Exploring teachers' well-being through a professional learning community

by

Madira Matjeni

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Supervisor: Dr Sarina de Jager

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Declaration

I, Madira Matjeni, declare that the dissertation, which I hereby submit for the Master's in Education degree at the University of Pretoria, is my own work and has not previously been submitted by me for a degree at this or any other tertiary institution.

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Mrs Madira Matjeni

5 December 2022

Abstract

Teachers in special needs education often face adverse experiences leading to stress and burnout, affecting their well-being, and this is even more considerable for teachers teaching learners with autism spectrum disorders. This study explored LSEN teacher well-being through a professional learning community. Teaching learners with ASD comes with diverse challenges, affecting teachers' self-efficacy and certainty in their capabilities and abilities regarding teaching and learning. This study hopes to address the scholarly neglect in the area of teacher well-being within special needs contexts. Personal well-being challenges as a novice teacher in an LSEN school inspired this research project. This study aimed at empowering SPED teachers with the autonomy to collectively explore and consider challenges and opportunities concerning their well-being. The literature review supported the argument that forging communities facilitated well-being. The teachers explored their well-being engagingly and collaboratively, forming mutual trust and connection. The research project involved eight teachers teaching learners with ASD. A phenomenological research design was employed for this study to explore teachers' lived experiences to collect rich, in-depth data. Observations, semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions were the chosen data collection methods. The study found that ASD teachers in LSEN contexts faced adverse experiences which affected their well-being and that adequate support structures were lacking for teachers. Participants highlighted social support as a possible measure for teacher well-being. This study was underpinned by the basic psychological needs theory, which was supported by the data findings, which revealed that the teachers felt a need for connection with their peers, competence in their profession, and autonomy to overcome obstacles with the help of the school management team to promote their well-being. Recommendations for the study included creating opportunities for special needs teachers to connect, accountability for well-being structures and adequate training in special needs for all novice teachers.

Key Terms: autism spectrum disorder, learners with special educational needs, subjective well-being, professional learning communities

Ethical Clearance Certificate

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This Ethics Clearance Certificate should be read in conjunction with the Integrated Declaration Form (D08) which specifies details regarding:

- Compliance with approved research protocol,
- No significant changes,
- Informed consent/assent,
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- Data storage requirements.

Ethics Statement

The author, whose name appears on the title page of this thesis, has obtained, for the research described in this work, the applicable research ethical approval. The author declares that she has observed the ethical standards required in terms of the University of Pretoria's Code of Conduct for Researchers and the Policy Guidelines for Responsible Research.

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Editor's Declaration

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Dedication

I dedicate this dissertation to my late uncle, Lawrence Moloko "Nhlanhla" Ndlovu. My uncle was an amazing person who was always supportive and proud of all my achievements, and I am forever grateful for that. Even though he is no longer with us, his spirit lives on. Thank you, Nhlanhla, for everything. I love you and miss you every day.

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- Last but not least – my colleagues, for whom, without their support and participation, this research project would not have been possible. For this, I will forever be grateful.

Table of Abbreviations

ADHD	Attention deficit hyperactivity disorder
ASD	Autism spectrum disorder
BPN	Basic psychological needs
BPNT	Basic psychological needs theory
DCAPS	Differentiated Curriculum Assessment Policy Statement
DoE	Department of Education
IPA	Interpretative phenomenological analysis
JET	Journal of English Teaching
LSEN	Learners with special educational needs
OCD	Obsessive-compulsive disorders
PLC	Professional learning community
SDT	Self-determination theory
SGB	School governing body
SIAS	Screening, identification, assessment and support
SPD	Sensory processing disorder
“SPED	Special education
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization”

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Chapter 1: General Orientation

In this chapter, I will provide an overview of the need for researching the well-being of teachers teaching learners with autism spectrum disorder (ASD). I will discuss the background of the study, the rationale and significance of the study, and its focus and purpose. In addition, I will outline the research questions underpinning my study and clarify the key theoretical concepts. Finally, I will delineate the imitations of my research.

1.1 Background and Context

The overwhelming literature on teacher stress and burnout in the last two decades is unavoidable (Bottiani et al., 2019; Cancio et al., 2018; Zhang et al., 2019). The teaching profession is thus regarded as a stressful career, and I consider the situation even more so in a special educational needs environment. Love et al. (2019) agree that teaching learners with ASD comes with diverse challenges, affecting teacher self-efficacy and certainty in their capabilities and abilities regarding teaching and learning. The literature also reports on the impact of stress on the parents of learners with ASD (Iadarola et al, 2019; Krakovich et al., 2016), however, more research is required on how educators are affected. The special educational needs school environment can be overwhelming, and often teachers are left with feelings of frustration, isolation, and depression (Love et al., 2019). I therefore believe that educators' subjective well-being should be considered. Stress negatively affects teacher well-being, which, in turn, affects teacher health, causing absenteeism and eventually leading to teachers leaving the profession. The literature also reports on the crisis of SPED teacher retention in the first five years of teaching, citing that at least 50 per cent of SPED teachers left the profession within five years (Fu et al., 2022). This was evident in the school that was my research site. In the previous three years, teacher turnover had been high, and the first quarter of the school year saw five teachers leaving the school, with some citing issues relating to lack of well-being which resulted in their inability to cope with the work stress.

Teachers with compromised well-being cannot bring their creativity to the workplace; therefore, learners suffer the consequences of unwell teachers (Turner, 2016). In this study, I initiated a

professional learning community (PLC) with SPED teachers, where teachers conversed about their well-being.

When South Africa joined the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) in 1994, it adopted its principle of non-discrimination, ensuring the right to education for all (UNESCO, 1960). This was later reflected in the 1996 Constitution, when the basic human rights of all people living in South Africa were established. Everyone living in South Africa thus has the right to basic education; education must be available and accessible (Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, 1996). Furthermore, the Bill of Rights is supported by Education White Paper 6 (EWP6), which focuses on the complete transformation of the South African education system, making it accessible to all, including learners with both mental and physical disabilities (Department of Education (DoE), 2001). The Bill of Rights, as mentioned above, and Education White Paper 6 have shaped the current education system and guided the quality of special needs education. The development of community-based support systems is regarded as vital in supporting learners' developmental needs (DoE, 2001).

The awareness of ASD has been gaining momentum over the last decade. Solmi et al. (2022) speculate that this could have resulted from an enhancement in diagnostic criteria. Still, diagnosis and awareness are rising owing to accessibility to the knowledge of the spectrum and medical care for people, even in the most remote places (Love et al., 2019; Mazibuko et al., 2020). The globalisation of information has made the world a much smaller place. With the click of a button, we can instantly access news and opinions from around the globe. This easy access to information has resulted in a better understanding of many other phenomena, ASD included, making it easier to identify and diagnose those with the condition. Alsehemi et al. (2017) concluded that there was a need to improve public awareness of ASD as they deemed current public awareness inadequate. Other scholars concurred, stating that besides the public being aware, physicians and other healthcare professionals also fell short of ASD knowledge (Davin, 2020; Hayat et al., 2019).

The school where I conducted my research was a school for learners with special educational needs (LSEN) in Pretoria, South Africa. At the time of my research, the school served just over 540 learners, with a staff complement of 54 qualified teachers, of which 16 were situated in the ASD

phase. The school was in the process of converting to being an entirely ASD school, phasing out those students with severe intellectual disabilities at the school. The school mainly served learners with severe to profound intellectual disabilities and ASDs, that is, all the learners at the school had an intelligence quotient below 70. The admission process for learners went through the Gauteng DoE, and the school's district office handled the application process. Mainstream schools also transferred learners there. The screening, identification, assessment, and support process was followed by an application process (Hess, 2020). The school-based support team, which included nurses, social workers, psychologists, occupational therapists, and speech therapists, were involved during the screening process to consider the holistic needs of learners. Learners were then placed in classes according to their age, abilities, and needs. The school consisted of eight phases: Senior, Junior, High Support Junior, High Support Senior, ASD Junior, ASD Senior, Profound Intellectual Disabilities & Profound Intellectual Disabilities ASD, and the Occupational phase.

I am a novice LSEN teacher with two years of experience, and I find teaching in this environment both enriching, exciting, and overwhelming at most times. For this reason, I have embarked on this journey as I believe teacher well-being to be at the educational sector's forefront, as it affects the individual, learners, their peers, the whole school community, and national education.

1.2 Rationale and Motivation

1.2.1 Personal Rationale

I value the challenges faced by teachers in special needs education as immeasurable. Although I was excited about starting my career in an LSEN school, I had no prior experience in teaching learners with special needs, and my professional training in this area was limited. This was my first experience as a teacher, and I quickly realised that I had no idea what I had gotten myself into.

As a novice teacher, the joy of finding employment clouded the possible negative experiences ahead of me. I found this to be a great opportunity. However, I was unprepared for the experience and the daily realities that SPED teachers teaching learners with ASD faced. Unlike many other professions, I find it troubling that beginner teachers are expected to work in these “different”

circumstances regardless of whether they specialise in a specific field or not. I also feel that support was minimal as no support structures were given to me during my induction process, and I somehow did not dare to ask for the help I needed for fear of being seen as incompetent. The realities of that environment were harsh and could be to many other teachers too, especially at the beginning of their careers. The limited number of teachers trained in this field leaves little room for management to attract teachers specially trained for these schools.

As a novice teacher in an LSEN school, I was overwhelmed by the diverse challenges I faced. After a few months at the school, I was moved to the Junior ASD Phase to teach learners with ASD. My stress levels were heightened in this phase as the learners had much more complex and unique demands. The ASD phase came with new challenges, which prompted doubt about my teaching capabilities. As a result, my stress escalated and manifested as headaches and other physical symptoms typically associated with stress, burnout, and anxiety, which affected my general emotional, psychological, and physiological well-being. I then took it upon myself to seek a lasting solution to my problem.

I was interested in finding solutions with my colleagues to our work challenges and how we could overcome them. As a result, I initiated a PLC as a possible support system for teachers facing similar difficulties in the phase. I formed a PLC for teachers working with LSENs at the school to open paths for support, collaboration, and development among experienced and novice teachers.

The above is a personal account of my experiences. This experience propelled me to extend the initial PLC and utilise it as a platform to discuss LSEN teacher well-being, specifically for teachers teaching learners with ASD. With the rise of teachers leaving the profession during their novice years, I hope this study will contribute to the well-being needs of teachers, the retention of special educational needs teachers, and the quality of education provided for LSENs.

This study was motivated by my experience as a novice teacher teaching at an LSEN school; it was also inspired by all the teachers who find themselves in the same predicament. Statistics at my current school reflect that the lack of well-being practices and interventions could be why teachers leave. Well-being challenges have been contributing to the retention of teachers. The phenomenon of

teachers leaving the profession in the first five years is well-documented. Still, many studies focus on other attributes, such as teacher support, without considering how the lack thereof affects teacher well-being.

12.2 Scholarly Rationale

The prevalence of ASDs is rising globally, with recent estimates suggesting that one in every 100 children has ASD (World Health Organization, 2022). Given the increasing number of children with ASDs in society, it is likely that more and more teachers will find themselves teaching learners with ASD in their classrooms. However, there is currently a lack of research on the well-being of these teachers. This study seeks to address this gap by exploring the well-being of teachers who teach learners with ASD.

The neglect of SPED research is a significant issue confronting South Africa's educational system. This neglect has an impact on both teacher well-being and teacher retention. This neglect means there is little to no scholarship on improving the quality of teaching and support staff in special education. As a result, teachers often feel unsupported and undervalued, leading to high-stress levels and burnout. This can, in turn, lead to teachers leaving the profession altogether. Therefore, more attention must be paid to SPED research to improve teachers' working conditions and retention rates in this field. The lack of knowledge in this field of study may lead to a decline in the quality of SPED programmes. As a result, the degeneration in quality will lead to less effective teachers, feeding the cycle of teacher attrition.

1.3 Focus and Purpose of the Research

The focus of this study is to explore teacher well-being in a special educational needs school. This is an essential topic, as teachers in these settings often experience high levels of stress and burnout. It is, therefore, necessary to consider how PLCs can facilitate the well-being of teachers in such schools.

Research has shown that PLCs can benefit teachers in terms of their personal and professional development (Huusela, 2020; Mahimuang, 2018). For example, PLCs can support

teachers in planning and managing workloads and offer collaboration and peer learning opportunities. In addition, PLCs can help to create a sense of community in a school, which can be beneficial for teacher well-being (Huusela, 2020).

In my study, I opted to explore our well-being and practices as a community, using a PLC as a forum for my colleagues and me to converse about our subjective well-being and how experiences teaching learners with ASD affected our well-being.

Finally, this study aims to empower SPED teachers with the autonomy to explore and consider challenges and opportunities concerning their well-being meaningfully.

1.4 Research Questions

The following research questions guided the collection of information on the research topic.

1.4.1 Primary Research Question

How can a PLC investigating well-being at an LSEN school enhance the well-being of special educational needs teachers?

1.4.2 Secondary Research Questions

- What are SPED teachers' experiences of teaching learners with ASD?
- What is being done to facilitate teacher well-being at school level?
- What contribution do SPED teachers' jobs make on their well-being?
- How did SPED teachers experience a PLC?

1.5 Key Theoretical Concepts

The key concepts that underpin this study are PLC, LSEN, ASD, subjective well-being, and teacher well-being.

1.5.1 Professional Learning Communities

PLCs constantly seek improvement by teachers to obtain and share learning (Huusela, 2020), thereby playing an essential role in supporting and improving teaching and learning. PLCs provide a platform for teachers to share values, vision, and mission and to focus on student learning. They also

enable teachers to collaborate and take collective responsibility. Through PLCs, teachers can access each other's experience and expertise, making teaching more effective and efficient.

PLCs are beneficial because they help create a culture of continuous improvement in schools (DuFour & Eaker, 2009; Hord, 2007). They also help to build mutual respect and support among teachers. In addition, PLCs can be initiated in a school in a single educational phase or subject. Teachers can extend their professional learning beyond their classrooms into the larger teaching community (DuFour & Eaker, 2009; Hord, 2007; Huusela, 2020; Lazor, 2019).

1.5.2 Learners with Special Educational Needs Schools

LSEN schools are schools that cater specifically to LSEN. These needs may include physical, intellectual, emotional, or social disabilities (Buli-Holmberg & Jeyaprathaban, 2016; DoE, 2001). LSEN schools strive to provide a holistic and inclusive education for all their students, regardless of their abilities (Naicker, 2005; DoE, 2001).

1.5.3 Autism Spectrum Disorders

ASDs are a diverse group of neurological conditions characterised by challenges in communication and social interactions; a repertoire of restricted, repetitive behaviour; and intellectual disability (Bakare & Munir, 2011; Hampton et al., 2019; WHO, 2021). The criteria used for ASD admissions is a diagnosis by a professional doctor, a psychiatrist, or a neurologist using the DSM-5 diagnostic tool, and the diagnosis usually follows cues that are associated with the ASD characteristics that learners display (Evers et al., 2020). Other psychiatric comorbidities usually accompany ASD. These include but are not limited to the following: attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), obsessive-compulsive disorders (OCD), anxiety, major depression disorder, schizophrenia, and epilepsy (Veatch et al., 2017). These comorbidities can range from mild to severe, making it difficult for those with ASD to function in everyday life.

