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Emergent Themes on Teachers' Professional Well-Being: A Qualitative Descriptive Study

Marco Ferreira^{1,2,*} 

¹Higher Institute of Education and Science, ISEC Lisboa, Lisbon, Portugal

²UIDEF, Institute of Education, University of Lisbon, Lisbon, Portugal

*Corresponding Author: Marco Ferreira. Email: marco.ferreira@iseclisboa.pt

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ABSTRACT: Objectives: Teachers' well-being significantly impacts schools, educators, and students. Many negative effects of low well-being are widely recognised, with stress and burnout linked to attrition and teacher shortages globally. In Portugal, a country with a severe lack of teachers, attention to teacher well-being is crucial for the long-term sustainability of the profession. This study aims to understand teachers' professional well-being. Specifically, it seeks to (1) clarify well-being, the sense of belonging, and autonomy within the school community and (2) explore how teachers perceive the values and behaviours of schools that prioritise well-being. **Methods:** A descriptive qualitative study was conducted with 22 teachers who had taught for at least 15 years in Portuguese public middle and secondary schools. Individual in-depth interviews via Zoom were carried out using a semi-structured interview protocol, and the data were analysed using qualitative thematic analysis. **Results:** The analysis identified three interrelated dimensions of teachers' professional well-being: learning and development, underscoring the significance of ongoing professional growth and reflective engagement; inclusivity, reflecting experiences of belonging, equity, and supportive collegial relationships; and psychological safety, denoting trust, open communication, and a lack of fear of judgment. **Conclusions:** The findings conclude that teachers' professional well-being rests on the dynamic integration of learning and development, inclusivity, and psychological safety. These dimensions together define the essential conditions under which teachers experience growth, the sense of belonging, and emotional balance within their professional contexts.

KEYWORDS: Well-being; healthy relationships; inclusivity; sense of belonging; psychological safety

1 Introduction

1.1 Well-Being

Well-being has historically been viewed as a combination of feeling good and adapting well. The concept evolved to reflect contemporary societal demands, incorporating new perspectives to highlight personal potential and growth, mastery over one's life, a sense of purpose, and the importance of positive relationships [1]. In this context, well-being should enable individuals and communities to grow and thrive. It is linked to achievements in the personal, professional, and social spheres, with those who experience higher levels of well-being showing increased workplace productivity and a greater capacity for learning and personal advancement [2].

The World Health Organisation defined positive mental health as a state of well-being whereby individuals recognise and utilise their abilities [3]. This state equips them to manage daily stressors, work

effectively, and engage positively with members of their communities. Thus, well-being is not conceptualised as the absence of mental health issues but as the perception of a flourishing and satisfying life.

Well-being is a multi-dimensional and intricate concept that has posed several challenges to researchers striving to establish a widely accepted definition [4]. The ongoing debate surrounding the definition of well-being remains largely unresolved, leading to various interpretations. A relevant study identified key dimensions that enhance our understanding of well-being, pinpointing autonomy, mastery of the environment, quality relationships, purpose, potential realisation, and self-acceptance [5]. Well-being comprises three interrelated elements: life satisfaction, positive affect, and negative affect [6].

More recently, the definition of well-being reflects a consensus emanated from the work of different researchers. The contemporary understanding comprises a cognitive aspect, involving personal evaluative judgments typically regarding life satisfaction, encompassing specific or more general aspects, and an affective/emotional dimension, which can be either positive or negative and can manifest itself in indicators of happiness, physiological signs or behavioural and expressive cues [7,8].

1.2 Teachers' Professional Well-Being

In recent years, there has been a notable increase in attention to teachers' professional well-being, especially as teachers face growing demands. Teacher well-being is closely tied to both effectiveness in teaching and student success. Studies indicate a strong link between teacher well-being and teaching effectiveness, with happier teachers showcasing more innovative and effective teaching practices, leading to better student outcomes [9,10]. Furthermore, teachers enjoying higher levels of well-being tend to remain in the teaching profession longer, contributing to greater educational stability [11,12]. Teachers need to work in a psychologically healthy environment to remain committed to their job and overcome the difficulties it poses [13].

