Unveiling English school leaders' intentional well-being cultivation practices during a global pandemic

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Abstract

Purpose

There is an urge worldwide that school leaders' mental health and well-being must be prioritised within the education recovery at the local, national, and global policy levels. This research identified the intentional well-being practices that school leaders cultivated as they faced unprecedented challenges during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Design/methodology/approach

Data was collected through one-to-one in-depth semi-structured interviews with ten senior school leaders from primary and secondary schools in England. During the pandemic, online interviews were organised using Zoom. An inductive followed by deductive approach qualitative data analysis was employed to offer insights into the multidimensional and sensitive nature of school leaders' well-being.

Findings

The findings indicated that despite a reported decline in well-being, the participants intentionally engaged in well-being cultivation practices which were both relational: developing multi-faceted support networks, and individual: developing self-care and self-regulation skills. These practices provided different psychological and practical needs necessary for maintaining their well-being and work functioning facing the pandemic.

Originality/value

This study affirms school leaders' well-being cultivation is an intentional and effortful process involving relational and individual practices to support their multidimensional well-being during extreme challenges. These practices can be mindfully and strategically cultivated. This study enhances the theoretical understanding of school leader well-being and offers timely insights into well-being initiatives in leadership development programmes for educational leaders and policymakers amid global challenges.

Keywords: School leader well-being; Well-being cultivation; COVID-19 pandemic

Introduction

School leaders worldwide today are leading in a rapidly changing global climate, such as economic inflation, sociopolitical tensions, and artificial intelligence evolution (Chen et al., 2023; Schechter et al., 2022). These growing global challenges and their educational impacts upsurge school leaders' work demands and pressure, putting their mental health and well-being under increasing threat (Anderson & Weiner, 2023; Chen et al., 2023; Marchant et al., 2024). Preceding COVID-19, school leaders already faced high work demands (i.e., well-being, policies compliance, diverse engagement, and school performance, Collie et al., 2020), often leading to mental health issues and burnout (DeMatthews et al., 2021; Gorrell & De Nobile, 2023; Reid, 2022). During COVID-19, school leaders' work was intensified, including school closures, digital curricula, teacher training, assessments, learning loss, equity issues, health and well-being of staff and students, safeguarding, school reopening and recovery with little support and guidance (Fotheringham et al., 2021; Hayes et al., 2022; Reid, 2022). These challenges further exacerbate previous concerns about school leaders' well-being and workplace stress issues as they continue to face ongoing global challenges (Arnold et al., 2021; Hayes et al., 2022; Marchant et al., 2024).

The threat to school leaders' well-being has multiple educational consequences, including less effective leadership (Mahfouz, 2020), and negative impacts on students' learning outcomes, school climate, and staff workforce (Grissom & Bartanen, 2019). Whereas, the promotion of school leaders' positive well-being avoided stress and burnout (DeMatthews et al., 2021) and created positive school outcomes (i.e., teacher and student performance, culture and school improvement, Mahfouz, 2020; McNeven et al., 2023). While there is a growing global awareness to address the importance of understanding and

supporting school leaders' well-being, particularly since the pandemic (Arnold et al., 2021; Burke & Dempsey, 2021; Urick et al., 2021). Most recent research often focuses on leaders' roles and practices to manage challenges and support staff, students and families' well-being (Anderson & Weiner, 2023; Ferguson et al., 2021; Robinson et al., 2023). Less is known through empirical research regarding how school leaders take care of their well-being whilst leading to further school improvement and managing extreme challenges such as the pandemic and ongoing global challenges (Chen et al., 2023; Collie et al., 2020). To address this gap, the main research question was: how do school leaders cultivate their well-being when managing unprecedented challenges in their leadership roles during a global crisis? Applying a qualitative research approach, this study aims to identify the fundamental well-being cultivation practices employed by school leaders (including headteachers, assistant headteachers and executive headteachers – senior school leaders in England) during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Literature review

This qualitative research is grounded in well-being theories with reflection on school leaders' unique positions facing unprecedented global challenges. Attention is given to discerning the definitions and concepts of well-being as a state and well-being cultivation as a process. Well-being and well-being cultivation are interconnected but differentiable, however, the emphasis of this research focuses on the latter. Recent research regarding the well-being cultivation practices of school leaders during the COVID-19 pandemic was expounded to provide a context for this research.

Well-being as a multidimensional state

Deci and Ryan (2008) define well-being from two principal approaches: The hedonic perspective, namely Subjective Well-being (SWB) defined as "experiencing a high level of positive affect, a low level of negative affect, and a high degree of satisfaction with one's life" (Deci & Ryan, 2008, p. 1). Whereas, eudaimonic well-being (Psychological Well-being) considers human positive functioning and fulfilment beyond the hedonic experiences, including autonomy, environmental mastery, personal growth, positive relations with others, purpose in life, and self-acceptance (Ryff and Keyes, 1995). Recently, Simons and Baldwin (2021) provided an overarching universal definition of well-being in the global context of a post-COVID-19 era as: "a state of positive feelings and meeting full potential in the world (p.1)" - similar to Mental Well-being which includes both subjective experiences of happiness and life satisfaction and positive psychological functioning (Tennant et al., 2007).

