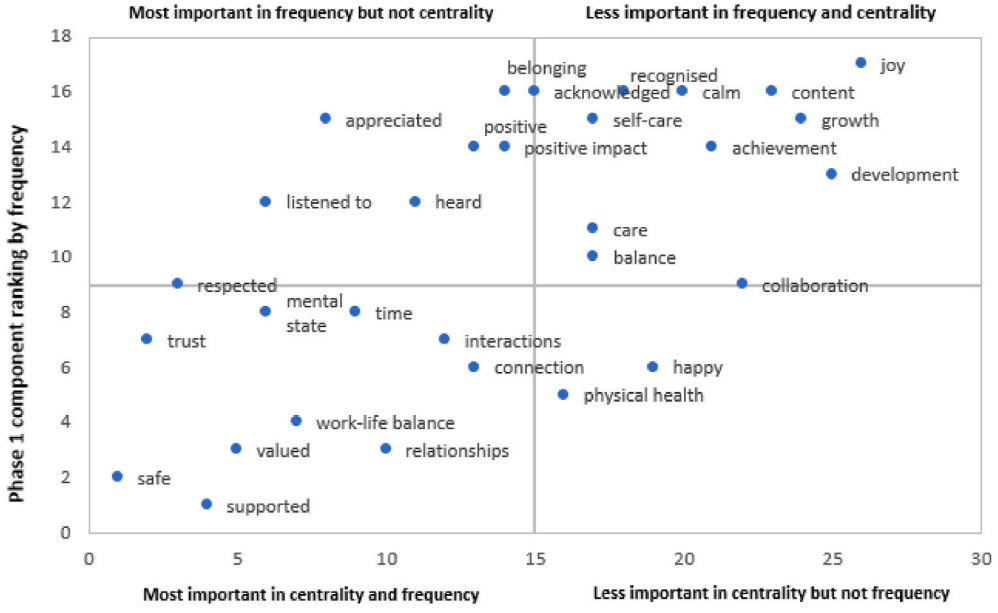



**Fig. 2.** Relationship between component rankings in Phase 1 and Phase 2.

central narrative descriptions (i.e., descriptions 1 and 2) as better representations of wellbeing than the peripheral ones.

Drawing from the literature on vignette development (Anzul et al., 2021; Jarden et al., 2018; Miles, 1990; Spalding & Phillips, 2007), all narrative descriptions were similar in length, used similar adjectives, and minimised the use of words additional to the central and peripheral components identified. This ensured that the wellbeing components were the defining differences in the narratives while minimising other variables. In addition, a mix of character genders were represented as well as cultural backgrounds, to ensure a broad representation of the sample (See Appendix B for all four narrative descriptions.). Narrative descriptions were randomised to avoid order bias. The following instructions were detailed in the survey:

Below are four descriptions of fictional teachers' experiences of wellbeing at work. Instructions: 1) Read through all four descriptions. 2) On your second reading, rate how closely each description matches your idea of positive wellbeing at work by selecting a number between 0 (no match at all) and 10 (extremely good match). Please note we are not asking about your current experience at work necessarily, but your idea of positive wellbeing at work. How closely does each description match your idea of positive wellbeing at work?

For this phase, data were collected between March and April 2023.

#### 3.5.3. Analysis

The objective of Phase 3 was to validate the wellbeing components identified in previous phases, meeting Rosch's (1975) second criterion for a prototype structure. That is, if the concept of teacher wellbeing at work has a prototype structure, then this structure should affect participants' recognition of components in a memory task.

Means and standard deviations were calculated for each narrative description, as shown in Table 5. Split-half reliability with the Spearman-Brown coefficient for corrections was used to measure the internal consistency of the ratings (Savage, 2017). The split-half coefficient (applying the Spearman-Brown correction) of 0.956 indicated that the ratings for each description is highly consistent within each category, which suggests high reliability.

We also analysed whether there was a statistically significant difference between the ratings of the central and peripheral descriptions. After testing for normality of data using histograms and the Shapiro-Wilk test, the Wilcoxon signed-rank test was performed given non-parametric data. This revealed a significant difference ($Z = -6.99$, $p = < 0.001$), indicating that the ratings of the peripheral descriptions were significantly lower than the ratings of the central descriptions.

#### 3.5.4. Results

Results showed narrative descriptions 1 and 2, which incorporated central components, were rated higher ($M = 8.18$ and 8.09, respectively) than descriptions 3 and 4 with peripheral components ($M = 7.68$ and 7.87, respectively). Therefore, taken together, analysis in Phase 3 indicated that the concept of teacher wellbeing at work is prototypically organised. In other words, participants considered some components to be more representative of the concept of teacher wellbeing at work than others.

