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ABSTRACT
Social emotional well-being has become a focal point of government policies and standards requiring schools to provide a whole-school approaches to meet the diverse needs of students, yet there is a paucity of understanding around teacher's preparedness to meet these standards. This study responds to a need to understand teacher's preparedness to meet these expectations with a focus on the middle years of social emotional development and classroom practices. A phenomenological framework informed data generation using semi-structured interviews with three Australian middle years teachers which was followed with thematic analysis. Three major themes were inductively derived from the data. First, access to relevant school supported professional development is needed to ensure the ongoing rigour and teaching and understanding of approaches to effectively support student social emotional well-being. Second, a teacher's efficacy to proactively teach and support student well-being depends on both their professional and life experience. Both need to be recognized and affirmed as valuable by teachers themselves and wider education systems. And, thirdly, the study affirms the importance of relationships – student-teacher, parent-teacher and collegial, as part of effective strategies to support the teaching of social emotional well-being. These findings lay the foundation for further studies to construct an understanding of whole school practices and teacher's daily work in delivering social emotional well-being learning.

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Social emotional well-being; teacher preparedness; professional relationships; middle years; professional development

Australian teachers in the middle years have a professional commitment to providing a supportive and nurturing learning environment governed by policies and teaching standards (Australian Government, 2022; Education Queensland, 2023; Queensland College of Teachers, 2023). To meet this requirement, inclusive classroom practices have been developed to promote student social emotional wellbeing (SEWB) and require teachers to be proactive in making deliberate adjustments for a wide range of students' needs, considering individual characteristics and contextual factors of the student (Brühwiler & Vogt, 2020; Reinke et al., 2011). In some cases, differentiating instruction is used to proactively create optimal inclusive learning environments, such as working in groups using cooperative learning and self-regulatory capabilities as part of teaching student social emotional wellbeing (SEWB) (Hardy et al., 2019). However, as noted by Hardy et al. (2019) and Brühwiler and Vogt (2020), a teacher's capacity to meet the complex needs of students pedagogically and use adaptive strategies rests squarely with the teacher's own perceived capability.

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There is well-established evidence to suggest that a student's sense of belonging, through strong student–teacher interactions and creating a safe setting can have a tremendous impact on their wellness and functionality (Bower et al., 2015; Brühwiler & Vogt, 2020). This is especially important at the crucial developmental juncture that occurs during the middle years, 9 to 12 years of age where teachers are fundamental in influencing and pedagogically meeting the needs to facilitate this development (Thomson et al., 2021). However, this knowledge is often subjective due to the teacher's own understanding, and how they create their own personal construct through their own experiences (van Kraayenoord, 2007). As a result, teachers' understanding of what types of environments support SEWB are frequently based on what they see as reality or assume to be true of the child (Ekornes et al., 2012; Reinke et al., 2011; Scott, 2014).

This is further problematized as teacher's capacities to respond to the SEWB needs of students squarely rest on their confidence to effectively support students (A. Graham et al., 2011). There is currently limited research on how teachers perceive their capacity and the practices they implement to respond to support the SEWB of their students (Bower et al., 2015; A. Graham et al., 2011). As such, research in local contexts is essential in Australia because it lays the foundation to understanding school wide approaches to supporting SEWB of students and how broader policy is implemented in the classroom context. Providing an Australian context furthermore broadens the field.

Defining social emotional wellbeing

A person's thoughts and feelings about themselves and other people are referred to as their social and emotional wellbeing. This also includes having the resilience and coping skills necessary to deal with problems as they arise yet still lead a fulfilled life (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2012). Gregory et al. (2019) and O'Rourke (2019) emphasize that recent research in SEWB has recognized students' social and emotional abilities as essential to learning and to developing their capabilities to build relationships and self-regulate. However, Main (2018), Gregory et al. (2019) and Mælan et al. (2020) stress that a teacher's lack of self-efficacy to promote and support a child's wellbeing can be reported as a lack of teacher confidence and have implications for practice.

