Schooling as a Contribution or Threat to Wellbeing? A Study of Norwegian Teachers' Perceptions of their Role in Fostering Student Wellbeing

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ABSTRACT

Little is known about the role of teachers in fostering wellbeing in the everyday context of school life. This paper explores the phenomenon among a sample of Norwegian teachers. Focus groups with 23 teachers in four schools (grades 1–10) in Norway were conducted. In the analysis of the findings three themes were developed: 1) fostering student wellbeing as the foundation to teachers' everyday philosophies, 2) managing the everyday reality of student performance expectations, and 3) teachers struggling to manage these tensions and dilemmas. This study indicated that the teachers viewed concern for students' wellbeing as integrated in their professional identity, seeing wellbeing and learning as intertwined. However, dilemmas and tensions in teachers' every day practices were identified, which related to competing expectations and conflicting priorities in the school context. High expectations on academic performance seem to leave the teachers little room for an holistic approach to schooling, where students' academic and personal development were interwoven. We discuss the possible consequences these findings may have for teachers' professional identity and judgements, alongside suggestions for how to address these aspects in CPD and initial teacher training programmes.

Introduction

Wellbeing has become widely regarded as a matter of concern for governments and public policy (Fisher, 2019) and, in recent years, schools have been increasingly seen as sites for promoting wellbeing. This has given rise to a substantial growth in research on school-based interventions related to student wellbeing (Spratt, 2017; Thapa, Cohen, Guffey, & Higgins-D'Alessandro, 2013; Watson, Emery, Bayliss, Boushel, & McInnes, 2012; Weare & Nind, 2011). In this regard, the role of teachers has received particular attention, given the well-established association between the quality of teacher–student relationships, student engagement and wellbeing, and their social and emotional development (Cornelius-White, 2007; Franklin, Kim, Ryan, Kelly, & Montgomery, 2012; Huang et al., 2015; D. Wang & Fletcher, 2016). However, research on the role of teachers has identified a need for conceptual

clarification in regard to what fostering wellbeing might entail (Chapman, 2015; Edling & Frelin, 2013; Spratt, 2017; Thomas, Graham, Powell, & Fitzgerald, 2016; Watson et al., 2012). Graham, Phelps, Maddison and Fitzgerald (2011), for example, have argued that as teachers are widely seen as having a crucial role in students' wellbeing, attention must be given to teachers' assumptions, values, beliefs, and attitudes towards students' social and emotional needs. In the same vein, Thomas et al. argued that '*despite the increased attention to wellbeing, there is little specific wellbeing-focused education policy, a lack of conceptual clarity, and a fragmented approach to implementation that is inconsistent with current best-practice knowledge*' (Thomas et al., 2016, p. 507). This policy background provides the departure point for this paper. It presents the findings from a study of Norwegian teachers, the aim of which was to explore the sense they made of fostering wellbeing in an everyday teaching and learning context. To date, teachers' perspectives on their understanding and competence in this arena has been under-researched, especially with regard to the educational processes themselves in supporting or undermining wellbeing. Thus, this study explores the following research question: *How do teachers perceive their role in fostering wellbeing among students?* We start by critically reviewing the research and debates in this field before moving on to describe the study in detail.

Teachers' role in wellbeing promotion

In the context of education policy and practice, mental health and wellbeing are terms that are often used synonymously, and are frequently referred to as social and emotional learning or growth (Spratt, 2016; Watson et al., 2012). Danby and Hamilton (2016) found that although primary school teachers had a broad definition of mental health, they preferred to use the term 'wellbeing' or 'emotional wellbeing', as they saw mental health as being connected to mental illness and stigma. Similarly, Ekornes, Hauge and Lund (2012) found that teachers favoured the term 'wellbeing', and were reluctant to use 'mental health'. However, although the term 'wellbeing' is commonly used in an educational context, it is a contested concept, having a multitude of definitions and measurement instruments, and significant cultural and social meanings (Dodge, Daly, Huyton, & Sanders, 2012; McLeod, 2015; Spratt, 2017; VanderWeele et al., 2020). In a review of studies on teachers' conceptual understandings of mental health promotion, Whitley, Smith and Vaillancourt (2013) found that even though teachers emphasized the importance of mental health promotion, there was a gap in understanding how this was to be reflected in practice. They argued that there was a need to find effective ways of promoting mental health literacy among teachers, to help them adjust

their practices adequately. Given that language shapes experiences, understanding teachers' preferences can shed light on their particular way of seeing the world, especially with regard to what they believe to be worth pursuing (Pring, 2010).