Well-being is associated with the concept of positive mental health. Health is defined as "a state of complete physical, mental, and social well-being, and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity"; and mental health is "a state of well-being in which the individual realises his or her own abilities, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and is able to make a contribution to his or her community" (World Health Organisation, 2001, p. 1). Similarly, Dodge et al. (2012, p. 230) defined positive well-being is "when individuals have the psychological, social and physical resources they need to meet a particular psychological, social and/or physical challenge". This definition implies that positive well-being requires individuals to reach a balanced condition between resources and challenges.

The above literature suggests that well-being is 1) a multifaceted and dynamic state which requires an internal equilibrium of all its biopsychosocial components (Dodge et al.,

2012); and 2) feeling positive enough to function well at personal, regional, national, and international and global levels (Simons & Baldwin, 2021; World Health Organisation, 2001). Chen et al., (2023) and Wang (2024) further clarified that school leader well-being is multidimensional, including six dimensions – physical, cognitive, emotional, psychological, social and spiritual; and each dimension is interrelated and may relate to their occupational nature, demographics and contexts as school leaders. Considering the complex nature of school leaders' well-being where personal and professional life boundaries were blurred during the global crisis, for this research, we cogitate that school leaders' well-being is a multidimensional state that they desire to maintain to feel positive enough and to function well in their leadership roles (e.g., Chen et al., Dodge et al., 2012; Ryan & Deci, 2001).

Well-being cultivation as a process

It is important to note that the processes and practices that lead to positive well-being are different from the states of well-being. Building on the above well-being definitions, the processes to cultivate well-being for school leaders should involve achieving both purposes of maintaining emotional well-being and positive functioning to manage work and life demands. The definition by Dodge et al. (2012) revealed that individuals' well-being is not a static state but a dynamic movement of managing between none and extreme challenges by adapting their biopsychosocial resources to maintain homeostasis.

Cummins' theories (2010, 2018) provide insights into defining well-being cultivation as a process of "homeostatic management" when individuals face challenges and articulate the specifications of "external and/or internal buffers" in such processes. According to Cummins (2010, 2018), individuals' subjective well-being is a relatively stable state within a reasonable proxy of a set-point range unique to each individual under normal circumstances

facing no or mild challenges. When the external challenges are too overwhelming, their homeostasis starts to fail and their subjective well-being below the set-point range sharply (Cummins, 2010). Cummins (2018, pp. 69-72) further argued that individuals are inclined to achieve a new homeostasis state of positive well-being when facing challenges by either engaging or disengaging with external and/or internal buffers. The external buffers include money, relationships, and a sense of achieving in life; and the internal buffers can be differentiated as (1) the automatic subconscious processes (i.e., positive emotions, habituation, adaption, and domain compensation); (2) the cognitive conscious buffers (i.e., self-esteem, perceived control, and optimism). Utilisation processes of these buffers represent what Dodge et al. (2012) articulated as the re-establishment movement of homeostasis through adapting the biopsychosocial resources that individuals may use to leverage their well-being when managing challenges. However, Cummins (2010; 2018) and Dodge et al. (2012) did not articulate the processes of these movements in terms of what resources and how to use them to leverage their well-being when facing extreme challenges or crises.

We argue that the role of the intentional self-management mechanism associated with physical, social and psychological resources and activities is key to reversing well-being states when facing extreme setbacks (Sovereign & Walker, 2021). Building from the above, we define school leaders' well-being cultivation as intentional processes that involve self-management by engaging in resources and practices that establish and maintain their positive well-being and functioning when facing strong challenges in their leadership roles. To our knowledge, few studies investigate the intentional cultivation of school leaders in the face of extreme challenges.

School leaders' well-being and well-being cultivation during the pandemic

Literature has found that individual well-being initiatives such as self-care and mindfulness are common well-being practices that school leaders use when facing high-stakes responsibilities and expectations (Hayes et al., 2022; Wells & Klocko, 2018). Anderson et al. (2020) reported that, during the COVID-19 pandemic, school leaders in the United States found self-care practices (e.g., physical, spiritual faith, and staying positive) helpful in managing stress and improving mental health. However, cultivating well-being and positive functioning in professional contexts for school leaders requires more than individual self-care activities by considering work-related factors. For example, job-related demands (e.g., worries about teacher shortages and work-life conflicts) can hamper their well-being, whereas job-related resources (e.g., collegial relationships and participatory workplace climate) can enhance their well-being (Collie et al., 2020; Hu et al., 2016).

Although there is a rising awareness amongst school leaders to take care of their well-being as they serve others, in general, school leader well-being is being perceived as a subjective experience, a personal responsibility with an expectation upon themselves as well-being supermodels in normal circumstances (Lindley, 2021). This subjective and personal responsibility concept of school leaders' well-being is challenged as they face extraordinary pressure during and after the pandemic. Indeed, effective advice on well-being initiatives in leadership development programmes is necessary; therefore, we need strategies learnt from school leaders' own experiences to be put into place (Bingham, 2022).