Teachers' perceptions of being equipped

The classroom is an ideal space to develop and meet the social, emotional, and intellectual needs of students (A. Graham et al., 2011). Reinke et al. (2011) highlights that teachers are therefore uniquely positioned to use pedagogy to support the SEWB of students, however, there are frequently disparities between this role and their knowledge and training experiences (Bower et al., 2015; Mazzer & Rickwood, 2015).

According to policy and Australian teaching standards (Education Queensland, 2023; Queensland College of Teachers, 2023), it is the educator's responsibility to ensure that all students' needs are met, regardless of their preparedness in this area. There is substantial research on the importance of teachers developing their professional knowledge to provide inclusive pedagogical practices for supporting social emotional wellbeing, in particular for instructional learning and students from socio-economic backgrounds (Brühwiler & Vogt, 2020; L. Graham, 2019; van Kraayenoord, 2007; VanTassel-Baska, 2018). However, there is limited literature on how teachers perceive being equipped and proactive to meet these social emotional needs in the middle years (Main, 2018; Reinke et al., 2011).

The importance of SEWB has been illustrated in recent literature as being part of school systems and seen as essential learning to develop lifelong skills (Ekornes et al., 2012; Gregory et al., 2019; Main, 2018; O'Connor, 2020; O'Rourke, 2019). From this, SEWB has been recognized as equally fundamental as curriculum instruction, as successful learners should have a sense of worth, confidence, self-awareness, optimism, resilience, empathy, and respect for others, as well as the social skills to form and maintain healthy relationships (Barr et al., 2008). To date, several studies have investigated classroom practices to observe the effectiveness of teachers providing social emotional support for their students and the challenges teachers may face when implementing instruction to achieve this (Ekornes et al., 2012; L. Graham, 2019; O'Rourke, 2019). Hosford and O'Sullivan (2016) study investigated teachers' efficacy in inclusive practice. The study explored teacher perceptions and how a supportive school climate can positively influence how teachers' view their efficacy based on Bandura's theory that one's capacity is based on their belief to succeed (Jones & Bouffard, 2012).

These researchers have found that the self-appraisal of teachers regarding their perception of their ability to manage the demands of the social needs of students is dependent on their belief in their ability and expectations to meet these demands (Bower et al., 2015). It is interesting to note that schools that work collaboratively and provide access to quality support, can still be impacted by how teachers view this support and their openness to it if it is meaningful and relevant to their needs (Hosford & O'Sullivan, 2016). This view is supported by L. Graham (2019) and van Kraayenoord (2007), who argue that when teachers understand inclusive practice and their role in developing a positive, supportive classroom, they also provide a climate that supports students' social emotional needs. Similarly, Gregory et al. (2019) and Mazzer and Rickwood (2015) also found that teachers who feel equipped to meet the social emotional demands of students are more capable of implementing deliberate adaptive strategies for an effective inclusive environment.

Proactive practice

Hardy et al. (2019) and Reinke et al. (2011) explain that teachers provide conscious and deliberate strategies to accommodate social emotional considerations based on their experience and their knowledge of adopting strategies. Mazzer and Rickwood (2015) agree stating that a teacher's role as being primarily to manage behavioural issues, while psychologists have a larger role in conducting social emotional education to support students. However, Hardy et al. (2019) claim that the acknowledgement of the individual needs of students, based on the teacher's professional knowledge, beliefs, and skills, is the prerequisite to providing a variety of pedagogical choices for meeting the needs of the students. The competence and preparedness of teachers therefore is an integral part of a teacher's role, and this, according to Reinke et al. (2011) relies on teachers making decisions about students' individualized SEWB support to make the appropriate adaptive adjustments.

