

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

# Wellbeing Promotion in Tasmanian Schools: Have We Forgotten Support Teachers?<sup>†</sup>

Kristy-Lee Holzner<sup>1</sup>  and Lorraine Gaunt<sup>2</sup> 

<sup>1</sup>University of Southern Queensland, Australia, and <sup>2</sup>Charles Sturt University, Australia

**Corresponding author:** Kristy-Lee Holzner; Email: [kristyholzner@gmail.com](mailto:kristyholzner@gmail.com)

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## Abstract

Support teachers are responsible for educating students with disabilities who have complex needs and require additional resources. Because of the highly stressful nature of the role, support teachers are at greater risk of professional burnout, higher attrition rates, and impacts on wellbeing. There is a distinct lack of Australian or state/territory empirical evidence on strategies to promote support teacher wellbeing. In this exploratory qualitative study, we applied thematic analysis to interviews of Tasmanian support teachers to find that their wellbeing relies on principals' and leadership staff's support and implementation of wellbeing and inclusive education practices. Support teachers are experiencing stress, anxiety, emotional exhaustion, and depression caused by workload, accountability for funding, and poor leadership. School leaders who value wellbeing and inclusive practices foster a positive culture, demonstrating ecological theory. This study marks an initial step towards understanding how to nurture the support teachers of Tasmania.

**Keywords:** wellbeing; special education teacher; wellbeing promotion; ecological theory; special education; burnout

For special education teachers, international research demonstrates that the responsibility of educating students with disabilities and additional needs is stressful (Adera & Bullock, 2010), carries a high rate of burnout (Brunsting et al., 2014), and contributes to high attrition rates (Billingsley & Bettini, 2019). According to research from the United States of America, the responsibilities of special education teachers include managing and implementing individual education plans and behaviour plans, organising and liaising with external services, and assisting classroom teachers with inclusive practices (William & Dikes, 2015). In the Australian context, Preston and Spooner-Lane (2019) identified factors impacting the poor retention rates of specialist teachers, including organisational factors, such as a lack of appropriate professional development, and student factors, such as complex psychological, emotional, and behavioural needs of students. In the Australian state of Tasmania, special education teachers are referred to as support teachers (Department for Education, Children and Young People [DECYP] Tasmania, 2020). In this paper, as we discuss research in the Tasmanian context, we will hereafter refer to all special education teachers as support teachers (STs).

The complexities and demands of the ST role can impact the wellbeing of individuals (Brittle, 2020). Although the benefits of promoting wellbeing through education policy in Australia are being recognised (Powell & Graham, 2017; Price & McCallum, 2015), existing documents such as the *Principal Wellbeing Action Plan 2019–2021* (DECYP Tasmania, 2019) fail to acknowledge the

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prevalence of these impacts on ST wellbeing. These policies provide whole-school contextual factors that may influence school staff wellbeing, yet more research is needed on role-specific influences on ST wellbeing, particularly in Australia or Tasmania. This qualitative study aims to identify negative impactors and positive enablers influencing ST wellbeing and explore ST perceptions of both whole-school and role-specific factors to support Tasmanian policy development.

### **Wellbeing in an Educational Context**

Carter and Andersen (2023) define wellbeing as 'how an individual feels and functions across several areas including cognitive, emotional, social, physical, and spiritual wellbeing' (p. 18). Clarke (2020) indicates that wellbeing is not solely objective (e.g., safety and welfare) but includes subjective constructs (e.g., happiness, life satisfaction, and flourishing). Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological theory of development model illustrates interconnected influences on wellbeing called systems. These systems include the microsystem (work, school, and family), mesosystem (interactions between systems), exosystem (policy, services, and media), and macrosystem (culture and ethnicity). In educational contexts, an ecological wellbeing model fosters a secure and flourishing environment for student learning (Carter & Andersen, 2023; Price & McCallum, 2015). This model is gaining prominence in current Australian education departments' policies (Powell & Graham, 2017), including the *Wellbeing for Learning: Child and Student Wellbeing Strategy* (DECYP Tasmania, 2022b).

### **Importance of Support Teacher Wellbeing**

Researchers describe teacher wellbeing as a feeling of happiness, including job engagement, positive relationships, job satisfaction, self-efficacy, and coping when challenged (De Stasio et al., 2017). Because of the nature of the role, STs appear to be vulnerable to impacts on wellbeing (Brittle, 2020). Compared to classroom teachers, STs have higher risks of burnout and negative wellbeing impacts, including poor psychological health (Adera & Bullock, 2010). Burnout is a chronic response to stress, characterised by emotional exhaustion, depersonalisation, and job dissatisfaction (Maslach et al., 2001). Due to exposure to a child's trauma, Australian STs are at risk of secondary traumatic stress (feelings of distress, isolation, inadequacy), a contributor to burnout (Brunzell et al., 2018). Commonly, STs become emotionally invested, holding a sense of responsibility for students with disabilities, increasing their susceptibility to emotional exhaustion and affecting job performance (Brunzell et al., 2018).