Methodology

Qualitative in-depth interview research guided by the interpretive paradigm was applied to investigate well-being cultivation practices employed by school leaders in England during the COVID-19 pandemic. The qualitative research paradigm was considered the best approach to capturing the participants' perspectives (Creswell & Creswell, 2018), exploring their lived experiences of well-being facing unprecedented circumstances considered sensitive and unknown phenomena (Vaismoradi et al., 2013), and researching significant personal experiences and insights in a crisis phenomenon (James et al., 2011).

Participants and ethics

The prospective participants were invited via purposeful sampling through school-university partnership connections. The selection criteria were school leaders, including headteachers, and executive and assistant headteachers who led in either primary or secondary schools in England during the COVID-19 pandemic. Ten participants working in various types of schools and regions in England took part in this study, including 7 females and 3 males with an age average of approximately 51 years old. Their headship experiences ranged from 2 to 7 years, and work experiences in education from 6 to 35 years (See Table I). The information regarding the sensitive nature of the research was communicated to all participants in the building rapport stage via emails and debriefed at the beginning and the completion of the interviews. All participants completed the consent form before the interview. They were informed of their right to withdraw and to withhold responses to sensitive questions at any time during the interview. This research followed the Ethical Guidelines from the British Educational Research Association (2018) and was approved by the first author's university research ethics committee.

Insert Table 1 here

Data collection

The qualitative semi-structured interview is favourable to encourage responsive conversations with the participants about their personal well-being experiences (Adams, 2015). The data was collected using in-depth interviews with an average length of approximately 56 minutes between March and August 2021 during the COVID-19 pandemic. Zoom was used in the interview to facilitate long-distance communication, enabling flexibility and voluntary participation in sensitive and confidential data collection (Gray et al., 2020). Knapp (2017) showed that leaders might be hesitant to share their lived experiences to avoid disclosing sensitive information in a preservative manner. Hence, to facilitate authentic experiences, an interview guide (See Appendix) with two main interview questions and 11 sub-questions was created and refined in a pilot study with a former headteacher. The first main question was to probe experiences of school leaders' well-being states during the crisis: What are the most challenging moments you have experienced since the pandemic? The second question was to probe experiences of well-being cultivation processes and practices: How do you manage your well-being so you can better accomplish personal and work challenges facing the pandemic?

Data analysis

An inductive followed by the deductive approach of qualitative data analysis was chosen to develop previously unrecognised themes, concepts, and theoretical exploration due to the

scarcity of forgoing school leader well-being research (Elo & Kyngäs, 2008). All interview data were transcribed and anonymised and all interviewees were given pseudonyms. All data were imported into the NVivo 12.2 software for analysis systematically (Leech & Onwuegbuzie, 2011). The coding process was non-linear and iterative, generally including the following steps. Data was reviewed several times before being segmented according to interview questions on well-being and cultivation practices. Then, they were coded into different initial codes with descriptions across transcripts. Initial codes were consolidated into categories. The code and category descriptions were further documented and refined to ensure rigorousness and communication to reach agreements between the authors. The categories were analytically compared, unified, and adjusted based on the research questions and the literature until the sub-themes and themes emerged. Similar categories, sub-themes and themes, and their descriptions were clustered, organised, and modified until the writing up and revision stage. Finally, 3 main themes, 7 sub-themes and 17 categories regarding school leaders' well-being conditions and cultivation practices during the pandemic were summarised in Table 2, described and discussed in the next section.

Findings

This section presents the key themes in response to the main questions in the following sections: School leaders' multi-dimensional well-being conditions; relational dimensions of well-being cultivation practices – multi-faceted support networks; and individual dimensions of well-being cultivation practices – self-care and self-regulation.

The first theme revealed that school leaders experienced multidimensional well-being issues during the pandemic. Unsurprisingly, the participants' well-being conditions were challenged physically, emotionally, and psychologically at some point since the pandemic

outbreak, showing three sub-themes of well-being conditions during the crisis, including mental and physical well-being, and breakdown. Nine out of ten school leaders expressed a range of mental and physical well-being issues, four had experienced a breakdown, and one did not disclose information regarding personal well-being conditions.

Regarding *mental well-being*, the participants reported expressions of anxiety, worries, and stress facing the uncertainty of the pandemic, and feelings of anger, frustration and undervalue. At the beginning of the pandemic, Nicho-P1 complained that her "anger and frustration was channelled towards government" due to a lack of consistency and communication, and Nina-P2 felt "undervalued" whilst vaccinations were not prioritised for the teaching profession. These negative emotions were triggered by both personal and social-political matters. Several participants expressed a high intensity of stress, worry, and anxiety due to increasing extra responsibilities and accountabilities associated with the pandemic. For example, Claired-P4 stated that "I fell ill most of the time, just from the stress". Eventually, some reported disruptions in their interactions with work colleagues and family members. For example, Joyce-P9 mentioned: "I think it became quite clear to them (*staff*) that I was not the same person in Term Six"). Brian-P8 said: "My wife is… extremely vulnerable…, there was a concern and the worry that I would bring something back from school".

