**HOW CAN SCHOOL-BASED SUPPORT BOOST TEACHERS’ WELLBEING?**

**Posted on** [**MAY 22, 2016 4:20 PM**](http://schoolwell.co.uk/2016/05/)**by**[**SCHOOLWELL**](http://schoolwell.co.uk/author/schoolwell/)



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In my work as an Educational Consultant, I regularly meet effective teachers struggling to manage the high workload and constant pressures of the current educational system. This is reflected in low levels of teacher wellbeing and morale regularly documented in the educational media. However, I visit schools where teachers’ wellbeing appears more positive, especially when leadership teams emphasise this and provide school-based support for their staff. Therefore, I decided to investigate the relationship between school-based support and teacher wellbeing for an MSc in Occupational Psychology.

**The role of school-based support**

Research has suggested such support may protect teachers from the consequences of teaching challenges, such as pupil misbehaviour and substantial workload, reducing the negative consequences (e.g. Bakker, Hakanen, Demerouti & Xanthopoulou, 2007). Studies appear to show a positive relationship between teacher wellbeing and support from co-teachers and school leaders.

However, findings are varied and suggest the relationship between support and wellbeing may be complex and could be affected by the type of support provided. Furthermore, much research does not identify the type of support in place, making it hard to determine what kinds of school-based support may effectively support wellbeing. In addition, one study suggested that school-based support is only linked to positive benefits when teachers perceive it to be of good quality (Devos, Dupriez & Paquay, 2012).

Most research approaches used only show correlations between wellbeing and support and do not demonstrate that such support causes wellbeing improvements. It has been argued that the relationship may include other factors. For example, some psychology stress theories emphasise the importance of thought processes in determining levels of stress and wellbeing (e.g. Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Therefore, my research also considered the role of teachers’ thought processes in the support-wellbeing relationship

**The role of psychological factors**

Such stress theories claim that people evaluate events that happen to them (and their coping ability), with these evaluations influencing how stressed they feel. So people who interpret high workload or exam pressure as more stressful (and feel they are unable to cope) may subsequently experience lower wellbeing. However, certain psychological characteristics have been suggested to help people make positive interpretations. For example, psychological capital (referred to as PsyCap) has been described as a positive characteristic which people can develop, that includes:

> Self-efficacy – confidence in one’s own abilities

> Optimism – positive expectations of current and future achievements

> Hope – a positive view of one’s ability to succeed through planning and action

> Resilience – the ability to recover from adversity or failure and attain success (Youssef & Luthans, 2013)

Higher employee PsyCap levels have been associated with higher wellbeing in other professions (e.g. Avey, Luthans, Smith & Palmer, 2010). One study showed a relationship between support and wellbeing which was explained by PsyCap levels (Bin et al., 2014). Support was shown to boost an individual’s PsyCap which subsequently improved their wellbeing. However, since this study was not conducted in a workplace, more research was needed to see if this applies to teachers. Theory suggests that social support may create positive emotions which increase PsyCap, aiding positive interpretation of work situations and coping abilities, therefore increasing wellbeing (Culbertson, Fullagar & Mills, 2010). My research aimed to investigate if this could be the case for teachers.

The research considered associations between teachers’ school-based support, PsyCap, wellbeing and quitting intentions, investigating the following questions:

> Is there a positive relationship between support, teachers’ PsyCap level and their wellbeing?

> If there is a relationship between support and wellbeing, is this direct, or does support increase PsyCap, which then improves wellbeing?

> Do teachers who have higher levels of support, wellbeing and PsyCap have lower intentions of quitting their job?

> What particular support strategies do teachers perceive to be of sufficient quality to positively influence their wellbeing and who delivers these?

**Research methods**

An online survey was used to measure teacher wellbeing, PsyCap, school-based support and quitting intentions, along with demographic characteristics. In addition, two group interviews were conducted to explore teachers’ opinions of beneficial support strategies, the quality of these, who delivers them and the effects on wellbeing.

**Key findings**

**Survey:**

> Teachers with more school-based support had higher levels of PsyCap and teachers with higher PsyCap levels reported better wellbeing.

> Teachers with higher levels of school-based support, wellbeing and PsyCap were less likely to want to quit their job.

> PsyCap was shown to mediate the relationship between school-based support and wellbeing. This suggests that support increases teachers’ PsyCap, which subsequently enhances their wellbeing (as shown in Figure 1).



Figure 1. The relationship between teachers’ school-based support, PsyCap and wellbeing. The direct relationship is shown in blue and the mediated relationship (supported by analysis) is shown in red.

> Teachers reported greater variability in the levels of leader support, compared to colleague support, although average scores were similar.

**Interviews:**

> Examples of support strategies viewed by teachers as beneficial to their wellbeing were shared – particularly co-worker support, coaching and mentoring.

> However, teachers’ views of the influence of support strategies on their wellbeing varied. Explanations of these differences related to the effects on teacher confidence/self-efficacy and perceived fairness in how support was delivered, particularly by leaders.

This suggests school-based support could make a substantial difference to teacher wellbeing and associated school-level outcomes, such as quitting intentions. This is particularly vital at present, given the high stress and staff turnover levels currently documented in the profession. However, further research is needed to ensure findings can be generalised to other teachers and to investigate whether support causes increases in PsyCap, which improve wellbeing.

**Implications for schools**

The research findings suggest schools could make a difference to teachers’ wellbeing by carefully implementing school-based support strategies that enhance PsyCap skills, subsequently enhancing wellbeing levels.

Consequently, If not already consistently in place, the following recommendations are suggested for schools:

1. Encourage, and provide a range of in-school opportunities for informal colleague support. For example, buddy systems, teacher-teacher mentoring, co-teacher support meetings, staff wellbeing group, etc.

2. If not in use, introduce coaching and mentoring strategies to support with all aspects of teacher practice, including wellbeing.

3. Carefully implement support strategies (especially from school leaders) to ensure these are viewed as good quality and fairly delivered.

4. Gather teacher perceptions of the impact of support strategies (e.g. through periodic anonymous, short online surveys) to monitor this.

5. Use strategies that improve teacher confidence/self-efficacy (as well as hope, optimism and resilience) – some pre-tested training programmes already exist.

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