Teacher well-being is a complex concept involving various dimensions [14]. Teachers' professional identity is a crucial factor in their well-being [15]. The study found that a robust sense of professional identity among math teachers positively affects their well-being, implying that those who strongly identify with their roles are more likely to enjoy job satisfaction and experience less stress [15].

Institutional elements play a significant role in teacher well-being [16]. For instance, a case study shows how a positive school culture, marked by supportive policies and opportunities for professional growth, can positively impact teacher well-being [17]. A multilevel analysis using TALIS data indicates that factors like workload, support from administration, and collegial relationships are vital in shaping teachers' professional well-being [12]. The importance of a supportive school culture in promoting teacher well-being emphasised that relationships with colleagues, students, and administrators as significant predictors of teachers' mental health and overall well-being [18]. Social connections and school conditions play crucial roles in determining teachers' well-being [19].

A recent study demonstrates that supportive actions from school leaders correlate positively with teachers' job satisfaction and subjective well-being, reinforcing the idea that a nurturing atmosphere is vital for teacher morale [20]. Autonomy also seems to boost teachers' morale, because it significantly impacts their well-being [21]. Research indicates that teachers who feel autonomous enjoy higher job satisfaction and commitment [14]. Perceived autonomy is a significant predictor of teacher engagement and satisfaction, indicating that when teachers believe they have control over their academic tasks, they are generally more content with their careers [22]. Granting teachers autonomy enhances their decision-making abilities, positively influencing the educational environment [23]. Similarly, increased autonomy among teachers is

associated with fewer disciplinary issues and lower turnover rates, highlighting the connection between autonomy and teacher retention [24].

A sense of belonging to the school community significantly affects teachers' well-being [25], which is improved through collaborative practices and shared decision-making [26]. These practices support individual teachers and foster a collective purpose, essential for maintaining morale and alleviating feelings of isolation [27].

Several studies have illustrated that the interaction between autonomy and the sense of belonging is critical for cultivating a positive school climate [21,22,26]. Teachers who feel a sense of autonomy are more inclined to engage in collaborations that enhance their sense of belonging, thus creating a positive school climate for both educators and students [28]. This connection between autonomy and belonging is crucial for nurturing a healthy school culture where teachers can thrive [29]. Implementing restorative practices can enhance teacher-student relationships, contributing to a positive school environment that supports well-being [30].

Studies show that school leadership is a determinant in sustaining well-being initiatives [31]. This aligns with previous research in other areas that connects leadership behaviour to employees' well-being, emphasising leaders' essential role in ensuring their team's health [32,33]. Similarly, teachers' beliefs and actions are critical in fostering an environment prioritising sustainable well-being [34]. Moreover, teachers' multicultural beliefs and experiences influence their support for classroom practices that encourage tolerance, inclusivity, and acceptance of diversity [23,34].

1.3 Research Gap

In summary, the literature on teacher professional well-being highlights its complex nature, emphasising the interplay of individual, institutional, and systemic factors. This qualitative study goes beyond a contextual account of Portuguese teachers. Its framework helps reconcile competing perspectives in the literature by situating purpose, resilience, adaptability, and relationships as cross-cutting mechanisms that link school culture and leadership to sustainable professional well-being.

The literature increasingly recognises links between teacher well-being, the sense of belonging, autonomy, and leadership, but several issues remain unresolved. First, conceptualisations of teacher well-being remain fragmented, often oscillating between deficit (stress/burnout) and positive psychology models, with limited integration of the concepts of belonging, autonomy, and leadership into a single coherent framework. Second, most studies examine these constructs in isolation (e.g., leadership practices, autonomy or inclusion), which obscures how everyday school cultures and relationships jointly shape teachers' sense of professional well-being. Third, while leadership is recognised as important for teacher retention, evidence is still lacking about how specific leadership practices cultivate psychological safety, shared values, and real autonomy (rather than merely devolved responsibility), especially in high-demanding school contexts.

Teachers' professional well-being plays a pivotal role in supporting schools, educators, and students alike. This study investigates teachers' professional well-being by clarifying the dimensions of well-being, the sense of belonging, and autonomy within school communities, and examining teachers' perceptions of the values and behaviours that characterise schools prioritising enduring well-being.