### **Impactors and Enablers of Support Teacher Wellbeing**

Researchers in educational wellbeing define an impactor as a negative influence, whereas an enabler positively influences wellbeing (Carter & Andersen, 2023; McCallum & Price, 2016). Based on these definitions, the present study will use the terms impactor and enabler. In the United States of America, ST wellbeing is impacted by unmanageable workloads (Bettini et al., 2017), teacher qualifications, school environment, working conditions, and other non-work factors, affecting attrition rates and outcomes for students with disability (Billingsley & Bettini, 2019). These findings echo a literature review by Brunsting et al. (2014) that synthesised international research from 1979 to 2013. Authors found that individual traits, classroom stressors, school administration, and systemic factors are associated with ST burnout. Brunsting et al. (2014) and Billingsley and Bettini (2019) challenge policymakers to ensure better outcomes for STs and students with disabilities, highlighting high attrition rates and staff shortages resulting from poor ST wellbeing. While research is limited regarding the influences on Australian ST wellbeing, one Australian review found similar retention and attrition difficulties among classroom teachers, with relationships, school culture, resources and facilities, qualifications, policy, and role complexities influencing wellbeing (Mason & Matas, 2015). Both Australian and international studies demonstrate the ecological systems that impact ST wellbeing, including the exosystem (policy, services, and media), specifically the lack of policy effectively supporting the wellbeing of STs.

Research into whole-school factors that positively enable ST wellbeing is emerging internationally (De Stasio et al., 2017). Teachers' wellbeing is enabled when teachers feel appreciated, are empowered to make decisions, and have positive relationships with principals and school leaders (Brunsting et al., 2014). Similarly, a systematic review of international studies by Allen et al. (2018) found that teachers' self-esteem, motivation, and self-efficacy increase when a strong sense of belonging exists within a school environment. The ecological model of wellbeing depends on educational leaders' understanding of wellbeing and its promotion to foster a positive school climate, policies, and collegial relationships (Carter & Andersen, 2023; De Stasio et al., 2017; McCallum & Price, 2016).

Mentoring is a role-specific enabler of ST wellbeing, providing professional coaching, reducing isolation, and offering emotional support (Dempsey & Christenson-Foggett, 2011). Professional development, additional qualifications, and experience also enable ST wellbeing (Adera & Bullock, 2010; Bettini et al., 2020). Surveying 194 STs in Italy, De Stasio et al. (2017) found that ST training in disabilities, disorders, and inclusive practices promotes wellbeing. Literature suggests experience and training promote self-efficacy, reduce stress, and improve retention among STs (Askill-Williams & Cefai, 2014; Bettini et al., 2020; Brunsting et al., 2014).

### **Wellbeing of Tasmanian Support Teachers**

To demonstrate ecological theory and potential impacts on ST wellbeing, the absence of policies and understanding around the ST role (exosystem) influences school staff perceptions (mesosystem and microsystem). The *Wellbeing for Learning: Child and Student Wellbeing Strategy* (DECYP Tasmania, 2022b) and *Principal Wellbeing Action Plan 2019–2021* (DECYP Tasmania, 2019) policies reflect an ecological approach, incorporating safe and secure workplaces, professional learning, manageable workloads and a supportive environment, so that individuals may flourish, as Price and McCallum (2015) recommended. However, these wellbeing policies do not consider Tasmanian STs specifically. The *Tasmanian State Government Improved Support for Students with Disability: Ministerial Taskforce Report* (Minister for Education and Training, 2015) found that clarity is required around the ST role within schools and recommends that STs be a fully resourced leadership position. Currently, Tasmanian STs are recognised under the generic Teacher Statement of Duties, with no additional qualifications necessary, and paid at a teacher rate (DECYP Tasmania, 2020) rather than considered specialists or leaders in their field (Askill-Williams & Cefai, 2014). The *Ministerial Taskforce Report* (Minister for Education and Training, 2015) found that STs require training and qualifications to teach students with disabilities after identifying a gap that could impact student outcomes. The absence of an ecological exosystem, such as recognising skills, title and remuneration in policy, could be perceived as undervaluing STs, cause emotional and professional stress (Brunsting et al., 2014) and impact Tasmanian ST wellbeing.

Further research is required regarding the wellbeing of Tasmanian STs and the ecological factors that impact or enable their wellbeing. The current exploratory study explores influential factors in Tasmanian schools that impact or enable ST wellbeing. The following research questions framed this study:

1. What are the role-specific impactors and enablers influencing ST wellbeing in Tasmania?
2. What are the whole-school impactors and enablers influencing ST wellbeing in Tasmania?

## **Methodology**

### **Participants**

Ethical approval for this study was obtained through the University of Southern Queensland (H21REA169F1) and the DECYP Tasmania (2021-39) under the requirements of the *National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research* (National Health and Medical Research Council, Australian Research Council, & Universities Australia, 2018) prior to the commencement of research.

**Table 1.** General Information on Participants

Participant pseudonym	Age	Gender	Years as ST	Years in education	Days per week as ST	Other roles within school	Number of STs in school (inclusive of themselves)
Johanna	56	Female	10	17	5	Advanced skills teacher	3
Josephine	50	Female	1	30	2.5	Literacy support	1
Maxine	55	Female	4	27	1	Advanced skills teacher, birth-to-five education, literacy coach, early years education leader	1
Rose	49	Female	7	25	5	No	1
Robert	37	Male	5	15	1.5	Advanced skills teacher, wellbeing lead teacher, trauma lead	2

Note. ST = support teacher.