Eccles and Roeser (2011) argue that schools are complex multilevel institutions that influence students' development in multidimensional ways. They view education as an ongoing process into which wellbeing is interwoven, and they argue for an holistic and cross-disciplinary approach to the study of education's influence on students' intellectual and social-emotional development. Spratt's (2016) views converge with this conceptualization of education and, furthermore, she argues that if wellbeing is viewed as integral to the educational process then supporting wellbeing is anchored in everyday teaching and learning rather than additional to it. In many ways these views reflect the enduring concerns of many philosophers of education (see, for example Biesta (2015, 2016) and Pring (2012; 2010)) who have argued for a focus on educating the whole person. This notion is underpinned by an expanded notion of teaching and learning as a dynamic process of enhancing each student's opportunity to flourish and lead a valuable and meaningful life. Conceptualizing wellbeing as 'eudaimonia', or 'flourishing' (Aristotle, Ross, & Brown, 2020) similarly gives emphasis to nurturing human potential within the conditions of one's life of which education during childhood and youth is a substantial part.

The physical and social dimensions of the learning environment are commonly referred to as 'school climate', and although the definitions of the term varies, school climate is widely regarded as influential to students' academic learning as well as to their social and psychological development (McGiboney, 2016; M.-T. Wang & Degol, 2016). In viewing education as a dynamic process, which seeks to nurture the human potential of each student, we conceptualise the school climate as generated in and through social interactions rather than as a separate entity.

The tendency for education systems to increasingly focus on assessment and performance in relation to narrowly defined academic outcomes, however, has meant that the normative practice of education has tended to displace expanded notions of nurturing and wellbeing within teaching and learning. Spratt (2016) argues that the dominant discourse has focused on how students' wellbeing can lead to better academic outcomes, rather than wellbeing being an outcome of education. At the same time, the rise of school-based interventions has given rise

to therapeutic discourses tending to dominate the wellbeing arena (K. Ecclestone & Brunila, 2015; K. Ecclestone & Hayes, 2009; Kathryn Ecclestone & Rawdin, 2016). Coupling wellbeing and health in this way, as Spratt points out, has meant that – intentionally or otherwise – notions of illness, difficulties, and deficiencies have come to the fore. Consequently, teachers' roles become defined somewhat therapeutically, crowding out in the process wider notions of flourishing that link wellbeing and learning and the stimulating potential of education. This latter approach is distinctive as Spratt argues: *'a fuller consideration of health and wellbeing would move beyond its supporting role in schooling and look to the role of education itself in enhancing human flourishing'* (Spratt, 2016, p. 236). Furthermore, her analysis offers an explanation as to why teachers might be uncertain when talking about their role in fostering students' wellbeing.

However, in attempts to define the purpose of education, there has, for some time, been an ongoing tension between philosophers of education and policy makers in respect of the emphasis on developing human beings, versus instrumental outcomes (qualifications). Biesta (2016) has referred to the current era of school policy as the 'age of measurement', in which there is an imbalance between this and the other purposes of education relating to socialization and personal development, with the qualification dimension having priority. Finding some kind of balance between these three dimensions of education requires reflections among teachers about the values and world views their mandate is founded upon, including questions about the moral and political dimensions of educational goals (Biesta, 2015; Chapman, 2015; Dunne, 2005; Hufford, 2014; Pring, 2010). In her work on the ethics of care in an educational context, Nodding (2019) has emphasised the significance of a dialog-oriented relationship between teachers and student, both as an educational goal and as a fundamental aspect of education. This implies that teachers need capacity and opportunity for reflecting on what their professional mandate is, and how it is portrayed in their practice, according to their professional judgement (Biesta, Priestley, & Robinson, 2015; Dunne, 2005; Graham et al., 2011; Noddings, 2019). The purpose of the current study is to explore teachers' views on this mandate with regard to fostering students' wellbeing in school.

The general trend of recent educational policy developments in Norway have similarities with many other countries, especially with regard to the focus on assessment and the associated accountability culture, in line with New Public Management thinking. Within the school context, these developments escalated during the education reform of 2006, (the 'Knowledge

Promotion Reform'), and a more prescriptive curriculum was introduced in primary, lower, and upper secondary education. Alongside the reform, there has been an increased focus on internal and external evaluation of students' performance. The consequences of these reforms have been debated, and there has been some agreement that the reform put rather too much emphasis on measurable learning objectives. Hence, a new national curriculum will be introduced in August 2020. The new curriculum is promoted as being more flexible with regard to how teachers might teach, gives more attention to a core curriculum, and is based on a wider definition of competence. These are all changes that might give room for a more holistic perspective on schooling. However, the extensive evaluation of student performance will continue.