Teachers' professional capacities

A. Graham et al. (2011), Mazzer and Rickwood (2015), and L. Graham (2019) highlight that implementing adequate inclusive teaching practices is essential for supporting students who exhibit deficits in social emotional functioning. A recent study by Mazzer and Rickwood (2015) used a qualitative approach to examine whether teachers believed themselves to effectively support students' SEWB. The study was conducted with 21 Australian teachers and investigated how they felt about promoting positive mental health and wellbeing in young children with these deficits. Mazzer and Rickwood (2015) found that all participants felt it was their duty to provide SEWB support for students, but this was mostly limited to a baseline of support due to their lack of expertise in this area.

Reinke et al. (2011) also used a qualitative study with significant findings regarding aspects of teachers' skills and knowledge in implementing mental health support. They found that 55.5% of teachers did, while 45.5% said they did not or were not sure. The study also asked teachers if they had the skills to meet the mental health demands of their students, and, surprisingly, only 4% strongly agreed, 24% agreed, 31% were neutral, 36% disagreed, and 5% strongly disagreed (Reinke et al., 2011). These findings appear to be consistent with the findings of Bower et al. (2015), Brühwiler and Vogt (2020), and Main (2018), whereby teachers who feel they lack this skill set can also view their lack of ability as a barrier to being equipped to provide adequate SEWB support for students.

Research questions and intent

Informed by the literature, this study was guided by the following research question and sub questions to address the problems identified through the review of literature. These questions provide a clear purpose for the research ahead:

How equipped are classroom teachers to proactively manage social emotional wellbeing of students in the middle years?

- Does a teacher's experience play into their perception of being equipped to proactively support and manage the development of student's social emotional wellbeing?
- What roles do relationships play in being equipped to proactively manage social emotional wellbeing of students?

Methodology and methods

Unlike many previous studies that have taken a quantitative methodological approach, the current research project approached the topic using ontological realism and a constructivist epistemological framework within a phenomenological methodology (L. Cohen et al., 2017; Scott, 2014). These research paradigms were selected to provide a distinct perspective on this important facet of teachers' work with middle years students to expand how we currently understand these phenomena. Furthermore, the guiding research framework allowed for a subjective point of view to understand how teachers define social emotional wellbeing in the middle years. Using this research design offers contrasting insights to prior studies and valuable descriptions and explanations of multiple and differing interpretations of SEWB and adaptive pedagogical practices that adds to the richness of the data (L. Cohen et al., 2017).

As part of this approach and aligning with the selected methodology, the research was approached in a way that assisted the researcher to suspend their own perspectives and minimize misconceptions (Nicholls, 2019). When exploring the experiences of the research participants, it was fundamental for the researcher to keep an open mind to gain an understanding of the teachers' perspectives, which may be different from their own. To complement this, a constructivist epistemological stance was adopted to understand how teachers perceive their teaching practices to be effective. In doing this, the researcher also plays a role in co-constructing the data using reflexivity and this was engineered into the methods (Johnson & Christensen, 2020; Nicholls, 2019). These ontological and epistemological positions were carried over into the thematic analysis and reporting the research (Braun & Clarke, 2021).

Participant sampling strategy

Before commencing field research, approval was received from Human Research Ethics, University of Southern Queensland. Having received approval, an email was then sent to the principal of a local primary school that the researcher worked at to ask permission to carry out interviews with middle years teachers for the research project. To mitigate perceived power imbalance and intimidation due to the principal researcher being familiar with the participants, the school principal was asked to email the participants and invite them to volunteer for an interview to collect data.

The selected school site is situated in a low socio-economic area with a population of approximately 730 students. The school uses the Positive Behaviour for Learning (PBL) framework which encompasses tiered support based on data for the effective implementation of positive behaviour support strategies (Queensland Government, 2023b). The PBL framework provided a tool for teachers to explicitly teach and build students' social emotional competencies to improve their emotional regulation and get along with others (Queensland Government, 2023b).