The limited number of STs, and limited time frame for recruitment and data collection, made access to participants difficult. Cohen et al. (2018) state that under these circumstances, volunteer sampling (non-random and purposive) is an appropriate method to receive truthful representations of experiences without causing distress considering the sensitive topic of wellbeing (Cohen et al., 2018). The director of inclusion and diversity within the DECYP advertised for current ST volunteers via an ST forum on Microsoft Teams. Five STs in Tasmania's rural and urban state primary schools were interviewed in 2021. Table 1 displays participants' pseudonyms and demographic information, as Brinkmann and Kvale (2018) proposed. Years in the ST role ranged from 1 to 10 years ( $M = 5.4$  years), and four out of five STs had at least one additional role.

### Data Collection

For the current study, we applied a qualitative research design using an interpretivist paradigm to explore how participants make meaning of subjective experiences regarding wellbeing within a school context (Bogdon & Biklen, 2007). Data were collected using semistructured interviews with three sections of questions: general participant information, whole-school and role-specific enablers of wellbeing, and whole-school and role-specific impactors of wellbeing (Hays & Singh, 2011). Interviews were conducted and recorded via Zoom conferencing software, supporting statewide participation (Archibald et al., 2019) and COVID-19 guidelines (Jones & Abdelfattah, 2020). The first author transcribed interviews manually to understand the data thoroughly for analysis (Cohen et al., 2018).

Interviews began with the interviewer defining wellbeing to participants according to Carter and Andersen's (2023) definition to ensure participants understood wellbeing. Interview questions were aligned with the interpretivist paradigm and subjectivist epistemology, to explain interpretations of situations and experiences in the social environment and to understand behaviours and interactions that influence wellbeing (Cohen et al., 2018). Interviews were conducted outside of school hours for 30 minutes during September 2021. The interviewer (first author) worked in collaboration with the second author (experienced researcher), who provided scaffolded guidance prior to the interviews commencing.

### Data Analysis

Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase thematic analysis procedure was applied to the qualitative data: familiarising ourselves with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report. The first author labelled statements within interview transcriptions, grouped common statements, refined these into themes, and refined and

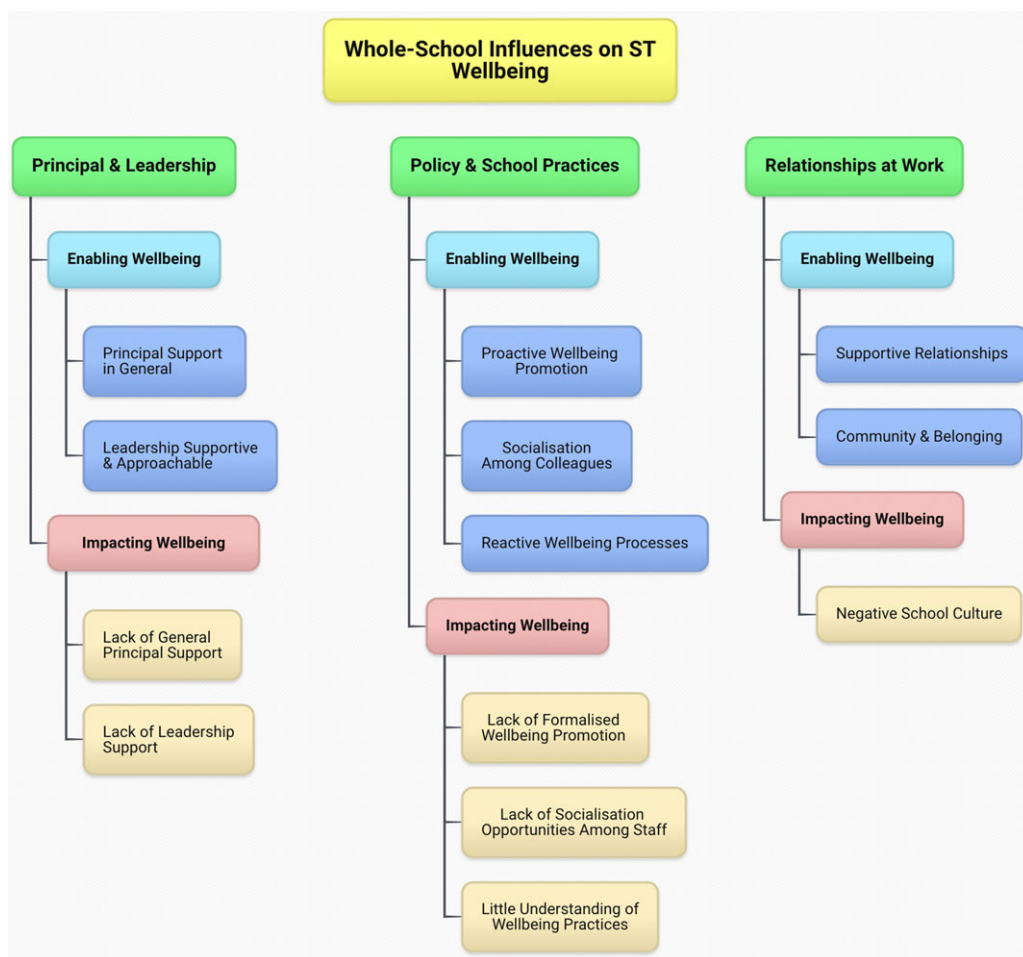


Figure 1. Whole-School Influences on Support Teacher Wellbeing.