1.5.4 Subjective Well-Being

Subjective well-being (SWB) is commonly defined as how people emotionally experience and assess their lives. It includes positive and negative emotions and can be measured in terms of life

satisfaction – how content people feel with their lives as a whole (Anglim, 2020). SWB acknowledges the various factors that influence emotions and life satisfaction. These factors include spiritual, economic, social, and personal relationships (Churchillet al., 2020; Dolan & Metcalf, 2012). This thus influences the well-being of teachers.

1.5.5 Teacher Well-Being

Chu and Liu (2020), together with Crome and Cise (2019), define teacher well-being as various cognitive psychological factors, the mind, motivation, and emotions. Therefore, I regard teacher well-being as being influenced by physical, emotional, and mental health, and it is associated with workplace relationships and organisational structures. I consider teacher well-being as vital, as it is associated with the overall life satisfaction of teachers and their positive relationship with their colleagues and students (Harding et al., 2019). Teacher well-being is the professional fulfilment of individuals, thus impacting satisfaction in the workplace, and it is a factor associated with feelings of purposefulness. According to Seligman (2018), well-being consists of five characteristics: positive emotion, engagement, relationships, meaning, and accomplishment. Seligman (2018) claims that these five elements are essential to people's ability to thrive, which I regard as vital to the well-being of teachers.

1.6 Value of the Research

1.6.1 Academic

My research aims to contribute to the body of knowledge in SPED, specifically addressing the lack of academic research on the well-being of teachers specialising in learners with ASD in South Africa. This study endeavours to fill this gap by exploring teachers' lived experiences, challenges, and motivations for working with this population of learners.

1.6.2 Special Needs Education

There is a general lack of understanding of what it means to be a teacher of students with ASD, which can often lead to feelings of isolation and devaluation. I hope my research will help to

shed light on the unique challenges and compensation associated with this type of teaching and on the motivation that drives these educators to continue their vital work.

1.7 Delimitation of the Study

The delimitation of this study is that it will only focus on eight teachers in the ASD phase in the school, resulting in a small sample size. While the information gathered may appear biased or subjective, it is important to note that this study only takes place in one school for LSENs, and it is specifically for learners with ASD. Therefore, the findings of this study cannot be generalised to other schools. This research investigates the lived experiences and well-being of teachers teaching learners with ASD.

1.8 Insider Researcher

As an insider researcher, I have both participated in and observed this qualitative research study, and, at the study site, I had a unique opportunity to engage professionally with the participants. Because I was already employed at the research site, the participants were more likely to trust me and be willing to discuss their experiences. This allowed me to gather more detailed and accurate data than if I had been an outsider researcher (Dwyer & Buckle, 2009).

This role provided a unique and insightful perspective on the research topic. By being able to interact with the participants and observe their behaviour, I was able to gain a deeper understanding of the research topic. Overall, I believe that insider researchers play an essential role in qualitative research studies. I could give a complete picture of the findings by providing a first-hand account of the research study. I hope my insights and observations can add depth and richness to the data collected, as required in qualitative studies (Heslop et al., 2018).

During the study, I was aware of my potential biases and the influence they may have had on my interpretation of the data. This informed the requirement to respect the ethical code and not lose objectivity in the study by making assumptions about the research.

1.9 Research Approach and Design

A qualitative research approach was employed for this study to acquire rich, in-depth data on the complex topic of teacher well-being. I opted for this research approach as it was best suited to understand the phenomenon from the participants' perspective, understanding how they felt, thought, and experienced life.

I undertook a phenomenological research design to uncover the teachers' lived experiences. This type of research is based on the philosophy of phenomenology, which states that reality is experienced through the conscious mind. Phenomenological research is used to understand how individuals experience and make meaning of the world around them. The critical characteristic of phenomenological research is its focus on subjective experience. This study focused on the lived experiences of teachers working with LSEN and how the teachers' work affected their SWB.

1.10 Target Population and Sampling

The target population is the group of people or objects that the researcher wants to learn about and study. The sampling method is the process or technique used to select which members of the target population will be included in the sample.

1.10.1 Target Population

The target population of this study was experienced and novice teachers from an LSEN school in an urban area, who taught learners with ASD.

1.10.2 Sampling

For this study, I employed purposive sampling, which involved selecting participants based on specific criteria and their work contexts. This group of teachers belonged to a specific phase of the school, the ASD phase, that is, teaching learners with a particular diagnosis, ASD. I selected the participants who were most likely to provide valuable insights into the research question.

Convenience sampling, on the other hand, involves selecting participants who are easily accessible and willing to participate in the study. Participants for this study were conveniently my colleagues, making them accessible.

Hence, I considered both sampling methods as they were compatible with my research study and its aims.

1.11 Data Collection

Data for the research were obtained from focus group discussions, semi-structured interviews, and observations from field notes.

1.11.1 Focus Group Discussion

Focus group discussions were conducted with seven participants, with me as a participant observer. This was done at the school to allow me to gain access and insight into the lived experiences of teachers as well as explore their experiences of the well-being phenomenon. Engagement and collaboration took place during this phase of the data collection process. My aim for conducting focus group discussions was to offer the participants the platform to engage freely in conversations by providing descriptive accounts of their well-being experiences as special needs teachers.

1.11.2 Semi-Structured Interviews

Semi-structured individual interviews were held with three participants, one at the school and two virtually. This allowed me to gain access to confidential knowledge that the participants were uncomfortable sharing in a group setting. These were one-on-one interviews, allowing participants to share more descriptively while having the reassurance of anonymity. I also interviewed participants who had missed sessions during the focus group discussion to enable them respond to the posed questions and for me to have a comprehensive understanding of their experiences

1.11.3 Observations

Observations were extracted from the field notes recorded during data collection. The field notes assisted me in capturing data which included body language, arrival and departure times, and the overall atmosphere of the focus group discussions. I used field notes to capture the participants' behaviours, thoughts, feelings, and interactions.

1.12 Data Analysis

Interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) was employed during this study as a data analysis tool, allowing me to explore the participants' personal experiences in depth. One of the key features of IPA is that it enables researchers to gain an understanding of how participants make sense of their experiences. This was achieved using detailed, open-ended interviews, which were then analysed using a rigorous, step-by-step process.

- **Organisation** - Focus group discussions, in-depth interviews, and observations were used to collect data with the participants. I then transcribed the audio-recorded interviews and focus group discussions and analysed them in Microsoft Word. This allowed for the organisation of the data into smaller pieces, which made it easier to interpret and understand.
- **Perusal** - I examined the collected data several times to understand what the data contained as a whole. I read and reread the data, ensuring accuracy between the audio-recorded interviews and focus group discussions, and the transcripts. This process is known as data reduction, and it is an important step in data analysis.
- **Classification** - I classified the data by dividing them into themes and sub-themes. Themes refer to broad categories that provide a general overview of the subject matter, and sub-themes refer to narrower categories that offer more specific information about the theme.
- **Synthesis** – I searched for connections across themes to create a more comprehensive understanding of the topic, aiding in creating a well-rounded argument.
- **Induction** - I employed an inductive approach to arrive at answers to the research questions. This meant that I, as the researcher, first studied the available literature I could find on the subject, conducted interviews and focus group discussions. After thoroughly investigating the primary and secondary sources of information, I developed my findings, conclusions, and recommendations.

1.13 Methods Taken to Ensure Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness is the cornerstone of good research. Research must be credible, dependable, confirmable, and authentic to be trustworthy.

1.13.1 Credibility

Credibility refers to the believability of the research (Maree, 2019). It is based on the quality of the evidence and whether that evidence is convincing. Research must use high-quality data and reliable methods to be credible. Reliable data collection methods were used throughout the study, ensuring a good standard of reporting.

1.13.2 Dependability

Dependability refers to the stability of the research (Maree, 2019). For dependability, research must use methods that produce consistent results. This means that if the research were conducted again, it would yield similar results. I ensured the dependability of my study by reporting honestly.

1.13.3 Confirmability

Confirmability refers to the ability of others to verify the findings of the research (Maree, 2019). For the study to be confirmable, I adopted the principle of researcher reflexivity, being aware of my biases and assumptions. I also kept detailed records of my research methods and results so that others could replicate my work.

1.13.4 Authenticity

Authenticity refers to the truthfulness of the research. This study was authentic; the data, which was collected accurately, reflected reality and avoided bias. Authenticity also means that the researcher must maintain objectivity throughout the process and present an unbiased account of what was found.

1.13.5 Triangulation

The principle of triangulation is often used in research to increase the trustworthiness of findings. In this study, it involved collecting data from multiple methods of data collection: observations, focus group discussions, and individual semi-structured interviews.

1.13.6 Member Checking

This process was used to ensure that the data collected was accurate and reliable (Iivari, 2018). It involved having participants review and confirm their responses to ensure they understood the questions correctly and provided accurate information.

1.14 Ethical Considerations

It was important to consider ethical considerations such as informed consent, voluntary participation, confidentiality, anonymity, and protection from harm. The participants were given information about the study to make an informed decision about whether to participate. They were free to choose whether they wanted to participate in the research and could leave the study at any time. Data protection was considered when conducting the research ensuring that the participants' personal information would be kept confidential and that their data would be protected.

1.15 Research Structure and Overview

The research overview provides a summary of the research conducted on the topic. It provides an overview of the chapters covered in the study. The overview also addresses the research aims and questions and outlines how the study was structured. The chapters are outlined as follows:

Chapter 1: General Orientation

The first chapter of this research report discusses the study's topic, rationale, and research questions. The purpose of the study, a brief discussion of methodology, and clarification of concepts in terms of how they were used in the study are provided. This chapter also sets out the aims and questions that were addressed in the research

Chapter 2: Literature Review

The second chapter provides an overview of the research field, including a review of the relevant literature pertaining to PLCs and teacher well-being. The theoretical framework underpinning was basic psychological needs (BPN) theory. This study is also discussed and linked to the literature deemed suitable for this study.

Chapter 3: Research Method and Methodology

The chapter discusses the research paradigm, design, and methodology used in this study, including a description of the data sources and how they were analysed. Sampling, data generation, analysis, credibility, ethical issues, and limitations are all investigated.

Chapter 4: Data Presentation, Analysis, Interpretation, and Findings

The fourth chapter presents the research results and discusses the study's data findings. The fourth chapter of the research study presents the data findings of the study's results. The data are presented clearly and concisely. The study's findings are significant and provide new insights into the topic under investigation.

Chapter 5: Discussions, Recommendations, Summary of the Study, and Conclusions

The fifth chapter discusses the implications of the findings and makes recommendations. The results are organised around six central themes corresponding to the theoretical framework, the literature review, and new literature. The chapter concludes by considering what the findings mean for practice in the field. The summary of the study, its limitations and conclusions are also stipulated. Additionally, this chapter informs the reader of the discoveries during the research and relates them to the aims and research question on which the findings and recommendations are based.

Chapter 6: Reflection

The sixth chapter discusses the reflections on the research process. This process enables researchers to pause and reconsider their data and findings and identify areas where additional research is required.

1.16 Summary of Chapter

Chapter 1 of this dissertation discussed the introduction to the research project and gave an overview of the study. It outlined the research questions, purpose of the study, and research rationale. A detailed description of teacher well-being in the context of SPED was followed by an insider researcher's perspective. The next chapter, Chapter 2, will be a review of the relevant available literature and theoretical framework related to the study's topic.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

In this chapter, I outline the literature on the phenomenon of PLCs and the well-being of teachers in SPED. I review the challenges that special educational needs schoolteachers face when teaching learners with ASD. I thoroughly explore the characteristics of PLCs to improve teachers' SWB. I also review the concepts of stress and burnout and how they affect teacher well-being. Finally, I examine the relationship between community and well-being, how PLCs may facilitate well-being in a school environment, and the theoretical framework underpinning this study.

2.1 Professional Learning Communities

In the last few decades, the education sector has experienced many reforms to improve the professional development of teachers and student learning (Hord, 1997). Thus, strategic professional development measures such as PLCs were established. PLCs were established to collectively strategise to find educational solutions that would benefit learners, teachers, the school community, and the broader schooling communities, which include districts (DoE, 2015). These strategies should also be systematic and regular, fostering sustainability within the community (Brodie & Chimhande, 2020). Huusela (2020) defines PLCs provide a means for teachers who seek constant improvement to find and share learning. A group of educators, rather than individuals, seeking to find solutions to support learners to learn better, by extending practices from the classroom to the larger teaching community, often based on a single phase, subject, school, district, country and globally (Hord, 2007; Huusela, 2020; Lazor, 2019). These conversations typically occur in physical venues, although recently more PLCs have been taking place on social media platforms such as Twitter (Xing & Gao, 2018). Brown et al. (2018) assert that the objective of PLCs is to focus on learner improvement and academic achievement. PLC activities include continuous formal and informal meetings with teachers within and between schools (Prenger et al., 2019). The above definition is further supported by the DBE (2015), which describes PLCs as a strategy for professional development. They further assert that PLCs provide a means of addressing barriers to learning (DBE, 2015). Teacher experiences are considered critical during PLC conversations (Brodie & Chimhande, 2020). PLC activities include

continuous formal and informal, and planned and unplanned meetings. They are flexible, and the process may stretch for years to track the development of ideas and whether the implemented strategies have been effective (Voelkel & Chrispeels, 2017). Furthermore, the teachers coming together should critically share questions while reflecting on their practice with others. Another opportunity identified by Voelkel and Chrispeels (2017) was that educators should allow their colleagues to observe during classroom teaching, giving first-hand experience while simultaneously transferring skills and knowledge. Leane (2014) also reports that the activities during PLC meetings also stimulate enrichment and intervention plans for learners facing challenges in the classroom. The most important effect of PLCs is that they provide teachers with opportunities to develop professionally and improve the standard of learning and teaching (Huusela, 2020). According to Brodie and Chimhande (2020), this improvement occurs as a result of quality conversations within the PLCs. The DBE (2015) goes as far as designating key role-players in establishing and implementing PLCs. These players include teachers, school management teams, district, provincial and national level teams, teacher unions, South African Council for Educators, subject-based teacher organisations, and higher education institutions (DoE, 2015). I believe that this broad outlook on PLCs can potentially dilute the focus. In my experience, keeping PLCs to matters and goals related to the specific subject or grade could minimise complications which ultimately affect the participation levels. Participants must have ownership of their goals in order to attain them. Top-down goals thus diminish the possibilities within PLCs.

Stoll et al. (2006) view capacity-building as essential to establishing PLCs, regarding novice and experienced teachers as healthy for such groups. I agree with their view that the whole school must be involved in the process for actual change to take place in the teaching context. Working in isolation is perceived as a thing of the past in education as it produces little to no systematic changes, which are required for tangible results to occur in individuals and within schools. The DBE (2015) also regards PLCs as capacity-building entities in the sense of knowledge and skills. Teachers are capacitated within PLCs to initiate and facilitate meetings on matters that concern them the most and those that need urgent attention.

Many PLC studies emphasise improving teaching and learner achievement, which was the initial idea. However, PLCs can play other roles in a teacher's life. Antinluoma et al. (2018) regard PLCs as a means to improve professionalism, well-being, and creativity in the teaching context in order to affect student learning. The conversations among members facilitate communication and interactions, where the perspectives of others are shared, and the understanding of educational concepts is discussed and improved (Xing & Gao, 2018). These are factors left out by many scholars, which, I believe, are vital to the sustenance of the teaching profession.