A total of three teachers volunteered to participate in interviews from years 4, 5, and 6, respectively. The participants were provided with a participant information sheet and consent form which were read and signed by the participants and then returned to the principal researcher before the interviews commenced. To maintain confidentiality, participants and the school were de-identified using pseudonyms to align with planned ethical requirements. The participants are described as follows:

- Mary is an experienced senior teacher who has been teaching Years 3 to 7 for over 35 years. She currently teaches Year 5.
- Jane is a beginning teacher. Has been teaching Year 4 for two years.
- Sue is a senior teacher who specialized in middle years. She has been teaching Years 3 to 5 for 12 years and is currently teaching Year 6.

Data generation

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with the research participants to gather data using open-ended questions. These questions were crafted within a phenomenological approach of bridling to prompt participants' thoughts regarding their efficacy in developing SEWB in the middle years (Nicholls, 2019). Open-ended questions allowed the participants to respond on their terms and follow-up questions were asked to clarify responses and explore teachers' views while maintaining a clear focus on the topic (L. Cohen et al., 2017). Each interview lasted approximately 20–30 minutes and was held face-to-face between the principal researcher and the participant on-site at the primary school. Audio recordings were made of the interviews.

Data analysis

Braun and Clarke's (2021) methods for reflexive thematic analysis were used as an inductive method of analysis to code themes driven by the data from the interviews. Qualitative data analysis used participants' experiences, opinions, and viewpoints in response to the interview questions, resulting in emerged insights and an understanding by connecting the data and searching for patterns and their meanings (Braun & Clarke, 2021).

Reflexive thematic analysis was chosen to make sense of the data using a subjective lens while keeping focused on the research questions (Punch & Oancea, 2014). This process allowed for reflexive exploration of the data to refine and clarify concepts that had been developed inductively and to link them to research (Punch & Oancea, 2014). Braun and Clarke's (2021) six phases for thematic data analysis were adopted that involved a linear process of familiarization, systematic searching, identifying patterns and developing initial themes, and defining codes before continuing the analytic process into the writing phase.

As part of the inductive coding, Johnson and Christensen's (2020) advice was taken on board to ensure that "theming the data" should not stop at identifying the themes. Therefore, after the initial coding, further steps were used to search for relationships and important nuances within the data set (p. 552). Furthermore, the reflexive practice was applied to be continually conscious of any researcher assumptions and decide whether this assumption applied to the analysis process (Braun & Clarke, 2021; Nicholls, 2019).

Results

The following is a list of themes that were created as a result of using reflexive thematic analysis by integrating the teachers' perspectives on their preparedness regarding this phenomenon. These themes were defined as:

- Experience refers to both the teachers' professional experience and life experience that relates to their efficacy of being proactive in applying SEWB support.
- Support incorporates school-wide support and supportive collegial relationships that help build teachers' knowledge and understanding of SEWB.
- Relationships comprise of parent–teacher relationships and student–teacher relationships that facilitate the effectiveness of providing SEWB support.

Findings and discussion

Being equipped

The participants reported that teachers in general are seen to have the confidence and skills necessary to establish a secure and supportive learning environment (Main, 2018). However, these responses from the participants were varied depending on the level of experience they had. Sue responded about her tertiary studies and asserted they were theory-based instead of having real-world experiences. Sue stated that despite the "fake scenarios [the university provided], it is totally different when you are in a classroom". Yet, Jane was more confident in her opinion of being equipped and stated that "it depends on the level of the needs and the reaction to the needs at the time". She further added that "I am better prepared than just a few years ago [and] there has been a lot of changes in the last couple of years that have made a big difference [such as] changes in school support". These responses contrasted with Mary's, who felt differently. In response to the question, can you tell me about how you feel being equipped? she replied, "I am equipped with the general maintenance of the social emotional wellbeing of the students". However, when asked to clarify this, Mary stated that "I have a lot of strategies to help kids feel confident and secure". These views of being equipped showed that all the participants commented on the importance of having a range of skills to cope with supporting students SEWB. Nonetheless, the teachers also indicated that they do not know how to deliver this support effectively (Mazzer & Rickwood, 2015; Reinke et al., 2011).