reviewed themes further with the second author. Initially, 144 unique codes were condensed into 26 subthemes to discern patterns related to whole-school and role-specific factors affecting ST wellbeing. The process involved four layers of refinement, where the first author completed each layer and then conferred with the second author, resulting in the identification of four primary themes, along with their corresponding percentages. Two mind maps were created to understand key themes and subthemes within the variables of whole-school or role-specific influences (Figures 1 and 2). These mind maps show impactors and enablers separated under each theme to understand how these influences affect ST wellbeing. Both authors reviewed and rigorously edited themes to ensure clarity and precision (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

## Results

The authors identified four themes reflecting negative impactors and positive enablers contributing to ST wellbeing: (1) *valuing and understanding the ST role and demands* (42%; only associated as a role-specific influence); (2) *policy and school practices* (27%); (3) *principal and leadership* (including assistant principals and advanced skills teachers [ASTs]; 17%); and (4) *relationships at work* (14%). Percentages were calculated based on the number of coded statements related to each theme. Themes

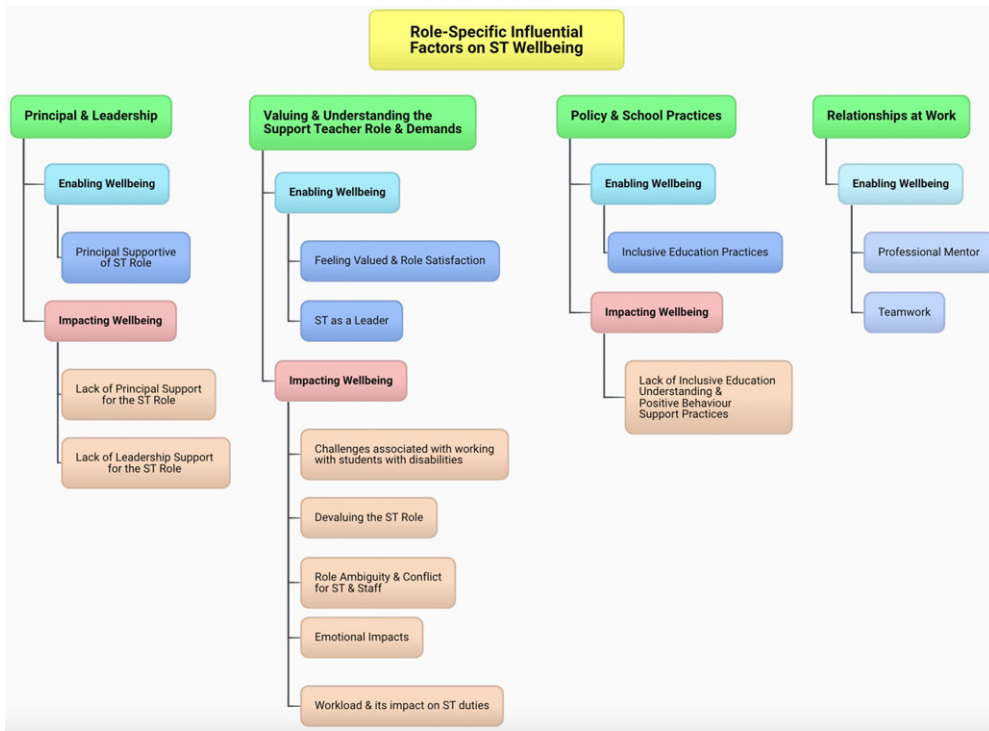


Figure 2. Role-Specific Influential Factors on Support Teacher Wellbeing.

are divided into enablers and impactors of ST wellbeing (Figures 1 and 2), based on Carter and Andersen's (2023) definition of an impactor as a negative influence and an enabler as a positive influence on wellbeing. Whole-school and role-specific influences are discussed under each theme heading.

### **Valuing and Understanding the ST Role and Demands**

The theme of *valuing and understanding the ST role and demands* comprised seven subthemes specific to the ST role (Figure 2). The results demonstrated that valuing and understanding inclusive education and the ST role by leadership staff are closely related to ST wellbeing. Feeling valued and satisfied in the ST role was determined through the enabling subtheme from participants discussing positive feedback on performance from school staff, including the principal and students. Josephine explained that staff and children regularly gave positive feedback, and an official school review process made her feel valued: 'I worked very differently to my predecessor did, and I got some really nice feedback via our school review'.

The ST role was valued when STs held leadership titles, such as assistant principal or AST (DECYP Tasmania, 2012), assisting the principal in improving policy and educational outcomes. Johanna explained her full-time AST/ST leadership position: 'it's a valued role and that my principal puts funding and time into the support teacher role'. Three out of five STs held an AST position (Table 1). Robert, also an AST, felt valued within his school as a member of leadership staff; however, his comments reflected concern about the ST role being a small portion of his overall workload: 'I've probably felt like that's a way to fund an AST, you know, you've got a certain allocation of support teacher, and if we can sweep that into an AST role, then, you know, you're not paying extra'.

The remaining subthemes negatively impacted ST wellbeing (Figure 2) and contributed 82% of the theme valuing and understanding the ST role and demands. These included challenges associated with

working with students with disabilities, devaluing the ST role, role conflict, workload and its impact on ST duties, and emotional impacts. Devaluing the ST role was conveyed by participants sharing experiences of regularly performing teacher assistant duties, lack of understanding of the ST role among staff, and feeling devalued due to leadership staff's poor attitude towards inclusive education. Rose wept as she explained her frustration with the lack of compassion and understanding of inclusive education by school leaders: 'it's a role that I love, and that I'm passionate about, but sometimes I feel data sets and making the school look good is more important than helping our most vulnerable'. Her reflections also indicated emotional impacts, such as emotional exhaustion and stress. Rose continued to illustrate her emotional investment, reporting her responsibility to advocate for students with disability, particularly around support and resourcing: 'I care about the most vulnerable kids get the support they need . . . if they need the most support, then that's how it should be'.