2 Methods

2.1 Design and Participants

The study employed a qualitative descriptive design. Participants were teachers with a minimum of 15 years of experience in middle and secondary education (public schools). These teachers were selected because they are situated in a mature career stage in which professional identity, coping strategies, and trajectories of well-being and ill-being are more fully consolidated, allowing for rich, reflective accounts of occupational well-being. Experienced teachers have accumulated a wide range of classroom, school, and reform experiences that support the collection of thick descriptions and nuanced meaning-making in qualitative interviews [35].

This study was conducted in full accordance with established ethical standards for research involving human participants. Participation was entirely voluntary, and informed consent was obtained from all teachers before data collection. Participants were assured of the confidentiality and anonymity of their responses, and all data were securely stored and used solely for the purposes of this research. Care was taken to ensure that the study posed no risk of harm, and ethical principles such as respect, integrity, and transparency guided all stages of the research process.

Participants were recruited from schools located in the Lisbon metropolitan area, which concentrates a high number of educational institutions, a diverse student population, and a wide range of socio-economic contexts. This regional focus allowed access to teachers working in complex, heterogeneous environments where issues of professional well-being are often amplified by elevated workload, administrative demands, and heightened expectations from families and the broader community.

Purposive sampling was used to recruit participants. Demographic information, including years of teaching, scientific teaching area, gender, and age, was collected before each interview to provide a better context for the data (Table 1).

Table 1: Demographic characteristics of the participants.

No.	Years of Teaching	Scientific Teaching Area	Gender	Age
T1	17	Mathematics	Female	42
T2	18	Portuguese language	Female	45
T3	16	Physical education	Male	40
T4	17	Mathematics	Female	46
T5	15	Physics	Female	39
T6	21	History	Male	47
T7	19	Mathematics	Female	44
T8	25	Portuguese language	Female	51
T9	27	Portuguese language	Female	52
T10	17	Geography	Female	42
T11	18	Geography	Male	44
T12	23	Philosophy	Female	48
T13	22	Mathematics	Female	46
T14	19	History	Female	45
T15	18	Philosophy	Male	45
T16	19	Portuguese language	Female	44
T17	31	Mathematics	Female	57
T18	22	Physical education	Female	49
T19	19	Psychology	Male	45
T20	28	Portuguese language	Female	57
T21	23	English language	Female	47
T22	21	Economy	Female	46

2.2 Research Tool

A semi-structured interview was designed and used for the study. An initial draft of the protocol interview was reviewed by two experts in qualitative research and teacher well-being, who provided feedback on the clarity, relevance, and sequencing of the questions. Subsequently, the guide was piloted with three teachers who met the inclusion criteria but were not part of the final sample, which enabled us to assess the comprehensibility and flow of the interview. Based on this process, several questions were reworded for greater clarity, redundant probes were removed, and the order of topics was adjusted to move from more descriptive questions to more specific and precise issues. These steps contributed to improving the relevance and clarity of the interview guide and ensured an adequate alignment between the questions and the study's objectives.

The interviews occurred via Zoom from April to June 2025. The semi-structured interviews encompassed the following questions:

- (1) How do you perceive well-being at your school?
- (2) How do you describe belongingness and connectedness in your school community?
- (3) How do your school leaders perceive teachers' autonomy and participation in school decisions?
- (4) What professional skills and attitudes have you learned from the colleagues with whom you worked?
- (5) In a scenario-thinking context, what values and actions can you predict for a school that prioritises sustainable well-being for teachers?

The author of the article conducted the interviews, which were audio recorded with participants' consent. Each interview lasted between 30 and 45 min. To ensure anonymity and facilitate data analysis, the teachers were assigned codes from T1 to T22.

2.3 Data Procedures and Analysis

A six-step process for inductive thematic analysis was conducted [36]. Audio recordings were stored on a separate password-protected computer, and the data were transcribed verbatim and analysed by reading and rereading the printed text to gain familiarity with the data. Subsequently, relevant phrases or sentences were highlighted, and brief codes were assigned. The highlighted data were then collected into groups to provide a condensed overview of the participants' narratives. Following coding, themes were generated by identifying patterns among the codes.