The term proactive management refers to how equipped teachers are about making deliberate adjustments to meet the SEWB demands of students. According to Reinke et al. (2011), teachers can be reluctant to implement support if they do not understand SEWB due to a lack of training or evidence-based strategies. The participants shared their definitions of SEWB during the interview questions. For instance, Mary said she was not as confident "[with] the pointy end and kids with genuine mental health issues or trauma". Instead, Mary reflected "I would like some extra trauma training, some counselling skills, [and] I think it would be the best thing for the general teacher". In contrast, Jane remarked, "I think I will do that [support] on the spot and depending on what is happening [and] not make a fuss". Jane also stated "there were times … I used my tool bag and every tool in there and had no idea what to do next". Conversely, Sue gave examples of being proactive by reflecting on "what I have done [and] what I could have done better". In this case, Sue understood what proactively managing meant because of her reflective practice to improve how she manages students requiring SEWB support. These findings suggest that teacher's preparedness does not only mean a willingness to teach but also, according to Main (2018), having the skills and ability to meet the SEWB demands of students.

Professional experience

The participants shared their views on how professional experience impacts being prepared to support SEWB for their students. Both Mary and Jane stated they felt confident in catering to the social emotional demands of middle years students because of their prior teaching experience. Mary stated, "I am confident in social emotional skills". This was also reiterated by Jane, who said, "I am better prepared than just a few years ago. … Through experience, I have a bank of strategies and tools to help me". However, Sue felt uncertain about being equipped due to her lack of knowledge in this area. Sue further mentioned:

I do not think I am fully equipped for it [SEWB demands]. Courses in university do not give us the real world. Most of us would [say] you are [not] equipped until you are in a classroom; learn as you go.

Sue also recognized a lack of knowledge as a shortfall due to her tertiary studies offering a lack of courses to prepare her for SEWB demands as a beginning teacher. The barriers Sue identifies concur with the ideas of Main (2018) and Reinke et al. (2011), who stated that SEWB can be a deficit in education in tertiary courses. Understandably, a large number of teachers perceive to be unqualified to provide effective social emotional support and directly relate this to not having confidence in this domain (J. Cohen, 2006). This view is also reinforced by Jane's reflection. "I think I could definitely improve, [even though] I understand what works for certain kids. I know what the kid likes and how they want to be supported". Therefore, professional experience can be a crucial element for consideration to improve teachers' preparedness and be fully equipped for the role of being responsive to the SEWB needs of the students (Bower et al., 2015). Conversely, Reinke et al. (2011) argue that, aside from the level of professional experience of teachers, providing interventions as needed is part of a teacher's role regardless of whether they are adequately trained to do so.

Arguably, teachers who overcome barriers, such as a lack of experience, will fulfil this role, regardless of their experience and level of preparedness (Reinke et al., 2011). This is seen from Jane's perspective, who said, "[Being equipped] depends on the level of the needs and the [teachers"] reaction to the needs at the time'. That being said, all participants stated they had a bank of strategies that they use to support students; for instance, when feeling anxious, they provide downtime as well as teach social skills. However, it is interesting that the beginning teacher was the only applicant who commented that they used deliberate adaptations to cater to students' needs: "it would be purposeful in my head checking on them [and] spending more one-on-one time with them. Brain breaks would be one of them [thought-out adjustments]".

Similarly, Jane also stated that regardless of her responses to students' SEWB needs as "on the spot", she added, "[it] depends on the kid, [such as] giving a student downtime or going for a walk outside for a little bit to support those needs as it is needed". Indeed, an inclusive practice includes being proactive to make reasonable adjustments that consider the knowledge of a student's characteristics to ensure a positive response to meet their individual needs (Education Queensland, 2023; L. Graham, 2019; Queensland College of Teachers, 2023).