Method

Schools and informants

A qualitative approach was adopted for this study, as the purpose was to obtain in-depth insight into teachers' subjective experience and understand the meanings they attach to their actions (Brinkmann, 2013). The study was carried out in the context of a continuing professional development programme (CPD) for teachers in fostering student wellbeing, organised by a collaborative network of 10 municipalities with approximately 30 schools in a county in Norway. The network recruited four schools to participate in the research, and all four schools were grade 1-10 schools, with students aged from 5 – 16 (a combination of primary and secondary school). Two of the schools were in small industrial towns and two were in village/rural environments. The schools were different in size; three were medium-sized (150 – 250 students) and one was a large school (more than 350 students). The four schools had focused on various content and methods in their school developmental work on fostering student wellbeing. For pragmatic reasons, the school administration recruited the participants to the study, based on criteria provided by the researcher to represent the variation within the teacher groups at the schools (e.g. in regard to which grade and subject they taught, years of experience, age, and gender). Altogether, 23 teachers participated, 17 female and 6 male, reflecting the unequal distribution of women and men in the staff. Their teaching experience varied from 2 to 41 years.

Data gathering procedure

The first author and research assistant together carried out all the focus groups, which took place at a private meeting room at each of the four schools. Focus groups were used as the method of data collection, because open and associative discussions in focus groups have the advantage of bringing variety and breadth into the discussions (Saldaña, 2016). A thematic guide was developed with open-ended questions in order to allow the participants' associations and thoughts to lead the direction of the discussion (Brinkmann, 2013). The researcher emphasized that the purpose of the interviews was to know more about their perspectives and experience, and that whatever reflections and ideas they wanted to share would be of interest. The starting theme was the teacher's role in fostering students' wellbeing, and follow-up questions included how they would describe a good *school climate* in this context, and whether they considered students' wellbeing to be related to how they managed everyday life at school. Having few and relatively open questions, allowed the participants to control the way in which they wanted to answer, express their concerns, questions and perspectives, and the researcher could add questions by following the participants' line of thought (Brinkmann, 2013; Saldaña, 2016). The researcher functioned as a moderator and made it clear that the point was not to reach consensus, but to allow different viewpoints to be articulated. The follow-up questions from the researcher varied slightly in the different focus groups, depending on the direction of the discussion among the participants in each group. All focus groups were audio-recorded and subsequently transcribed verbatim and anonymized.

Data analysis

The analysis followed the inductive analytic approach common in thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Saldaña, 2016). Thematic analysis is a systematic procedure for identifying, analysing and interpreting patterns of shared meaning, guided by the research question (Clarke & Braun, 2017). The approach used in the analysis of the data is what Braun and Clarke (2019) call reflexive thematic analysis, which is an active and generative process of thinking, reflecting and developing themes or core concepts that underpin or unite patterns of shared meanings. These core concepts or themes are '*produced at the intersection of the researcher's theoretical assumptions, their analytical skills, and the data themselves*' (Braun & Clarke, 2019, p. 594). First, the transcripts were coded by the main researcher. After a few

preliminary readings of the transcripts, the raw data were labelled with codes associated with the research question. Then, codes were grouped into categories, with the wider research team discussing comparisons within and across categories to determine patterns and relationships, and to give rise to emerging themes. Although the discussions at the four schools varied, we did not find a distinctive pattern in these variations, related to our research question.

The analysis was an iterative process that involved rereading the transcripts, adding, modifying, and reorganising codes, drawing illustrations, and discussions among the co-authors. The development of main themes was a process of reflexive collaboration, questioning and querying the assumptions, attempting to generate a rich, nuanced and valid reading of the data. After having decided on which quotations to use to illustrate the findings, they were translated by two of the authors, and the teachers were given fictional names.

Ethical considerations

The study was approved by the Regional Committee for Medical and Health Research Ethics in Western Norway. Informed consent was obtained from all teachers when they were asked to participate in the study. They were informed that their participation was voluntary, and that the data would be anonymised. For confidentiality, the password-protected files were kept on the computers of the main researcher and the research assistant. The rest of the research team had access to transcribed and anonymised data.