Insert Table 2 here

Only one participant had contracted COVID-19, but the continual work demands for a long period had caused many to experience poor *physical well-being* due to restlessness caused by the lack of sleep and rest, exhaustion and physical illness. Claire-P4 indicated: "It was hard to

relax" and “couldn't sleep properly for months”. Some eventually reached a state of cognitive fatigue, survival, and exhaustion. Nicho-P1 stated: “It feels like survival… It was just physically, emotionally and cognitively utterly exhausting). Some experienced *breakdowns*. Joyce-P9 shared honestly: “I can just take no more... well, I think then a breakdown, actually”.

Next, the second theme revealed that the participants had to intentionally develop relational well-being practices facing the pandemic by cultivating two sub-themes: *professional-institutional* and *personal-social networks*.

The *professional-institutional* networks include four categories: colleagues for work demands and trust, school communities for job-related satisfaction, independent professionals for perspectives and reassurance, and other school leaders for peer support. Each served different functions to support the participants’ well-being in different ways. Firstly, the participants established *the network with colleagues* within the immediate school contexts by strengthening and constructing the pre-existed or new connections to ensure that work-related demands were met, and trust was established to meet such demands. Joyce-P9 expressed strong attempts to ensure that clear channels to connect with work colleagues were built up (e.g., “making sure that meetings do happen”) and further elaborated that colleagues “are a very powerful resource” when she “felt comfortable opening up to” ask for support in time of need. There were emphases on the importance of trust with the work colleagues: Nicho-P1 said:“…you know trust must have to go with the work”. Anna–P10 articulated:

> “Sometimes, I'm purposely not being there because I need to let the rest of the staff know that it can run perfectly fine without me there. But it means I can step away from the date-to-date stuff and actually do some more strategic leadership stuff, which is what I've been brought in to do.”

Similarly, cultivating *networks with the school communities* (such as parents and students) enhanced participants' job satisfaction for the extra work they did for the school in their leadership roles. Nina-P2 shared:

> "We had such amazing feedback from parents and students about the online learning that we provided… I spoke to parents every day because there'd be an issue with something that might resolve…. When you have parents then sending an email or calling just wanted to say thank you for helping my child…It makes you feel right."

The third type of professional network was those with *independent professionals* (e.g., a supervisor and a coach) who were indirectly related to their immediate work contexts. Our findings revealed that this network type was particularly important in times of crisis when they needed to refresh perspectives, release pressure, and gain reassurance during the pandemic. This importance is observed from two contrasting examples: Joyce-9 who was an experienced headteacher working within a newly established Multi-Academy Trust (MAT) expressed a lack of supervisory support potentially leading to a breakdown and emphasized her needs and actions to acquire a supervisor. She shared:

> "There isn't a set supervision type of support….I do think supervision-type activity should happen more regularly, you know, even if you don't need it or if you're not feeling low, I think there should still be the opportunity to offload."

Whereas Anna-P10 who was a novice headteacher working within a well-established MAT expressed how a provided independent professional coach had helped her:

> "I also have a coach and professional coach who I find really, really helpful, because it's somebody totally independent. Totally confidential. Sometimes It's just nice to get

> a different perspective or even air it to somebody else, and it makes it clear in your own head,…and time for reflection".

The last professional-institutional network is *with other school leaders* to establish peer support, concerns, resources and problem-solving together in their leadership roles. Ben-P6 elaborated:

> "Every Friday that I met them, all the other heads within the local area… we talk about how things are going within our individual schools, what was happening with the individuals, and some of the concerns that we got.... where did you get your PCP from, where do you get your hand sanitisers from,.. and that felt …felt good in a way ... I walked away, thinking: Well, we're OK here. We seem to be OK now."

The second dimension of the multi-faced support network of the relational well-being cultivation practices the school leaders reported is *the personal-social* support network with friends, families and other social communities. The participants gained a sense of *belongingness, positivity and perspectives* through these networks during the pandemic. Claie-P4 expressed the significance of "being a part of a group" when connecting with friends during isolation. Anna-P10 articulated how spending time with family shifted her perspectives to appreciation in life when facing work challenges: "coming home and forgetting about the school… They (*my sons*) grounded me, …we did a family walk every day, and appreciate where we live."

The third theme in our findings revealed the individual aspect of school leaders' well-being cultivation practices, including two sub-themes: prioritising *self-care practices* and *self-regulation skills* when facing crises.

First, the participants expressed an increasing awareness of taking care of themselves so they can better take care of others. To p*rioritise self-care practices,* they showed dedication in two categories: *scheduling time to reset* and *engaging in pleasant activities*. To schedule a time to reset, they made *a personal care plan, and regulated work demands* to establish a rhythm of work-life balance. Clair-P4 expressed an awareness to actively dedicate downtime for better work effectiveness even when she felt she "can't switch off": "whereas actually … you're more efficient if you've had a break". *Engaging in pleasant activities* served a similar purpose to relax and recharge, including health (exercises and a healthy diet), nature, leisure (games, TV, and readings), and mindfulness, depending on participants' personal preferences and interests. Intriguingly, one insight was revealed that engaging in these nonwork-related pleasant activities gave them "the psychological security" needed during a time of crisis, such as a sense of pride, achievement, competence, and control. For example, Nicho-P1 chose to switch off by playing a simple mobile phone game to gain "a sense of control and achievement" needed during the crisis. Anna-P10 started her morning run, noting that "in the day, knowing you've done it…, it's a nice sort of pride. Pride in yourself"