Life experience

All participants expressed that life experience played a major part in teaching and being prepared and adequately support students. Interestingly, Jane was the only participant who discussed how personal experience was also a contributing factor. She said, "I feel really equipped through just my own life experience. I think that being equipped is literally being experienced and, that is with other kids and my own life". This suggests that despite teachers' perceptions of the life experiences that they bring to their teaching practice, it is the culmination of personal experience, professional knowledge, training, and the implementation of strategies that highlight what teachers know about being equipped for this role (Reinke et al., 2011).

In this regard, it was interesting to note Mary's response when asked how she felt about being equipped to manage SEWB of students and how she makes deliberate adjustments for them. Mary stated, "I have to decide what is better for them in the long run, [which is] exclude, structure it, or scaffold it. It is just basically doing whatever they need to do their best". Most surprisingly, despite Mary's teaching for more than 35 years, she did not mention life experience as a factor to help support students. However, Mary said "I will learn a lot from the Inclusive Support teacher or the Guidance Officer or any other support that I can find for strategies that might help". Mary's viewpoint concurs with the findings of A. Graham et al. (2011), Mælan et al. (2020), and Reinke et al. (2011), who suggest that regardless of having a range of experiences in this domain, teachers could all benefit from support to fill the gap in their knowledge, provide the expectations of teachers, and improve their self-efficacy in promoting SEWB.

School-wide support

The data from the participants overall demonstrated a commonality in their views and all felt more skills were required to develop their capacity to meet the SEWB demands in the classroom. The participants provided a variety of perspectives on SEWB professional development (PD). Jane stated:

> I think definitely a bit more PD in how to support those particular types of students [it] would be helpful because it is still another tool and a strategy to put in your tool bag. I think that there does definitely need to be ongoing PD.

The participant's perspective of professional development is necessary for their compliance to apply the knowledge to make reasonable adjustments to meet students' individual needs (Queensland Government, 2023a). The data also supports the work of Humphrey (2013) and Bower et al. (2015) that there needs to be a school-wide commitment to provide access to professional development that is planned, delivered consistently, and routinely.

Mary and Sue both shared the same views. Mary commented that "really good PD helps you understand that child". Sue reiterated this by saying, "PD helps you understand that child". Again, all the participant's perspectives on professional development in SEWB were on the same thread of providing a school environment so students can engage positively and be able to develop social connectedness and interpersonal relationships as well as their emotional competencies (Bower et al., 2015; Hosford & O'Sullivan, 2016). In this regard, the participants had varying degrees of knowledge of SEWB but commonly stated a demand for more training and resources. Arguably, effective SEWB professional development needs to be provided depending on teachers' barriers and needs (Main, 2018; Reinke et al., 2011).

It is evident from this data that schools that address the issue of teacher preparedness for SEWB practices will need to identify what professional development or individualized upskilling is required to provide an efficacious, inclusive, supportive practice (Hosford & O'Sullivan, 2016). Therefore, understanding the participants' perception of their capacity to support students' SEWB is vital to determining what is required to support these teachers in this domain (Ekornes et al., 2012). The participants all explained that school support was essential. Mary emphasized this by saying, "inclusion is necessary, but bring that with professional development [and] a lot of expert support". In support of this opinion, Main (2018) and A. Graham et al. (2011) claim that teachers need to be prepared and have the necessary knowledge to provide reasonable adjustments, however, this depends on what school support for inclusive practice looks like. Therefore, when schools address the need for teacher SEWB preparedness, through either professional development or individualized upskilling, they can fill the gap in teachers' knowledge and build their confidence and skillset to provide inclusive SEWB practices (Brühwiler & Vogt, 2020; Ekornes et al., 2012; A. Graham et al., 2011; Queensland Government, 2023a).

