

# Guest editorial: Advancing equity, voice and sustainability in school well-being

633

Well-being has become a defining concern of contemporary education (Cefai *et al.*, 2021; OECD, 2021). Across policy, research and practice, schools are increasingly called upon to respond to rising levels of stress among both students and teachers, while also navigating widening social inequalities, the pressures of digital culture and intensifying demands on educators' work (Bor *et al.*, 2014; Sandmeier *et al.*, 2022; UNESCO, 2019). In this context, well-being is positioned as both an urgent priority and an integral dimension of educational quality and school development (WHO and UNESCO, 2021). Recent policy initiatives, including the WHO European Region policy paper on school well-being (WHO European Region, 2025), call for coordinated, whole-system approaches to strengthen well-being in schools. Yet, as this special issue demonstrates, what is meant by "well-being", and how it is conceptualised, enacted and measured, remains deeply contested.

Existing approaches have tended to emphasise resilience, coping and personal responsibility, with comparatively less attention given to broader contextual and structural factors. While such approaches offer important tools, they risk obscuring the structural, relational and ecological conditions that shape how well-being is experienced and distributed. Questions of power, privilege and voice frequently remain at the margins. As a result, well-being can become depoliticised, treated as a neutral or technical domain, rather than recognised as an ethical and political concern (O'Toole and Simovska, 2022).

This special issue, *Advancing Equity, Voice and Sustainability in School Well-being*, brings together contributions that critically re-examine these assumptions. Across diverse contexts, the papers challenge one-size-fits-all models and instead foreground well-being as a relational, systemic and context-dependent process. In doing so, they reposition well-being as central to broader educational aims, including equity, democratic participation and sustainable futures (United Nations, 2015).

## Reimagining well-being as relational, ecological and systemic

A central contribution of this special issue lies in its call to move beyond individualised understandings of well-being towards more relational, ecological and systemic conceptualisations. In *School Well-being Unveiled: Insights from a Systematic Literature Review*, Simovska and Primdahl (2026) highlight how the concept of well-being has expanded rather than stabilised, incorporating diverse and sometimes contradictory perspectives. These range from individual skill-based approaches to broader relational and socioecological frameworks. As Simovska and Primdahl (2026) show, these conceptual differences matter. Interventions that focus on individual competencies tend to emphasise adaptation – changing how students think, feel or behave – while more holistic approaches aim to transform the environments in which well-being emerges. The latter, although more complex, offer greater potential for meaningful and sustained change.

This systemic orientation is echoed across several contributions in this special issue. Lindskov (2026) conceptualises well-being in *Mapping the ecosystem of Student Well-Being: Understanding entangled and interconnected factors* as emerging through interconnected systems of school, peer, family and community life. Hartnett (2026) similarly demonstrates in *Teacher Well-being as a Systemic Phenomenon: A Psychological Needs and Ecological Systems Analysis across the school ecological system*, how teacher well-being is shaped across multiple ecological levels, where experiences of autonomy, competence and relatedness are influenced by interactions across immediate and wider contexts.



Together, these contributions challenge the notion of well-being as a discrete outcome or individual attribute. Instead, they position it as a dynamic, relational process, shaped by interactions across systems and time.

### Challenging dominant discourses and policy framings

If conceptualisations of well-being matter, so too do the ways in which they are embedded in policy. As several contributions in this special issue demonstrate, dominant constructions of well-being are neither neutral nor inevitable; they are shaped by underlying assumptions about responsibility, agency and the purposes of education.

Mælan's (2026) analysis provides a powerful illustration of this. In *Health and Well-being Discourses in Norwegian Education Policy: Using Bacchi's WPR Method to Understand Problem Representations*, Mælan (2026) reveals how well-being is framed in Norwegian education policy. Her findings reveal a series of dominant discourses centred on resilience, self-regulation and health literacy; framings that align closely with broader neoliberal logics. Within these constructions, well-being is positioned primarily as an individual responsibility, tied to students' capacity to make appropriate choices, regulate themselves and optimise their functioning. Crucially, what emerges from this analysis is not only what is present but what is absent. Structural inequalities, social conditions and institutional influences are largely excluded from the problem frame. In this way, policy discourse works to both individualise responsibility and obscure the systemic conditions through which well-being is produced and unevenly distributed.

Carlsson's (2026) contribution extends this critique by situating well-being within broader conversations on sustainability. In *Conceptions of the Relation Between Well-Being and Sustainability in Social Theories, Global Policy and Education Research*, Carlsson (2026) explores how well-being and sustainability are increasingly understood as interconnected across global frameworks such as the 2030 Agenda; United Nations (2015): Societies characterised by inequality, stress and disconnection are less able to engage in long-term ecological action, while experiences of belonging, hope and security enable participation in collective futures. Schools therefore emerge as critical sites where connections between person, place and planet can be realised. However, as Carlsson (2026) notes, both well-being and sustainability remain constrained by disciplinary silos and narrow curricular framings. More integrated, participatory and action-oriented approaches are needed; these should foster connection, agency and shared responsibility.