**Table 5**
Phase 3: Mean and standard deviation.

| Description | *M* | *SD* |
|---|---|---|
| 1 (central) | 8.18 | 2.63 |
| 2 (central) | 8.09 | 2.54 |
| 3 (peripheral) | 7.68 | 2.52 |
| 4 (peripheral) | 7.87 | 2.51 |

Note. $n = 418$; $M$ = Mean; $SD$ = Standard Deviation. The minimum ranking for all four descriptions was 0 and the maximum was 10.

## 4. Discussion

The findings of this study provide evidence supporting the prototypical structure of the concept of teacher wellbeing at work, indicating that teachers associate certain wellbeing components as more representative of the concept than others. In particular, it was interesting to note that the components of *trust*, feeling *safe, supported, valued* and achieving *work/life balance* were considered central to wellbeing. The following section discusses these findings in relation to existing literature and provides important insights and implications for policymakers, educational administrators, schools, scholars, and teachers themselves.

### 4.1. The concept of teacher wellbeing at work

#### 4.1.1. Multifaceted

Results in Phase 1, which asked teachers to freely-list all the items they considered to be associated with the concept of teacher wellbeing at work, suggest that the concept is multifaceted and complex, consistent with the literature. Notably, the wide-range of positive wellbeing categories generated in Phase 1 ($n = 109$) might suggest that the concept of wellbeing is temporal, and dependent on the individual perspectives and context (Hamling et al., 2020; Kern & Taylor, 2021; Vo et al., 2023). Various academic models and frameworks support the idea that subjective wellbeing is a dynamic and multifaceted construct, which consists of several components (Diener, 1984; Huppert & So, 2013; Kern, 2022; Ryff & Keyes, 1995). For example, Kern (2022), proposed six wellbeing components in the PERMAH model, including positive emotion, engagement, relationships, meaning, accomplishment, and health. Similarly, emphasising positive wellbeing, Huppert and So (2013) suggested ten 'flourishing' characteristics – competence, emotional stability, engagement, meaning, optimism, positive emotions, positive relationships, resilience, self-esteem, and vitality.

Even though many components identified in the current study align with those in academic models (Huppert & So, 2013; Kern, 2022), such as the ones above (e.g., *relationships*, *engagement*, *accomplishment*, *resilience, health* and *meaning*), it is interesting to note that many were not. For instance, teachers in this study viewed *trust,* feeling *valued*, *respected* and achieving *work/life balance* as central to the concept of wellbeing. This finding suggests there may be a mismatch between general academic models and the perceptions and experiences of teachers. Although *trust*, *valued*, and *respected* may be subsumed in *relationships*, these central components identified by teachers are not explicitly addressed in some academic models (Huppert & So, 2013; Kern, 2022; van Dierendonck et al., 2008). This finding raises the question about the universality and applicability of existing wellbeing frameworks, suggesting that the experiences and priorities of different occupational groups might necessitate a more nuanced and context-specific understanding of wellbeing (Hamling et al., 2020), in this case teachers. Therefore, when developing meaningful interventions and programs to foster teacher wellbeing at work, schools, policymakers and other stakeholders should consider teachers' perspectives (i.e., bottom-up approach) to ensure a meaningful effective approach.

#### 4.1.2. Prototypically organised

This study found the concept of teacher wellbeing at work was indeed prototypically organised. Through three phases, teachers were able to list the components relevant to the concept, consistently agree on the central ones, and recognise them in a mental task, meeting the two criteria established by Rosch for a prototype construct (1979). Thus, we can posit that teachers typically think of some wellbeing components as being more representative of the concept than others. This finding aligns with other prototype analyses investigating wellbeing among workers in New Zealand (Hone et al., 2015) and nurses (Jarden et al., 2018). Moreover, studies with Chinese international students (Huang et al.,

2022) and New Zealand adolescents (Bharara et al., 2019) have also indicated that the concept of wellbeing is prototypically organised for these groups.

Although previous research has identified various wellbeing factors important to teachers in different contexts (Hine et al., 2022; McCallum, 2021; Weiland, 2021), perhaps the most compelling finding of this study is the suggestion that there is an ideal representation of wellbeing from Australian teachers' perspectives. Considering scholars continue to question how wellbeing is best understood (Dodge et al., 2012; Halliday et al., 2019; Hamling et al., 2020; Kern et al., 2020), this study adds to the discussion by providing insights into the internal structure of the concept among a specific population. In particular, the context-specific understanding gained from a relatively large sample (993 in total) allows conclusions to be drawn about common conceptualisations among Australian teachers.