Relationships

Collegial relationships

Quality relationships are essential for creating positive and connected individuals that show acceptance of others (Bower et al., 2015). The data highlights that connectedness formed from the relationship with others is also important, as individuals sense that belonging and being valued is due to the relationship they have with others (Bower et al., 2015). Jane demonstrated this collegiality when she sought information from the previous teacher of the student for strategies. Jane further explained that this collaboration aided in the formation of positive relationships with the student saying, "I relied on some of the teachers that already knew them". These supportive collegial relationships to reflect the positive culture of the school as they shared the same norms, beliefs, and behaviours set by the school's expectations (Betzler & Löschke, 2021; Jones & Bouffard, 2012).

This data suggests a school's culture can be influenced by the interactions, relationships, and support to provide positive student outcomes (Jones & Bouffard, 2012). A positive school-wide approach can be characterized by building caring relationships, shared pedagogical approaches, and a sense of community (Bower et al., 2015). All the participants mentioned connections with their colleagues, which helped them make adaptive strategies for students. Mary reflected, "every person that comes into the room can offer something new; I will watch and listen to what they are doing [in the classroom". Collegial support not only means within the school community, but also through online sources. For example, Jane said, "I am in a few groups and teacher groups, through Facebook [and] ask what you have used that has helped you". It is also worth mentioning that the participants agreed that at this primary school, a whole-school approach to having supportive collegial relationships to build the expertise of teachers is highly encouraged.

The data reflected those supportive interactions between teachers and leadership and provided opportunities to build and promote efficacious inclusive practice (Bower et al., 2015; Hosford & O'Sullivan, 2016). When asked about the tools used to help the students, Mary said, "if they need to ask for advice, I will often go down and speak to my deputy principal". She further emphasized the importance of this relationship saying, "I consider them to be the expert". These insights recognize that school-wide commitment involves leadership support and a teacher's awareness and commitment to improving their knowledge and confidence to improve inclusive practice (Humphrey, 2013). Furthermore, there are multiple layers to developing and building collegial connections within the school context by fostering positive school–community interactions (Betzler & Löschke, 2021).

Parent–teacher relationships

The relationship formed with parents is a vital contributing factor to knowing about the student's contextual factors (Brühwiler & Vogt, 2020). The participants noted that the connection between home and school is essential when considering a student's needs and sense of self to promote the SEWB development of the child (J. Cohen, 2006). When talking about why parent–teacher relationships are important to know the student, Mary stated that "links between school and home helps". Further, Jane also commented, "it is really about making those connections". Again, the partnership between home and school can assist in creating a shared-responsibility process whereby parents are encouraged to get involved with a focus on the student's SEWB (J. Cohen, 2006).

As the participants identified during the interviews, communication with parents can be a bridge to supporting the student through understanding the home environment and the role of teachers, which is particularly important to ensure the appropriate social and emotional skills are developed (Bower et al., 2015). An example of how communication between the teacher and parent can help support the student was expressed by Mary, who said, "I was very aware of what is happening at home because mum had asked just to keep it quiet". This sentiment was echoed by Jane, who recalled a time she made contact to communicate with a parent. She said, "I had an email from mum to let me know that her and the husband had split and just to keep an eye on him". The participants' responses highlighted nuances in the role they play, regardless of their views on their preparedness, in the phenomenon of developing SEWB for students.

As stipulated by the Queensland College of Teachers (2023), the role of the teacher is to know the student and to design and implement strategies to support the student. These teaching standards inform professional knowledge, practice and engagement and provide guidelines on what teachers should know and do. Therefore, the nuances of these findings are not based on teachers' perspectives of being equipped but rather on their commitment to these standards. This is significant because regardless of what teachers perceive about their efficacy in providing SEWB support for students, education policies and standards place teachers in a position to ensure students have a safe, supportive, and inclusive environment (Australian Government, 2022; J. Cohen, 2006; Education Queensland, 2023; Queensland College of Teachers, 2023; Queensland Government, 2023a).