To enhance trustworthiness, the researcher maintained a reflexive journal to document assumptions, emotional responses, and emerging interpretations. Peer debriefing was also employed. An ongoing analysis and emerging interpretations with one informed peer who was not directly involved in the study strengthened the coherence and robustness of the final thematic structure. Thereafter, emergent themes were defined. English quotations in the manuscript were translated from Portuguese and reviewed by a bilingual researcher who verified the excerpts.

3 Results

Three main themes, each with three subthemes, emerged from the data, as illustrated in Table 2. The three themes include factors that promote and/or impact school well-being, although each of them presents different challenges for schools.

Table 2: Themes, subthemes, and meaning units.

Main Themes	Sub-Themes	Examples of Meaning Units
1. Learning and development	1a. inner satisfaction and purpose	personal motivation, calmness, and pride; setting clear goals; contributing with a sense of meaning and purpose.
	1b. teacher effectiveness	being effective in teaching, high-quality teaching on student learning, nurturing effective learners, and personal development.
	1c. personal growth and resilience	learning from others; the need to be mentally and physically strong; turning challenges into opportunities for learning.
2. Inclusivity	2a. acceptance and recognition	accept individuals' feelings and experiences without judgment; gratitude; recognition provides a sense of accomplishment.
	2b. school social practices	active and meaningful engagement in academic and social activities; schools, families, and communities as interconnected entities.
	2c. adaptability and innovation	to recover quickly from difficulties and adapt to change; innovation climate; teacher resistance to digital advancements.
3. Psychological safety	3a. healthy relationships	trust and mutual respect among colleagues; schools where students feel safe, supported, and able to engage.
	3b. leadership	shared governance practices; authentic leadership as a mechanism for workplace safety and well-being; encouraging and welcoming the ideas of others.
	3c. autonomy	independent decisions that align with personal values and goals; personal development and professional fulfilment; a source of self-empowerment.

3.1 Theme 1—Learning and Development

This theme describes factors in teachers' professional learning and development that promote and impact their well-being. Most participants were enthusiastic about the opportunity to talk about their teaching experiences.

Sub-theme 1a—inner satisfaction and purpose—most participants reported that, despite all the difficulties in the teaching profession, they still take satisfaction and have pride in their role.

“... I know a lot of colleagues who are unhappy at school, but they don't think of giving up on their careers. Sometimes, they talk about it, but at the end, they start thinking about the pleasure inside the classroom.” (T1)

“... A teacher's job is to nurture, teach, and raise children to become useful to society, and I assume that since my first day in the profession.” (T14)

Sub-theme 1b—teacher effectiveness—even without a specific question in our interview protocol about teaching, teachers have shown in their statements their willingness to address the importance of being effective in teaching.

“... At the end of the day, preparation and organisation of classes and the way you manage your daily classes have a huge impact on your day and have a substantial effect on your disposition.” (T4)

“... teachers can only feel good if they are motivated for what they do and if they maintain adequate relationships with students. Otherwise, teachers cannot be happy at school.” (T11)

Sub-theme 1c—personal growth and resilience—most participants described the will to develop new personal competencies as a factor in protecting themselves from poor well-being, stating that having a good level of resilience is crucial for dealing with their daily challenges.

“... I discovered that you could accomplish many things as a teacher. You can do things on your own. To do it right, you must learn from others. How they deal with challenges and how they resolve disagreements and adverse feelings.” (T5)

“... Being a teacher involves being mentally and physically strong. Our profession has an enormous “wear and tear”. We deal with students, parents, and others with different personalities and characters, and we must systematically adjust to different ways of speaking and being. And that destroys many of us!” (T18)

3.2 Theme 2—Inclusivity

This theme highlights the teachers’ well-being as essential for establishing schools that provide equal access to resources and opportunities for all.

Sub-theme 2a—acceptance and recognition—participants identified acceptance and recognition as important factors for improving well-being.

“... To accept ourselves is to accept the fact that what we think, feel, and do, but we do need others’ approval to have a kind of sense of connectedness.” (T12)

“I believe that our work’s recognition is a means to demonstrate appreciation, helps us feel acknowledged, and motivates us to continue progressing in the right direction. There is a deficiency of gratitude, and we often feel undervalued and invisible.” (T20)

Sub-theme 2b—school social practices—participants described some indicators of well-being related to school resources and relationships with the community, including several aspects of students’ lives in school.