2.1.1 Characteristics of Professional Learning Communities

PLCs have been widely used, with a documented trail spanning over two decades in sub-Saharan Africa (Franz et al., 2017). Although scholars cannot agree on a definition of PLCs, they agree on most of the characteristics. Brodie (2021) names the following critical attributes of PLCs: focus, long-term inquiry, collaboration, leadership support, and trust. While the DBE (2015) agrees with these characteristics, they additionally include inclusive membership, collective responsibility for learners' change, a coherent, responsive shift in practice, regularity, and systemic, rigorous inquiry into practice as essential to the success of PLCs (DBE, 2015). For this study, six characteristics formulated by DuFour and Eaker (2009) are discussed below.

2.1.1 Shared Mission, Vision, and Values

PLCs aim to influence the school culture of teaching and learning (Sahin & Yanel, 2021). The members of the PLC collectively determine the shared mission, vision, and values. Members need to agree on the focus of the community and how to realise the aims of the PLC (Mahimuang, 2018). I acknowledge that a shared vision can open paths of engagement and clarity on what the community is initiated for, allowing teacher agency to decide what teachers aim to achieve by establishing the community.

The mission and vision of the learning community not only focuses on the current objectives of the community but also on future endeavours. This is the reason why PLCs are initiated as long-term professional development tools. PLCs are considered long-term activities since development is a

process that occurs over time and in stages. For participants to track the programme's progress and effectiveness, there needs to be time for the objectives of the programme to be fulfilled. Teachers working together for extended periods are at an advantage as they develop trust, respect, and understanding, which is essential for the endurance of PLCs.

Values within the community refer to the beliefs that people may embrace and hold dear. These values often affect peoples' behaviour and decisions in everyday environments, such as the workplace, church, home, and social circumstances. Sometimes these values may hinder or facilitate the progress of the community. Thus, community members must group themselves and establish the values they consider to be progressive in order to reach the selected objectives. Values, from the onset, may appear personal, but literature reports that they derive from all the different circumstances that people have experienced (Antinluoma et al., 2018). One of the core influential elements in peoples' value systems is their generation. Gibson et al. (2009) verify the generational influence on values in their study regarding values and behaviours in the workplace. Their research study examined how being born at a particular time may determine the beliefs and stance on matters in the workplace. I believe that people's perspective on their work also extends to their personal and social lives. As PLCs' mission, vision, and values are guided by the school's vision and mission statement, participants must align themselves with the goals of the provincial government for which they work and the national government. PLCs may seem to be specific to a school's programme; however, it is crucial to acknowledge and understand that schools are not isolated entities but belong to a greater community, which should be reflected in the PLCs' vision, mission, and values. The greater community includes the district, provincial government, and national government.

2.2 Collective Inquiry

Collective inquiry is a process of seeking and constructing knowledge within a group or community (Habgood-Coote, 2020; Michos & Hernandez-Leo, 2020). During this process, meaningful engagements among individuals develop (Yarborough, 2021). Collective inquiry is a process of learning and teaching for all participants involved. Michos and Hernandez-Leo (2020) assert that the role of joint inquiry is to develop and benefit both the individual and their peers, while Bishop et al.

(2019) state that its function is to expand knowledge. Participants are required to be involved in each step of the learning process. This component of the PLC compels teachers to reflect critically on the community's functions and the personal and collective growth that transpires as a result. Participants opt to engage in goal-oriented inquiry (Michos & Hernandez-Leo, 2020). Participants should critically reflect on the outcome of the community. Therefore, the PLC members must establish the goals and outcomes of the community simultaneously. Bell et al. (2010) view the support provided to individual learners and the integration of different learning environments as possible challenges to the collective inquiry component of PLCs. They embrace this PLC component as the most challenging of all the six principles. The different viewpoints may foster conflict among group members, but, most of all, it also has the potential to promote deeper perception, personal and collective progress, and growth (Nelson et al., 2010). Thus, the collective inquiry process plays an essential role in PLCs, where educators challenge one another to construct knowledge and solve current and relevant matters in their workspace.

2.2.1 Collaborative Teams

Collaboration in its entirety refers to the ability of individuals to come together and work towards a common goal (Many et al., 2018; Martinez, 2019). According to DuFour and Reeves (2016), collective responsibility is one factor that determines highly effective PLCs. PLC members enter into a contract that serves students by taking collective responsibility. DuFour and Reeves (2016) further expand on the role of this characteristic of a PLC by asserting that it explores practices that teachers should be engaged in rather than just personal references. Scholars agree that collaborative teams in PLCs bring forth a sense of community and diminish feelings of isolation (Gorman, 2019; Hallam et al., 2015; Many et al. 2018; Molina & Lopez, 2019). Collaboration enhances the autonomy of PLC members. Teachers can incorporate their ideas and find better solutions to problems while learning to trust one another (Owen, 2014; Rentfro, 2007). Through collective inquiry, community members assess their individual and collective practices (Yarborough, 2021), and thus innovation becomes consequential. I, therefore, find collaborative teams to be a possible community-building mechanism. Many et al. (2018, p. 2) credits PLCs with allowing team members to develop what he calls "a common

language around their practice". He further explains that members of a PLC need to be intentional about its process for it to be effective. Collaborative workspaces need not only be physical but they can also be intellectual. For teachers to experience any level of development, their intellect needs to be challenged within a group setting, which will also challenge their beliefs and values about certain aspects of their job.

2.2.2 Action-Orientation and Experimentation

Action-orientation and experimentation refer to the implementation processes that teachers should engage in once decisions have been made about specific ideas (DuFour & Robert, 2009; Owen, 2014). It also propels teachers to expand their intentions from discussions to actual activities. In a unique study by Beddoes et al. (2021), Physical Education became the focal point of their PLC. They (2021) agree and assert that moving beyond discourse is an essential process of PLCs compared to other professional development models. Thus, action is followed by reflection, which is an intricate part of personal and collective development. Teachers must ask themselves whether anything is changing in their practice; if not, they will fail to improve their practice and their learners' capacity to learn. Experimentation provides teachers with enthusiasm. The notion of continuous learning can be daunting to most, but this is a role that teachers play and ought to understand upon entering the profession. Teachers are regarded as lifelong professionals; therefore, learning and experimentation are continuous for the benefit of both teacher and student (Brown, 2018). As new teachers enter the profession, they can be valuable to experienced teachers. New teachers are exposed to the latest teaching theories, technology, and techniques that experienced teachers can utilise. Experienced teachers have the wisdom to impart knowledge based on years of trial and error (Scherer et al., 2022).

2.2.3 Continuous Improvement

To some degree, I have reserved regard for training opportunities such as workshops, as teachers are not held accountable for the non-practice of their newly acquired skills and knowledge. Brown et al. (2018) also believe that little collaborative influence results in personal development. I, instead, agree with Bernadine (2019) that PLCs are more valuable for the professional development of

educators in such a way that accountability becomes part of the school's culture. PLCs offer diverse opportunities for teachers to improve continuously. Teachers can observe their peers in practice and provide constructive criticism; thus, learning from one another becomes second nature. Also, learning from others cultivates a stronger bond among colleagues and builds trust. In this case, the teachers progress as a unit and no one is left behind. PLCs unite teachers professionally and socially as inter-relationships are developed in the process. Teachers' progress essentially extends to the improvement of the school. Professionalism is cultivated. Another opportunity that PLCs cultivate is the ability and freedom to challenge teachers' beliefs and practices. Teachers cannot improve without challenges. I believe that it is through adversity that individuals grow and improve.

2.2.4 Results Orientation

Quality in teachers brings quality to a whole school community; this affects the outcome of education and the school's personnel. While the improvement of individual teachers is essential, collective teachers' progress results in the school's improvement (Goldberg et al., 2019; Mogren et al., 2019). When teachers progress in the grades they work in, this can positively affect other school grades. When the whole school seeks improvement, the quality of education becomes evident as new and innovative forms of education are implemented. The more teachers seek solutions to their challenges, the more solutions can be tried and tested, implemented, monitored, reflected upon, and improved. This process is a continuous cycle of learning and development. Authors DuFour and Eaker (2009) hold the view that it is only with dramatic improvements that one can demonstrate the success of PLCs. This is guided by the vision, mission, and values characteristic of PLCs, where the community members define goals. Goals must then be realistic and attainable, which affects continuous improvement. Results must be measurable to enable the tracking of progress.

2.2.5 Benefits of Professional Learning Communities

Stoll et al. (2018) list collaboration and mutual trust as benefits of PLCs. Through these collaborations, teachers facilitate teaching methods, reach out to learners, and cultivate feelings of accomplishment and positive emotions of happiness, enthusiasm, and pride (Ashkanasy & Dorris,

2017). As a result, these positive emotions play a role in facilitating the well-being of teachers. Therefore, working together with others fosters a sense of belonging and acceptance, which positively affects how people feel about their jobs and work environments, and these feelings positively influence the well-being of individuals as they feel heard and seen (Owen, 2016; Peacock & Cowan, 2019; Sweet et al., 2018). Another positive aspect of mutual trust among teachers is that they are more prone to take risks and make bold decisions about matters that improve teaching and learning (Owen, 2016; Stoll et al., 2006; Zhang et al., 2017).

A platform such as a PLC that is used to share positive and negative experiences with colleagues also forms a bond between teachers, fostering trust among colleagues. Colleagues express their experiences which might relieve them of negative emotions as teachers play a peer-coaching role for their colleagues (Gutierez & Kim, 2018). When individual teachers feel supported and happy, this comforts their colleagues and influences the school climate (Kayiwa et al., 2017). A crucial aspect of PLCs is the power to give autonomy to teachers to participate in meaningful discussions. Teachers are provided with a "safe space" to initiate innovation in their classrooms and schools. The non-hierarchical structure of PLCs offers all participants the agency to move towards change in their practice without the fear of negative criticism as everyone in the PLC is working towards a shared goal (Worth & Van den Brande, 2020). A study by Xing and Gao (2018) found that members stayed in PLCs for sustained periods because they felt that they benefitted from the community, and were encouraged to engage in reflective practices, seek new ideas, and question and obtain feedback on other members' views.

Other benefits cited by Prenger et al. (2019) are the contributions that PLCs make to teacher training and professional development, which supports continuous development efforts set by the school management and the districts as part of the appraisal systems. While different approaches and theoretical frameworks guide researchers, Gilbert et al. (2018) approached their study using a leadership lens. They found collaboration and critical pedagogy to be at the centre of teacher and leadership efficacy.

2.3 Challenges of Professional Learning Communities

A few challenges affect the formation, implementation, and development of PLCs. García and Weiss (2019) emphasise that barriers to PLCs mainly stem from challenging work environments, such as poverty, prevalent obstacles to teaching and learning, and teachers' emotional well-being and physical safety. I agree that challenges associated with PLCs are systematic but they are also influenced by internal matters of the school. Voulalas and Sharpe (2005) found principal-led PLCs to be possible barriers to the implementation process. The principal's vision may not align with the teachers' vision for themselves and their learners; this creates resistance and conflict between the teachers and the principal, consequently affecting the school's climate. Another aspect of the challenge which points to principals is their inability to establish or encourage PLCs in their schools (Gilbert et al., 2018). As stated in the PLCs' guidelines for South African schools (DoE, 2015), principals must encourage the formation of PLCs, as failure to do so discourages its formation.

Time is necessary for organising effective PLCs, as most school time is spent on teaching, extra-curricular activities, and administrative duties. Time is regarded as a barrier for PLCs, as most of the time spent at school by teachers is already depleted by other "important" matters, which include discipline, internal and external training, and other responsibilities (Molina & Lopez, 2019; Prenger et al., 2019; Stoll & Louis, 2007; Voulalas & Sharpe, 2005). Therefore, scheduled time for professional development, such as PLCs, is a secondary matter. Other challenges include the lack of commitment by teachers who may consider PLCs an option and consequently decline to participate without understanding its value and benefits for all stakeholders (Antinluoma et al., 2018). Prenger et al. (2019) identify workload and varying levels of participation by members that contribute to participants' experiences as challenges.

2.4 Professional Learning Communities Within the South African and Sub-Saharan Context

Soares et al. (2020) report that the PLC's studies mainly focused on Western rather than African contexts, highlighting the gap in the literature on PLC studies in the African context. The authors further assert the prominence of South Africa as the leading PLC country in the sub-Saharan region.

Du Plessis and Muzaffar (2010) conducted a study at a teacher's college where they observed PLCs. This study emphasised that learning in isolation was not favourable to high-quality institutions. Isolation, in which people find themselves stuck in their teaching and learning journey, brings feelings of helplessness to the fore. Du Plessis and Muzaffar (2010) indicate the following as the most significant roles of PLCs for teachers: appraising their knowledge on educational issues, engaging in critical dialogue about educational issues that affect them, and, finally, developing a reflective approach to their practice. The point of learning is to cultivate new and innovative ideas for the most relevant and pressing issues. Learning as a community can be an effective tool for combating isolation in the workplace for teachers.

Although the concept of PLCs may appear as a recent trend, Tshiningayawe and Songqwaru (2017) attest that PLCs have been part of the sub-Saharan region for over two decades under other terms, such as clusters. Teachers from the sub-Saharan region have collaborated for professional development and classroom practices. Tshiningayawe & Songqwaru (2017) report on PLCs in the Namibian and South African regions and recognise them as platforms for improving teaching and learning practices. In both instances, teachers take part in communities to share experiences and knowledge. Teachers in this and other regions of the world have used PLCs mostly in the languages, mathematics, and science school subjects (Brodie, 2021; Chauraya & Brodie, 2017; Ndunda et al., 2017; Scrimgeour & Morgan, 2018). Brodie (2021) regards PLCs in South Africa as ineffective, he asserts that this results from most schools being driven by provincial departments of education, leaving little room for agency. This defeats the purpose of learning communities, as it perpetuates hierarchy in school organisations, which undermines the democratic principles of PLCs. The experiences of PLCs throughout the sub-Saharan region have been considerable. In their study, Soares et al. (2020) describe PLCs as an alternative model to teacher professional development and found that countries that supported PLCs went as far as financing teachers to travel to scheduled meetings in a bid to promote participation. PLCs within the region are still emerging. Through leadership and the determination for quality education, South Africa and the sub-Saharan region may benefit from this much needed professional development strategy.

2.5 Professional Learning Communities in the Context of a Special Educational Needs School

I value how PLCs can bridge the gap between skilled, knowledgeable teachers and novice teachers. Research shows that special schools can be stressful for teachers, as the demands of learners may have psychological, emotional, and physical implications on the teacher's well-being (Minghui et al., 2018; Sweet et al., 2018). Furthermore, teaching diverse learners in one class may sometimes be challenging for teachers. PLCs can support teachers with challenging learners (Engelbrecht et al., 2003). I believe that a collective inquiry process focuses teachers on the core functions of their job and aims at improving the outcomes. In their 2018 study, Minghui et al. (2018) imply that special educational needs teachers are more likely to experience social isolation, citing the possible lack of interactions to engage with each other. Studies support the idea that teachers develop collectively, develop new skills and knowledge together with other teachers, and construct meaning as a group to overcome some of their challenges. Minghui et al. (2018) and Shirley et al. (2020) look to social support to aid SPED teachers in their pursuit of well-being. They indicate the positive effects that social support has on the psychological well-being of special educational needs teachers. Social support refers to the many circles in which individuals find themselves, including family, friendships, and colleagues. They furthermore state that social support has the positive consequence of improving the quality of teaching, meaning that it benefits not only teachers but also the recipients of their services. Therefore, PLCs play a direct role in facilitating well-being without any intent.