Findings

At an overarching level, the teachers in this study considered fostering students' wellbeing to be integrated into their professional role. The teachers talked about why they saw student wellbeing as important and relevant, and described various aspects of fostering student wellbeing in their everyday work. They also described challenges they encountered in their efforts to foster wellbeing, and, because the task was important to them, this generated dilemmas for them. The following three main themes were developed in the analysis: 1) fostering student wellbeing as the foundation to teachers' everyday philosophies, 2) managing the everyday reality of student performance expectations, and 3) teachers struggling to manage these tensions and dilemmas. See figure 1.
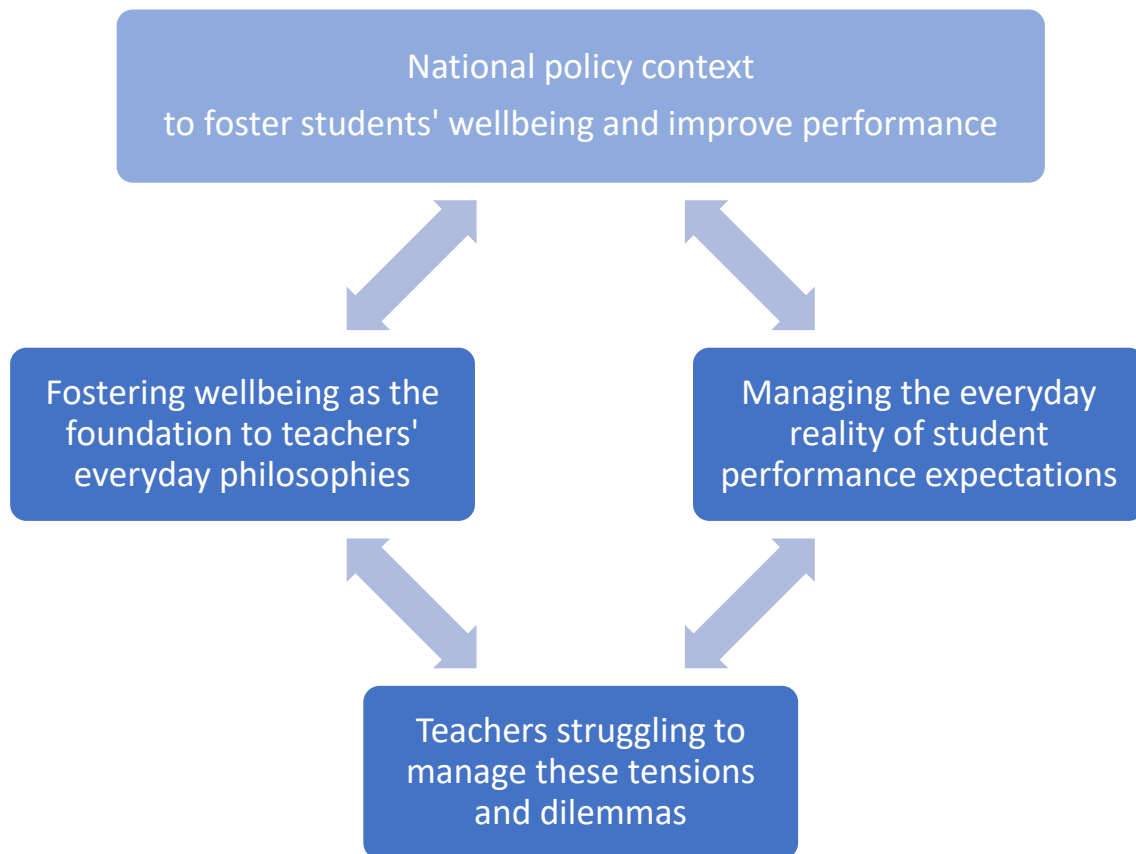
Figure 1: The three main themes developed in the analysis

Theme 1: Fostering student wellbeing as the foundation to teachers' everyday philosophies
In referring to everyday philosophies, this theme reveals the teachers' values and beliefs underpinning their views of their role in developing students' learning and wellbeing. Thus, it refers to how the teachers talked about their task of fostering student wellbeing as integrated in the educational process, and as a dimension of constant concern. They had a long-term perspective on their students' development and growth, and emphasized their role in facilitating conditions in which the students could thrive, explore, learn, and develop a sense of self-worth and social competence. The teachers talked about wellbeing and academic learning as intertwined in this holistic approach, and that neither academic learning nor student wellbeing could be dealt with in isolation from each other.

> '*The most important part of my role is how I can help them to become confident and steady persons. Teaching the subject is secondary.*' (Nina, FG 1)

Illustrated in the quotation above was that the value attached to teaching the subject only made sense in relation to their more expansive vision of developing the student as a person over the long term.

The teachers saw the task of fostering student wellbeing as relating to their role in creating or generating a good school climate, viewing this work as an ongoing process, and work they never could ignore, nor define as completed. They emphasized that the school climate was of major importance for the students' wellbeing and learning capacity, which they regarded as being interrelated. Central to this notion was the view of developing the whole person.

> '*The school climate should allow the student to develop and learn, both academically and as a human.' (*Linda, FG3)

They talked about the dynamic link – akin to a social process – between students feeling psychologically safe, socially included, participating and learning. The teachers pointed out that the psychological, social, and emotional conditions were less visible, but just as essential as many of the physical structures and routines that help to establish a good school climate. The teachers perceived that students' wellbeing depended on such conditions, in which they could flourish, and where they could enjoy the school and the learning process. They emphasized the importance of teachers' efforts in generating a safe, light-hearted, and cheerful school climate.

> 'W*ellbeing is about so much; it is about making the students feel comfortable and safe, focusing much on creating a good atmosphere in the classroom [...] a lot of laughter.'* (Ellen, FG4)

The teachers saw the task of fostering student wellbeing as related to their role in establishing a school climate in which everybody felt included in the student group, where there was room for individual variation, and where diversity was embraced. The teachers emphasized that they, as teachers, were responsible for maintaining a non-judgemental atmosphere in the classroom, where there was room for students to make mistakes and to ask freely about things they did not know or understand, and where the students felt secure enough to explore unknown areas. They talked about psychological safety associated with the quality of relations, and referred to those among the students, and between students and teachers.