“... The education system caters to students with diverse abilities, interests, and experiences. The community can play a key role in building on students’ strengths and addressing their needs. As a teacher, including the community in my classes would benefit all involved.” (T19)

“... Helping students develop the skills and competencies they need to enter the workforce is one of the core functions of the education system. Sometimes, I feel frustrated with the gap between the students’ needs and the lack of teaching resources that the school must fill that gap.” (T22)

Sub-theme 2c—adaptability and innovation—participants also illustrate well-being as the possibility to innovate and transform the students’ educational experience.

“... Schools need to improve the effectiveness of decision-making and shared governance practices to ensure an inclusive education, and, in this way, greater adaptability to changes is necessary.” (T9)

“... Teachers with higher capability to innovate and to be socially adaptable are more confident in their abilities to take specific actions and achieve goals. As the world is consistently driven by new information technology, teachers must receive specialised training for this new challenge. If not, this is a new element of disturbance and uncertainty.” (T17)

3.3 Theme 3—*Psychological Safety*

Participants refer to the feeling of being able to speak up, take risks, and make mistakes without fear of negative consequences. They also emphasise the relevance to working in a thriving workplace, fostering pleasant relations, autonomy, and open communication within the school.

Sub-theme 3a—healthy relationships—participants emphasise that developing and maintaining mentally healthy, equitable, and caring environments within the school is crucial for their well-being. Their testimonials include words such as respect, honesty, and trust.

“... Honesty is fundamental to building a healthy environment in the workplace. Being honest with yourself and your colleagues is crucial, especially when mistakes occur. Transparency is equally important as it establishes trust and credibility among colleagues.” (T8)

“... It’s important to be respectful and professional with colleagues and keep the lines of communication open. Sometimes, there appear to be confrontations and negative feelings. When it occurs, my focus is on finding solutions to any issues that may arise to avoid compromising school climate.” (T14)

Sub-theme 3b—leadership—participants consistently link leadership to well-being. Their testimonials mention factors such as concern and support for team members, understanding individual needs, and the importance of showing appreciation and recognising teachers’ efforts.

“... Leadership has a relevant role in schools with a high impact on teachers’ well-being. To me, leadership is about being respectful, approachable, accessible and transparent, and encouraging and welcoming the ideas of others.” (T10)

“... To a good school climate and well-being between teachers makes all the difference in having a good leader. A good leader brings people together, emphasising collaboration and teamwork and showing appreciation for teachers’ hard work. Their actions inspire others.” (T19)

Sub-theme 3c—autonomy—participants’ testimonials emphasise a relationship between teachers’ autonomy, engagement, job satisfaction and well-being.

“... So far, I have worked in 5 different schools, and I found that in schools where there was more teacher autonomy, I saw higher levels of teaching motivation and work engagement with a willingness to achieve school goals.” (T6)

“... As teachers perceived more autonomy support from schools, they attached greater importance to their professional development... when teachers view the positive outcomes of autonomous teaching, such as progress of students, or when they receive encouraging feedback from leaders or colleagues, their perception of accomplishment improves.” (T16)

When reading the testimonials of each teacher, we must consider the characteristics of each educational community. Each school is a unique and singular academic world, and the results presented and the following discussion cannot be dissociated from this evidence.

4 Discussion

The three themes and nine subthemes will be discussed as a dynamic system in which learning and development, inclusivity, and psychological safety mutually reinforce one another in shaping teachers’ professional well-being.

A school culture that nurtures teachers' sense of belonging and well-being is an essential building block for job satisfaction [26]. Research indicates that a strong sense of belonging contributes to high employee motivation, engagement, productivity, retention, and health [25,37]. T3 states, "I have 16 years of teaching experience. I've been at this school for the last five years, and the good relationships between colleagues make all the difference at the end of the day. We are motivated because we feel supported and engaged in a teaching and learning community." The sense of belonging fosters employees' sense of well-being [38]. The results suggest that teachers' job-related well-being, especially positive emotions in the workplace, plays an important role in their job satisfaction and subsequent retention [13,39]. There is accumulating scientific evidence indicating that the emotional dimension is worth considering when discussing teaching effectiveness [40], teacher well-being [41], and job satisfaction [39].