The data reflected emotional demands and challenges when supporting students with disabilities and contributed 13% of the valuing and understanding the ST role and demands theme. Exposure to students who are dysregulated, such as aggressive behaviour, was identified as a role-specific impactor on wellbeing. Josephine explained how some recent incidents impacted wellbeing:

*We have had quite a few situations . . . that have been unpleasant and confronting. We had a child abducted from school . . . we had the fire this morning, we've had some issues with children with self-harm, and . . . can trigger things for us as professionals in our personal lives.*

Josephine demonstrated the potential for emotional exhaustion, burnout and secondary traumatic stress. However, she felt cared for by school staff when these situations occurred, explaining she can 'sit and have a chat or take a day' for herself if needed.

Table 2 provides examples of coding participant quotes to the *workload* subtheme, showing that this subtheme contributed 29% of impacts on ST wellbeing, particularly relating to the educational adjustments moderation process. This is part of the Tasmanian funding model for students with disability, guided by the Nationally Consistent Collection of Data on School Students with Disability (NCCD; Education Services Australia, 2022). Tasmanian Educational Adjustments Disability Funding Model (DECYP, 2022a) provides targeted resources for students to access and participate in school. Moderation occurs annually between DECYP Disability Services and schools to assess documentation of adjustments provided over a 10-week period and determine an adjustment level based on the NCCD to deliver targeted funding for students with disability. Maxine illustrated the stressful nature of moderation (Table 2), while Johanna reported that moderation was the sole focus for second term: 'it basically was everything I did in Term Two'. Four out of five participants experienced stress, emotional investment and frustration due to the moderation workload. Johanna, who worked full-time as an AST/ST, explained that workload demands were too great at the beginning of the year with moderation, and she could not take up offers of additional training from the DECYP (see Table 2).

Workload further impacted wellbeing at home, including personal relationships: 'the workload infiltrates your home life, your outside-of-school times. I have conflict with my partner about that', said Johanna. Robert explained his inability to 'switch off' at home, reflecting the emotional and professional investment in the role (Table 2). Therefore, results show that workload impacts ST duties, such as working with individual students or teachers, and professional and personal wellbeing.

Emotional impacts on ST wellbeing included stress, anxiety, depression, low self-efficacy, emotional exhaustion, and feeling blamed for lack of funding, and accounted for 21% of codes contributing to the theme valuing and understanding the ST role and demands. All participants reported some emotional impact with varying degrees. Rose and Maxine reported emotional impacts to a greater extent, as their school culture and leadership staff did not support inclusive education and devalued the ST role. Rose explained feeling devalued: 'I have a good cry and a weep every now and again, out of frustration more than anything else, and if, oh my God, I can't believe they've done that, I can't believe they've just ignored my recommendations'. For Maxine, the workload created by her principal's lack of support negatively impacted her wellbeing, including stress and disengagement with the job, possibly indicating

**Table 2.** Valuing and Understanding the ST Role and Demands: Codes Contributing to the Subtheme of Workload and its Impact on ST Duties

Codes	Sample quote
Workload of moderation impacted on other ST duties	Maxine: 'That is the most stressful time of the year for me, and I often have to go to my principal for support because I often can't get the evidence I need for moderation from our teachers.'
Moderation is upsetting and stressful because of emotional investment in children	Rose: 'There's never enough [funding]. I know it's a needs-based funding, and it's better than the last system we had, but it is still nowhere near enough.'
Workload in Terms 1 and 2 (referring to moderation) a barrier to additional qualifications	Johanna: 'You try and upskill, but that again comes to workload. Again, it comes to the fact that it is only offered in Terms 1 and 2, and Terms 1 and 2 are without a doubt our busiest terms. That's when we're preparing for moderation, which is a big deal here.'
High expectations regarding learning plans, moderation, and funding applications	Johanna: 'There's an expectation on standards of learning plans, there's expectations on getting good results with moderation conversations, there's expectations that I won't miss anything like miss trauma applications.'
Workload impacts home life	Robert: 'You just don't ever switch off, even in holidays, you're still thinking about kids and how they're going, what you need to do, and that's just stressful.'

professional burnout: 'it stresses me, it impacts on my sleep patterns and stuff like that. Some days I don't feel like coming to work'. Robert compared his time as a classroom teacher to his role as an ST to convey stressors of role responsibilities: 'there's a high degree of pressure on making sure kids are well funded, making sure kids have got the right adults working with them, . . . and the right programs going'. Participant comments reflected emotional impacts, such as stress and anxiety, when valuing and understanding the ST role and demands were lacking, fuelled by the ST's sense of responsibility for students with disability.