Teachers in special needs education focus on holistic development, thus assisting in realising learners' full potential (DoE, 2018). Currently, South African special educational needs teachers are informed by the Differentiated Curriculum Assessment Policy Statement (DCAPS) document, drafted in 2018 for public comment but not formally approved. I believe that DCAPS gives teachers ideas on themes to teach and how they should be taught but fails to address the needs of most learners. DCAPS further expects teachers to differentiate lessons, a process that can be stressful and time-consuming (Laine et al., 2019). Parker and Thomsen (2019) acknowledge that most learners in SPED have various ways of processing information, compelling teachers to find other creative means of teaching through play, educational resources such as visual schedules, hearing aids, sign language,

and other practical methods. Therefore, teachers constantly need to seek new and innovative ways to teach the same concept in a few different ways to meet the demands of learners, and, by working together as a community, these ideas can be far-reaching for both teachers and learners.

2.3 Teacher Well-Being

According to the literature, well-being is a multifaceted concept (Granziera et al., 2021; Gregersen et al., 2020). Therefore, well-being must be considered from a holistic viewpoint, reflecting the emotional, psychological, spiritual, physical, mental, and social domains of people's lives. Well-being in a teacher context refers to the holistic health of teachers around their work environments. How teachers experience their careers plays a crucial role in their outlook on the profession (Cherkowski, 2018). Roffey (2012) states teacher well-being as the impact of stress and teacher retention, and regards the retention rates of teachers as an indicator of teacher well-being. With the current high numbers of teacher turnover, one may interpret teachers as experiencing ill-being. Virtanen et al. (2019) argue that teacher well-being indicators are reflected through burnout and job satisfaction.

The complexities of the term well-being can be challenging for scholars; as a result, different definitions can be found. In their research study, O'Brien and Guiney (2021) express how concepts such as well-being can be vague as they are not frequently used in everyday language. They assert the need for such terms and concepts to be defined by the people experiencing them to give a clear and concise indication of whether individuals and groups agree on the concepts. For this to occur, O'Brien and Guiney (2021) deem critical reflection to be essential and facilitated by engaging in discussions among communities of practice. According to Granziera et al. (2021), scholars need to consider paying attention to the fundamental factors contributing specifically to teacher well-being. Furthermore, they argue that the generalisation of the term does not help researchers understand the needs of teachers, which need to be indicated and addressed. In their 2018 study, Granziera et al. indicated that teachers' adaptability plays a crucial role in their well-being. They attest that adaptability not only influences teacher well-being but also learner achievement. In conclusion, Granziera et al.

(2021) named and divided the three domains that contribute to teacher well-being as job resources, personal resources, and job demands.

Cherkowski (2018) highlights the importance of teacher well-being and how it should be directed at the whole school, as all stakeholders stand to benefit. According to Cherkowski (2018) learners benefit from creative and productive teachers. By contrast, administrators benefit from lower levels of teacher absenteeism owing to ill health, and teachers benefit by impacting learner achievement and higher levels of well-being. All involved in the school environment will collectively benefit from such initiatives as they yield opportunities for collective capacity (Cherkowski, 2018). The balance between the two is the composite of well-being. The holistic well-being of teachers focuses not only on the positive experiences in the workplace but also on the negative. Thus, teachers must experience various circumstances, as those challenges can be empowering. Human beings grow through challenges; therefore, challenges are necessary to develop individuals and groups (Holmes, 2018). The ability to adapt to the ever-changing teaching environment propels resilience and influences well-being and job satisfaction (Collie et al., 2018). Holmes (2018) differs on the subject of resilience and asserts that teachers should understand what well-being means for them rather than using resilience to accept dysfunctionality within the profession. Holmes (2018) advocates for teacher well-being and considers it a significant factor in the success of schools. I agree that teacher well-being should be central to the education system, as teachers must use all their resources to their fullest potential to improve student achievement.

Collie and Martin (2020) found that social support is a fundamental indicator of well-being among people in general and especially in teachers. They found social relations with others to be connected to their greater well-being. Therefore, it is important for teachers to establish and maintain strong social connections with their colleagues. Roffey (2012) agrees that social capital is pivotal to the well-being of teachers and the school climate since teachers deteriorate in isolation. Social capital refers to the networks that people forge in their workplace, which foster trust, respect, and partnerships (Elaicin et al., 2018; Meng et al., 2018). Social capital is thus regarded as a resource that can forge collaborations among colleagues to overcome challenges and shared objectives in the workplace.

Job satisfaction has a positive influence on well-being; this was corroborated by Sironi (2019). The study found that job satisfaction is positively related to mental and physical health, longevity, and efficiency in the workplace. In the study conducted by Mertler (2016), motivational factors were ranked in order of importance to consider influences on job satisfaction. They found a sense of achievement to be the top motivational factor influencing teachers' job satisfaction. He further explored motivations for teachers in different categories, and I found this to be noteworthy. The rationale for teaching incentives included student appreciation and observations of substantial improvement in learner achievements.

It is clear that a teacher's sense of achievement is highly influential in terms of job satisfaction. This makes sense as a key component of satisfaction is feeling a sense of accomplishment in one's work. For teachers, this means seeing their students succeed and grow. Additionally, it is vital for teachers to feel appreciated by their students and colleagues. This appreciation can come in the form of verbal praise or acknowledgement of the hard work they put in day after day. Finally, observing substantial improvements in learner achievements is also a powerful motivator for teachers. Seeing their efforts make a real difference in their students' lives reinforces their commitment to their jobs (Mertler, 2016). Mertler (2016) also found that not having a competitive salary motivated teachers to leave the profession. A salary increase was the major motivation for teachers to stay in the profession. Financial rewards thus contribute immensely to teacher perceptions of job satisfaction and well-being. Sironi (2019) agrees that rewards contribute to the well-being of teachers but only do so when they are attached to responsibility that is tied to workers' skills, growth opportunities, relations with colleagues, and job security. In other words, financial rewards are most impactful when they are part of a package that includes other benefits such as responsibility, development opportunities, and good relationships with co-workers.

Briner and Dewberry's study (2007) focused on the relationship between people's feelings and behaviours and how this affected their performance. They concluded that for schools to perform better, it was necessary to consider the well-being of teachers. They also found that students' performance impacted the well-being of teachers, and that the well-being of teachers had a beneficial effect on

students' performance; this was further supported by Ortan et al. (2021). The researchers found that positive connections between teachers and students yielded much greater rewards for the whole school community (Briner & Dewberry, 2007). Pagán-Castaño al.'s (2021) findings suggest that satisfied employees are more likely to go the extra mile and achieve all organisational objectives. This is particularly relevant for teachers, as their well-being is linked to their appraisals, student achievement, overall health, and a conducive work environment. As Pagán-Castaño et al. (2021) suggest, creating healthy and conducive environments for teachers to work in is essential to optimise individual and organisational success. An efficient work environment is crucial to decreasing teacher attrition, burnout, and emotional exhaustion while increasing job satisfaction and retention (Ortan et al., 2021). A well-run workplace can help teachers to feel supported in their career choices and prevent them from experiencing the negative consequences of stressful job conditions. In addition, an efficient workplace can improve communication and collaboration among staff, which leads to increased morale, a more positive school culture, and, in turn, to the general well-being of teachers.

After the considerable positive factors mentioned by several scholars, it is clear that teacher well-being should be prioritised in schools and the broader school community, including other stakeholders such as policymakers. For teacher well-being to be considered and prioritised, policymakers need to participate in activities that promote teacher well-being.

2.3.1 Teacher Well-Being in a Special Educational Needs Context

Teachers in SPED can be most impacted by stress and burnout, consequently affecting their well-being (Fox et al., 2020). The reported teacher attrition rates of special educational needs schools are of great concern as they are twice the rate of mainstream schools (Moore et al., 2018). Therefore, neglecting the well-being needs of teachers may soon leave LSEN without teachers as a result of the impact of their daily challenges. A study based on conflict-affected contexts revealed that teachers in such settings experienced many difficulties which affected their socio-emotional and intensified stressors associated with teaching (Falk et al., 2019). Wu et al. (2020) refer to social support as a significant aspect of well-being in the special needs educators' context. In their view, special needs educators carry the emotional burden, negatively affecting their psychological and mental well-being.

The scholars further conclude that special needs educators should be frequently supported by various structures to facilitate well-being in the workplace.

Wu et al. (2020) regard social support as an essential facet of teacher well-being, especially regarding special educational needs teachers. They view teachers in these contexts as needing exceptional support from all stakeholders. This is a rather significant point to make, as isolation in this profession is viewed as a contributory factor to teachers' mental health issues.

While many well-being and special needs education studies focus on the challenges that teachers face, I believe that scholars should also explore the opportunities that these challenges may encompass. Scholars such as Granziera et al. (2021) focused their interest on resilience resulting from challenges faced by teachers. They looked to autonomy-supportive leadership as an effective tool to surmount threats to teacher well-being by affording them teacher autonomy. Their study found that teachers felt empowered when given agency in the workplace, which left a lasting positive attitude, which concurs with a study by Ali (2021). Fox et al. (2020) offer a different perspective that steers researchers away from teachers' challenges as these are not easily overcome but focus on the possibilities that may facilitate teacher well-being, especially in a SPED context. This perspective fosters a whole school approach to enhance work relationships among teachers.

2.4 Stress and Burnout

Teacher stress and burnout is a topic that has been widely studied and reported. While the causes of teacher stress are varied and complex, some of the most commonly cited reasons include large class sizes, heavy workloads, lack of resources, lack of support, and disruptive students (Boujut et al., 2017; Herman et al., 2020; Ogba et al., 2020). In addition, teachers often feel pressure to meet the high standards set by administrators and society at large. When teachers are under stress, they may experience various symptoms, including fatigue, headaches, difficulty concentrating, irritability, and depression. Burnout is a more severe form of stress that can lead to complete physical and emotional exhaustion. If left unchecked, teacher stress and burnout can severely affect the individual teachers and their learners (Boujut et al., 2017; Herman et al., 2020; Kebbi, 2018; Ogba et al., 2020).

A growing body of evidence suggests that burnout and stress are significant factors in low self-esteem and self-efficacy (Boujut et al., 2017). Various scholars have argued that these two factors often cause many other problems, such as poor performance at work, relationship difficulties, and health issues. Burnout has been described as a state of physical, emotional, and mental exhaustion caused by prolonged or excessive stress (Fathi & Derakhshan, 2019; Hülya et al., 2018; Méndez et al., 2020). It is often characterised by feelings of cynicism, detachment, and dissatisfaction (Bottiani et al., 2019). Burnout can lead to a decrease in motivation and productivity, as well as an increase in absenteeism and errors.

On the other hand, stress is a response to demands placed on the individual that exceed their ability to cope. It is often accompanied by feelings of anxiety, tension, irritability, and fatigue. Stress can also lead to physical symptoms such as headaches, chest pain, and gastrointestinal problems. The combination of burnout and stress can impact an individual's self-esteem and self-efficacy profoundly. Low self-esteem can lead to negative thoughts and behaviours such as social withdrawal, depression, and substance abuse. Low self-efficacy can make it difficult for individuals to set goals or achieve objectives. It can also lead to reduced satisfaction with life in general.

2.4.1 Stress and Burnout in a Teaching Context

Richards et al. (2018) and Herman et al. (2020) regard teaching as a stressful profession. Consequently, stress and burnout negatively affect teachers' health and well-being (Pagán-Castaño et al., 2021). Kyriacou (2001) defines teacher stress as teachers' experiences of disagreeable, negative emotions, such as anger, anxiety, tension, frustration, or depression resulting from some aspect of their work that threatens their health and well-being.

In their study, Pagán-Castaño et al. (2021) report that well-being should be prioritised in the human resources management department in schools, with which I agree. The statement is further supported by Haydon et al. (2018), who found lack of administrative support to be one of the leading stress indicators. Management of schools is often overwhelmed with demands from provincial governments, which ultimately pressurises top management of schools to overload teachers with administrative duties and frequent changes in policies and curricula (Haydon et al., 2018). In 2018,

Haydon et al. conducted a study where SPED teachers were interviewed regarding their work stress and its effect on their health and well-being. It was found that the teachers identified six factors that contributed to their stress, in the following order: 1. Lack of administrative support, 2. Individual student challenges, 3. Teacher perceptions, 4. State mandate, 5. Peer interaction, 6. Others. Teachers from the above study felt unsupported by the school's management, as well as district and provincial government, to make empowering decisions because of the top-down management styles in education.

Regarding student challenges, learners in SPED have unique demands which often deplete teachers' resources, leading to frustration and powerlessness. The individual needs of LSEN vary according to their disabilities and other comorbidities that they may have. Some learners require daily physical, social, and emotional support, which can put a strain on teachers' psychosocial well-being (Kulkarni, 2022; Minghui et al., 2018).

Burnout is a phenomenon that is particularly common in in-service professions such as teaching, nursing, policing, and medicine (Richards et al., 2018). It occurs when the demands of the job exceed the resources available to the individual and this results in feelings of helplessness, hopelessness, and inadequate coping. The individual may also experience physical symptoms such as fatigue and illness (Pedditzi et al., 2020; Richards et al., 2018). The researchers revealed that teachers with low stress and high coping profiles were most adaptable to change in the workplace and they were more likely to manage stress (Richards et al., 2018). Thus, it is crucial to develop strong coping mechanisms in teachers to lower their stress and improve their self-esteem and self-efficacy.

Teachers are constantly under pressure to meet the demands of their job, be it from students, parents, administrators, or society at large. This pressure can lead to stress, impacting teachers' ability to perform their job effectively.

2.4.2 Stress and Burnout in an Autism Spectrum Disorder Teacher Context

There are considerable factors affecting the pressure on teachers of learners with ASD. There are considerable factors affecting the pressure on teachers of learners with ASD, which mainly derive from the diversity of ASD as a disorder (Love et al., 2020). Learners present multiple symptoms and

having seven to eight ASD learners in a classroom can be overwhelming for many teachers, especially those without ASD background or training (Alkobish & Algahtani, 2019). Alkobish and Algahtani (2019) argue that some of the stress and burnout of teachers derives from the lack of sufficient qualifications to work in the special educational needs discipline, with which I agree.

There are several reasons for the scarcity of qualified teachers in SPED. One reason is that many teachers enter the profession without background training to teach learners with ASD effectively. This can lead to psychological and emotional stress, as they are unprepared for the realities of the job. Another reason is that there are not enough teachers enrolling to teach or work in SPED. This shortage of qualified teachers often leads to burnout for those already in the profession as they are constantly overwhelmed and stressed by the job demands (Boujut et al., 2017; Collie & Martin, 2020).

The challenges faced by ASD teachers vary depending on the severity of the learners' developmental disability and underlying issues, such as intellectual disabilities and comorbidities. Murphy et al. (2009) identify the following challenges as being experienced by teachers: challenging behaviours, lack of communication, aggression, incontinence/ toilet training issues, destructiveness, and self-harm. Many ASD learners are on medication to facilitate learning, but often these medications do not work effectively because of improper administration at school and at home (Paynter et al., 2019; Shahidullah et al., 2018).