T7 says, "I have no doubts that teachers' emotional well-being ultimately contributes to more effective teacher performance." From a social-ecological perspective of resilience, teachers may encounter individual and contextual challenges that threaten their well-being. Well-documented examples of personal challenges include low self-efficacy [42] or poor health [43]. Contextual challenges can involve interpersonal difficulties, such as strained relationships with students, parents, or colleagues [44]. At a broader contextual level, policy changes [45], assessment and reporting requirements [46], or societal expectations [47] may present themselves as factors that threaten teachers' well-being. T18 notes, "I see my colleagues exhibiting lower levels of resilience compared to some years ago. They tend to shy away from new challenges and focus solely on the obligatory daily tasks. Minimal difficulties are perceived as insurmountable mountains. We are expected to multitask, and this impacts our professional satisfaction."

Despite the teachers' role, they often face a lack of appreciation, inadequate remuneration, and a general undervaluation of their profession [48]. Workplace recognition and ongoing professional development positively correlate with teacher well-being [49]. T14 states, "Governments, educational institutions, and society do not value teachers' professionalism. There is an urgent need for a multifaceted strategy involving all stakeholders to rectify this lack of appreciation. If no changes occur, the teacher shortage will exacerbate." Experiences of change, novelty, and uncertainty are commonplace for all individuals. Teaching needs continued adjustments in teachers' thoughts, actions, and emotions to respond effectively to various school situations. When teachers display greater adaptability, they are better equipped to address the evolving nature of teaching and navigate a complex work environment [50]. T11 states, "Effective instruction requires the adaptation of instructional content and lesson pacing to meet students' varied learning needs and to react to the shifting classroom environment. This significantly impacts the social and emotional dimensions of teaching."

Working in schools requires that teacher effectively respond to and manage any evolving demands that arise throughout the school (e.g., changes in staffing, new procedures or policies) [51,52]. In educational research, supportive initiatives within schools have also been recognised as a vital job resource that positively influences teacher innovation [53]. A supportive interpersonal environment is essential for fostering innovation, as positive support, feedback, and collaboration encourage an open and cooperative professional relationship that builds trust and enhances job satisfaction [16,54]. T20 refers to "There are schools that do not operate in this digital age. Desktops are outdated; IT support has diminished. This significantly affects our classes because students possess the most current gadgets, and what we can offer is outdated digital resources." Teacher well-being is anchored in a positive attitude towards teaching, which arises from supportive relationships with colleagues and students, the belief in one's ability to teach effectively [27], and the perception that one's personal and professional needs and expectations are fulfilled [55]. T17 states, "Our professional well-being is critical for student learning. Concomitantly, it

profoundly impacts the overall well-being of the school community.” Schools must be environments that promote feelings of belonging, respect, value, and trust for teachers and students [28,56]. Positive school environments nurture the development of a school community where members, including teachers, feel connected [57]. T13 observes, “Cultivating supportive and caring relationships with colleagues and students is crucial to a safe learning atmosphere.”

Teacher well-being and leadership are pivotal for effective education. A study found a reciprocal relationship between teacher leadership and well-being in educational contexts [31]. T9 states, “School leaders can promote a positive learning environment, contribute to the continuous improvement of the school as a whole, and often act as catalysts for innovation and professional development among teachers.” The influence of school leaders extends beyond the classroom, rendering them invaluable assets in building thriving educational communities [58] while also advocating for and shaping educational policies and practices [59].

A pertinent study indicates strong correlations between positive teacher-student relationships, perceived autonomy, and teaching motivation [13]. Teacher autonomy consolidates educators’ sense of independence and decision-making authority within their professional roles [22]. Research has confirmed its significant influence on job satisfaction, commitment, and overall well-being, empowering teachers and fostering a supportive teaching environment [28]. T18 states, “Autonomy is a relevant concept in teachers’ professionalism. It involves decision-making about discipline strategies, lesson pacing, and creating a conducive learning atmosphere. This grants teachers the freedom to implement strategies aligned with their professional judgment and contributes significantly to job satisfaction and well-being.” There is a need to nurture support for autonomy and self-confidence to alleviate emotional exhaustion and enhance teachers’ well-being within educational settings [29,60]. Recent literature emphasises numerous intersections between teachers’ professional well-being and the themes and subthemes that emerged in this study [14,21,61,62].