Next, our data revealed the second sub-theme of *individual well-being cultivation practice* is *developing self-regulation skills*. There were two categories under the self-regulation skills, including *cultivating positive emotions and cognitive mindset* and *regulating negative emotions*. The positive mindsets of *gratitude, acceptance, hopefulness, and savouring* were commonly mentioned. Ben-P6 cherished "those little cards or a drawing from a child… who has been working from home" and immersed himself in a sense of gratitude, and savouring of the positive moments. Anne-P10 cultivated a sense of gratitude and hopeful mindset for "a memory of this time of being not all doom and gloom and not all negative.

Let's take some positives from it as well" whilst she cherished the family walks during lockdowns.

Our data also showed that *spirituality*, such as faith, values, meaning and purpose were helpful to participants' well-being. For example, Ben-P6 focused on his faith schools' ethos and *values* and Joyce-P10 medicated on Christian inspirational quotes, had anchored them to press through the uncertainty and instability during the crisis. Nina-P2 found her work purpose strengthened her well-being whilst she insisted on working right after contracting COVID-19:

> "I was worried my well-being would go downhill because of it. But actually, it improved even more because I felt that actually, my job had a purpose… You don't go into it for the money and you don't go into it for the title…And I think when you realise that you made a sacrifice, but it has helped someone else, that's when you feel good…"

Next, *self-regulation skills* also included *regulating negative emotions*, such as recognising and releasing negative emotions appropriately (e.g., anger, grumpiness). Anna-P10 mentioned: "You do need that sort of release of angst. Even if it's done in five minutes". In addition, intentionally disengaging from unnecessary comparisons to avoid additional psychological burdens was also shown in our data as a practice of regulating negative emotions. Brian-P8, who was purposefully appointed to be the headteacher of an "Inadequate" Ofsted-rated school was aware of his mission to prioritise school improvement whilst the pandemic happened, and he shared how he dealt with a headteacher WhatsApp group messages he was a part of:

> "At the end of the year, everyone is posting how useful they found it. Um. But to a degree, some of that is actually... also a comparative where schools compare themselves against each other and that can be destructive as well. Yeah. In terms of my own mental well-being, I tend not to engage too much in the chat."

Discussion

The above findings are discussed with relevant literature in the following sections.

School leaders' multidimensional and interconnected well-being conditions

The findings regarding school leaders' well-being conditions during the COVID-19 pandemic showed that the participants experienced mental and physical well-being issues and breakdowns. Following Tennant et al. (2007), the mental well-being in our findings combined emotional and psychological well-being. These findings are consistent with Riley et al. (2021) and Marchant et al. (2024) that their well-being deteriorated due to the challenging experiences during the pandemic, and their functioning and work performances were affected negatively.

Our findings are resonant with the two main theoretical implications: firstly, school leaders' well-being conditions are multidimensionally (Chen et al., 2023; Wang, 2024); and secondly, these different dimensions are conjunctly interconnected (Dodge et al., 2012; Wang, 2024). Both Chen et al. (2024) and Wang (2024) articulated six dimensions of school leader well-being: physical, social, emotional, cognitive, psychological, and spiritual. Amongst these six dimensions, all were explicitly mentioned in the well-being related findings, except the social and spiritual dimension which was actually articulated in the well-being cultivation practices findings. Wang (2024) addressed that emotional and psychological well-being is vital to school leaders' overall well-being. This is reflected in our study that school leaders' "mental

well-being" (i.e., "emotional and psychological well-being", Tennant et al., 2007) suffered the most as they worried, felt angry, frustrated, stressed, and undervalued. At times, our study also shows that these different dimensions of well-being were intertwined, indicating that the mental states are likely to relate to physical well-being in terms of a lack of rest and quality sleep, meaning that mental homeostatic failure is associated with the decline of physical homeostatic failure, and vice versa (Dodge et al., 2012; Simons & Baldwin, 2021).

Different from the cross-sectional school leader well-being study conducted in Wales and Northern Ireland by Marchant et al. (2024), our findings revealed that the adversities during the pandemic provided opportunities for our participants to intentionally prioritise and protect their well-being via both *relational* and *personal well-being cultivation practice* which are discussed in the following two sections.

School leaders' relational well-being cultivation practices – multi-faceted support networks

Findings regarding the relational dimensions of well-being cultivation demonstrate that the participants cultivated their well-being beyond personal practices. In addition to cultivating personal support networks to maintain well-being, there is a clear link between work-related factors and school leaders' well-being (Collie et al., 2020). Our findings contribute to this link by differentiating the multi-faceted *professional-institutional and personal-social* support networks which provide different psychological and practical needs for school leaders' well-being at the workplace and personal life during crisis. These are articulated in the following three points.