### **Policy and School Practices**

The theme *policy and school practices* recorded 27% of codes, with two main subthemes reflecting participant views of enabling or impacting wellbeing: wellbeing promotion and social opportunities among staff. Proactive wellbeing promotion positively enabled ST wellbeing, including staff meetings and staff roles dedicated to wellbeing. Josephine's school employed a teacher equivalent to 2 days a week allocated to wellbeing promotion: 'they're talking about getting a massage of an afternoon or yoga'. Josephine described protocols and benefits of the professional learning communities' proactive approach to teacher development and wellbeing, which 'starts just as a quick check-in around the room [for all teaching staff] to see how everyone's travelling'. Johanna's school ensured staff needs were recognised through 'leadership being involved in grade teams, and they get to know their teaching group quite in depth'. Two participants mentioned an anonymous counselling service offered by DECYP as a reactive practice; Rose said, 'I don't know how many times I've been passed that number [counselling service], just in case!'

Subtheme *socialisation among colleagues* contributed to policy and school practices, as four out of five participants reported regular social events for 'fun' and a 'stress breaker'. Twice termly, Josephine's school staff gathered socially to 'go to a winery or go bowling . . . as a whole-school community, we can all have that time together'. Social opportunities were described as building relationships and community to enable support and collegiality among staff and enabling ST wellbeing.



Four out of five STs identified a lack of understanding and implementation of inclusive educational practices as negatively impacting wellbeing, which accounted for 19% of the policy and schools practices theme codes. Rose reported a ‘constant battle’ with leadership staff to support students with disabilities: ‘comments like, why do these children need support when they’re not going to be learning anyway? What’s the point in doing that? It devalues my role’. Results indicated that principals and leadership staff were responsible for failing inclusive practices (discussed next). Josephine discussed struggling with teacher attitudes regarding inclusive practices: ‘words such as discipline, and punishment, and naughty children, kept coming up in the equation’. When the opposite occurred, and inclusive education was understood and valued, ST wellbeing was enabled: ‘my principal is on board in terms of inclusive education as a philosophy and as a culture, and she’s prepared to give me time with teachers’ (Johanna). Participants concurred that when leadership staff understand and value inclusive practices, so do teachers.

### **Principal and Leadership**

The theme *principal and leadership* influenced ST wellbeing and accounted for 17% of codes. Participants distinguished between principals and other leadership personnel (assistant principals and ASTs) and recognised their whole-school and role-specific influence on wellbeing. This influence encompassed factors such as resource support, behaviour management, approachability, and engagement in wellbeing promotion. Josephine’s principal supported her wellbeing in many ways, as there was ‘no issue at all if we decide we need to take a mental health day’, and she could comfortably ‘reach out and get some help’. Some principals valued the ST role through resourcing role demands and enabling wellbeing. Johanna explained she was lucky that the ST role was seen as ‘specialist and time is being put into the team’ and was valued, with three STs employed. Johanna reported that this enabled her wellbeing.

In contrast, when a principal lacked understanding of staff’s needs and did not provide opportunities for staff to contribute to school decisions, principals and leadership staff were associated with negatively impacting ST wellbeing. To illustrate this, Rose reported her frustration and sadness from a lack of agency; she felt devalued as an ST:

*Changes without warning, change without consultation, changes that might not always be in the best interests of the children . . . I find that upsetting for me because it could have been done in a much better way, then that kid wouldn’t have had a meltdown.*

Although principal and leadership was not the highest scoring theme (17%), leadership staff were responsible for implementing effective policy and practice, managing staff and fostering an inclusive and supportive community, which was reflected in other themes. To illustrate this, Maxine and Rose described their principals and leaders as ‘devaluing’ their role, offering ‘poor leadership’, and explained how these impacted their wellbeing and staff attitude towards the ST role. Rose reported that the teaching staff perceived the ST role as easy since ‘you only got one kid at a time, or a small group’. However, these children had ‘massive trauma backgrounds, and the disabilities, the things that they disclose to you, the chairs they throw at you . . . I don’t think there’s much of an understanding really of what you do as a support teacher’. Alternatively, Robert, Johanna and Josephine explained that their principal and leadership staff nurtured a culture that valued the ST role, inclusive practice, and healthy working relationships. For example, Robert told of the approachability of the principal and leadership staff and immediate support given to teachers’ concerns: ‘people feel like they can, sort of, say what they’re struggling with and whatever, and know that the support is there’. For these three participants, ST wellbeing was enabled by approachable, understanding and supportive principals and leaders.

### **Relationships at Work**

Supportive and collaborative relationships positively enabled ST wellbeing and accounted for 14% of codes within the theme of *relationships at work*. Teaching staff and teacher assistants enabled ST wellbeing through approachability, understanding of daily stressors, and providing reassurance. Rose explained that relationships extended beyond collegiality to supportive networks that enabled wellbeing. She had ‘an amazing group of TAs [teacher assistants] who are fabulous at their job and really supportive, as far as if you have ideas, or you’re not sure about things, they’re great sounding boards the TAs’. Rose shared her friendship with like-minded colleagues, including the school psychologist and classroom teachers, describing them as ‘awesome’ and ‘brilliant’, illustrating the joy and connection experienced in these relationships.

Professional mentors and specialist colleagues were identified as positive relationships among three of the five STs. Mentor support from DECYP Tasmania, in the form of an inclusive practice coach, was valued among participants and accounted for 11% of codes for the theme of relationships at work, as Maxine described, ‘I go to her [inclusive practice coach] a lot when I’ve got an issue. She’s very knowledgeable and supportive; she’ll come to the school at a drop of a hat if I need her’. Additionally, Josephine explained that other school-based professionals (speech pathologists, psychologists, etc.) facilitated the ST role via collegial relationships: ‘there’s a whole community of us working for the children’. Mentors and teamwork were role-specific enabling factors enhancing ST wellbeing. Supportive relationships flourished through whole-school practices implemented by leadership staff. Social opportunities, meetings, and a supportive school culture influenced job satisfaction and ST wellbeing.