Understanding the closest representation of teacher wellbeing at work has significant implications for informing, benchmarking and evaluating interventions, and ensuring evidence-based practice. Furthermore, a prototype of teacher wellbeing at work might help to promote a shared understanding of the concept among educators, researchers and policy makers, which may ultimately lead to effective wellbeing initiatives for teachers.

#### 4.1.3. Components central to teacher wellbeing at work

According to the findings of this project, the concept of teacher wellbeing at work has an internal structure (Fehr, 1988; Gulliford et al., 2020; Hone et al., 2015). That is, some components of wellbeing were identified as more central to the concept than others; namely, *safe*, *supported, valued, trusted*, *work/life balance*, *respected*, *relationships*, *positive mental state*, *time* and *listened to*. For the purpose of this discussion, we focus on the top five components (i.e., *safe*, *supported*, *valued*, *trusted* and *work-life balance*), as calculated in the *sum of ranks* (see Appendix A) and consistently recognised by teachers in Phase 3.

Feeling *safe* was ranked important by participants in both frequency (Phase 1) and centrality (Phase 2). These findings relate to a major study investigating Australian teachers' perceptions of their work, which revealed that a quarter of survey participants reported feeling unsafe in their workplace, highlighting the increasingly negative attitudes and behaviours shown by students and parents (Longmuir et al., 2022). Given these findings, the suggestion that teachers are bullied daily in their professions (Billett et al., 2019), and that teacher-targeted bullying is a concern across the globe with detrimental effects on teacher wellbeing (Burns et al., 2020), it is perhaps not surprising that teachers in the present study viewed feeling *safe* as central to the concept of wellbeing at work. Another possible explanation, from a physical safety perspective, could point to the enduring effects of the COVID-19 pandemic (Billett et al., 2022; Longmuir et al., 2022).

Teachers also emphasised the significance of feeling *supported* and *valued* as important components in the concept of wellbeing. These findings align with previous studies examining prototypes of wellbeing among intensive care nurses (Jarden et al., 2018) and workers (a sample of teachers and lawyers) in New Zealand (Hone et al., 2015). Furthermore, past studies have highlighted the significance of collegial supports as a source of satisfaction for teachers (Longmuir et al., 2022). Research indicates that the connection between teacher perceptions of *support* and feeling *valued* has substantial implications for various teaching outcomes and where, for example, support and appreciation from principals, leadership teams and peers enhance teacher job satisfaction, commitment, and, consequently, overall wellbeing (Cann et al., 2021; Edinger & Edinger, 2018; Singh & Billingsley, 1998).

*Trust* emerged as another critical component of wellbeing consistently highlighted by teachers throughout this study. Compelling evidence in the literature demonstrates the importance of *trust* in the workplace and its impact on the mental health and wellbeing of employees. For example, it has been shown that workplaces characterised by low levels of trust create high-stress environments, putting employees at risk of feeling burned-out, anxious, and depressed (Hungerford & Cleary, 2021). Conversely, cultivating a culture of trust enhances work performance (Harris et al., 2013), employee career satisfaction (Jabeen & Isakovic, 2018), and empowerment (Frei, 2020).

In the context of the teaching profession, organisational trust, which encompasses trust in principals and working teams, has a significant mediating role on the relationship between distributed leadership and teacher wellbeing (Liu et al., 2022). Moreover, Longmuir et al. (2022) suggested that fostering greater trust in teachers' professional judgement would not only contribute to their mental health and wellbeing but also facilitate the management of their workload and improve teacher retention within the profession.

Notably, the components of *safe*, *supported*, *valued* and *trust* were not explicitly identified in previous literature exploring the concept of wellbeing from teachers' perspectives (Hine et al., 2022; McCallum, 2021a; Weiland, 2021). However, a closer examination of the findings from these prior studies, combined with the outcomes of the present project, demonstrates a common underlying theme: the pivotal role of social relationships (Hascher & Waber, 2021a,b; Simmons et al., 2019; Spilt et al., 2011; Weiland, 2021). Thus, the findings of this study contribute to expanding current understandings of teacher wellbeing by shedding light on the possible mechanisms underlying the significance of the "social interactions that seem to be at the heart of teacher wellbeing" (Hascher & Waber, 2021a,b, p.18).

