How the wellbeing of Australian teachers is supported, defined and measured: A scoping review

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Australian schools face persistent teacher shortages driven by uneven workforce distribution, an ageing workforce and unsustainable workloads, making teacher wellbeing central to workforce sustainability. This scoping review maps Australian research on how teacher wellbeing is defined, supported and measured, and identifies perceived enablers and barriers to inform policy, teacher education and professional learning. Guided by Arksey and O'Malley's scoping review framework, we searched major education databases for empirical studies on Australian primary and secondary teachers published between 2015 and 2025, identifying 35 peer reviewed articles. Inductive thematic analysis, informed by Job Demands–Resources Theory, PERMA and Social Ecological Models, identified recurrent patterns and gaps. Leadership, workload, professional learning and school culture emerged as central influences that can function as job-demands that undermine wellbeing or job-resources that sustain it. The review highlights the need for approaches that align policy, teacher education, leadership and professional learning with coherent social-ecological understandings of teacher wellbeing.

Introduction

Australian schools face mounting teacher shortages driven by rising enrolments, uneven workforce distribution, an ageing workforce and unsustainable workloads, making teacher retention a critical concern (Department of Education, 2022b). By 2027, teacher demand is projected to exceed supply, with many mid and late-career teachers intending to leave (Department of Education, 2022b).

Although this review focuses on Australian schools, concerns about teacher wellbeing, workload and workforce sustainability are widely reported across education systems internationally, with many countries documenting high stress, burnout and attrition among teachers (Hascher & Waber, 2021; Kidger et al., 2016). International reviews highlight similar constellations of pressures, accountability demands, intensifying workloads and policy reform cycles (Ozturk et al., 2024), suggesting that insights from the Australian context may speak to broader global challenges in supporting and retaining teachers.

Government strategies to improve teacher wellbeing often focus on remedial supports such as employee assistance rather than structural drivers like workload, staffing and policy demands (Acton & Glasgow, 2015; Department of Education and Training, 2019). These pressures are most acute in 'hard-to-staff' outer metropolitan, regional, rural and remote schools, where working conditions and teacher wellbeing are closely linked to turnover intentions, especially among early-career teachers (Arnold & Rahimi, 2025; Kingsford-Smith et al., 2023).

Teacher wellbeing is conceptualised in diverse ways, with studies emphasising subjective experiences and contextual conditions (McCallum et al., 2017; Taylor et al., 2024). Empirical research identifies enablers such as leadership, collegial relationships and relevant professional learning (Corbett et al., 2021; Lummis et al., 2022). Research also identifies barriers such as workload intensification, staffing shortages and accountability demands, but evidence remains fragmented across sectors, contexts and theoretical frameworks (Heffernan et al., 2022; Kingsford-Smith et al., 2023). Approaches to measuring teacher wellbeing range from burnout indices to broader flourishing constructs, with tools varying in theoretical alignment, making cross-study comparison difficult (Dixon, 2023; Taylor et al., 2024).

Existing Australian research has examined leadership support, workload pressures, professional learning quality and school culture as key influences on teacher wellbeing (Corbett et al., 2021; Morris et al., 2020). While international reviews have broadly synthesised teacher wellbeing literature, no systematic mapping has focused on Australia, where workforce conditions such as geographic isolation, ongoing policy reforms, and accountability pressures shape teacher experiences (Hascher & Waber, 2021; Heffernan et al., 2022; Kidger et al., 2016).

This review therefore maps how Australian teacher wellbeing is defined, supported and measured in studies published between 2015 and 2025 (Arksey & O'Malley, 2005; Peters et al., 2020) and identifies perceived enablers and barriers to inform future research and interventions for teacher recruitment and retention in Australia and, by extension, in other systems grappling with similar workforce pressures, particularly in hard-to-staff settings (Kingsford-Smith et al., 2023).

Teacher wellbeing theoretical frameworks

Teacher wellbeing is multidimensional, encompassing objective conditions (economic, political, health) and subjective experiences of happiness, purpose, relationships, competence and accomplishment (McCallum et al., 2017; Taylor et al., 2024). This review uses three complementary frameworks: PERMA, Job Demands-Resources Theory (JDRT) and Social-Ecological Modelling (SEM), to capture how teacher wellbeing is conceptualised at individual, organisational and institutional levels and to highlight different policy levers, from individual support to structural and institutional change (Bronfenbrenner, 1977; Demerouti et al., 2001; Seligman, 2011).

PERMA conceptualises wellbeing as thriving across positive emotion, engagement, relationships, meaning and accomplishment, focusing attention on individual experiences and skills (Seligman, 2011). PERMA-based interventions and measures have been used in teacher wellbeing research to examine how positive psychology strategies shape teachers' emotions, classroom practice and student outcomes (Turner & Thielking, 2019a; Turner & Thielking, 2019b). JDRT complements this by explaining how job-demands (such as workload and emotional labour) and job-resources (such as leadership, autonomy and collegial support) interact to shape teacher wellbeing, motivation and retention, as demonstrated in recent Australian studies linking specific demands and resources to

vitality and turnover intentions (Collie, 2022; Demerouti et al., 2001). SEM extends both frameworks by locating teacher wellbeing within nested systems spanning classrooms, schools, communities and policy environments, as in qualitative work that uses social-ecological models to interpret teachers' experiences and identify multilevel barriers and enablers (Corbett et al., 2025; Hine et al., 2022). Table 1 presents these frameworks comparatively and shows how they structured this review's analytical emphasis on multilevel responses to teacher wellbeing.