### Teacher and leadership agency in school well-being

While policy and public discourse influence priorities, resource allocation, accountability expectations and understandings, well-being itself is realised through everyday practices in schools. The contributions in this issue position teachers and school leaders as key actors in shaping the relational and organisational conditions that support well-being.

In *Becoming a Health Promoting Teacher: Learning from Primary School Teachers' Perspectives*, Holt and Gray (2026) move beyond curriculum-focused approaches by conceptualising well-being as an integral dimension of pedagogy and professional identity. Rather than being treated as an additional responsibility, well-being is embedded in everyday interactions, relationships and teaching practices. This perspective highlights teachers' capacity to embed well-being within their pedagogical practice, drawing on their values and the needs of their students.

Teachers' own well-being is fundamental to supporting the well-being of others. In *Teacher Well-being as a Systemic Phenomenon*, Hartnett (2026) examines the conditions that influence teachers' well-being. The paper highlights how well-being is shaped by factors operating across multiple ecological levels, from relationships with students and colleagues to broader pressures such as curriculum demands, accountability measures and neoliberal expectations.

These pressures may contribute to the internalisation of ideals of constant productivity, undermining well-being and professional sustainability.

Leadership is therefore critical in mediating these dynamics. In *Leadership for Well-being: How a Scottish Secondary School Embeds Whole School Health and Well-being Promotion*, [Hardley et al. \(2026\)](#) demonstrate how relational, context-responsive leadership can foster cultures of trust, collaboration and care. Their findings highlight practices such as shared decision-making, distributed leadership and protected time for well-being work, alongside an emphasis on staff well-being and professional growth.

Extending this, *Empowering Teachers for Sustainable School Well-being: A Systemic Analysis of Engagement in Health Education*, [Simar et al. \(2026\)](#) emphasise that teacher engagement is contingent on myriad of factors including collaborative practices and institutional support. Whole-school strategies, leadership alignment and professional development are essential for sustaining well-being initiatives and embedding them meaningfully within school life.

Across these contributions, teachers and leaders emerge not as passive recipients of policy but as active contributors to whole-school approaches to well-being. At the same time, their capacity to do so depends on the conditions in which they work. Supporting both their agency and their well-being is therefore essential.

### Justice, voice and reparative approaches

A final theme of this special issue brings into focus the ethical and transformative dimensions of well-being, foregrounding justice, voice and the need for reparative approaches. Here, well-being is not only understood as relational and systemic but as inseparable from histories of inequality, questions of power and possibilities for future change.

[Murphy and O'Toole \(2026\)](#) analysis is central to this framing. In *Towards a Deep and Reparative Well-being in Schools: Confronting Historical Trauma in Irish Education*, they argue that well-being in schools cannot be realised without attending to the enduring legacies of colonialism, religious control and institutional abuse in Irish education. These forms of coercive and ideological power continue to shape educational relationships, cultures and practices in ways that are often unacknowledged. Their concept of “deep well-being” challenges superficial or compliance-driven approaches by emphasising the need for relational safety, critical reflection and cultural truth-telling. In this framing, well-being is inherently reparative, requiring engagement with both past and present injustices and creating space for acknowledging harm and rebuilding trust.

At the same time, this focus on justice is closely linked to questions of voice and participation. [Lindskov \(2026\)](#) *Mapping the Ecosystem of Student Well-Being* foregrounds the importance of student voice and participation. Well-being is co-created through relationships and systems and therefore demands meaningful inclusion of young people in shaping the environments that affect them. Moving beyond tokenistic consultation, participatory approaches position students as active agents, aligning well-being with democratic engagement and shared responsibility.

These perspectives also intersect with [Carlsson's \(2026\)](#) focus on sustainability, reinforcing the idea that well-being must be understood in relation to collective futures. Experiences of belonging, agency and hope are not only central to individual well-being but to the capacity of communities to engage in social and ecological transformation. In this sense, equity, voice and sustainability are not parallel concerns but mutually reinforcing dimensions of a more holistic vision of well-being.

Taken together, the contributions to this special issue call for a fundamental reorientation of school well-being. They position it as a relational, systemic and justice-oriented endeavour, shaped by policy, practice and lived experience. This reorientation demands more than incremental change. It calls for policies that address structural inequalities, practices that centre voice and participation and systems that support educators as agents of change. It also

highlights the importance of connecting well-being with broader goals of equity and sustainability.

This special issue underscores that well-being and education are mutually reinforcing and foundational to sustainable futures. At a time of global uncertainty, the challenge is not only to support individual flourishing but to create the conditions for collective well-being. By centring equity, amplifying voice and embracing sustainability, education can move towards a vision of well-being that is not only inclusive, but transformative.

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