First, at the *professional-institutional* dimension, the support networks with *colleagues and the school community* were both "within" schools and important for developing *communication and trust* to meet the work demands and fulfil job-related

satisfaction during the crisis. The participants mentioned both networks opened effective communication channels which were the basis of nurturing trust within the schools and wider communities. This concurs with the observations by Beauchamp et al. (2021) who addressed that communication and trust are particularly important when collective actions to manage rapid changes and uncertainties are needed during a crisis. Our finding further articulates that trust in the workplace during a crisis could be developed in two ways: (1) Trusting their colleagues so they can delegate work needed to address immediate work demands during the pandemic; (2) Being trusted by the school community (e.g., students, parents) reward school leaders with a sense of job satisfaction and recognition. Indeed, the *trust* element in leadership is necessary to support school leaders' well-being and the school community's collective well-being during a crisis (Ahern and Loh, 2021).

Second, the other two *professional-institutional support networks* "outside" of the immediate school context provided different needs for school leaders' well-being during the crisis. These networks were: with *independent professionals* to develop to regain perspectives and reassurance; and with *other school leaders* to develop peer support, shared understandings and problem-solving. The contrasting stories between Anna-P10 and Joyce-P9 show that securing a network with independent professionals could be an effective well-being cultivation practice during a crisis. It implies that although personal leadership experiences, capacities and school contexts can be determinants of school leaders' mental health and well-being, the role of the institutions and organisations and their related resources matter to their well-being when facing extreme challenges. This finding suggests that a policy of coaching and supervision provision to school leaders may benefit their well-being and resilience (Sardar & Galdames, 2018).

Similar observations of seeking support from *professional-institutional* networks are in line with the study of Reid (2022) who found that school leaders in the United States suppressed their expressions of stress and anxiety within the immediate school communities to retain trust as a role model, whereas they relied on other self-care activities and individuals outside schools to release pressure and sustain well-being during the pandemic. Beausaert et al. (2021) echoed the importance of differentiating the "external social capital" (i.e., independent peer and supervisor support outside the school) and "internal social capital" (i.e., collaboration and trust in the school) to maintain a positive impact on school leaders' well-being over time. Our findings also provided empirical evidence to support the notion of network leadership provided by Harris et al. (2021) that developing school leaders' networks within and across schools could be a new imperative for all to adapt to the new educational environments that have changed since the COVID-19 pandemic.

Third, the *personal and social* dimensions of support networks can enable school leaders to obtain a sense of *belongingness, positivity, and perspectives* in their lives. These personal support networks are the fundamental cornerstones for positive psychological well-being in the context of social distancing and situational ambiguities during the COVID-19 pandemic, providing a sense of belongingness and relatedness, one of the human basic psychological needs (Deci and Ryan, 2000).

Overall, cultivating these relational dimensional support networks in different societal spheres supported the school leaders in sustaining their well-being and psychological needs in their leadership roles during the pandemic. Being a leader, it is important to differentiate and choose different types of support networks to meet various needs and demands. Different from the study of Lindley (2021) which concluded that school leaders' well-being is "a

personal responsibility" in everyday experiences, our findings revealed that school leaders' well-being cultivation process and consequences were relational and beyond personal responsibilities when facing a major crisis. Their well-being conditions were influential and influenced by the social and political domains around them due to their leadership roles. Therefore, we argue that school leaders may have a social responsibility to sustain their well-being to fulfil both professional leadership duties and personal responsibilities simultaneously when facing extreme crises.

The individual well-being cultivation practices: self-care practices and self-regulation

Our findings revealed that the school leaders made an intentional effort to develop individual well-being cultivation practices in two ways: *self-care and self-regulation*.

First, *self-care practices* included *structuring time to rest* and *engaging in pleasant activities* so that they could relax and refresh their bodies and minds, satisfy physiological and psychological needs, and regain a new homeostasis of well-being state. This finding is supported by other literature. For example, Hayes et al. (2022) asserted that self-care activities released endorphins to ease school leaders' stress and work demands during the COVID-19 pandemic. Self-care practices such as mindfulness helped school leaders to reduce stress and boost well-being during the pandemic (Liu, 2020) and physical exercises (e.g., yoga) helped with body-mind self-regulation systems to cultivate well-being (Sovereign & Walker, 2021). Self-care practices are now recommended as a prerequisite for school leaders to manage stress-facing crises (Arastaman & Çetinkaya, 2022) and promote their health and well-being (Ray et al., 2020).

The examples of our participants, Nicho-P1 who gained a "sense of control and achievement" via a small game play and Anna-P10 who emphasized the gain of "a sense of

pride" in her persistent morning run, added values to school leader well-being literature. Our study shows that self-care activities may provide "psychological security" (e.g., pride, competence, and control) which are critical elements for school leaders to address their psychological needs (Ryan & Deci, 2000) and psychological well-being (Ryff & Keyes, 1995) during a time of crisis full of ambiguity and uncertainty.