Table 1: Comparison of teacher wellbeing frameworks used in this scoping review

Framework	Unit of analysis	Conceptual focus	Policy implications
PERMA (Seligman, 2011)	Individual	Thriving across five dimensions: Positive emotion, Engagement, Relationships, Meaning, and Accomplishment.	Frames wellbeing as a psychological state; policy tends to emphasise resilience, mindfulness and self-care over structural change.
Job demands-resources theory (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017; Demerouti et al., 2001)	Workplace / organisational	Balance between job-demands (e.g. workload, emotional labour) and job-resources (e.g. leadership, autonomy, collegial support).	Guides workforce policy to reduce strain, strengthen resources and support retention through manageable demands and supportive leadership.
Social-ecological model (Bronfenbrenner, 1977; McLeroy et al., 1988)	Institutional (multi-level): individual, interpersonal, organisational, community, and policy levels.	Wellbeing shaped by nested systems and relationships.	Supports multilevel policy that addresses both individual and contextual factors (e.g. workload policy, leadership practice, school culture).

Method

This scoping review followed Arksey and O'Malley's (2005) five-stage framework, incorporating Levac et al.'s (2010) refinements including a consultation phase (Peters et al., 2020).

Stage 1: Research questions

1. What is known about how Australian teachers' wellbeing is supported?
2. From the perceptions of teachers, what are the enablers and barriers to teacher wellbeing?
3. What is known about how teacher wellbeing is defined and measured?

Stage 2: Relevant studies

Inclusion and exclusion criteria were iteratively refined using an inductive approach. Studies were included if they examined Australian teacher wellbeing in primary or secondary schools (government, Catholic or independent) across metropolitan, regional,

rural or remote settings, were peer reviewed, available online in full text, and published in English between 2015 and 2025. One international paper proposing a conceptual model of teacher wellbeing was also included because it drew on empirical data and case material from Australian research (Ozturk et al., 2024).

The 2015-2025 timeframe aligns the review with recent teacher workforce and wellbeing reforms, spans the period before and after COVID-19, and reflects contemporary conceptualisations of wellbeing beyond stress and burnout (Department of Education, 2022a; Taylor et al., 2024). Studies focusing only on stress, burnout or mental ill-health, or on early childhood, special education or higher education, and grey or international literature without explicit reference to Australia were excluded.

Searches were conducted in ERIC (EBSCO), ProQuest, A+ Education, JSTOR and Scopus between 12 June 2025 and 7 August 2025, using Boolean operators ("AND", "OR"), supplemented by manual screening of reference lists and expert consultation to identify additional publications. For example, a core search string was: "teacher* AND wellbeing AND (perception* OR experience* OR enabler* OR barrier*)."

Table 2: Synonyms used in search for how teacher wellbeing is supported, perceptions of enablers and barriers

Teacher Educator	Wellbeing Well-being Well being Welfare Safety	Perceptions Insights Views Opinions Observations Experiences Understanding	Supports Enablers Positive Strategies Professional learning	Barriers Constraints Pressures

Table 3: Synonyms used in search for how teacher wellbeing is defined and measured

System leaders Administrators Bureaucrats	Teacher Educator	Wellbeing Well-being Well being Welfare Safety	Policy Strategy Plan	Reporting Measure Benchmark

Stage 3: Study selection

Figure 1 illustrates the PRISMA-ScR protocol applied using the *Covidence* tool to manage data (Peters et al., 2020). The search yielded 1,914 articles, of which 999 duplicates were removed. After applying inclusion and exclusion criteria, 915 articles underwent title and abstract screening. Many were excluded for focusing on unrelated contexts (e.g., early childhood, higher education), lacking a clear link to teacher wellbeing, or being grey literature. Seventy-two articles proceeded to full-text review, with some requiring team discussion to reach consensus. A final 35 articles were included in the scoping review.