Teaching learners on the autism spectrum requires teachers to utilise adapted pedagogical methods, the curriculum, and an environment plan for individual lessons and to offer enrichment programmes and interventions beyond the curriculum, which can be highly challenging and stressful (Ogba et al., 2020; Sakellariou et al., 2019; Sandra & Kurniawati, 2020). Although scholars assume that SPED teachers have more stress than mainstream teachers, Kebbi (2018) found no significant differences between teachers' stress in mainstream education and SPED. He reports that all teachers are stressed, and, in essence, teachers' resilience and ability to cope with work stress is what sets them apart (Kebbi, 2018). I agree with the above statement to a certain degree, as I have experienced colleagues with a high tolerance for stress in my work experience. Alajmi (2021) agrees with Kebbi (2018), stating that teachers' everyday challenges affect their lives as they are emotionally vested in

their work, regardless of the type of student. I, therefore, cannot entirely agree with the two scholars, as some teachers in SPED need to be more involved in learners' lives, not less. Their involvement includes protecting the learners as they are deemed to be vulnerable in society (Park & Shin, 2020), thus their teachers need to be overprotective of their learners and invest in them emotionally and professionally. I, therefore, disagree with the above statements by Alajmi (2021) and Kebbi (2018).

Ogba et al. (2020) report that teachers teaching children with ASD are more vulnerable to stress and burnout. Teachers' SWB is tested in such working contexts as their emotions are vested in the lives of learners. When learners progress, teachers are happy to see the journey of teaching such learners come to fruition, and, when they regress, this negatively affects their emotions and well-being. Thus, teachers must identify symptoms of stress and exhaustion and attend to them when they arise – before they extend to burnout. It is paramount for educators working with children with ASD to be aware of the potential for increased stress and burnout. Stress can therefore harm the teachers' well-being and their ability to support learners effectively. Recognising the signs of stress and taking steps to address them early can help prevent burnout and improve outcomes for both teachers and students.

2.4.3 The Impact of Stress and Burnout on the Well-Being of Teachers

Stress and burnout can be devastating to the well-being of teachers, their outlook on the profession, and their overall self-efficacy and self-determination (Dudgeon et al., 2017; Love et al., 2020; Love, Toland et al., 2019). According to Herman et al. (2020), the various interfaces with parents, colleagues, and administrators, ranging from social media to face-to-face contact, impact teacher well-being. Teacher stress and burnout also negatively impact the lives of the learners in their care, colleagues, and the climate of the whole school (Madigan & Kim, 2021). Burnout also negatively affects student classroom experiences and learning outcomes. These can result from teacher absenteeism due to ill health when their creativity and pleasure are removed from their teaching experience; therefore, teacher well-being is a prominent factor in student achievement. Teachers' symptoms of stress and burnout include depression, anxiety, absenteeism from school due to illness, lack of interactions with learners, and poor performance (Malik et al., 2017; Park & Shin, 2020; Travers, 2017). I agree that the culture and climate of a school are influenced. According to Ashkanasy

and Dorris (2017), the impact on colleagues or students working closely with such teachers can be exhausting and frustrating, resulting in disconnection between people and leading to feelings of isolation and depression.

Teachers in SPED are met with complex situations, which consequently cause stress that leads to burnout and affects their well-being (Ugwoke et al., 2018). With this said, it is stressful in an ASD classroom where learners' needs are diverse and sometimes complicated (Symes & Humphrey, 2012). Stress and burnout in SPED teachers teaching learners on the spectrum are categorised into three variables: student-related, teacher-related, or school-related. Student-related variables include: the type of disabilities, behaviour problems, age, teacher-student ratio, and learners' socio-economic status (Park & Shin, 2020). I find that identifying these variables is significant, as problems cannot be solved without first identifying and naming their attributes.

By comparison, teacher-related variables include the teacher's age, gender, education level, teaching experience, job satisfaction, self-efficacy, stress level, and coping mechanisms. Lastly, hindrances in the workplace, emotional experiences, available resources, and support from school personnel are categorised as school-related variables. These three variables are interconnected; without the balance of all three, teachers fall short of internal and external resources, leading to stress and burnout.

Learner incontinence, emotional disorders, and chronic anxiety are some of the many stressors that ASD teachers face daily (Park & Shin, 2020). However, many schools offer classroom assistants to assist with the more labour-intensive tasks, so the absence of an assistant, as mentioned above, leaves the teacher to deal with such challenges in isolation (Symes & Humphrey, 2012). Another source of anxiety for teachers is that the majority of students with ASD have other comorbidities such as epilepsy, hyperactivity, insomnia, and other psychiatric disorders, leaving teachers mentally and physically exhausted and ultimately burnt out (Madigan, 2020; Veatch et al., 2017).

2.5 The Relationship Between Communities and Well-Being

Merriam-Webster (n.d) defines community as a group of people with a common goal, while Bonnici (2020) elaborates, further emphasising that the shared identity descends from environmental,

socio-political or mutual interests. In this community, collective measures and decisions are decided to resolve shared challenges. The individual may be part of the community, but individual interests do not thrive on such a platform. Unity is the core and foundation of communities, connecting individuals to enable them to enter into social agreements and norms. These communities need characteristics that empower individuals to have the agency to move the community in the right direction. Therefore, community is a concept that is open to different meanings and explanations depending on the framework that scholars use to approach the term. While Atkinson et al. (2020) refer to the community as a place and space where individuals are afforded the privilege to share experiences and a part of their lives with others, for this to materialise, participants need to have insight into the "self". I agree that for individuals to add value to a community, they need to have a level of cognisance which will provide them with opportunities to reflect on their experiences and those of other community members. Hilger-Kolb et al. (2019) identify social, economic, and environmental conditions as the primary factors influencing individual and community health and well-being. Community is thus an essential element of well-being, as it fosters social cohesion, which is necessary for human survival. People's social interactions determine how they understand specific terms and how those terms relate to their everyday and overall lives. It is, therefore, crucial that engagement should be facilitated at a professional level. Teachers, as professionals, need to constantly reflect on their practice and experiences as these shape their outlook on their profession and overall life satisfaction. The reflections must be critically engaging so that community members may overcome challenges and barriers and share resources and knowledge to enhance their well-being; as the saying goes, "a problem shared is a problem halved".

2.5 Theoretical Underpinnings of the Study

2.5.1 Theoretical Framework

My phenomenological study was underpinned by the self-determination theory (SDT) of human motivation. This theory has been used to understand studies related to the drive of learners, teachers, and other professionals (Gorozidis et al., 2020; Guay, 2022; Mergel et al., 2021). Within the SDT,

there are six mini-theories, of which one was used as the preferred theoretical framework for this study.

This study employed basic psychological needs theory (BPNT). Deci and Ryan (2012) developed this theory and determined three fundamental needs: autonomy, relatedness, and competence (Crome & Cise, 2019). Three basic psychological needs are required for organisations and teachers to flourish in their practice and personal well-being (Deci & Ryan, 2012). BPNT suggests that humans have an innate tendency towards growth and development, which is facilitated when individuals feel a sense of autonomy in their actions, feel connected to others around them, and feel competent in their abilities (Deci & Ryan, 2014). Once these three needs are satisfied, it is proposed that individuals will experience positive outcomes such as increased well-being and job satisfaction (Ryan & Deci, 2017). When these needs are not met, it can lead to dissatisfaction and a feeling of disengagement from work or learning activities. Although SDT provides a comprehensive understanding of human motivation, this study focuses explicitly on how BPNT can be used to enhance teacher well-being. To meet these needs in my research, I ensured that the participants had control over their involvement by offering voluntary participation and maintenance of confidentiality.

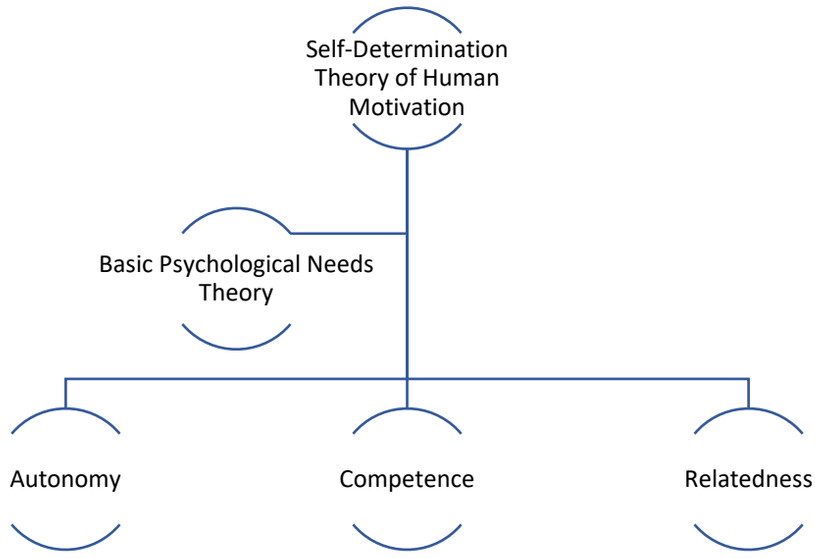

Figure 1: *Self-Determination Theory Model (Adapted from Positive Psychology, 2021)*

BPNT was developed by psychologists Deci and Ryan. It can be linked to PLCs and well-being phenomena. The theory is concerned with the needs that contribute to people's well-being and suggests that failure to meet these three needs results in a lack of vitality. For SPED teachers, this may translate to high rates of absenteeism and ill-being, which are often associated with job dissatisfaction.

Autonomy, the first component of BPNT. It refers to the fundamental psychological need that allows one to feel in control of their lives (Hurley & Walker, 2019). When individuals have autonomy, they feel free to act and make choices based on their own desires and preferences . This sense of freedom and self-determination aids them in feeling integrity and a sense of self-worth. Autonomy is required for teachers to engage in professional conversations on their classroom challenges and possible solutions by initiating changes in the school or phases in which they work. Deci and Ryan (2012) assert the centrality of autonomy in the three basic psychological needs. I agree that people perform better when driven by autonomous and intrinsic motives. Self-endorsed behaviour and self-initiated endeavours propel people to achieve their best abilities and capabilities (Deci & Ryan, 2020). This element of the theory is choice-driven and focuses on how one experiences choices and decision-making in their practice and organisation. I agree that teachers need agency to identify problems and find solutions. Teachers in schools are constantly challenged, especially in the context of the teaching of learners with special educational needs. It is then up to the teacher to seek mechanisms for each learner to achieve the learning outcomes in their unique way. These outcomes may be attained if teachers are given the agency to experiment within their practice. Regarding PLCs, teacher agency can be expressed as the interest teachers show by either choosing or refusing to participate in PLCs (Brodie, 2021). It is ultimately the sole decision of individuals to participate in PLCs; otherwise, they stand the chance of being passive members, failing to contribute to their community. Although PLCs are designed to support teachers in their practice, their choice must be considered when such forums are established in schools (Brodie, 2021).

With the ever-changing curriculum in SPED, teachers are constantly told what to do and how to do it, leaving little room for agency. I describe teaching as an art. A significant element of artistry is

giving the artist the agency to craft their masterpiece using their creativity. Worth and Van den Brande (2020) found a strong correlation between teacher autonomy and job satisfaction. By increasing teacher autonomy, teacher job satisfaction increased, giving them a sense of fulfilment. The PLC in my study was a safe space for teachers to become autonomous in their practice, helping them to solve problems to the many challenges they faced due to their work experiences. The challenges of special needs schools include curriculum matters, where there is not yet a set curriculum, and the need for teachers to initiate different teaching styles for learners. By coming together as a learning community, the challenges teachers face can be jointly shared and resolved, reducing the burden and workload of teachers. Through PLCs, teachers are encouraged to initiate the necessary changes needed in the classroom, thereby promoting innovation and creativity (Naz & Murad, 2017) as well as some pressing issues such as their overall coping mechanisms, especially those in SPED. Teachers in SPED constantly need training and skills on new concepts and ways of teaching based on the latest research and knowledge. Autonomy serves best as a tool to make decisions that move people forward and serve the greater community; it allows teachers to think and better their practice creatively. Teachers' professional development requires a sense of ownership; it brings meaning to their efforts, responsibilities, and accountability.

The second component of the BPNT is relatedness. Relatedness plays an influential role in the way that teachers can relate to each other through collaborative formal and informal discussions. These discussions impact the well-being of teachers since their need to work closely with others is met, which alleviates the isolation mostly felt when teachers face challenges in the workplace. The ability of teachers to engage, build trust, and collaborate during discussions contributes to their motivation, which is the driving force to move in a particular direction and assume certain behaviours (Eccles et al., 1998). This theory's relatedness component concerns teachers' perceptions of their relationship to everyone in the organisation, including there are various stakeholders, such as novice teachers, experienced teachers and the school management team, the DoE, and parents. Being part of a unit and feeling supported by colleagues and school leaders forms the essence of relatedness. Other essential aspects of relatedness are sharing ideas, collaborating with colleagues and trusting

each other to give constructive feedback (Crome & Cise, 2019). Teachers are also allowed to relate to their learners. Teachers can improve their relationship with learners by caring for their physical, academic, and holistic well-being. I acknowledge that when learners feel connected to teachers, their intrinsic motivation also develops (Kreijns et al., 2014). This element also relates to the partnerships that teachers build with one another.

The third and final component of BPNT is competence. Le Deist and Winterton (2005) and Crome and Cise (2019) define competence as a sense of effectiveness. The ability to accomplish specific goals through the mastery of goals that are important to the individual thus has a significant impact on people's experiences. The teacher's ability to feel challenged by their work, accomplish their goals, perform well in their roles, and learn in the process are all characteristics of competence (Crome & Cise, 2019). Competence plays a pivotal role in the behaviour and self-efficacy of teachers. When teachers feel that they are accomplishing their personal and professional goals, this motivates them to seek more out of their careers and daily lives. This element of the theory is also character-building.

When the three basic human psychological needs are met, teachers feel motivated to engage actively and participate in social activities, which benefits their well-being. By contrast, when teachers' basic psychological needs are frustrated, they either withdraw from participating in social activities such as PLCs or become passive participants. Autonomy in the context of teaching allows participants to determine how far they are willing to go for their learners and careers. While relatedness harnesses teachers' relationships and engagements, building trust and support during challenging times. When competence is accomplished in a teaching context, teachers feel satisfied and challenged in their workplace, developing motivation and resilience. These three components of BPNT achieve their intended purpose only when they are intertwined and working together. PLCs complement BPNT as its main characteristics, including a shared mission, vision, and values, collective inquiry, and team collaboration, can be linked to the relatedness component of BPNT. Action-orientation and experimentation support the autonomy element of BPNT. Finally, continuous improvement and the

results orientation element of PLCs support the competence component of the theory. Together, the six characteristics of PLCs are interconnected and support BPNT, as presented by Deci and Ryan.

2.5.2 The Limitations to the Theoretical Framework

The basic psychological needs theory (BPNT) as the chosen theoretic framework was chosen to explain how people may meet their need for autonomy, relatedness and competence in their quest to stay motivated (Deci & Ryan, 2012). As much as this framework provides significant developments in human motivation, there are a few limitations worth noting. First, the theory doesn't acknowledge contextual factors that may influence the individual's motivation, such as the environment. finally, the theory doesn't address how individuals can change their attitude towards challenges that they may not be able to overcome, leading to feelings of dissatisfaction and ill-being. The lack thereof, understates other aspects of human behaviour and doesn't cater to the whole human experience of motivation.