### **Discussion**

The findings reported four themes, valuing and understanding the ST role and demands, policy and school practices, principal and leadership, and relationships at work, as influencing ST wellbeing. Importantly, this study found that principals and school leadership staff are connected to and influence all other themes as they are responsible for policy, practice, and drivers of school climate. These results are consistent with ecological theory, displaying interconnected systems within an educational context (Carter & Andersen, 2023; Price & McCallum, 2015). The first author applied Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) ecological theory to develop Figure 3 to demonstrate the interconnected systems of ST wellbeing. This new model reflects the crucial role of principals and leaders within the mesosystem in facilitating school environment and culture and departmental policies and frameworks in influencing ST wellbeing. In line with the aims of this study, Figure 3 identifies whole-school and role-specific influences on ST wellbeing in educational contexts.

### **Whole-School Factors Influencing ST Wellbeing**

In this study, we identified whole-school factors that influence ST wellbeing, including the capacity of principals and leadership staff to implement policies and practices, foster a supportive school culture, and build positive relationships (see Figure 3). Principals and leadership staff who possessed a comprehensive understanding of wellbeing and its promotion, established effective school policies and practices, such as collegial teams (e.g., professional learning communities), and invested in the wellbeing of support staff were able to create a supportive and productive work environment. Findings align with Brunsting et al.’s (2014) research, which emphasises that leaders who possess expertise, implement quality policies and practices, and foster a supportive and inclusive school community can enhance wellbeing. These practices enable the ST’s role, promote positive collegial relationships, and improve wellbeing.

The theme relationships at work enables ST wellbeing by facilitating collegiality and friendships. Promoting collegiality through social activities and staff meetings alleviates stress and cultivates a sense

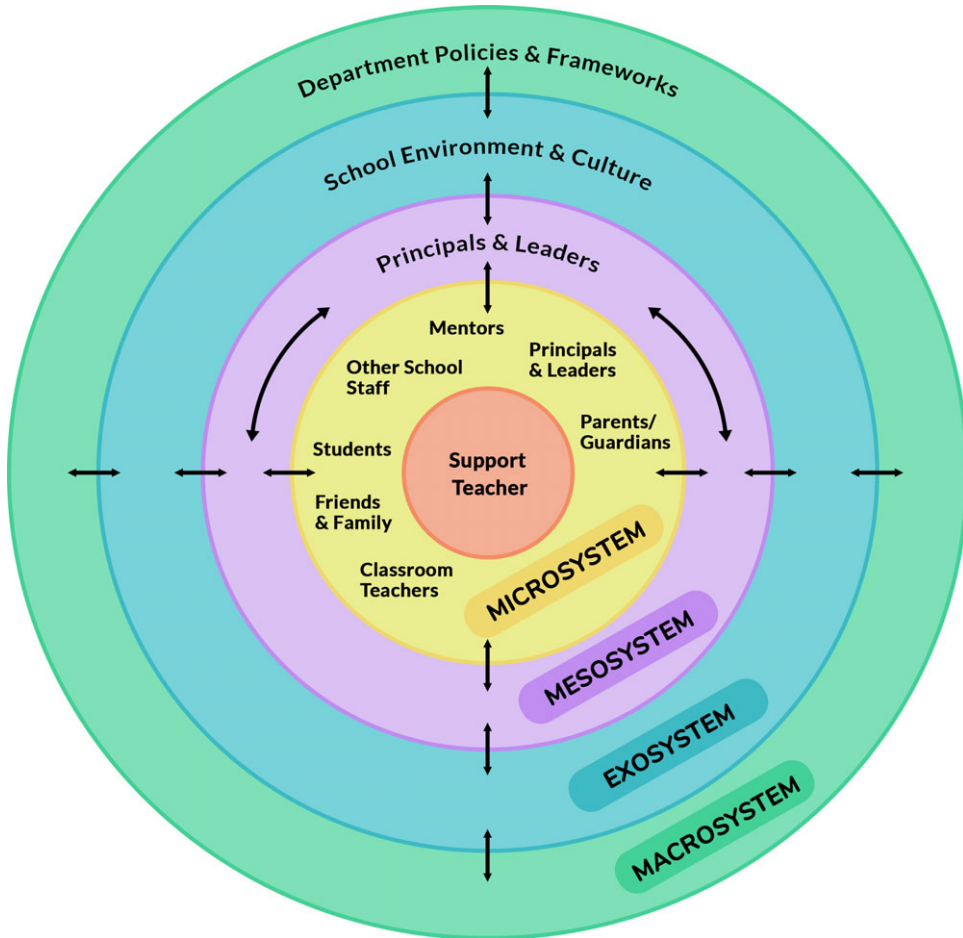


Figure 3. Ecological Model of Tasmanian Support Teacher Wellbeing.

of happiness at work, aligning with the findings of De Stasio et al. (2017) that STs experiencing happiness and job satisfaction are less prone to burnout. Billingsley et al. (2017) argue that colleague collaborations create a secure community for seeking assistance during challenges, and sharing workloads leads to positive ST role outcomes. Roffey (2012) describes this phenomenon as social capital, where trust and care among colleagues foster a robust collaborative community striving for shared objectives. In the ecological wellbeing model (Figure 3), principals and leadership staff are the crucial links between systems. The present study aligns with these previous findings and highlights the crucial role of principals and leadership staff, clearly emphasising the significance of supporting and facilitating collegiality in educational settings.