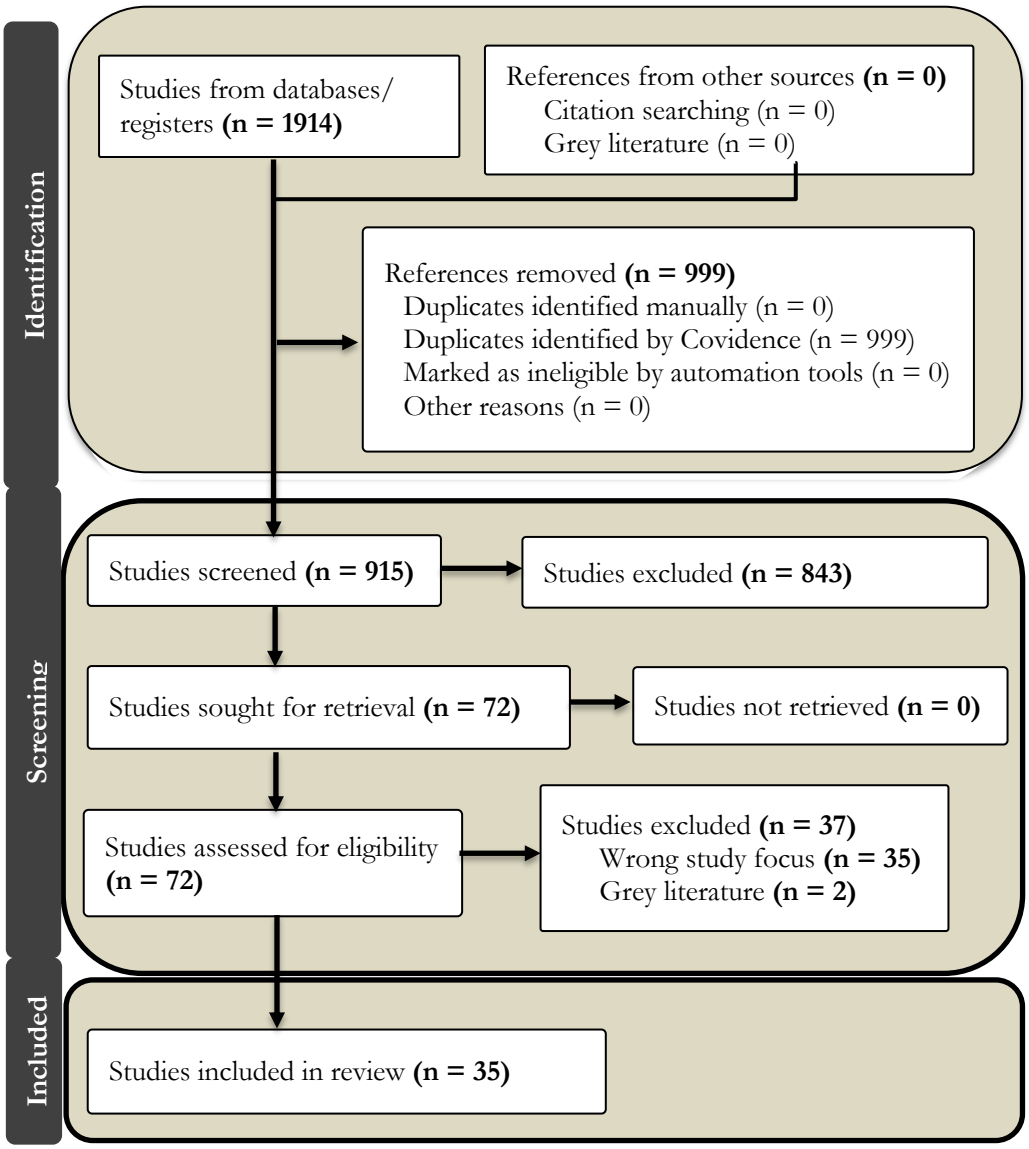

Figure 1: PRISMA-ScR protocol used to select peer-reviewed studies

Stage 4: Charting the data

A standardised data extraction form was developed collaboratively and piloted on five studies. For each article, we recorded study characteristics (author, year, research design, sample size, sector, level and location), theoretical framework(s), wellbeing definition, measurement tools, and reported enablers and barriers. The first author charted all 35 studies and discussed borderline cases with co-authors to support transparency and consistency.

Stage 5: Collating, summarising and reporting the results

We then conducted an inductive thematic analysis, informed by the three guiding frameworks, to code teacher wellbeing enablers, barriers and wellbeing conceptualisations (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Finally, we grouped codes into identified themes (leadership, workload, professional learning, school culture), and summarised findings in narrative and tabular form.

Stage 6: Consultation phase

Following Levac et al.'s (2010) guidelines, this review defined the purpose of consultation, used preliminary findings to guide discussion and ensured systematic data collection and reporting. Three external stakeholders, two PhD-qualified staff from the Australian Education Union (Victorian Branch) and a national education consultant in teacher wellbeing, provided feedback that revealed blind spots and led to the inclusion of three additional articles.

Limitations

Consistent search terms were applied across multiple databases, and inclusion and exclusion criteria were applied systematically throughout screening. However, the co-constructed search terms, focus on English-language peer-reviewed articles (2015-2025), and emphasis on Australian primary and secondary studies using "teacher wellbeing" terminology meant some earlier studies, grey literature and adjacent constructs (e.g., stress or burnout) may have been missed. As a scoping review, our aim was to map concepts and gaps rather than appraise study quality or estimate effect sizes.

Table 4: Summary of articles included in review, published between 2015-2025 exploring how Australian teachers' wellbeing is supported, defined and measured

Author(s)	Title	Method / n	Enablers and barriers to teacher wellbeing	Concepts and measures of teacher wellbeing
Acton & Glasgow (2015)	Teacher wellbeing in neoliberal contexts: A review of the literature	Qualitative: Systematic Review	Enablers: emotional/social support, PL for EI and emotion management, autonomy, respect. Barriers: performativity pressures.	Defines wellbeing as "personal professional fulfilment, satisfaction, purpose, and happiness"
Arnold & Rahimi (2025)	Teachers' working conditions, wellbeing and retention: An exploratory analysis to identify the key factors associated with teachers' intention to leave	Quantitative: Exploratory analysis / 744	Enablers: supportive cultures reducing workload/violence; job satisfaction. Barriers: emotional demands, workload, violence, negative interactions.	JDRT
Baxter et al. (2023)	Reflecting on teaching in low-SES areas during COVID-19: An Australian experience	Qualitative: Case Study / 11	Enablers: supportive leadership, flexibility, autonomy, peer support. Barriers: workload, change fatigue, uncertainty.	Multidimensional

Author(s)	Title	Method / n	Enablers and barriers to teacher wellbeing	Concepts and measures of teacher wellbeing
Beames et al. (2024)	'Very little is done other than the odd reminder' …'look after yourself': A mixed-methods evaluation of what Australian teachers need and want from a wellbeing program	Mixed: Survey & Semi-structured Interviews / 47	Enablers: co-designed, relevant, collaborative, flexible programs; supportive leadership; work-life balance. Barriers: workload, admin burden, financial stress.	WHO definition: coping with stress, productive work, community contribution. Recommends explicit teacher wellbeing metrics in policy.
Billett et al. (2023)	Australian teacher stress, well-being, self-efficacy, and safety during the COVID-19 pandemic	Quantitative: Survey / 534	Enablers: collegial relationships, purpose, self-efficacy. Barriers: stress, safety concerns.	PERMA
Brunzell et al. (2021)	Trauma-informed teacher wellbeing: Teacher reflections within trauma-informed positive education	Qualitative: Interpretative Phenomenological / 18	Enablers: self-/co-regulation, student relationships, strengths use. Barriers: lack of trauma-specific PL/support.	Trauma-Informed Positive Education framework.
Burns et al. (2020)	Teacher-targeted bullying and harassment in Australian schools: A challenge to teacher wellbeing	Mixed: Survey and Interview / 500	Barriers: bullying, unsafe environments, poor policy response, negative media.	
Collie (2022)	Teacher well-being and turnover intentions: Investigating the roles of job resources and job demands	Quantitative: Online Survey / 426	Enablers: supportive leadership, peer and student relationships. Barriers: time pressure, behaviour issues, low autonomy.	JDRT
Corbett et al. (2021)	Understanding the characteristics of professional development programs for teachers' health and wellbeing: Implications for research and practice	Qualitative: Systematic Review	Enablers: relevant PL, proactive EAP use, holistic programs. Barriers: irrelevant PL, workload, lack of support/autonomy.	
Corbett et al. (2025)	Teachers' experience, needs and recommendations for promoting their health and wellbeing in Australia: A reflexive thematic analysis	Qualitative: Reflexive Thematic Analysis / 23	Enablers: holistic, co-designed, context-relevant PL with flexibility and reflection. Barriers: workload, unsupportive culture, low trust.	SEM
Dixon (2023)	Teacher mental health and wellbeing: What, why and how	Qualitative: Literature Review	Enablers: emotional intelligence, leadership, communication, relationships. Barriers: workload, compliance, emotional labour, data monitoring, parent conflict.	Multidimensional Measures include WHO-5, PERMA-Profiler, MHC-SF, TSWQ.
Fogelgarn & Burns (2020)	What constrains passionate teaching? A heuristic exploration	Qualitative: Heuristic Inquiry / 21	Enablers: trust, positive cultures. Barriers: performativity pressures, administration, reduced meaning, collegial conflict, low autonomy.	