> *Safety is very important, but supporting safety is connected to the relationships between the students and teachers, and among the students. As a student, you*

*experience a good school climate when you can ask about whatever you wonder about, without anyone thinking that it is strange or stupid. If you are going to learn things, you have to be active and get the chance to ask questions. And if you do not understand, then it is OK to ask about it, without others making a big deal of you asking—then you are safe. (*Nelly, FG1)

They highlighted their concern for all their students to feel safe and confident, and to experience mutual acceptance and caring among peers. Moreover, they considered students, in general, to be in need of support from teachers in order to learn how to express both their emotions and thoughts, and they believed that such support depended on trust. The teachers emphasized that as teachers, they must be able to understand their students' perspectives, and show acceptance for and interest in their experience. They underscored that their opportunities to support students with emerging difficulties depended, in particular, on a trusting relationship between the student and teacher.

Moreover, given that there was often some degree of social ranking within student groups, and students might worry about being socially marginalised or excluded, they saw their role as being aware of such dynamics in a group. They also talked about it as a general challenge to know what was happening in groups, and to be able to disturb the dynamics of established patterns in a way that was more inclusive. This was seen as ongoing relationship work that required varied adaptation to different groups.

> *What works well in one class, does not necessarily work well in another class, and vice versa'* (Eva, FG3).

They also talked about the huge variation in social dynamics in the various classes, which made it complicated to decide on which strategies to make use of to influence the relational climate in each group.

Theme 2: Managing the everyday reality of student performance expectations
This second theme refers to the teachers' concern about the perceived high expectations on student performance in their everyday school life, and how they, as teachers, tried to deal with that situation. They talked about what they saw as a distinctive change in the school context over the last decade or so, since education policy had given higher priority to academic

performance. They saw the increased focus on measurable academic performance and the overall high expectations within the school context as a consequence of changes in the priorities in education policy at a national level. Moreover, the teachers experienced that students of today make more effort to perform well at school, and it had become more common for the students to try to get high marks. They characterised this increased eagerness among the students as a positive change in general, as more focus on learning had made the school days more interesting and rewarding for students, and for them as teachers, too. However, they also saw some negative aspects of this change, as the pressure to perform well had become a heavy burden for many students. They pointed out that the schools' standards were much too high for many of the students, who would have marginal chances of succeeding. Moreover, the teachers pointed out that in addition to the high expectations at school, many of the students were surrounded by expectations to perform in other areas too, such as sport, fitness, appearance, and being connected via social media, as well as think about the future. They experienced a general tendency among the students that they were exposed to higher standards and more pressure than earlier, and the students were working hard to manage multiple expectations within the classroom.

> *The society demands more and more, and there are higher demands on the students, and we start earlier to nag about what profession to choose. This is then a constant concern in the back of their minds, I think. <……..>* '*Some of the learning objectives are very high, and the majority of the students do not have the opportunity to reach them.*' (John, FG3)

The teachers described this situation as problematic. They experienced that these changes in school context had led to more pressure in general, both on teachers and students, and everyday school life had become characterised by higher speed and more time pressure. They realised that as teachers, they had a central role in accelerating the high expectations and the pressures the students' experienced. Even though they questioned whether this pressure was in the best interests of many of the students, the teachers felt that they had no choice but to pressure the students to perform. They considered that the high expectations to perform and be successful could threaten the wellbeing of many students, especially those who did not have the potential to get high marks, as well as those with high academic potential.

> Lisa: '*It is hustle, hustle, hustle, academic requirements, tests, it has become such a*

mad rush.'

Julie: '*There is pressure from our side as well, from the school.*

Hannah: *That is for sure! We are instructed to put pressure on them.' <....> 'It seems like the pressure piles up somehow, and it becomes too much for them'. (*FG 2)

The teachers experienced that more students felt overwhelmed and/or were struggling with mental health difficulties than they had encountered in previous years. They also talked about their current students having different kinds of difficulties, which they had not seen previously. The teachers had various explanations for this change among the students and related it both to the changes in society and in the school context. Their own experiences corresponded with common media coverage about the increased mental health difficulties among young people, and they reflected on how the media might influence their own perceptions.