The second personal endeavour our participants did to cultivate their well-being during the pandemic was through *self-regulation* practices via *cultivating positive emotions and mindsets* and *regulating negative emotion*s. Zimmerman (2000) defined self-regulation as individuals' competence to organise, manage, analyse, assess, and adjust inner conditions to reach the anticipated objectives in challenging circumstances. Gagnon et al. (2016) stated that self-regulation skills improve individuals' well-being by regulating thoughts, actions, and emotions to achieve goals and adapt to changes whilst facing challenges. Our findings concur with the study of Zion et al. (2022) that *cultivating positive mindsets and emotions* is an effective intentional well-being cultivation practice during the pandemic, in particular, gratitude, acceptance, and hopefulness which produce self-fulfilling effects to enhance positive emotions and well-being. These practices can sometimes relate to self-care activities (e.g., exercises, mindfulness and meditations) that generate positivity and regulate negative emotions.

Our study shows that cultivating positive mindsets relevant to spirituality including faith, values, purpose and meaning are important elements to the participants' well-being cultivation. This finding provided evidence of the spiritual dimension of school leaders multidimensional well-being articulated in the studies of Chen et al. (2024) and Wang (2024). This finding also echoes the work of Loi and Ng (2021) that spirituality and meaning searching may positively enhance individuals' well-being. Globally, school leaders shared

their experiences that establishing strong and clear organisational visions and values enabled them to manage challenges during the pandemic (McLeod and Dulsky, 2021). Our findings imply that self-regulation skills can be mindfully and strategically cultivated through effortful engagement to enhance individual well-being (Mrazek et al., 2021).

Overall, the above discussion show that school leaders' well-being conditions are multidimensional and interconnected (Chen et al., 2023; Dodge et al., 2012; Wang, 2024) with an emphasis on their deterioration in physical and mental well-being, which can potentially lead to breakdown. It also demonstrates that both relational and individual dimensions of well-being cultivation practices relate to each other to sustain school leaders' well-being during the pandemic, meaning that a combination of these practices is essential and can be internationally constructed as they face ongoing leadership challenges. In line with some notions in Cummins' theory (2010, 2018), the school leaders had experienced a well-being "homeostatic failure" and operated "homeostatic management" by either engaging with or disengaging from external and internal buffers during the pandemic. All the relational and individual well-being cultivation practices revealed from our study were the "external and internal buffers" needed the most by the school leaders facing the pandemic. Different from Cummins' notions (2010, 2018), the "automatic subconscious buffers" (e.g., positive emotions) appeared in our study to be an intentional and strategic effort which included both relational and individual multidimensional practices that our participants made to cultivate multifaceted well-being facing the global crisis.

Many of the well-being cultivation practices (e.g., social connections, gratitude, mindfulness, emotional regulation) identified within this study are similar to positive psychology strategies which were found to facilitate educators' and school leaders' well-

being if applied appropriately (Wicher, 2017; Author 1 removed for anonymity). Divoll and Rineiro (2024) further provided neuroscience evidence to articulate that school leaders can benefit from learning positive psychology strategies (e.g., gratitude) that may help to reduce stress and enhance their well-being.

Limitations and future research

Two major limitations are identified. First, our study captured a small sample of school leaders' experiences in England due to practical constraints during the COVID-19 pandemic (Solbakk et al., 2021). Although, our participants represented diverse backgrounds, experiences, school types, and Ofsted inspection school records, providing credible and invaluable insights into the experiences of school leaders. Second, qualitative research with school leaders using interviews was applied in this research, the researchers' and participants' subjectivity was unavoidable. The researchers' subjective perspectives might influence the data collection, data analysis and interpretation processes (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Educational leaders might modify their responses to avoid disclosing sensitive information or due to social desirability bias (Knapp, 2017). Therefore, the findings could not be generalised and must be interpreted with limitations. Future research can investigate school leaders' experiences at a wider level in a longitudinal study with leaders in different school contexts (e.g., MAT or low Ofsted inspection ranking schools in England), and demographics (Montecinos et al., 2022), using a mixed method approach to reduce the limitation of qualitative research (Vaismoradi et al., 2013). It would be interesting to learn from future research whether the school leaders would be able to maintain the well-being practices they developed during the pandemic and how these might evolve when facing ongoing challenges. Further research can also investigate the connection between school leaders' well-being and

the school community's collective well-being particularly when facing crises (O'Toole & Simovska, 2022).

Conclusion

There is an urge worldwide that school leaders' mental health and well-being must be prioritised within the education recovery at the local, national, and global policy levels (Fotheringham et al., 202; Arnold et al., 2021; Burke and Dempsey, 2021; Hayes et al., 2022). This study affirms school leaders' well-being cultivation is an intentional and effortful process involving relational and individual practices to support their multidimensional well-being during extreme challenges. These practices can be mindfully and strategically cultivated. This study enhances the theoretical understanding of school leader well-being and offers timely insights into well-being initiatives in leadership development programmes for educational leaders and policymakers amid global challenges.