Author(s)	Title	Method / n	Enablers and barriers to teacher wellbeing	Concepts and measures of teacher wellbeing
Garrick et al. (2017)	Teachers' priorities for change in Australian schools to support staff well-being	Mixed: Focus Group and Survey / 960	Enablers: supportive leadership, manageable workload, smaller classes, resourcing, relevant PL. Barriers: unsupportive leadership, irrelevant PL, workload, student behaviour.	Wellbeing is subjective; policies should be co-designed with teachers/unions.
Heffernan et al. (2022)	"I cannot sustain the workload and the emotional toll": Reasons behind Australian teachers' intentions to leave the profession	Mixed: Survey and Thematic Analysis / 2444	Enablers: workload reduction, trust, improved public perception. Barriers: workload, poor relationships, burnout, family–work conflict, feeling undervalued.	Employee Turnover Theory – factors shaping decisions to stay or leave.
Hine et al. (2022)	From struggling to flourishing and thriving: Optimizing educator wellbeing within the Australian education context	Qualitative: Case Study / 47	Enablers: healthy lifestyles, boundaries, meaning, positive culture, leadership, peer support. Barriers: stigma, workload, emotional labour, discrimination, unsafe cultures.	SEM
Kingsford-Smith et al. (2023)	Teacher wellbeing in rural, regional, and metropolitan schools: Examining resources and demands across locations	Quantitative: TALIS Survey / 3376 (Aus. data)	Enablers: collaboration, time for PL, autonomy. Barriers: workload, student behaviour, PL access (esp. rural).	JDRT
Ledger et al. (2024)	Resilience and wellbeing within schools: Contradictions and silences in global policy texts	Qualitative: Comparative phenomenological analysis	Enablers: supportive leadership; emotional/social competence; collegial networks; resilience strategies. Barriers: policy/testing pressures; systemic stressors.	Policies rarely target teacher wellbeing; argues for embedding wellbeing in success metrics acknowledging contextual differences.
Lemon & Turner (2024)	Unravelling the wellbeing needs of Australian teachers: A qualitative inquiry	Qualitative: Phenomenological analysis / 75	Enablers: supportive leadership; ongoing, relevant PL; collaboration; sense of purpose. Barriers: tokenistic leadership, burdensome PL, excessive workload.	PERMA
Lester et al. (2020)	A whole-school approach to promoting staff wellbeing	Quantitative: Survey / 800	Enablers: caring culture, strong relationships, engagement, respect.	WHO Measured via 52-item Staff Whole-School Wellbeing Indicator.
Lummis et al. (2022)	Leadership teams supporting teacher wellbeing by improving the culture of an Australian secondary school	Mixed: Action Research / 43	Enablers: supportive leadership, holistic culture, relevant PL, role clarity. Barriers: workload, poor leadership.	Teacher wellbeing = positive perception of workplace functioning; internal, relational, external factors.
Manuel et al. (2019)	"The dream and aspirations of teaching": English teachers' perspectives on sustaining the motivation to teach	Qualitative: Phenomenological / 211	Enablers: reduced workload, decision inclusion, admin relief. Barriers: workload, low autonomy, job dissatisfaction.	