Chapter 3: Research Design and Methodology

In the preceding chapter, I discussed BPNT as my study's theoretical framework and PLCs role in facilitating well-being conversations for special education teachers. This chapter deliberates my study's research paradigm, epistemological perspective, research design, data collection methods and data analysis procedures. The research paradigm and design are discussed first, followed by a discussion of the sampling procedures and the research process I followed to collect and analyse data. Lastly, I deliberate on the quality assurance procedures and ethical considerations used in this study. This study aimed to explore the following:

- The experiences of teacher well-being in a special educational needs school.
- How experiences within the ASD phase of a special educational needs school impact teachers' well-being.
- The available structures in the school to facilitate the well-being of teachers.
- Teacher's experiences of a PLC. A comprehensive account of the research design and methodology follows, commencing with the research paradigm.

Methodology and Procedures for the Study.

Table 1: *Outline of the Research Methodology and Procedure*

Methodology	Procedures
Research Approach	Qualitative
Ontological Perspective	Nomalistic: Idealism
Epistemological Perspective	Interpretivist
Research Design	Phenomenology
Sampling and Sample	Non-probability: Purposive and Convenience
Data Collection Methods	• Focus Groups • Semi-structured Interviews • Observations
Data Analysis	Inductive approach
Researcher's Stance	Subjective, involved in the study. Participant observer

3.1 Research Paradigm

A research paradigm is a set of beliefs and assumptions about what is real, how that reality becomes knowledge and how the world is understood (Kamal, 2019). Reality and knowledge are research paradigms explored by researchers and guided by their philosophical assumptions. Researchers must determine the ontological and epistemological perspectives and their methodology. My decision to use idealism as an ontological perspective was influenced by the belief that reality is multifaceted and subjective (Cohen et al., 2018). When studying human behaviour, it is essential to factor in contextual factors that shape and create people's experiences.

The ontological perspective is concerned with reality and aims to answer the question: What is reality? (Maree, 2019). I chose idealism, which originates from nominalism, as the most suitable ontological perspective for my study. Idealism recognises multiple realities and embraces the notion of subjective truth while encouraging dialogue as a means of constructing knowledge (Lamichhane, 2018; Maree, 2019).

Interpretivism, which involves interpreting knowledge and understanding reality, was the chosen epistemological perspective for this study (Alharahsheh & Pius, 2020). Pulla and Carter (2018) view interpretivism as the most common way to explain the behaviour of humans' social phenomena. Interpretivist studies aim to explore the meaning behind the perception of human experiences, behaviours, community, and society (Alharahsheh & Pius, 2020; Maree, 2019). The interpretivist point of view acknowledges that individual subjective experiences shape their worldview or external world thereby influencing their perceptions of reality (Cohen et al., 2018). In interpretivism, participants have different views of a specific phenomenon that has shaped their worldview based on their personal life experiences,. Various aspects of reality are encouraged, and the participant is respected as an autonomous individual. The complexity of individuals is acknowledged, and it is generally accepted that people understand and view certain "things" and behave in specific ways based on their life experiences (Alharahsheh & Pius, 2020; Ryan, 2018). External forces may appear in individuals' lives, but individuals do not always conform to social constructs (Ryan, 2018). Interpretivism aims to uncover and gain an in-depth understanding of participants' lives to understand why individuals experience

specific phenomena in a particular way (Alharahsheh, & Pius, 2020). Individualism is understood by researchers in interpretive studies, where the researcher and participant play an interactive and involved role in revealing a better knowledge of a given phenomenon descriptively via individual and humanistic aims (Pham, 2018). Language and meaning-making are central to interpretivism, and interpreting events is thus considered valuable to such studies.

Interpretivist researchers consider reality a social construct without any fixed route to knowledge, thus making it subjective. The phenomenon of interest needs to be thoroughly examined, and this is done through social constructs such as language, consciousness, and shared meaning (Alharahsheh & Pius, 2020; Pham, 2018). The complementary use of observations and interpretations is significant to data collection and analysis processes; hence, researchers must be on-site to capture these events, playing an interactive and participatory role (Maree, 2018).

For this study, I opted for an interpretive paradigm in the form of a qualitative research approach which explores cultural and social phenomena throughout the research development in different disciplines and fields such as the social sciences, medicine, and education (Bashir et al., 2008; Kamal, 2019; Patton, 1975; Tetnowski & Damico, 2001). Qualitative approaches recognise the value of the systematicity of human behaviour and aim to record this behaviour through observations and commentary, which leads to a broader understanding of the individuals' or community's voices and events (Bashir et al., 2008; Kamal, 2019; Rahman, 2017). The in-depth description of people's experiences is the essence of qualitative research studies. The numerous systematic data collection and interpretation strategies aim to explore complex phenomena "within their natural and authentic contexts" (Tetnowski & Damico, 2001, p. 23).

Qualitative research approaches are characterised by the need to understand and define people's social interactions within their natural environment. The researcher is close to the data collected, and holistic analysis is evaluated throughout the process (Bashir et al., 2008; Patton, 1975;). Qualitative research approaches mainly focus on language, images, and interpretations used by participants (Pham, 2018). Inductive data analysis is used to interpret the data. A qualitative approach refers to the research method where inductive data analysis is used to gain insights into participants'

meaning of a particular social problem by identifying patterns or themes that provide reliable and valid findings (Creswell, 2012; Thomas, 2006). The purpose of employing an inductive approach is to permit raw data that have not been interfered with or imposed by outlined methodologies to be used for research findings (Thomas, 2006). Samples tend to be small-scale and not representative of the broader population but rather of one specific group of individuals. During this process, an understanding of a particular phenomenon is observed through the meaning-making of participants' experiences', which requires the researcher to be fully involved in the research study by being physically on-site to conduct the research (Alharahsheh & Pius, 2020; Pham, 2018). The researcher performs research on-site to record the participants' experiences in the finest detail; thus, involvement at the highest level is required from researchers in qualitative research studies. At the core of qualitative approaches are activities that lead to the generation of meaning of the events experienced by the participants (Mohajan, 2018). These data collection activities include case studies, focus groups, interviews, personal journaling experiences, ethnographies, observations, interactional and visual texts, and images (Alharahsheh & Pius, 2020). These methods aim to describe the events, experiences and meaning in human lives and behaviours (Cohen et al., 2018; Maree, 2019).

3.2 Research Design and Methodology

A research design is a plan the researcher has decided to follow to conduct successful research (Maree, 2019). I chose phenomenology because its core function focuses on captivating participants' lived experiences, so I deemed it a suitable design for my study. In the context of my research, phenomenology was used to capture the SWB experiences of special educational needs teachers through a PLC. A phenomenological design allows participants to reflect on their lived experiences, which is one of the study's aims. Thus the most compatible methodology is characterised by reflections on previous and current experiences

3.2.1 Phenomenology Research Design

Phenomenology was employed in this study as the research design. Cohen et al. (2018) define phenomenology as the lived exploration of people, focusing on how several individuals experience

specific events and situations (Maree, 2019). The participant's lived experiences are analysed to provide a descriptive analogy of the situation, where meaning is uncovered. The SWB of SPED teachers and PLCs are the phenomena under exploration for this study. Participants were observed through field notes and were audio-recorded during the focus group discussions and held at the school. Four focus group discussions were scheduled for two months. The focus group discussions involved eight participants. Three semi-structured interviews were scheduled with three participants. This research design provided an in-depth understanding of participants' realities and interpretations of their experiences during the PLC meetings. A deeper meaning was given to well-being concepts, and opportunities to further elaborate on those concepts were further explored during the face-to-face semi-structured interviews.

Although phenomenological design typically follows unstructured interviews, which seek to uncover the meanings of the phenomenon or experience, semi-structured interviews were used for this study to create a formal set-up to maintain structure throughout the process (Cohen et al. 2018; Evans & Lewis, 2018). First, PLC meetings in focus group discussions were recorded and then transcribed. Thereafter, depending on the outcome of the group data, some of the participants were approached for individual interviews, after the focus group discussions. The interviews were scheduled to accommodate participants' availability and were held after school hours between 13:45 p.m. and 14:30 p.m. Each interview was scheduled for 45 minutes and conducted separately to enable differences in voices, multiple realities and perspectives by using different data-gathering methods to validate results, referred to as crystallisation (Maree, 2018). Each participant's account of the phenomenon was interpreted to meet the selected criteria of the research design.

3.2.2 Research Site and Participants

One LSEN school was chosen for this study. The school, which had approximately 540 learners and accommodated learners with severe to profound intellectual disabilities and ASD, was situated in an urban area in Pretoria, South Africa. Currently, the school's ASD phase is rapidly expanding, significantly impacting teachers and it is in the process of being fully converted to a school for ASD learners. I chose this school because it is my workplace, where I have experienced

challenges with my SWB since working there. In 2021, I approached the school's principal, deputy principal, and departmental head for permission to initiate a PLC to facilitate support for experienced and novice teachers. I formed the PLC because I was not the only teacher experiencing challenges. I believed that, as teachers, we were responsible for some part of our well-being and support. Therefore, I sought measures for this support, and the PLC was established. Permission was granted to hold monthly PLC sessions with my colleagues, and the PLC yielded some changes in the ASD phase of the school. Teachers had time to engage and interact to improve teaching, learning, and work relations. From this experience, I decided to use this PLC to academically explore teacher well-being, hoping to make meaning of the SWB experiences faced by the teachers at the school.

I chose this research site because it was conveniently my place of work. Secondly, I had more than enough teachers at the school working in the specific phase that I wanted to explore, and these teachers were my colleagues, although not directly working with me daily. Thirdly, I could use the school's facilities to conduct the focus group discussions and interviews, with the permission of principal and school governing body (SGB), without travelling or incurring any other costs personally or for my participants. Lastly, I collected the data after learners had completed their lessons for the day, to prevent interfering with learner contact time.

3.2.3 Sampling Procedure

Acharya et al. (2013) define sampling as a population subgroup selected to represent the larger population. Researchers use samples to acquire knowledge about a target population (Scholtz, 2021). A small group represents the larger group because researchers have limited resources, thus saving time and money. Sampling is typically categorised into two groups, probability and non-probability samples. Therefore, probability sampling refers to sampling that allows the researcher to generalise their findings to the larger population. By contrast, non-probability sampling is a non-generalisable method (Cohen et al., 2020). Results from non-probability sampling studies are often applicable to one group and not the greater population.

I undertook a purposive sampling method to achieve the required representation of my population, which focused on specific and unique issues by collecting rich, in-depth knowledge from

those who could provide it (Cohen et al., 2018). A non-probability sample was used for this study, and purposive sampling was selected as the preferred sampling method. Non-probability sampling has its advantages and disadvantages. One advantage is that it allows for more in-depth and detailed data collection from fewer participants. This can be beneficial when studying a specific population that is hard to access. However, a disadvantage of non-probability sampling is that it can lead to biases in the results if not done correctly. This is because the sample may not be representative of the larger population, which can skew the findings.

A purposive sampling method involves selecting individuals who meet a specific research need (Acharya et al., 2013); it aims at a particular group of people that does not represent the wider population (Maree, 2018). The sample for this study consisted of seven teachers who were teaching in the ASD phase of the school and who were invited to participate in the study, and me. The sample size was kept small because I sought to conduct in-depth research about the lived experiences of special educational needs teachers and their well-being, therefore seeking sufficient rich data. All the participants were my colleagues and fellow teachers at my place of work in Pretoria, South Africa. Although seven teachers in the ASD phase were part of the PLC, I foresaw less participation from them owing to other work commitments and responsibilities. I, therefore, only used data collected from active and available participants.

3.3 Biographical Information

The table below summarises the biographic information of the sample.

Table 2: *Biography of Participants of the Study*

Participant	Teaching qualification	Years of experience in teaching	Years of experience in an ASD Phase
Participant A	Postgraduate Certificate in Education - Senior and Further Education and Training (FET) phase	4	3
Participant B	BEd Foundation phase	5	less than 1
Participant C	BEd Early Childhood Development phase	10	3
Participant D	BEd FET phase	7	2
Participant E	Postgraduate Certificate in Education - Senior and FET phase	1	less than 1
Participant F	BEd Foundation phase	1	1
Participant G	BEd in Intermediate and Senior phase	10	5
Researcher	Postgraduate Certificate in Education - Senior and FET Phase	2,5	2

3.4 Data Collection Methods

Multiple data collection methods were employed in this study for triangulation purposes. The primary data collection method was focus group discussions, which were audio-recorded and later transcribed. Secondary data collection was recorded as semi-structured interviews, audio-recorded, and transcribed for richer in-depth data. Lastly, observations were used to triangulate and support the primary data collection method. Methods employed an interpretive approach involving descriptive data and evaluative coding of the findings from the PLC focus group discussions.

Table 3: *Data Collection Methods of the Study*

Qualitative data collection methods		
Instruments	**Number of sessions held**	**Number of participants involved**
Focus group discussions	4	8
Semi-structured interviews	3	3
Observations	4	8

3.4.1 Focus Group Discussions"

Focus groups are typically associated with qualitative data collection methods, which seek to gain an in-depth understanding of people's lived experiences with the guidance of a moderator (Nyumba et al., 2018; Sim & Waterfield, 2019). According to Jones et al. (2018), focus groups are platforms used to investigate individuals' views, emotional states, and insights about issues and topics. I used focus groups to facilitate conversations on the SWB of teachers teaching learners with ASD and their experiences of PLCs. A focus group is an interactive method of gathering data from people who share the same experiences (Cohen et al., 2018; Maree, 2018). Participants are carefully selected individuals who meet specific criteria, for example, cancer patients, high school principals, or special educational needs teachers (Nyumba et al., 2018; Sim & Waterfield, 2019). These people are gathered to share perspectives on a topic (Jones et al., 2018).

There were seven participants in the focus group discussions and I was an active participant observer. The participants included both novice and experienced teachers who were teaching students with ASD. The focus group discussions consisted of four sessions conducted over two months. The focus group discussion protocol guided the format of the sessions, which sought to answer questions led by the research questions. The questions were asked to avoid the rigidity of the sessions and provide flexibility. The SWB of teachers teaching learners with ASD was discussed. The discussions in this study were focused on the SWB of special educational needs teachers impacted by their experiences teaching learners with ASD. I facilitated and moderated the focus group by keeping the participants focused on the topic. During the study, I was a participant observer, gaining and

constructing insider knowledge during the discussions. Through observations, I analysed how the participants experienced the PLC through their body language, gestures, level of participation, and engagement, and where the teachers were sharing their knowledge, challenges, innovations, and solutions to the topic, as mentioned earlier (Creswell & Creswell, 2017; Maree, 2018).

3.4.2 Individual Semi-Structured Interviews

The semi-structured interviews were designed to serve as feedback from the focus group discussion, where open-ended questions required follow-up questions or clarity (Adams, 2015). Participants were asked to elaborate on their experiences during the interviews, as expressed in the focus group discussions. The need for open-ended questions, clarity on specific questions, and independent thoughts from group participants are reasons that researchers would consider using semi-structured interviews (Adams, 2015). Other reasons for conducting semi-structured interviews include trust factors, where participants may not trust other group members enough to feel confident enough to express their feelings and views on particular issues.

Semi-structured interviews offer insight as they are in-depth in nature, providing personal and intimate sessions where the researcher may prompt detailed accounts of events and experiences (Whiting, 2008). According to Whiting (2008), semi-structured interviews should have the following characteristics: sessions should be scheduled ahead of time, the location should be neutral, questions should be predetermined, new questions should emerge from dialogue, and they should last 30 minutes or more.