> *I can see the same situation at our school as we hear about in the media: there is an increase in mental health difficulties among children and youth. I think it is connected to what the school has done [increased pressure on performance] over the recent years*. (Lisa, FG 2)

Theme 3: Teachers struggling to manage these tensions and dilemmas

This third theme refers to the tensions and dilemmas the teachers experienced in their everyday lives, struggling to balance the various dimensions of their role. Although fostering wellbeing was foundational to their everyday philosophies, they somehow found the reality of student performance expectations to challenge their philosophies. According to the teachers, the high expectations made many students feel unhappy about themselves and their lives, and encouragement and other supporting efforts from teachers were often not enough to compensate. This situation left teachers struggling to balance their various responsibilities; on the one hand they felt that they should put pressure on the students to make them work harder and get better test scores, and on the other hand they felt that this might come at the expense of their focus on fostering students' overall wellbeing. Describing this development in the school context, the teachers problematised what they saw as a lack of balance, and how the emphasis on academic performance might come at the expense of students' overall development and growth. Although they considered their task of fostering wellbeing to be

important for the students' future life, they experienced unbalanced priorities and lack of time as barriers for them to focus sufficiently on this task. The teachers expressed that they disagreed with the priorities of the current school political climate, and that they often questioned their own practice.

> '*We are very much engaged with the subjects and progress, and do not have the time to work systematically on fostering wellbeing and mental health,*' (Linn, FG4)

The teachers underlined that although student learning and wellbeing were, for them, intertwined, they needed to work systematically on both dimensions. Although learning the subject could enhance student wellbeing, this did not necessarily happen when teachers focus on teaching and progress in subjects in a more instrumental direction. The teachers pointed out that for many students, it could be difficult to see how school subjects related to their life, and this could give rise to feeling alienated. Moreover, the teachers viewed the school system as being organised in ways that suited some students better than others, and they found it troublesome that all students' academic progression was evaluated according to the same standards, even when there was huge variation in the students' resources, interests, and ability to perform well academically.

They were concerned about the consequences this situation might have for many students' wellbeing. In everyday school life, there were lots of comparisons and competition between the students, generated by how the school system functioned. This could cause a lot of stress for the students, which could hamper the development of their self-worth and expectations about their own future contribution. Because of the variations in students' capacities, the teachers found this aspect of the education system uncomfortable and even unfair. The teachers expressed that in spite of their awareness of this, they felt they had limited opportunities to mitigate such possible threats to students' wellbeing.

Although they had the impression that mental health difficulties among students had increased, they considered students having mental health difficulties of some sort to be a normal part of life that they as teachers had to deal with. However, the teachers expressed that their busy work situation made it challenging for them to give adequate support over time to students with mental health difficulties.

'*It is not difficult to deal with a specific situation when it happens, but to follow up adequately over time, that is not easy, and it is time consuming, when it comes to students' struggling with* mental health difficulties,' (Anna, FG4).

They seemed to take for granted that they should support students in such situations, and acknowledged and accepted the therapeutic aspect of their role. However, they struggled to juggle tensions related to time and capacities, as other responsibilities were given higher priority.

Referring to variations between different student groups, the teachers discussed that there sometimes was a lack of coherence between the various aspects of school climate and student wellbeing. One of the teachers, Ludwig (FG3), compared two of his recent 10th grade classes, one of which was a hard-working group, with students competing about getting the best grades. The students in this group performed well academically, but there was a lack of trust among them, and the social and emotional relations among the students were relatively poor. In the other class the students performed at a medium level academically, and they did not put as much effort into school work. However, in this group, the relations between the students were very good in terms of emotional security, and the students really seemed to thrive in class. He concluded:

'*And afterwards one may sit and reflect: 'which of the two groups had the best school climate?' I do not know if I have an obvious answer to that* ' (Ludwig, FG3)

When there were inherent contradictions between the various dimensions of school climate and student wellbeing, the teachers found this particularly challenging to balance the different expectations in their role.

Discussion

The teachers in this study gave high importance to their role in fostering student wellbeing, seeing it as related to students' personal development and growth. However, competing expectations in the school context created some dilemmas in how to foster student wellbeing in an everyday context. The high priority in national policy on academic performance, gave them too little room for an holistic approach to schooling, in which students' academic and

personal development were interwoven. On the contrary, the teachers worried that academic pressure could threaten students' wellbeing, rather than being a part of a process of development towards becoming a whole person. As the teachers perceived themselves as contributing to such pressure, they somehow found themselves trapped in a position where they wanted to support student wellbeing, and yet at times doing the very opposite.

Fostering student wellbeing was clearly a foundation in the everyday philosophy of the teachers in this study, and the teachers implied continuously working on generating a safe and stimulating school climate. They also cared about the long-term impact schooling could have on their students' lives, and showed concern for students' overall development as human beings, as Biesta (2015, 2016), Pring (2010, 2012) and Spratt (2016) have argued. However, the high priority given to academic performance often made this difficult to sustain and illustrates the point argued by Pring: '*What is central to educating young people too often gets marginalised in a system that needs to measure and standardise performance and that values the attainment of qualifications over the transformation of experience*' (Pring, 2010, p. 90). Although the teachers acknowledged the potential in academic learning to support students' wellbeing, they worried that their expectations relating to performance was too much pressure for some students, and thereby in danger of threatening their wellbeing in some way. Overall, they found this a difficult dilemma to resolve. Moreover, beyond any one student, they saw high academic expectations as undermining they capacity to generate a safe and secure school climate. These tensions and dilemmas were perceived as characterising what teaching had become for them; that is to say, it meant that the other important dimensions of education relating to the development of students' identities and cultivating their inner strengths as a person (Biesta, 2015, 2016; Eccles & Roeser, 2011; Pring, 2010, 2012) could, unintentionally, be lost.