Author(s)	Title	Method / n	Enablers and barriers to teacher wellbeing	Concepts and measures of teacher wellbeing
Morris et al. (2020)	The role of leadership in establishing a positive staff culture in a secondary school	Mixed: PAR Survey and interview / 28	Enablers: visible leadership, open communication, teacher voice, recognition, shared decisions, relevant PL. Barriers: tokenistic leadership, lack of recognition, no voice, limited growth.	Measured via School Organisation Health Questionnaire (SOHQ).
Nwoko et al. (2024a)	Navigating teachers' occupational well-being in the tides of classroom processes and school structures	Qualitative: Phenomen-ological Analysis / 21	Enablers: targeted PL, supportive leadership, collegial support, recognition, positive student relations. Barriers: workload, poor leadership, limited recognition, bureaucracy, negative public perception.	OECD framework
Nwoko et al. (2024b)	"SHIELDing" our educators: Comprehensive coping strategies for teacher occupational well-being	Qualitative: Phenomen-ological Analysis / 21	Enablers: personal boundaries, exercise, social and mental health support, work-life balance, supportive leadership, autonomy, resources. Barriers: admin burden, stress, workload, limited coping capacity.	OECD framework
Ozturk et al. (2024)	A conceptual model for teacher wellbeing: Towards a holistic understanding	Qualitative: Phenomen-ological Analysis	Enablers: autonomy, meaningful work, positive relationships, job satisfaction, emotions, physical health. Barriers: stress, burnout, financial/emotional strain.	Calls for unified conceptualisation integrating PERMA, JDRT, PsyCap (HERO) frameworks.
Stapleton et al. (2020)	Psychological distress and coping styles in teachers: A preliminary study	Mixed: Survey and Thematic Analysis / 166	Enablers: positive emotions, happiness, satisfaction. Barriers: workload, distress, low recognition, financial stress.	Effort–Reward Imbalance (E-RI) model
Turner & Thielking (2019a)	How teachers find meaning in their work and effects on their pedagogical practice	Qualitative: Phenomen-ological / 5	Enablers: purpose, student relationships. Barriers: workload, administration.	PERMA
Turner & Thielking (2019b)	Teacher wellbeing: Its effects on teaching prac-tice and student learning	Qualitative: Phenomen-ological / 5	Enablers: strengths use, social support, meaning, positivity. Barriers: time constraints.	PERMA
Turner et al. (2021)	Teacher wellbeing, teaching practice and student learning	Mixed: Phenomen-ological / 5	Enablers: character strengths, support, purpose, positivity. Barriers: insufficient time.	PERMA Measured via 5-point Likert analysis.
Turner et al. (2022)	Teacher wellbeing and social support: A phenomenological study	Qualitative: Phenomen-ological / 5	Enablers: social support, altruism, efficacy, student relationships. Barriers: isolation, limited collaboration.	PERMA

Author(s)	Title	Method / n	Enablers and barriers to teacher wellbeing	Concepts and measures of teacher wellbeing
Venema-Steen et al. (2023)	Drawing on the locus of control framework to explore the role of school leaders in teacher well-being	Qualitative: Scoping Review	Enablers: effective culture, leadership, stakeholder relationships, empowerment. Barriers: poor culture, unsupportive leadership, emotional labour.	Locus of Control framework
Vo & Allen (2022)	A systematic review of school-based positive psychology interventions to foster teacher wellbeing	Qualitative: Systematic Review	Enablers: mindfulness, gratitude, autonomy, context-fit, social connection, professional facilitation.	Holistic / multidimensional
Vo et al. (2024)	Australian teachers' conceptualisations of wellbeing at work: A prototype analysis	Qualitative: Prototype Analysis / 438	Enablers: feeling safe, supported, valued, trusted, balanced. Barriers: workload, time pressure, feeling unsafe.	Teacher wellbeing / safety, support, trust, value, work-life balance; vital for measurement and shared understanding.
Willis & Grainger (2020)	Teacher wellbeing in remote Australian communities	Qualitative: Phenomenological / 4	Enablers: peer/community support, resilience. Barriers: isolation, scrutiny, workload, poor leadership, cultural challenges, limited PL/resources.	
Zhou et al. (2024)	Factors associated with teacher wellbeing: a meta-analysis	Quantitative: Cumulative Review	Enablers: supportive leadership, autonomy, flexibility, psychological satisfaction, hope, relationships, work-life balance. Barriers: workload, turnover intentions.	JDRT & SDT

Findings

Findings are organised around the three research questions. The 35 included studies (Table 4) span six quantitative (17%), eight mixed-methods (23%) and 21 qualitative designs (60%).

What is known about how Australian teachers' wellbeing is supported?

Teacher wellbeing is complex and multidimensional

Across the 35 included studies (Table 4), teacher wellbeing emerged as shaped by interacting personal, relational, organisational and societal factors, spanning emotions, relationships, purpose, health behaviours, leadership, workload and school culture.

Five studies applied Seligman's PERMA model, emphasising wellbeing as multidimensional, while Lemon and Turner (2024) extended this perspective by framing wellbeing as collective, context-dependent and relational (Billett et al., 2023; Turner & Thielking, 2019a; Turner & Thielking, 2019b; Turner et al., 2021, 2022). While PERMA provides a valuable strengths-based framework for flourishing, critics argue that it can

under-represent negative emotions, chronic stressors, and structural demands (Acton & Glasgow, 2015). Teacher accounts of workload pressure and persistent anxiety reinforce the need for frameworks that acknowledge both positive and distressing aspects of experience (Turner & Thielking, 2019b).

Corbett et al.'s (2021) systematic review highlighted that social, psychological, and physical health behaviours underpin teachers' occupational wellbeing. Similarly, Dixon's (2023) review showed that many wellbeing frameworks integrate both personal and community dimensions. Nwoko et al.'s (2024a) phenomenological study (n = 21) aligned with the OECD model, identifying four domains of teacher wellbeing: cognitive, subjective, physical/mental, and social. One teacher emphasised the value of context-sensitive support:

> We differentiate for our students, so it would be beneficial to have a health program that differentiates for individual [teachers] (Corbett et al., 2025, p. 7)

Arnold & Rahimi's (2025) quantitative analysis (n = 744) highlighted the need for holistic approaches that integrated systemic, professional and workplace reforms to prevent attrition.

Teacher wellbeing is a shared responsibility

Studies by Lester et al. (2020), Corbett et al. (2025), and Hine et al. (2022) showed that SEM positions teacher wellbeing as a shared responsibility across institutional, school, and individual levels. Lester's (2020) quantitative study (n = 800) examined whole-school wellbeing and demonstrated how SEM can guide approaches that strengthen relationships, engagement, emotional support, and school climate.