Student–teacher relationships

Teachers have a professional responsibility to create and maintain a safe, caring, and supportive environment for all students (J. Cohen, 2006; Queensland College of Teachers, 2023). Again, the climate of the school is the platform to create a sense of school community, and this is gained from engaging students and forming positive relationships (Mælan et al., 2020). From the perspective of the participants, forming a shared sense of being safe and supported is based on the teacher focusing on a positive classroom climate (J. Cohen, 2006; O'Rourke, 2019). To support this claim Mary commented, "it is good to involve the child as much as possible [and] they have to feel valued and appreciated". The data also suggested that student–teacher relationships are the foundation for student's sense of being valued and supported, which was reiterated by Jane who said:

> I think it's all about just trying to get to know them to start with because if they trust you, you have got a better chance of being able to support them. I think that is where that inclusive practice of having them in the classrooms makes that connection.

In this regard, positive relationships become the foundation for making connections and building a sense of belonging to help the student engage in the SEWB support provisions based on their needs and circumstances (L. Graham, 2019; Portilla et al., 2014; van Kraayenoord, 2007).

Again, the same perspective was also evident when Sue said, "I think I found that you have to have a relationship with the kids [and] you cannot support [them] without the relationship because they are not willing to open up". Hence, the common factor for all participants was a focus on how teachers have an important role forming positive relationships in the classroom to enable the student to feel valued and build a connection with the teacher (Bower et al., 2015; O'Rourke, 2019).

Conclusions

The discussions with the research participants highlight three main findings that inform wider discussions on teachers' preparedness to deliver SWEB in the middle-years. Firstly, teachers view professional development as important regardless of their varying degrees of preparedness in SEWB. Second, the study highlights that positive relationships are fundamental to teacher's practices in supporting students with SEWB developmental needs. Particularly, the results highlight that relationships are a culmination of all stakeholders in the student's life, both inside and outside of the school community to not only knowing the needs of the student but also to check that the proactive support provided is effective. Finally, it is evident that making purposeful, meaningful, and deliberate connections with home are essential criterion for creating and continuing quality relationships with the student and the student's stakeholders. As the discussion highlighted, it is positive relationships between teacher's experiences, colleagues, school environment and parents lie at the core of teaching SEWB and learning.

The results emphasize how teachers felt about being equipped to meet SEWB demands in the middle years and provide new understandings of how teachers lack understanding of what SEWB is, and the strategies required to implement the social emotional skills needed for middle years students' development. As such, this study begins to fill a gap in this field of literature. There are opportunities for further research focussing on the area of professional development and teacher feelings and preparedness to support student social emotional wellbeing and how this directly informs classroom practice and pedagogy.

Though this study was limited in scope by the small number of participants, the findings presented here signify the importance of teachers' experience, school support, and relationships and how these elements play a role in the SEWB for students. It would be highly useful for future studies, to gain further insight into teachers' perceptions by including all teachers from years 3 to 6 with focus groups for each year level at a single school. These findings could then be used to consider the expansion of the project to other school sites. It is also noted that the study was limited to teachers and that important insights could be drawn from interviewing viewpoints from school leadership perspectives. In future studies, semi-structured interviews could include the leadership team to provide a system-wide approach to SEWB to make a comparison of teachers' perspectives in this domain.

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Author's contributions

TP is responsible for the design of the project, data collection, data analysis and drafting of this paper. TP was mentored throughout this project by CDN who refined the methodology and methods, managed the ethics application process, reviewed drafts and approved the final manuscript.

Declaration of conflicting interests

The authors declare no conflict of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Data availability statement

The datasets generated and analysed during the current study are not publicly available due to the scope and context of the study. The data can be requested in a de-identified format from the corresponding author for a reasonable purpose.

Ethics

This research was conducted with the approval of the University of Southern Queensland Human Research Ethics Committee (UniSQ HREC Project ID HRE22009731) and complies with requirements pertaining to the written and verbal consent of participants. The authors take complete responsibility for the data generation, maintenance, and accuracy of data analysis.

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