Semi-structured interviews were used as the second data collection method for this study. I, the researcher, conducted a one-on-one interview with each participant to clarify and elaborate on matters discussed during the focus group discussions. I also used individual semi-structured interviews for those teachers who had missed a session during the focus group discussions to get them to respond to the questions missed. The interviews were conducted in a formal yet flexible manner, allowing for unscripted follow-up questions where necessary. Open-ended questions were asked to facilitate the participants to express their thoughts, feelings, beliefs, and reflections about the PLC discussions regarding their SWB (Cohen et al., 2018; DeJonckheere & Vaughn, 2019). The semi-

structured interviews were recorded with the participants' consent to avoid misrepresenting the data collected. The recordings were played repeatedly and compared to the transcripts to confirm that the transcripts were captured verbatim and precisely.

The semi-structured interview questions were guided by my research questions which were:

Primary research question

How can a PLC investigating well-being at an LSEN school enhance the well-being of special educational needs teachers?

Secondary research questions

- What are the SPED teachers' experiences of teaching learners with ASD?
- What is being done to facilitate teacher well-being at the school level?
- What contribution do SPED teachers' jobs make on their well-being?
- How did the SPED teachers experience a PLC?

The follow-up questions from the focus group discussions were structured to assist the participants in expressing themselves in a safe space, where only one participant and the researcher would be involved thereby affording the participant confidentiality and true anonymity. At the beginning of the interview, demographic data were drawn from the participants concerning their teaching qualifications, the number of years they had been teaching, and the number of years they had been teaching learners with ASDs. Open-ended questions were asked throughout the interviews to allow the participants to express themselves descriptively. The interviews were audio-recorded with written consent from the participants to alleviate the oversight of important details and transcribed to protect the authenticity of each participant's account of events and experiences. It also assisted in reliability checks to ensure that the information collected was accurate.

3.4.3 Observations

Observations were the third and final data collection method selected for this study. Observations are regarded as one of the oldest approaches used in data collection in qualitative research (Smit & Onwuegbuzie, 2018), being used to record the behavioural patterns of participants and events as they occur in their natural setting (Busetto et al., 2020). The researchers avoid

interactions such as communication with participants, instead relying on their senses and intuition to record events and participant behaviours (Maree, 2019). While Maree (2019) acknowledges the valuable insight and understanding that observations contribute to issues and topics being studied, he also warns of the possible biases that researchers should be aware of and avoid. Maree (2019) cautions researchers to be conscious of their subjective recording of observations which may hinder the overall data collection and misrepresent the participants.

Observations are often categorised into two sub-sections: participant and non-participant observers (Busetto et al., 2020). Participant observers are considered part of the research setting, participating in the particular phenomenon. Participant observation is usually viewed as a suitable data collection method when research is concerned with the actions of participants (Busetto et al., 2020).

The role of the participant observer is to provide an insider's view of a particular phenomenon or group. This involves participating in the group's studied activities and observing and documenting those activities (Maree, 2019). As a participant observer, I was careful not to allow personal biases to influence my observations. I was also aware of the potential for my presence to change the behaviour of the group being studied.

The participant observer role can be valuable, providing insights that would not be possible from an outsider's perspective (Seim, 2021; Maree, 2019). This position has allowed me to see first-hand the insider—outsider dynamic at work in these contexts. Several factors can contribute to the insider—outsider dynamic, including power differentials, group norms, and personal characteristics. In my experience, one of the most important factors is the level of access that the researcher has to group members and resources. Insiders generally have more access than outsiders in terms of people and information. They are more likely to be trusted by group members and given privileged information. This can give them a significant advantage in conducting research, especially if they are interested in studying sensitive or controversial topics.

Outsiders often face greater challenges in conducting research but can also bring valuable skills and perspectives to the process. Because they are not part of the group, they may be more objective and able to see things that insiders cannot (or will not) see. They may also be less likely to

accept group norms blindly and can provide fresh insights into the culture and dynamics of the group (Seim, 2021). However, it is essential to remember that the participant observer is still an outsider in many ways, and their observations should be interpreted accordingly.

During this process, I, the researcher, became part of the research community. I did not only watch participants perform specific actions but also took part in those actions, such as discussing a particular topic with other group members and co-creating knowledge. Participant observers highlight their role in unearthing meanings that people ascribe to their activities (Creswell & Poth, 2016). By contrast, a non-participant observer is merely present but not part of the "group" and is considered to be a bystander during the data collection (Moser & Korstjens, 2018). Observers record observations through field notes during or after the events, noting specific patterns among the participants. Observers are urged to focus on the investigated matters for accuracy to be maintained throughout the recording and findings (Maree, 2019).

Seven participants were observed during the PLC focus group discussions held between April 2022 and June 2022. My role as a participant observer was to facilitate the PLC and participate in the discussions on the teachers' SWB experiences, being cautious not to dominate. I recorded the participants' interactions, body language, and gestures during the PLC with the phenomenon of well-being as the topic of discussion. I participated in four scheduled PLC focus group discussions during the duration of the study. I observed how teachers from the ASD phase of the school interacted during conversations. I used field notes to capture the participants' facial expressions, body language, and undertones when specific topics arose during the discussions. The field notes gave additional insight into the emotional impact that the discussions had on participants.

3.5 Data Analysis Process

I used IPA to analyse the gathered and generated data for this study. The analysis strategy employed for this study was hermeneutic, focusing on the descriptive interpretation of the phenomenon (Thorne, 2000), in which the transcribed audio recordings of the semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions, and observations were interpreted. I focused on the participants' lived experiences and how they made meaning of those experiences. The participants

were given space to narrate their stories as they saw fit in a safe space that encouraged freedom of expression.

I employed IPA to uncover the participants' issues and needs. IPA assisted me in identifying the emerging themes and exploring similarities and relationships between the collected data. The evidence from the study included transcripts from the audio recordings during the PLC focus group discussions, semi-structured individual interviews, and field notes. I organised and categorised the data according to the similarities found in the transcribed audio recordings. The similarities that were identified were then grouped and labelled as the themes and sub-themes of the study (Alase, 2017). Patterns were discovered in the collected data set, and meaningful interpretations were developed (Cohen et al., 2018).

IPA is a systematic method of analysing data that follows a six-step approach developed by Smith et al.(2009) and is as follows:

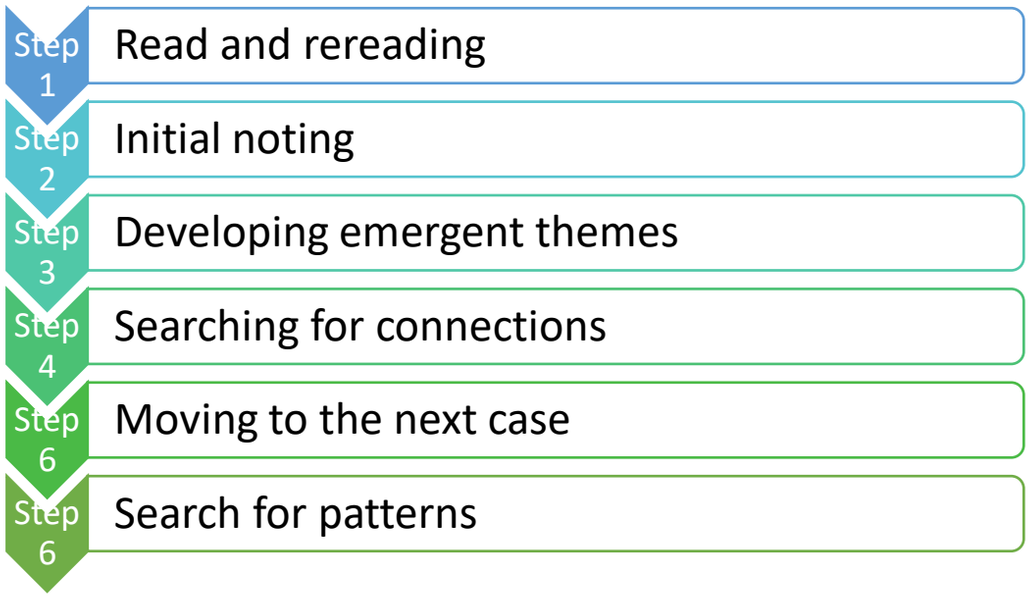

Figure 2: *Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis, Six-Step Approach (Adapted from Smith et al., 2009)*

Step 1: Reading and rereading. This is the step after the focus group discussions and interviews. I transcribed each recorded session verbatim. This allowed me to have access to the readily available data during the analysis. Field notes also accompanied the audio recordings and

transcriptions. I listened to the audio recordings to ensure accuracy between the audio recordings and the transcripts, then I thoroughly read and reread the transcribed focus group discussions, interviews, and field notes.

Step 2: Initial noting. I systematically identified the study's descriptive, linguistic, and conceptual comments by examining the content of the data. This process was done after I had familiarised myself with all the gathered data. For this to occur, I had to immerse myself in the data by reading and rereading all the content, including the focus group discussions, interview transcriptions, and the field notes from the observations.

Step 3: Developing emergent themes. I developed codes and categorised them into themes. Themes are generally linked to the research questions and offer a response to some of those questions. Patterns found in the collected data sets provided me with themes for the study.

Step 4: Searching for connections across emergent themes. I conducted a quality check, which involved reviewing the themes and coded data and establishing the relationship between the two, and, if they did not match, some of those codes and themes were reviewed, and others were discarded or changed.

Step 5: Moving to the next case. After analysing the first participant's transcripts and notes, I moved to the next participant and repeated the steps.

Step 6: Searching for patterns across cases. I searched and identified patterns across all the cases, including discovering new themes. In this final step of IPA, meaning is given to the collected data and reported by answering the research questions. This phase needed to be logically structured so that there was a flow in the themes. Alongside IPA, I used Microsoft Word as the data analysis tool to code and theme the collected data.

3.6 My Role as a Researcher

During my research, I held the position of special educational needs teacher at Diem School*. My role as the researcher in the study was as an active participant observer, observing from both an insider and outsider perspective. A participant observer investigates social phenomena to understand a group of individuals in their natural habitat through involvement and engagement (Ciesielska et al.,

2018). During this process, the researcher listens, watches, and takes notes to identify group norms and hierarchies (Cohen et al., 2018).

I was aware of any biases I may have had throughout the data collection process. I dealt with my biases by allowing the participants to respond to the questions before I attempted to respond. I did this to avoid influencing their responses in one way or another. I considered each participant's SWB experiences and the meanings attached to those experiences. My study consisted of observations during the four focus group discussions and three interviews with the teachers teaching learners with ASD.

All the participants in the study were my colleagues at the school where I work and with whom I was acquainted. As of January 2022, I did not work in the same phase as they did. However, the data collection was conducted between April and July 2022.

My role in this study may therefore be described as follows:

- A facilitator in the PLC
- A participant observer in the PLC
- A researcher

I collected, analysed, coded, and categorised the data into themes. Other functions performed were designing interview protocols and leading questions for the focus group discussions which were similar to the semi-structured interview questions that were used to gather the data.

3.7 Research Procedures

3.7.1 Trustworthiness

The purpose of trustworthiness in qualitative research is to determine the confidence one should have in the research study. I therefore opted to use the following criteria: credibility, dependability, confirmability, and authenticity (Maree, 2019). This was done as quality assurance measures refer to the methods and actions employed to ensure excellence and rigour throughout the data collection and analysis of the study (Sargeant, 2012). This procedure was carried out to avoid

biases in the sampling process, thereby safeguarding the data quality, data collection, and analysis procedures (Cohen et al., 2020; Maree, 2019; Sargeant, 2012).

3.7.2 Credibility

Credibility refers to the confidence in the truth of the data presented, its interpretations, and whether enough information has been shared in the research to support the researcher's argument (Kyngäs & Kääriäinen, 2020). Cohen et al. (2020) suggest using triangulation during the research to improve the study's credibility; they elaborate that using multiple sources reinforces the credibility of the research study. I opted to use three data collection methods: focus group discussions, semi-structured interviews, and observations.

3.7.3 Dependability

Dependability is the ability to have other sources substantiating the researcher's findings (Maree, 2019). This was expressed in the collected data, where the transcribed interviews and focus group discussions were thoroughly examined through reading, analysis, evaluation, and interpretation. Kyngäs and Kääriäinen (2020) assert that the importance of dependability lies in the consistency of the data processes employed throughout the study. A few methods that researchers use during their data analysis process include independent coding-recording, peer examination, dialogue among co-researchers, panel discussions, and face validity (Kyngäs & Kääriäinen, 2020). To strengthen the dependability of my study, I employed member checking by my participants who read the transcribed focus group discussions, semi-structured interviews, and field notes taken during the observations to ensure accuracy and truthful reporting before and after the analysis.

3.7.3 Confirmability

Confirmability refers to the ability of the study to be neutral, where data is seen as objectively accurate, significant, and meaningful (Maree, 2019). This was demonstrated by the PLC's diverse knowledge of educational topics, where teacher well-being was discussed in Chapter 2 of the dissertation's literature review section. The study's findings should only reflect the data collected and not the influence or opinions of the researcher or other factors (Cohen et al., 2020). Transferability

refers to the study's scope and whether it has value outside the immediate studied population (Maree, 2020). I used audit trails such as field notes and a field diary as supporting tools between the data collected and my research findings.

3.7.4 Authenticity

The range of realities presented by the researcher is regarded as a measure used to authenticate data (Cohen et al., 2020; Maree, 2019). Authenticity is an essential consideration in qualitative research. It refers to the degree to which the research findings are accurate in relation to the lived experiences of the participants (Cohen et al., 2020; Maree, 2019). In other words, it measures how well the research captures the reality of the participants' lives. There are several ways to ensure authenticity in qualitative research. One is to use data triangulation, which involves collecting data from multiple sources and perspectives. This helps to reduce bias and ensure that the findings are as accurate as possible. Another way to guarantee authenticity is through member checking, which involves verifying the results with the participants themselves. This helps to ensure that the researcher has accurately captured their experiences.

Qualitative research is often criticised for being subjective and not objective enough. However, if done correctly, it can be a powerful tool for understanding human behaviour and providing otherwise unavailable insights.

The authenticity of the data is an important consideration in any research study. In my study, I included the views of at least eight participants to offer a variety of perspectives so that one view was not seen as being promoted over the other. Including multiple perspectives helped to create a more accurate picture of the research topic under investigation. Maree (2019) notes that the authenticity of data may be expressed by citing various participants' views on the research topic or phenomenon. This allows for a more comprehensive understanding of the issue at hand. In my study, I sought to include a wide range of views to provide a well-rounded perspective on the issue under examination. It is important to note that no single perspective can provide an entirely accurate representation of reality. However, by including multiple perspectives, one can gain a more nuanced and authentic understanding of the issue.

3.7.5 Triangulation

Triangulation is a qualitative research technique that involves collecting data from multiple sources and perspectives in order to understand a phenomenon more fully (Maree, 2019). This approach can provide more significant insights than relying on a single source of information, as it allows for different interpretations and understanding of the issue.

Researchers can use various types of triangulation, including methodological, data, researcher, and theory triangulation (Anderson et al., 2022; Heesen et al., 2019). Methodological triangulation involves using multiple data collection methods, such as interviews, observations, and focus groups, as employed in this study (Heesen et al., 2019). Data triangulation entails analysing data from different sources, such as secondary data sources or other groups of people. Researcher triangulation involves having more than one researcher working on a study, while theory triangulation refers to the use of multiple theoretical frameworks to understand data (Anderson et al., 2022).

The use of triangulation can be beneficial in various ways. It can help increase the credibility, validity, and reliability of research findings by providing multiple perspectives on an issue. It can also help generate new ideas and understanding about a phenomenon under study. Additionally, triangulation can assist in disconfirming or confirming participants' responses at different times, for example, during focus group versus individual interviews.