Although the teachers in this study pointed out interests in students' perspective as an essential aspect of their work in fostering student wellbeing, they did not seem to link this interest to their presentations of the content in the curriculum, but rather to an interest in finding the right balance of pressure on performance expectations to the various students. They did not discuss the distinction between stimulating achievement (according to measurable standards), and stimulating the students' search for new and meaningful insight that might be integrated in each of the students' life and worldview. Academic learning and student wellbeing somehow appeared as competing expectations, as the teachers saw the

focus on measuring academic performance as a risk for many students' wellbeing. The teachers experienced that for some students performance expectations could (unintentionally) generate a feeling of not being 'good enough' (psychological safety) or not being able to cope (self-efficacy), rather than stimulate their interest and engagement. However, the teachers did not clearly distinguish this kind of negative pressure from the struggle and challenge that is inherent in learning new skills and obtaining deeper insight. This could be related to the current school system's focus on measurable performance, which might overshadows the attention that could have been given to the potential within education itself to generate motivation (and performance) based on interest and meaning, rather than based on instrumental outcome. Pring (2010) described it thus: 'to *focus on measurable productivity and instrumental value of learning has little room for the struggle to understand, the exploration of ideas, trial and error in experiments or in the crafts or the exploration of meaning in life's experiences*' (Pring, 2010, p. 86). This resonates with Eccles and Roeser (2011), Pring (2010, 2012) and Biesta (2016), who call for greater attention to the purpose of education, and to the potential to stimulate students' engagement in the world and nourish the students' experience of meaning through active participation in society. Such a wider perspective on education acknowledges a kind of positive pressure inherent in learning, where students could struggle with the curriculum as they try to integrate what they learn into their own life world.

Even though the teachers in this study worried that the schools' strong emphasis on measuring academic performance could, at times, threaten their students' wellbeing, they felt they had little choice, but to focus on academic learning and progress in their respective subjects. As this was given very high priority by each school's authorities, they struggled to see ways of reducing the total burden of pressure on the students. This might be because they saw the origin and nature of the school pressure as being beyond their control or sphere of impact, and that they did not see themselves in a position to influence organisational changes in the schools' priorities. With limited possibilities to reduce the stress burden the school context puts on the students (let alone the pressure from stress sources outside of school), the only opportunity the teachers felt they had to alleviate their worries, seemed to be to apply compensating strategies, particularly through building good relations with their students and emphasising dialogic pedagogy (Noddings, 2019). Although important, the teachers found this approach to be insufficient, such that this dilemma was a persistent aspect of their everyday lives.

Managing tensions and dilemmas such as these are, moreover, likely to threaten the wellbeing of teachers. Working more or less continually according to high academic expectations when reluctant to do so, added to their feeling of having to navigate these difficult professional dilemmas, especially when unable to give the highest priority to what they thought was most important. Working in these circumstances could lead to feeling quite isolated. Over time, such a work situation is likely to erode teachers' professional identity, self-respect, and wellbeing (Edling & Frelin, 2013; Graham et al., 2011), and might threaten their professional judgement (Biesta, 2015; Dunne, 2005). Living with unsolved – and perhaps to some degree – unspoken dilemmas in their everyday work, is likely to compromise teachers' wellbeing. The degree of teachers' awareness about the dilemmas they experienced, and of their own strategies to deal with them, might be important for their capacity to foster student wellbeing (Biesta et al., 2015; Whitley et al., 2013). If the dilemmas they experienced were not shared, acknowledged, and reflected upon with colleagues and leaders in a timely way – in other words, they remain unresolved – then they are likely to hamper teachers' efforts to foster students' wellbeing.

The dominant discourse on fostering student wellbeing that Spratt (2016) referred too, might further contribute to the teachers' uncertainty about their role. The potentially unique contribution of education in fostering student wellbeing, has tended to be overshadowed by the discourses of other professions, where fostering wellbeing is defined as providing support, and seen as students developing a set of personal skills. In that therapeutic discourse, argues Spratt, wellbeing is viewed primarily as leading to better educational outcomes, instead of seeing the educational process as contributing to wellbeing. The teachers in this study gave quite a bit of attention to social and emotional literacy, as they talked about psychological safety, trust, relations, belonging, self-worth, and dealing with pressure as highly relevant aspects of students' wellbeing. The teachers' rationale behind their engagement in students' wellbeing was very much within the therapeutic discourse, and seemed to be about ensuring that students experienced conditions where schooling was possible. However, this discourse gives little attention to the potential of the educational process to contribute to wellbeing, the process that is at the heart of the teachers' mandate and the purpose of schooling. Whereas the dominant supportive approaches to student wellbeing put attention primarily on the individual student, upholding basic needs so each was receptive to schooling, education as such puts emphasis on something outside the student, namely, 'the world'. By stimulating the student's

engagement with 'the world', through the curriculum, each student, gets the chance to develop and experience degrees of wellbeing by making a meaningful connection with that world (Biesta, 2015, 2016; Eccles & Roeser, 2011; Pring, 2010, 2012).