### **Role-Specific Factors Influencing ST Wellbeing**

Adopting inclusive education practices by school principals and leadership staff is a role-specific influence on ST wellbeing. This study demonstrates that, in this context, STs feel valued, emotionally supported, provided with resources, and benefit from positive collegial relationships when led by leaders who understand inclusive education. The results agree with Maciver et al. (2018), who emphasise that inclusive education depends on a school culture that is influenced by policies, practices, and attitudes that are shaped by school management. Furthermore, the study reveals that STs perceive

value when their principal recognises the ST role as a leadership position and grants them a conjoining leadership role, such as the AST role in Tasmania.

Conversely, two STs expressed feeling devalued by principals and leadership staff due to their limited understanding of inclusive education. This was exemplified by one participant who cried while discussing stress and a sense of being undervalued due to a lack of support and understanding from superiors. Insufficient comprehension of inclusive education by leaders has ecological consequences on other systems, particularly in terms of inadequate support (e.g., resources) and emotional impacts, which can contribute to ST burnout (Brunsting et al., 2014) and attrition (Billingsley & Bettini, 2019). In this study, the two teachers who experienced devaluation clearly identified the importance of principal and leadership support impacting their wellbeing.

Workload as an ST is a compelling impactor on wellbeing, even though some participants explained they had access to additional resources when needed. In Tasmania, moderating adjustments for students with disability for individual funding generates substantial workloads and requires sacrificing regular ST duties. These findings corroborate Bettini et al. (2017), demonstrating the influence of workload on wellbeing, stress levels, and family life, potentially leading to emotional exhaustion. The results suggest that the substantial administrative workload, specifically securing appropriate funding for students with disabilities, significantly impacts ST wellbeing.

The DECYP Tasmania provides STs with a professional mentor, reported by participants in this study as a role-specific enabler for ST wellbeing. STs report that mentors are approachable, provide expertise and role support and help to ease stress. Mentorship is known to provide STs with professional guidance (Dempsey & Christenson-Foggett, 2011) and the current research contributes to this limited field of literature (Billingsley & Bettini, 2019). In this study, participants reported a shared understanding of inclusive education and support for one another professionally and socially.

In this study, ecological theory is vital for understanding factors influencing educator wellbeing. This exploratory study contributes to emerging national teacher wellbeing research by examining ST wellbeing in Tasmania. Results reveal that some principals view the ST role as leadership, by valuing it and assigning the title of AST. Results confirm existing literature on the impact of stress and emotional exhaustion on educators working with students with disabilities (Billingsley & Bettini, 2019; Brunsting et al., 2014). However, this study adds to the literature by demonstrating that principals and leadership staff account largely for role-specific and whole-school influences in Tasmania, as shown in Figure 3. Additionally, the significant workload associated with the moderation of educational adjustments for students with disabilities impacts the wellbeing of Tasmanian STs who are emotionally invested in ensuring appropriate funding and successful outcomes for their students. Further research is advised to establish a dedicated framework for ST wellbeing, to be included in the staff wellbeing policy, highlighting the significance of the ST role in the Tasmanian context.

### **Limitations**

Subjective data limitations arise from social expectations, sensitivity, and recording pressure (Cohen et al., 2018). This study comprised a very small sample of STs from one Australian state. The sample comprised teachers from urban and rural schools; however, such a small sample cannot be considered representative of Tasmanian teachers. With Tasmania being an island state somewhat isolated from the mainland with a population of only 2% of the national population of Australia, the study could not be considered indicative of the Australian context.

### **Conclusion and Recommendations**

Results of this qualitative study indicate two main influential factors for schools and administrators to consider when nurturing ST wellbeing: wellbeing promotion among the school community and systemically valuing the ST role and inclusive practice. Upon analysis of the four themes, valuing and understanding the ST role and demands, policy and school practices, principal and leadership, and

relationships at work, from an ecological perspective, principals and leadership staff have a profound influence within other themes. Principals and leadership staff are pivotal in impacting or enabling the ST's wellbeing.

The study supports prior research (Price & McCallum, 2015), emphasising the influential role of principals and leadership staff in promoting ST wellbeing through policy implementation and fostering a positive school culture. The absence of these factors contributes to stress and devaluation among STs. Adopting an ecological approach to wellbeing promotion is beneficial for STs. School leaders and policymakers should refer to the ecological model of Tasmanian support teacher wellbeing (Figure 3) as a guide for effectively promoting wellbeing and inclusive education through policy and proactive strategies. The DECYP Tasmania should guide principals regarding wellbeing policies, formalise the ST role with a dedicated position description and qualifications, and incorporate ST-related information in wellbeing policies.

Future research should include a broader Australian sample of STs, utilising surveys for quantitative data on ST wellbeing. Additionally, qualitative data from ST journals, focus groups, and interviews could be analysed to identify key themes. Structural equation modelling could be employed to investigate the relationship between identified themes and quantitative data. This comprehensive research approach is warranted to examine the ecological model's implementation in school settings to examine the crucial responsibility of principals and leadership staff in enabling ST wellbeing.

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