Learning and development capture the inner, agentic side of well-being (purpose, effectiveness, growth), while inclusivity and psychological safety describe the relational and organisational conditions that enable or constrain this inner work. In line with multidimensional models of psychological well-being (e.g., dimensions of purpose in life, personal growth, autonomy, and positive relations [5], teachers’ sense of meaning, competence, and resilience emerges from continuous interaction with their social and institutional environments rather than from individual traits alone [63].

Within Learning and development (theme 1), inner satisfaction and purpose (1a), teacher effectiveness (1b) and personal growth and resilience (1c) form a coherent motivational cluster. Teachers who experience their work as meaningful and aligned with personal values tend to report higher job satisfaction, stronger professional identity and greater resilience when facing adversity [63]. Feelings of effectiveness, seeing that one’s teaching makes a difference for students, are closely tied to this sense of purpose and have been shown to enhance both well-being and commitment, creating a positive feedback loop between perceived impact and motivation [64]. Over time, successfully navigating challenges under supportive conditions contributes to personal growth and resilience, which in turn helps teachers sustain their sense of purpose and effectiveness in demanding contexts [65].

Inclusivity (theme 2) and psychological safety (theme 3) describe the social and organisational conditions that make such learning and development possible. Experiences of acceptance and recognition (2a) and inclusive school social practices (2b) provide teachers with a sense of belonging and fairness, which supports positive relationships and organisational trust, both key ingredients of well-being and resilience [66]. In inclusive environments, adaptability and innovation (2c) are not merely technical skills

but are socially accepted forms of agency: teachers feel safe to try new approaches, share dilemmas, and learn from mistakes, which reinforces their sense of effectiveness and personal growth [64]. These dynamics depend strongly on psychological safety, where healthy relationships (3a), supportive leadership (3b), and experienced autonomy (3c) work together to create a climate in which teachers can express concerns, experiment, and seek help without fear of blame or stigma [13].

Psychological safety thus functions as a key mechanism linking inclusivity to learning and development. Research shows that supportive leadership enhances teacher well-being largely through increasing professional autonomy and organisational trust, which are central components of psychological safety [31,32]. When leaders foster open communication, recognise teachers' contributions and protect time and space for collegial collaboration, they strengthen healthy relationships and autonomy, enabling teachers to pursue personally meaningful goals, refine their practice and develop resilience in the face of continual change [58]. In such contexts, the three overarching themes form a virtuous cycle: inclusive and psychologically safe school cultures nurture teachers' sense of purpose, effectiveness and growth, while resilient and agentic teachers actively contribute to sustaining inclusive, trusting and innovative professional communities.

The sampling decisions inevitably limit the scope of the conclusions. The findings should be seen as reflecting the experiences of experienced teachers working in large schools in the Lisbon area and cannot be directly generalised to smaller schools or institutions in other Portuguese regions or international contexts. Instead of claiming statistical representativeness, the study provides an analytically generalisable, contextually grounded understanding of professional well-being in urban, large-school settings, which may still apply to similar contexts where organisational and regional features are comparable.

5 Conclusions

Teachers' well-being encompasses the capacity to function effectively over time in teaching and learning environments. This study, with an exploratory and qualitative design, drew on narratives of how participants interpreted concepts such as well-being, the sense of belonging, and autonomy within the school community. It also explored how they perceived the values and behaviours of schools that prioritise sustainable well-being, offering a genuine reflection from the teachers' perspective. The findings highlight the complex nature of teachers' professional well-being. Well-being is essential for teachers to thrive, remain in the profession, and maintain good physical and mental health. As such, policymakers and school leaders must cultivate the values and behaviours that ensure their well-being. Thus, it is important to understand what enables teachers to flourish in their professional roles and identify challenges that could hinder their professional well-being. The themes arising from the study identify key challenges regarding teachers' professional well-being, emphasising the necessity of a collaborative community, acceptance and recognition, autonomy and innovation, and healthy relationships with committed leadership. A central task for all educational agents is to understand what influences teachers' well-being throughout their careers, how to nurture and develop it, and how to sustain it within schools. Teachers' well-being must be recognised as a multi-faceted and dynamic concept, and its significance in sustaining teachers' commitment and effectiveness has important implications for the future of education.

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