Corbett et al.'s (2025) reflexive thematic analysis (n = 23) and Hine et al.'s (2022) case study (n = 47) applied Bronfenbrenner's (1977) SEM to highlight that effective wellbeing support hinges on collaboration between institutional leaders, school leaders, and teachers. Corbett et al. (2025) showed that teachers' engagement in health-promoting behaviours is sustainable only when leaders listen, collaborate, and co-design initiatives. Similarly, Hine et al. (2022) demonstrated that school leaders' ability to recognise stressors and provide support depends on institutional-level conditions and resources. One participant observed:

> I don't think there's a clear understanding of what teachers do at a government level, and that seems to flow through to expectations to a lot of the stakeholders in education. (Corbett et al., 2025, p. 6)

From the perceptions of teachers, what are the enablers and barriers to teacher wellbeing?

Thematic analysis of the charted studies identified leadership, workload, professional learning and school culture as the most reported influences on teacher wellbeing (Table 4).

Consistent with JDRT, each factor could function as either a job-resource that sustained wellbeing or a job-demand that undermined it, depending on how it was experienced in context (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017).

Leadership

Across 15 studies (43%), supportive leadership emerged as a primary enabler of teacher wellbeing (Baxter et al., 2023; Beames et al., 2024; Collie, 2022; Corbett et al., 2025; Corbett et al., 2021; Garrick et al., 2017; Heffernan et al., 2022; Hine et al., 2022; Lemon & Turner, 2024; Lummis et al., 2022; Morris et al., 2020; Nwoko et al., 2024a, 2024b; Venema-Steen et al., 2023; Zhou et al., 2024). Qualitative evidence from eight of these studies (53%) showed that valuing teacher voice, building relational trust, and embedding shared responsibility through everyday interactions were central to effective leadership practice (Baxter et al., 2023; Corbett et al., 2025; Corbett et al., 2021; Hine et al., 2022; Lemon & Turner, 2024; Nwoko et al., 2024a, 2024b; Venema-Steen et al., 2023).

Five mixed-methods studies (14%) demonstrated how supportive leadership translated into measurable wellbeing gains (Beames et al., 2024; Garrick et al., 2017; Heffernan et al., 2022; Lummis et al., 2022; Morris et al., 2020). Collie's (2022) quantitative study (n = 426) similarly found that autonomy-supportive leadership strengthened wellbeing and teacher-student relationships, while Zhou et al.'s (2024) meta-analysis identified supportive leadership as one of the most influential factors in teacher wellbeing. Nwoko et al. (2024b) emphasised empathy, approachability, flexibility, recognition, and genuine support as core leadership behaviours that enhance satisfaction and workplace climate.

Unsupportive leadership can arise when there is a disconnect between teachers' day-to-day work and leaders' understanding of that work (Fogelgarn & Burns, 2020). This tension between supportive and unsupportive leadership is illustrated in the following teacher reflection:

> Sometimes you feel frustrated that those above you don't necessarily know what you are doing… they get so caught up in all the administration that they forget about the teachers (Fogelgarn & Burns, 2020, p. 498).

Four studies (11%) highlighted the detrimental effects of tokenistic or autonomy-thwarting leadership on wellbeing (Lemon & Turner, 2024; Lummis et al., 2022; Morris et al., 2020; Venema-Steen et al., 2023). Together, these findings show how leadership both shapes and is constrained by growing administrative and accountability demands, pointing to workload as a central pressure on teacher wellbeing.

Workload

Across 18 studies (51%) high workload and role intensification were reported as major barriers to teacher wellbeing (Arnold & Rahimi, 2025; Baxter et al., 2023; Beames et al., 2024; Corbett et al., 2025; Corbett et al., 2021; Dixon, 2023; Garrick et al., 2017; Heffernan et al., 2022; Hine et al., 2022; Kingsford-Smith et al., 2023; Lemon & Turner, 2024; Lummis et al., 2022; Manuel et al., 2019; Nwoko et al., 2024a, 2024b; Stapleton et

al., 2020; Turner & Thielking (2019b); Zhou et al., 2024). Recent post-pandemic studies highlighted intensified administrative demands, staffing shortages, and emotional labour (Baxter et al., 2023; Billett et al., 2023; Lemon & Turner, 2024). While JDRT has expanded to recognise personal resources such as self-efficacy, resilience, and adaptability (Bakker et al., 2023), it also acknowledges personal demands, including self-imposed pressures that heighten vulnerability to strain. Workaholism, for example, can independently predict burnout even in supportive school environments (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017).

Heffernan et al. (2022) used turnover theory in a mixed-methods study of 2,444 Australian teachers, reporting that 59% intended to leave the profession. Of these, 62% cited workload as a primary factor undermining wellbeing, describing expectations as "excessive", "unrealistic", and "unsustainable" (p. 201). Teachers also highlighted administrative and reporting demands that diverted time from teaching.

Although no studies in this review reported meaningful reduction in teacher workload, Turner and Thielking (2019b) found that when teachers found meaning from their work, some were able to buffer the impacts of administrative demands. Drawing on the PERMA framework, their findings highlight the protective role of meaning, positive relationships, and a sense of accomplishment in sustaining wellbeing. One participant shared:

> I prioritise building supportive relationships with colleagues, using kindness and teamwork to ease their workload and strengthen connections. This focus leaves me less overwhelmed by administration and more positive about my role as a teacher. (Turner & Thielking, 2019a, p. 82).

Several studies then turned to professional learning as a mechanism to support teachers' wellbeing, typically by building personal and relational resources rather than directly reducing workload (Beames et al., 2024; Corbett et al., 2025; Lemon & Turner, 2024).

Professional learning

Thirteen studies (37%) reported mixed experiences of professional learning (Acton & Glasgow, 2015; Beames et al., 2024; Brunzell et al., 2021; Corbett et al., 2025; Corbett et al., 2021; Garrick et al., 2017; Hine et al., 2022; Kingsford-Smith et al., 2023; Lemon & Turner, 2024; Nwoko et al., 2024a; Venema-Steen et al., 2023; Vo & Allen, 2022; Willis & Grainger, 2020).