It is widely acknowledged that teachers' work demands are high (Hunter et al., 2022), putting a strain on their time, and thus it is perhaps unsurprising that *work-life balance* was viewed as important to teachers in this project. This finding is aligned with existing literature which has highlighted teachers' focus on being able to balance the demands of work and family, and health needs (McCallum, 2021), and the importance of finding meaning in life outside of work, especially connections with family (Hine et al., 2022). Prototype analyses with employees in other work settings have also identified *work-life balance* as a central component of wellbeing (Hone et al., 2015; Jarden et al., 2018).

Extensive studies have shown that appropriate *work/life balance* has beneficial outcomes for both the individual and the workplace. For employees, *work/life balance* has been associated with a greater quality of life (Greenhaus et al., 2003), buffering against the effects of negative experiences in any one domain (Barnett & Hyde, 2001), and even transferring or enriching positive experiences in one domain to the other (Greenhaus & Powell, 2006). Benefits to employers include saving time, retaining employees, increased employee motivation and productivity, and reduced absenteeism (Lockwood, 2003).

Given the timing of the study, it is essential to consider the potential impact of the pandemic on study findings. The significant and ongoing challenges (e.g., changes to teaching methods, student behaviour, and concerns related to supporting students' mental health and wellbeing, see Ozamiz-Etxebarria et al., 2021) might have led teachers to emphasise wellbeing components such as *safe*, *supported*, *valued*, and *trusted,* aligning with theoretical understandings of hedonistic and eudemonic wellbeing (Deci & Ryan, 2008). Hedonistic wellbeing, with its focus on the pursuit of pleasure and avoidance of pain, is reflected in the immediate need for safety and support during such a crisis (Uy & Frances Abendan, 2023). Simultaneously, the emphasis on feeling *valued* and *trusted* aligns with eudaimonic wellbeing, which is characterised by living in accordance with one's true self and seeking personal growth and fulfillment (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Research conducted both during and beyond the peak of the pandemic indicate that teachers' wellbeing is influenced by safety, social support, and public perceptions of the teaching profession (Billaudeau et al., 2022; Billett et al., 2022; Longmuir et al., 2022).

The identification of the five central components in this study highlights their crucial importance in understanding the concept of wellbeing at work for teachers. In addition to reinforcing the significance of *work/life balance*, this research has revealed interesting findings

regarding the components of feeling *safe, supported* and *valued*, and *trusted*. Notably, these four components have not been explicitly highlighted by teachers in previous studies that examine the conceptualisations of wellbeing at work for teachers (Hine et al., 2022; McCallum, 2021a; Weiland, 2021).

## 5. Limitations and future directions

Despite its strengths, this project has a few limitations, which may help guide future research. One limitation is the exclusive focus on Australian teachers, which may restrict generalisability of the findings to teachers from other cultural or geographical contexts. Comparative studies that include teachers from various cultures and systems would provide a comprehensive understanding of the universality and contextual nuances of the teacher wellbeing concept. Additionally, although the Australian teaching workforce in 2023 were predominantly females and working in Government schools (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2024), most of the Australian teachers in this project were of Caucasian or European backgrounds, identified as females, over the age of 40, working in secondary schools and in urban or metropolitan locations. Future prototype analyses might explore the concept of wellbeing at work with particular sub-groups of teachers. Moreover, it would be valuable to examine and compare how graduate teachers, teachers of marginalised backgrounds or schools, and teachers from different sectors (e.g., primary or early childhood settings) view the concept. This differentiation is particularly relevant given the predominance of secondary school teachers in the current study (particularly in Phase 1), and the reported diversity among teachers and their distinct work contexts (McCallum, 2021).

The authors acknowledge that results of this study require further confirmation. Future research might conduct an in-depth exploration into the specific characteristics of each component in relation to social interactions in the workplace and explore their influence on overall teacher wellbeing at work. Further investigation is needed to understand how teachers perceive feeling valued, trusted, and respected by various key stakeholders (e.g., students, parents, school leaders, or society). It might also be of value to investigate teachers' conceptualisations of wellbeing at work to include both positive and negative aspects, which may provide insights into the full spectrum of health and wellbeing.