Implications and conclusion

This paper has highlighted the need for a critical discussion about the teacher's role in fostering student wellbeing (Spratt, 2017; Thomas et al., 2016). The teachers in this study considered the concern for fostering student wellbeing as being a foundation to their everyday philosophies, and yet, they found themselves somehow trapped in a school system that forced them to focus on their students' academic achievements, often at the expense of their concerns for students' overall wellbeing in a long-term perspective. The current school context's instrumental centre of gravity seemed to generate uncertainties about their role in fostering student wellbeing, and even though they viewed academic learning and wellbeing as interwoven, the teachers found it difficult to practice this in their everyday life. Experiencing these kind of conflicting values and dilemmas on an everyday basis, is likely to erode teachers' professional identity, autonomy, and self-respect.

Therefore, the findings of this study call for attention to teachers' uncertainty about their role in fostering student wellbeing, and how they can strengthen their professional judgement in this domain of their work. It seems important to ensure that teachers have opportunities to reflect with their colleagues and school leaders on the professional dilemmas they experience, in order to increase their awareness about what is at stake and how they could deal with these tensions. As it is unlikely that the emphasis on academic performance and measurable school results will diminish in the near future, more opportunities for reflection about the dilemmas and tensions that are embedded in their practices could help them better manage these demands with a great embrace of the wider notion of education.

These aspects could be included in the content and structure of continuing professional development (CPD) for teachers. CPD programmes have the potential to introduce alternative perspectives regarding the teacher's mandate and practices, combined with their reflections about their everyday experiences. Such programmes could explore the potential tensions in wanting to focus on the overall purpose of schooling, rather than simply instrumental outcomes in particular domains. In the context of a CPD programme, teachers typically have

the chance to reflect with colleagues about their role, in a setting where there is room to acknowledge and discuss dilemmas and tensions they experience. Moreover, CPD programmes, might also shed light on how wellbeing and academic learning are interwoven, and how everyday school life could better nourish the students' potential to flourish and lead a meaningful life as active participants in society. Likewise, initial teacher education, too, could include the above mentioned aspects, and better prepare the future teachers to make professional judgements based on an expanded notion of education. Over time this might give rise to less need to implement specific interventions to improve, for example, social and emotional skills.

Limitations and strengths

The qualitative nature of the study gave insight into the everyday lives of teachers. It also provided the opportunity to theoretically generalise from the sample, but some limitations should be noted. First, even though the sample was varied it did not have teachers from urban areas where schools tend to be larger and more mixed in terms of pupil catchment area. This might mean that with a different sample of teachers, the discussions could have developed in other directions. But what should be noted is that the national policy context which emphasises academic achievement will affect all schools and therefore teachers. Second, using semi-structured interviews with open discussions may be at the expense of the study's dependability, as the risk is a lack of consistency between the focus groups regarding what the researcher asked the participants to elaborate on. On the other hand, the strength of focus group discussions, is the ability for the participants to follow their own associations, and elaborate on what they found important, not being restrained by a more rigid interview guide. Third, social desirability biases, given the context of the study, might have been a risk. The participants were colleagues, the focus groups were organised by the school leaders, and conducted at their workplace. Therefore, the participants might not have wanted to share their thoughts openly with colleagues. This and other workplace issues could have led to self-censure or other constraints being placed on the participants. On the other hand, the familiar context of the focus groups is also regarded as a strength, as it might have contributed to more open and sincere discussions. Forth, the participants had met the main researcher prior to the interviews, in a training session for the entire school staff organised by the collaborative network on school developmental work. This could have increased the risk of confirmation bias, e.g. that the interviewees adapted their responses to what they thought the interviewer expected from them. However, the interviewees being somehow familiar with the interviewer,

contributed to creating a relaxed atmosphere in the focus group setting, and could have made it easier for the participants to share their thoughts.

Further research could explore how teachers reflect upon and respond to working conditions that are characterised by difficult dilemmas, contradictions, and conflicting values, related to fostering student wellbeing. Further exploration is needed to find out more about possible variations in the teachers' perceptions of these areas, e.g. depending on the length of their service and age group of their students. Future investigation could look in more depth at teachers' experience and reflections', e.g. at the various strategies they choose, the different judgements behind their practises, and finally, at the consequences their choices might have on their ability to foster student wellbeing.

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