Professional learning was most effective when co-designed with teachers, aligned with their needs, and embedded in classroom realities (Corbett et al., 2025; Vo & Allen, 2022). One participant shared:

> Programs designed by teachers for teachers would better reflect the pressures we face. When delivered by outside providers without school experience, they tend to be generic and less relevant (Corbett et al., 2025, p. 7).

Studies reported strong demand for accessible, relevant professional learning, particularly in trauma-informed practice (Brunzell et al., 2021) and behaviour support (Nwoko et al., 2024a). Demand was especially acute in rural and remote schools, where professional learning was often reported as inaccessible or poorly aligned to local contexts (Corbett et al., 2025; Beames et al., 2024; Kingsford-Smith et al., 2023; Garrick et al., 2017). Across these studies, wellbeing initiatives generally targeted individual skills such as mindfulness, resilience or coping strategies, with limited attention to structural conditions like workload, staffing or class composition (Brunzell et al., 2021; Garrick et al., 2017; Vo & Allen, 2022). A thematic review of 63 wellbeing programs used in Australian schools found only three with robust evaluation, indicating limited quality control in this space (Corbett et al., 2021).

Together, these findings suggest that professional learning depends on school cultures that value teacher voice, collaboration and context-sensitive support, pointing to school culture as a further key influence on wellbeing (Corbett et al., 2021; Lummis et al., 2022; Morris et al., 2020).

School culture

Across 13 studies (37%), school culture was identified as a key enabler of teacher wellbeing, particularly when it fostered belonging, trust, and relational safety (Arnold & Rahimi, 2025; Billett et al., 2023; Collie, 2022; Corbett et al., 2025; Fogelgarn & Burns, 2020; Hine et al., 2022; Lester et al., 2020; Lummis et al., 2022; Morris et al., 2020; Nwoko et al., 2024a; Venema-Steen et al., 2023; Vo & Allen, 2022; Vo et al., 2024). Leaders who meaningfully involve teachers in shaping priorities such as workload, professional learning, and wellbeing initiatives promote environments where teachers feel valued (Lummis et al., 2022; Morris et al., 2020; Vo & Allen, 2022; Vo et al., 2024). As Turner and Thielking (2019a) argued, meaningful work is central to wellbeing, highlighting that shared leadership is critical for sustaining a positive school culture.

Morris et al.'s (2020) participatory action research (n = 28) demonstrated that when leaders actively listened and adapted practices, teacher morale and wellbeing strengthened. Key enablers included recognition, genuine involvement in decision-making, and visible support. In contrast, tokenistic gestures, such as performative "open-door" policies without authentic engagement, undermined trust and contributed to disengagement (Morris et al., 2020, p. 813). When wellbeing efforts prioritise appearance over substance, teachers can feel unheard and undervalued, eroding collective efficacy and contributing to emotional exhaustion and attrition (Lummis et al., 2022; Morris et al., 2020).

Lummis et al. (2022) and Morris et al. (2020) thus illustrated how leadership, workload, professional learning and school culture interact to shape teachers' everyday wellbeing experiences, raising questions about how wellbeing itself is conceptualised and measured across studies.

What is known about how teacher wellbeing is defined and measured?

Teacher wellbeing was inconsistently defined and rarely paired with clear measurement approaches, reflecting ongoing conceptual and methodological ambiguity. Definitions ranged across psychological, organisational, holistic, and relational perspectives, demonstrating wellbeing's multidimensional and context-dependent nature. The PERMA model (Seligman, 2011), applied in five studies (Billett et al., 2023; Turner & Thielking, 2019; Turner et al., 2019, 2021, 2022), reinforced multidimensionality but was critiqued for under-emphasising contextual and spatial factors (Dixon, 2023). Other frameworks expanded conceptualisations to include physical, social, and community dimensions (Corbett et al., 2021; Dixon, 2023; Nwoko et al., 2024a).

Vo et al. (2024) used prototype analysis to centre teachers' perspectives, identifying safety, support, trust, and work-life balance as core components, echoing calls to ground definitions in lived experience (McCallum et al., 2017). However, policy discourse often frames teacher wellbeing instrumentally, linked to performance or student outcomes (Acton & Glasgow, 2015; Collie, 2022), limiting genuine teacher-centred approaches and shared understanding.

Measurement remains contested given wellbeing's subjectivity, cultural influences and self-report limitations (Dixon, 2023). Common tools included the WHO-5, PERMA-Profiler and Teacher Subjective Wellbeing Questionnaire (Dixon, 2023; Turner et al., 2021), though Stapleton et al. (2020) demonstrated the value of mixed-method, context-sensitive approaches. International frameworks emphasise using multiple indicators and pragmatic, context-specific measures so that policy can progress without waiting for a single definitive instrument (Viac & Fraser, 2020). Such explicitly pragmatic approaches are largely absent from the Australian teacher wellbeing literature reviewed here, highlighting a key gap for future research.

Despite its potential to inform multilevel action, McLeroy et al.'s (1988) SEM was explicitly applied in only one study in this review (Corbett et al., 2025). In that reflexive thematic analysis, SEM framed teachers' experiences and shared responsibility for wellbeing across individual, interpersonal, organisational, community and policy levels and informed broad recommendations for health-promoting programs, but it was not used to design or evaluate a specific multilevel intervention. In other studies, social-ecological perspectives were rarely extended beyond description, indicating a methodological gap in translating multilevel models into practical strategies for improving teacher wellbeing (Dixon, 2023; Hine et al., 2022).

Discussion

Between 2015 and 2025, Australian research has shifted from viewing teacher wellbeing mainly as an individual attribute to recognising its ecological, relational and organisational determinants, yet multilevel models remain under-used in intervention design. Interpreting the findings through PERMA, JDRT and SEM clarifies how experiences of thriving hinge

on the balance of job-demands and job-resources embedded in school and institutional structures, with implications for leadership, workload policy and wellbeing-focused professional learning. In this section, we consider implications for workload and supportive leadership, the role of professional learning and school culture, and priorities for future research, including geographic context and emerging technologies.