## 6. Practical implications

Scholars, schools, policy makers, and other stakeholders might consider the five components when designing and implementing initiatives aimed at supporting teachers' wellbeing. For example, schools and policy makers in the Australian context could revisit existing wellbeing initiatives for teachers and update them to include the identified components. This may involve revising professional development programs, teacher training, and school policies. Moreover, interventions to foster TWB might consider the importance of creating a positive and supportive work environment, and fostering a sense of security and trust among teachers. Recognition (e.g., rewarding and recognising teachers' professional efforts) and mentoring programs, and professional development opportunities may contribute to making Australian teachers feel valued and supported. The possibility of flexible work schedules, workload management strategies, and programs aimed at promoting well-rounded lifestyles should also be considered given the significance of work-life balance identified by Australian teachers in this study.

## 7. Conclusion

Considering the dynamic and complex nature of the concept of teacher wellbeing at work and the wide array of wellbeing components identified in previous studies across various contexts (Hine et al., 2022; McCallum, 2021b; Weiland, 2021), this research makes a valuable contribution to our understanding of wellbeing at work in three key areas. First, by adopting a bottom-up approach from the perspective of teachers, we provide meaningful insights directly from those experiencing it. This approach ensures the authentic experiences and perceptions of teachers are captured, adding to the richness of our understanding of teacher wellbeing at work.

Second, our findings showed that the concept of teacher wellbeing at work is prototypically organised; that is, teachers tend to associate certain wellbeing components as more representative of the construct than others. This allows for the identification of core components that are consistently considered essential to the wellbeing of teachers. Our study showed that the concept of teacher wellbeing at work possesses an internal structure, our third contribution. Australian teachers overwhelmingly emphasised the importance of feeling *safe, supported* and *valued,* and noted that *trust* and *work/life balance* are vital to their idea of wellbeing. Importantly, these findings underscore the crucial role of social relationships on teachers' conceptualisations of wellbeing in the workplace.

Overall, this study offers valuable insights into teacher wellbeing at work, revealing alternative perspectives, prototypical organisation, and internal structure of the concept. An understanding of how wellbeing is considered and perceived by teachers can be used to inform Australian policy makers and school administrators to design interventions, measure wellbeing, and build policies to foster thriving educational environments for all teachers.

## CRediT authorship contribution statement

**Duyen T. Vo:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Validation, Software, Project administration, Methodology, Investigation, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Kelly-Ann Allen:** Writing – review & editing, Validation, Supervision. **Andrea Reupert:** Writing – review & editing, Supervision.

## Declaration of competing interest

The authors report no potential conflict of interest. All authors have approved the final manuscript.

## Data availability

Data will be made available on request.

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## Appendix A

Combined Frequency and Centrality Ranks to Determine Sum of Ranks.

| Component | Rank by frequency | Rank by centrality | Sum of ranks |
|---|---|---|---|
| safe | 2 | 1 | 3 |
| supported | 1 | 4 | 5 |
| valued | 3 | 5 | 8 |
| trust | 7 | 2 | 9 |
| work/life balance | 4 | 7 | 11 |
| respected | 9 | 3 | 12 |
| relationships | 3 | 10 | 13 |
| mental state | 8 | 6 | 14 |
| time | 8 | 9 | 17 |
| listened to | 12 | 6 | 18 |
| connection | 6 | 13 | 19 |
| interactions | 7 | 12 | 19 |
| physical health | 5 | 16 | 21 |
| appreciated | 15 | 8 | 23 |
| heard | 12 | 11 | 23 |
| happy | 6 | 19 | 25 |
| balance | 10 | 17 | 27 |
| positive | 14 | 13 | 27 |
| care | 11 | 17 | 28 |
| positive impact | 14 | 14 | 28 |
| belonging | 16 | 14 | 30 |
| acknowledged | 16 | 15 | 31 |
| collaboration | 9 | 22 | 31 |
| self-care | 15 | 17 | 32 |
| recognised | 16 | 18 | 34 |
| achievement | 14 | 21 | 35 |
| calm | 16 | 20 | 36 |
| development | 13 | 25 | 38 |
| content | 16 | 23 | 39 |
| growth | 15 | 24 | 39 |
| joy | 17 | 26 | 43 |

## Appendix B

Narrative Descriptions for Phase 3.

*Narrative 1*

Alex feels supported and safe at work. She is trusted as a teacher and feels valued. Alex has a good work-life balance.

*Narrative 2*

Al has positive relationships at work. He is respected and listened to. Al has time to do his work and has a positive mental state.

*Narrative 3*

Khai enjoys his interactions at work and has good connections. He feels appreciated and heard. Khai is in good physical health.

*Narrative 4*

Kelly's work has a positive impact. She feels happy and taken care of at work. Kelly is positive and feels balanced.

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