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Table 1 Demographics of the school leaders

Id	Pseudonym	Gender	Role	Headship (Years)	Experience in education (Years)	School phase	Student age	School type	Ofsted inspection	Region
P1	Nichol	Female	Headteacher	5	21	Primary	4-11	Foundation School	Good	London
P2	Nina	Female	Assistant Headteacher	5	12	Secondary and 16 to 18	16-18	Free school - Multi Academy Trust	Unavailable	South East
P3	Jenny	Female	Headteacher	15	30	Primary	4-11	Community School	Good	South West
P4	Claire	Female	Headteacher	14	35	Primary	2-11	Faith school - Voluntary controlled school	Good	South West
P5	David	Male	Headteacher	8	21	Secondary and 16 to 18	11-19	Academy sponsor led	Good	Yorkshire and the Humber
P6	Ben	Male	Headteacher	10	20	Junior school/Primary	7-11	Faith school - Voluntary controlled school	Good	South West
P7	Mary	Female	Executive headteacher	7	10	Primary	2-11	Free school - Multi Academy Trust	Unavailable	South West
P8	Brian	Male	Headteacher	17	30	Primary	3-11	Faith school - Voluntary aided school - Faith academy in transition	Inadequate	South West
P9	Joyce	Female	Headteacher	4	32	Primary	4-11	Faith school - Academy converter	Good	South West
P10	Anna	Female	Headteacher	2	6	Primary	4-11	Academy sponsor led	Unavailable	South West

Table 2 Themes of school leaders' well-being cultivations during the COVID-19 pandemic

Theme	Sub-themes	Categories	Category Descriptions
Multidimensional wellbeing	***Mental well-being***	Anxiety, Worries, Stress	Descriptions of participants experienced extreme anxiety, worry, and stress due to uncertainty about the future.
		Anger, Frustration, Undervalue	Descriptions of anger arose from frustrations, undervalued, dissatisfaction with governments' guidance and broader uncertainties from the COVID-19.
	Physical well-being	Restlessness and sleeplessness	Poor sleep quality and lack of physical rest led to mental unrest.
		Exhaustion	Participants felt completely exhausted physically, emotionally, psychologically and cognitively.
		Physical illness	Experiences of physical illness often coupled with anxiety caused by self- quarantine and work adjustments.
	Breakdown	Burnout, Overwhelmed, Survival	Descriptions of feeling overwhelmed, exhausted and in a survival mode.
		Cognitive functioning impaired	Descriptions of cognitive functioning, thinking and organisation were negatively affected.
Relational wellbeing cultivation - multi-faceted support networks	***Professional-institutional network***	Colleagues - for work-demand and trust	Developing infrastructures of regular meetings and channels of communications helped foster trust and connection with colleagues, helping to address work-demands.
		Independent professionals - for perspectives and reassurance	Seeking professional support and training such as consultancy, coach and wellbeing training courses externally to regain perspectives and reassurance.
		School communities - for job-related satisfaction	Developing communications channels to received feedback from the community, parents and student, such as cards and messages, boosted work-satisfaction.
		Other school leaders - for peer support	Maintaining and developing peers support networks amongst headteachers/school leaders provided shared understanding, problem solving, connections.
	Personal-social network	For belongingness	Connections with trusted families and friends to have dialouges developed a sense of belonging
		For positivity	Valuing support from families and friends fostered positivity during hardship
Individual well-being cultivation practices – self-care and self-regulation	***Prioritising self-care activities***	Scheduling time to reset	Regulating work-demands and making personal care plan deliberately, such as part time work or flexible hours promoted work-life-balance and better sleep.
		Engaging in pleasant activities	Engaging in pleasant activities improved mental health, including (1) Exercise and good diet; (2) Nature: outdoor activities in the nature; (3) Leisure: Game, TV, reading; (4) Mindfulness and meditation
	Developing self-regulation skills	Cultivating positive emotions and cognitive mindset	Cultivating positive mindsets, through gratitude, acceptance, hopefulness, savouring and spirituality, enhanced wellbeing. Spirituality practices include, faith, value, meaning and purpose.
		Regulating negative emotions	Releasing negative emotion appropriately and disengaging from unnecessary comparisons helped manage emotional burdens

Appendix The Interview guide

The main research question:

How do school leaders cultivate their well-being when managing unprecedented challenges in their leadership roles during a global crisis?

Main interview question 1 to probe the participants' well-being states during the crisis:

1. What are the most challenging moments you have experienced since the pandemic?
   1.1 How have you been since the pandemic (at the beginning of the Covid-19 outbreak, during school lockdown and school reopening)?
   1.2 Have you felt worried or stressed during the pandemic? And what has made you feel worried and stressed?
   1.3 What are the most challenging aspects of your work or tasks since the pandemic? Any examples?
   1.4 What were your feelings when facing these challenges?
   1.5 How have these challenges affected you and your work?

Main interview question 2 to probe the participants' well-being cultivation practices and processes during the crisis:

2. How do you manage your well-being so you can better accomplish personal and work challenges facing the pandemic?
   2.1 How do you manage these challenges?
   2.2 How has the pandemic affected your wellbeing? In what way? Positively or negatively? Any examples?
   2.3 What do you do when feeling worried and stressed or unwell?
   2.4 How do you keep up or manage your work when feeling worried, stressed or unwell?
   2.5 What support have you had since the pandemic?
   2.6 What support has helped you the most since the pandemic? Within the school? Outside the school?