Rethinking workload

While workload has been identified as a major contributing factor to eroding teacher wellbeing, "excessive workload" and "excessive administration" were rarely defined beyond broad references to paperwork, data reporting, compliance and student wellbeing monitoring (Baxter et al., 2023; Billett et al., 2023; Corbett et al., 2025; Garrick et al., 2017). International reviews similarly conclude that no single definition fully captures teacher wellbeing (Ozturk et al., 2024). This lack of conceptual and practical clarity can make it difficult for policymakers to determine which tasks should be protected as core teaching work, and which represent role expansion or bureaucratic task-creep. Future research should document in finer detail what "excessive workload" looks and feels like across settings, including the balance between instructional, relational and administrative labour, and examine how administrative burdens might be redesigned, automated or shifted to non-teaching roles. Emerging technologies such as generative artificial intelligence (AI) were not discussed in the reviewed studies but may offer opportunities to reduce repetitive administrative demands. If introduced in ways that respect professional judgement and workload boundaries, AI may help buffer teacher wellbeing by reducing low-value tasks, warranting dedicated investigation.

Making supportive leadership more concrete

Across the review, teachers described wellbeing being undermined by autonomy-thwarting practices such as leaders being invisible or inaccessible, excluding staff from decision making, and not listening to concerns (Baxter et al., 2023; Heffernan et al., 2022). Yet there was much less emphasis on what supportive leadership looked and felt like in practice. Where detail was provided, teachers associated support with behaviours such as active listening, visible advocacy around workload, flexibility, recognition and genuine involvement in decision making (Corbett et al., 2025; Lemon & Turner, 2024).

However, comparatively few studies examined leadership preparation or how confident school leaders feel to lead for teacher wellbeing, rather than mainly for accountability and performance (Garrick et al., 2017; Hine et al., 2022; Morris et al., 2020). This signals an important priority for leadership development and research. There is a need to specify the relational, organisational and advocacy practices that constitute supportive leadership for teacher wellbeing across diverse contexts, including regional, rural and remote schools, and to embed these practices in teacher-education curricula, leadership programs, induction structures and leadership standards and evaluations.

Professional learning, school culture and evidence gaps

The review highlights strong demand for accessible, context-relevant professional learning in trauma-informed practice, behaviour support and wellbeing-focused programs, with teachers in rural and remote schools reporting difficulties accessing suitable opportunities (Brunzell et al., 2021; Corbett et al., 2025; Kingsford-Smith et al., 2023). A significant challenge for school leaders is judging whether teacher wellbeing professional learning and programs are supported by robust evaluation and metadata to justify their claims about addressing teachers' wellbeing concerns (Corbett et al., 2021). This finding points to a need for institutional-level curation and evaluation of wellbeing-related professional learning and programs, alongside school-level attention to culture, trust, collaboration and shared purpose so that initiatives are prioritised and sustained rather than remaining tokenistic add-ons (Corbett et al., 2021; Lummis et al., 2022; Morris et al., 2020).

Place, equity and future directions

While some studies included regional, rural and remote schools, few examined how workload, leadership support, professional learning and community expectations are configured differently across place (Kingsford-Smith et al., 2023; Willis & Grainger, 2020). Given ongoing teacher shortages and higher turnover in hard-to-staff settings, future research should prioritise place-sensitive designs that investigate how teacher wellbeing demands and resources are shaped by local labour markets, community relationships, and access to essential services (Heffernan et al., 2022; Willis & Grainger, 2020). In particular, interpretative phenomenological and mixed-methods studies that explore how teachers in regional, rural and remote settings experience excessive workload, leadership and wellbeing supports in their everyday work could provide the depth of understanding needed to inform more context-responsive policies and interventions. Building on frameworks such as McLeroy et al.'s (1988) SEM, future research should explicitly connect teachers' lived experiences in different locations to specific institutional, school and community-level actions to improve wellbeing and retention in hard-to-staff settings.

Conclusion

Despite heightened post-Covid-19 attention to teacher wellbeing, significant gaps persist, particularly around defining 'excessive administrative workload' and specifying what supportive leadership looks like under contemporary pressures. Geographic variation also remains under-examined, with limited comparative research on how demands and resources differ across metropolitan, regional, rural and remote schools, constraining tailored policy responses for hard-to-staff communities (Kingsford-Smith et al., 2023; Willis & Grainger, 2020).

McLeroy et al.'s (1988) SEM remains under-utilised, despite its potential to illuminate interactions between individual, relational, organisational and policy-level factors (McLeroy et al., 1988; Bronfenbrenner, 1977). The literature points to the promise of multilevel perspectives that locate responsibility beyond individual teachers and

foreground institutional structures shaping workload, leadership and access to evidence-informed professional learning.

Teacher wellbeing is increasingly framed as a critical workforce issue, yet research gives limited empirical attention to institutional-level approaches beyond individual resilience. Few studies examine coordinated workload reform, resourcing inequities in hard-to-staff schools, or accountability frameworks that recognise the relational nature of teaching. Supportive leadership, collaborative cultures and context-relevant professional learning are often advocated, but evidence on how these conditions are embedded and sustained over time remains sparse. In-depth qualitative, mixed-methods, longitudinal and intervention research evaluating multilevel wellbeing initiatives is particularly needed in regional, rural and remote contexts where workforce challenges are most acute. Addressing these gaps is a central agenda for future research on Australian teacher wellbeing.

Disclosure statement

Author contributions
All authors contributed to the study conception and design. Still, this article is part of the first author's doctoral dissertation research, so he was primarily responsible for conducting the research. Material preparation, data collection and analysis were performed by Paul Faci. Paul Faci wrote the first draft of the manuscript, and all authors commented on previous versions. All authors read and approved the final manuscript.

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