Despite the advantages of this technique, some challenges are associated with its use (Noble & Heale, 2019). Triangulation can be time-consuming and resource-intensive, requiring data to be collected from multiple sources. It can also be difficult to achieve complete agreement among all investigators working on a study. Nonetheless, when used appropriately, triangulation can improve the quality of research.

3.7.6 Member Checking

Member checking is a process whereby researchers check with participants to confirm that their data and interpretations are accurate (Busetto et al., 2020). This is an important step in qualitative research, as it helps to ensure the trustworthiness and credibility of the findings. There are several ways to conduct member checking. Still, it is generally recommended that researchers interview

participants about their data in person or via telephone to comment or approve of the interpreted data (Iivari, 2018). This allows participants to provide feedback and clarification thus enabling researchers to probe for deeper understanding. Appropriately conducted member checking can be a valuable tool for ensuring the quality of qualitative research.

3.8 Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations are embedded in the three ethical principles established in The Belmont Report: beneficence, respect for the people, and justice (Maree, 2019). The adoption of the ethical principles aims to protect the involved participants, making the research a justifiable process that benefits both the research community and the participants (Ponterotto, 2010). I considered all three ethical principles and ensured that the ethical principle of beneficence was adhered to by protecting the and avoiding endangering their lives in any way (Anabo et al., 2019). Respect for the participants was addressed by ensuring that all the participants gave their consent and that vulnerable groups of society were protected during the study (Maree, 2019). Participants were protected during the study, which took place at a school where students are considered vulnerable due to their disabilities. Pseudonyms were used to protect the participants' and the school's identities. Pseudonyms were also used to protect learners' and teachers' real names who were mentioned in the study, and an asterisk preceded the names to indicate that there were not the actual names of the people mentioned. Lastly, justice was adhered to by ensuring the fair distribution of benefits and burdens throughout the study (Anabo et al., 2019).

Eight participants took part in the study , seven of whom were my teacher colleagues at the LSEN school, and me, the researcher and participant observer. The guidelines of the University of Pretoria's Ethics Committee guided the ethical standards of the study. As a researcher, I applied for ethical clearance according to the guidelines. Upon the approval of my ethical clearance, I was granted permission to conduct my study. Permission from the Gauteng DoE (see Appendix A), the principal, and the SGB (see Appendix B) was requested and granted by the relevant stakeholders. The participants were invited to participate in the study at an information session granted by the school principal. Before they agreed to participate, the participants were informed about the scope and

purpose of the study. Because the school in question was for vulnerable learners living with disabilities, informed consent, voluntary participation, anonymity, and confidentiality were explained (see Appendix C) to ensure the protection and anonymity of the participants and the broader school community (Coffelt, 2017). Four participants were given transcripts to read and confirm the accuracy of the gathered data.

Avoiding false evidence and plagiarising other researchers' work were adhered to by reporting honestly and using Turnitin to prevent plagiarism. Audio recordings of the focus group discussions and interviews were transcribed verbatim to avoid misinterpretation and inaccuracies.

3.9 Conclusion

Chapter 3 focused on the qualitative research approach underpinned by the interpretivist paradigm and the phenomenological research design chosen for this study. The sample consisted of seven individuals and me, as a participant observer. The participants were purposefully selected as the teachers teaching learners with ASD at a special educational needs school. IPA was used to analyse the data. The participants were given transcripts to confirm their accuracy and ensure the study's trustworthiness. Ethical considerations were upheld during this research study. The methods of gathering data that involved focus groups, semi-structured interviews, and observations were further discussed.

Chapter 4: Presentation of Data and Findings

4.1 Introduction

This chapter discusses the themes and findings that emerged from the collected data. Data were presented and analysed using IPA. The data captured the teachers' experiences of teaching learners with ASD and their well-being experiences in their work context. The sample included novice and experienced teachers who could explore their responses at different stages of their professional careers.

The methods used for the data collection included four focus group observations, four focus group discussions, and three semi-structured interviews in which open-ended questions were asked. The focus group discussions involved seven teachers, including me as a participant observer. The individual semi-structured interviews involved three participants. The collected data were transcribed, presented, and analysed by the researcher. The analysis was arranged using a logical and coherent sequence of the emerging themes.

For in-depth and rich data analysis, I wrote my data analysis for observations, focus group discussions, and interviews in narrative form. Transcriptions from the focus groups and semi-structured interviews formed this study's primary sources. At the same time, I used observations to analyse the group dynamics of the focus group discussions.

4.2 Data Presentation and Analysis

I collected data using audio recordings in the focus group discussions and individual semi-structured interviews, which I later transcribed, and field notes. I chose and used multiple methods to increase credibility and validity, contributing the research study's trustworthiness.

4.2.1 Focus Group Observations

I used field notes to collect the focus group observations. Four focus group discussions were conducted, and observations were recorded for the duration of the sessions. Each session ranged between 23 and 56 minutes. These observations were used to record more information, such as participation, body language, tone, attitude, and other nuances that audio recordings could not gather.

Observations served as a tool to contextualise what was being said and why the participants said it. As the researcher, I was limited in my efforts to observe and facilitate the discussions. The participants were seated at a round table to encourage equal participation and engagement. The observations are discussed in the following paragraphs.

These are generalisations of the events which I recorded as field notes during and shortly after the sessions. All the participants who consented to participate in the focus group discussions participated, although attendance was inconsistent for some.

The focus group discussions were held between April 2022 and June 2022 in Classroom 56. Participant A missed the first session as she was absent from work and therefore could not attend. Participant G missed the third session, and Participant F missed the last session.

The sessions typically began 15 minutes later than scheduled owing to other work responsibilities that some of the participants had to attend to before the session. The participants were generally excited. The experienced teachers showed more confidence when responding to the questions by giving in-depth responses. They dominated the discussions, pouring out their feelings and experiences since they had more content to share and reflect upon.

The experienced ASD teachers generally gave in-depth and rich responses, which propelled the novice teachers to participate in the discussions. As the researcher, I often invited and encouraged the novice teachers to join the discussions. The novice teachers initially hesitated to participate in the discussions, but they joined in and contributed towards the end of the session. The overall atmosphere was relaxed and friendly, and the participants were jovial, often relating to other participants' experiences. The atmosphere was pleasant, as the participants were acquainted with each other. The group dynamics were healthy, as all the participants were on the same professional level.

4.3 Presentation of Data

The themes from the collected data were derived from the participants' responses during the focus group discussions and semi-structured interviews. Both the focus group discussions and individual interviews shared the same questions. Where necessary, follow-up questions were posed for clarity. The questions were changed slightly where a follow-up question was required. That was

done to observe any changes regarding responses within and without group dynamics at play. The participants were encouraged to speak openly and respond to the questions by reflecting on their lived experiences. The reassurance of confidentiality and anonymity was upheld, as presented in the participants' letters of consent.

Table 4: *Themes and sub-themes*

Themes	Sub-themes
A. Teachers' perceptions of well-being	Defining well-being Meaningful experiences of teaching learners with ASD contributing to teacher well-being
B. Adverse teacher experiences	Physical and emotional exhaustion
C. Teachers' experiences of support and school culture	Perceptions of school culture Perceptions of support from school management
D. Teachers' experiences of identity and competency	Uncertainty and discontentment Imposter syndrome
E. Facilitating teacher well-being at a school level	Improving teacher well-being with support management and stakeholders of the school
F. Teachers' experiences of a professional learning community	Shared experiences, connection, and emotional expression Transformation

4.3.1 Participants' Perception of the Term Well-Being

The focus group discussions and the interviews began with defining the term well-being and exploring the participants' experiences of teaching learners with ASD. The definition was discussed in the first focus group which included seven participants and me as a participant observer and was investigated further with three participants who consented to participate in the individual semi-structured interviews.

4.3.1.1 Defining Well-Being. The participants responded to the first question: How would you define well-being? It was crucial to hear and understand the extent to which the participants understood the main topic of the focus group so that the rest of the sessions could be built upon it. Their response to the first question laid the foundation for follow-up questions and the direction of the discussions.

The participants' responses were similar with slight variations; some expanded further on the definitions provided by others. Participants B and E defined well-being as feelings and emotions, while Participant B included inner being and inner peace. Other participants expanded on these definitions by including words such as holistic and various other aspects, including social, personal, and community.

Participant B defined well-being, stating, "*I think it's emotional and like physical, like how you're feeling. Yeah, basically how you're feeling on the outside, like physically, your body. But also emotional, on the inside*." Participant B focused on the emotional and physical aspects of the term.

Participant E defined well-being as inner being, feelings, emotions, and inner peace. Her focus was on the emotional aspect of the term. She explained, "*Well-being has to do with your inner being. How do you feel about certain things? Your emotion, of course. How do you feel being in a certain place? Like well-being is generally your inner peace*."

Participant D defined well-being saying, "*I think it's, uh, holistic, my English is gone…. (laughs), yeah, like I said, it must be a holistic thing. The whole of you must be okay*." Keywords in Participant D's explanation of the term included “holistic” and “all of you”. Participant D's definition is not descriptive but gives one a sense that in all aspects of your life you should be well or satisfied.

Participant C brought a different element to the term, including social aspects in her definition. She explained, "*I think that well-being is regarding your family aspects, and your work aspects and your social aspects*."

Participant F agreed with Participants C and D by acknowledging that well-being was holistic and that other social factors such as family, work, and the communities we live in contribute to well-

being. "*Well-being is all to do with 'me'. It's either at work, at home, outside in the community to serve at large,*" she noted.

Participant G took her definition deeper by including "self " management and coping with her living and daily surroundings. She further elaborated on her definition by including coping with daily activities stating, "*I would like to agree with what everyone else said, and I think it is also how you manage yourself in everyday life. Can you cope with what's going on around you?*"

Participant G was later asked about well-being during her semi-structured interview. She gave a much broader definition of well-being than during the focus group discussion, mentioning how her well-being was affected and how it manifested as physical symptoms:

> "*Well-being to me is like it's basically your everything. It's holistic. So, it's spiritual, mentally, physically. Usually when my well-being goes down, like if I haven't had enough sleep or self-care, then it precipitates into physical symptoms, like I get sick*."

The participants' general definition of well-being included understanding that the term was multifaceted. Some of the participants acknowledged the emotional and physical aspects of their being as a composition of their well-being. At the same time, some paid tribute to their work, home, and communities as a fundamental piece of their well-being. Some of the participants said that well-being needed to be addressed holistically, not neglecting one feature over another.

4.3.1.2 Meaningful Experiences of Teaching Learners with ASD that Contribute to Teacher Well-Being. This sub-theme refers to meaningful experiences that contributed to participants' purpose and fulfilment, ultimately positively impacting their well-being. In this sub-theme, the participants told of their experiences teaching learners with ASDs, how these experiences shaped them as individuals, and their reasons for staying in the profession.

Both Participants C and E found that working or having a job and contributing to their families was a positive experience that came out of working as special needs teachers. Participant C said, "*It gives you a sense of self-worth; you're also contributing to your household*," and Participant E added:

"*When I first got here, it was that excitement. Wow, I got a job! Wow, I got a job! You know. Given the level of unemployment, the high level of unemployment in our country, I was like…Wow, I got a job! I'm gonna get money monthly*!"

Participant A named learner progress as a positive experience, while Participant D mentioned her ability to give a meaningful experience. For Participants A, E, and F, receiving from the learners who were affectionate offered meaning to their experiences. Participant A said, "*As Participant C has mentioned, a sense of self-worth because with each little achievement these learners go through, for you, it's a big hoo-ha*."

For Participant E, it was meaningful when, "*Like you just feeling down, or you're just depressed from certain things. And then when you get here, there are those learners who just hug you*."

Participant F stated, "*At least I can feel that I've contributed a lot to these children*."

By comparison, Participant D viewed giving to learners as a significant and purposeful experience that contributed to her well-being and helped her to connect with learners on a deeper level. She explained, "*For me, for them to come to school and I can give them love, and I can make a difference in their life at school, that's very big reward for, for me*."

These contradicting responses were interesting, as they both contributed to the same sub-theme of meaningful contribution, thus confirming the two-way process of well-being.

Participants E and B's responses are embedded in empathy. Their decision to stay in the profession was based on the needs of the learners. Participant E explained, "*What really keeps me going is sometimes seeing them suffer, then I'm like, wow, then maybe I need to be here*." Meanwhile Participant B said:

As I got to know the learners, I just, I've realised that they didn't choose this for themselves. And if it was my children, I would want someone to help them and to be able to be willing to teach them as well.

They come with love, and they hug you, even though they are sick, they just put everything in it. I know sometimes I think that, oh, it's gross, it's disgusting, but uh, I know it comes with so

much love. And if we can give that same kind of love back, we're making a difference already in their lives.

The participants acknowledged the importance of receiving emotional feedback from their learners. One can conclude that it helped the participants to feel appreciated and needed. Equally, giving to their learners was just as important. When the teachers gave of themselves, they helped to create meaningful experiences. These experiences can have a lasting impact on the well-being of both the teacher and the student. By giving to the learners, the teachers felt more connected to them, thus contributing to teacher well-being.

4.3.2 Adverse Teacher Experiences

Adverse experiences with teachers are not uncommon. Research suggests that teachers in SPED have experienced some form of emotional exhaustion, physical incidents, or injuries at the hands of learners. These experiences can have a lasting impact on teachers, causing them to feel less connected to work and less motivated to teach. Additionally, these experiences can lead to professional difficulties later in life.

When asked about their experiences, the participants reflected on the adverse experiences which stemmed from behavioural challenges that learners with ASD presented. Some participants recalled incidents that sometimes led them to seek medical attention, while others led them to take time off work for recovery, affecting their attendance and, subsequently, their absenteeism.

4.3.2.1 Physical and Emotional Exhaustion.

Participant G reflected on two incidents, a few years prior, during which she experienced physical injuries on duty and another requiring medical attention.

I think it was back in 2018, the one child had like a meltdown, and then he actually fractured my carpals on my left, arg, on my right hand. And, you know, they've attacked me with plastic knives, or you know (laughs), it happens, it happens, and it is scary when it happens cause you, it just happens so quick.

Participant F concurred, even though her experience was very recent.

Participant F: "*So, physically, yes, I've experienced an injury whereby a learner hits me very hard with a swing. Aaw!!! I could feel that, you know what, this is horrible. I nearly lost my knee. Even now, I'm still going under physiotherapy*."

Although Participant D did not share a particular physical incident, she mentioned the physical impact of working with learners with autism.

Participant B used the words "very tough" to describe her experience working with learners with ASD, saying:

I would say it's very tough…And I think what I've realised over the last year, like, this year actually, is that I've been sicker than I've been at the SID side because I'm constantly stressing about things that the children do or uhm, or things that I have to be aware of.

Similarly, Participant G mentioned being sick because of the stress of working within this phase of the school. She reflected on her work stress and how she dealt with it in her attempt to cope. She admitted that she was overmedicating, a clear indication of ill-being:

Participant G, *I get insomnia, can't sleep, and then I'll take a pill for that. I also get like chronic migraines, so what do I do? I get a pill for that. So, its pills, pills, pills, pills, and I'm like basically overmedicating to the point where you gotta kinda like up the ante coz no pill, painkillers helping anymore, so that's in my, in my situation, so yeah.*

Emotional exhaustion can be attributed to the build-up of stressful events and situations commonly associated with a negative outlook on experiences and events. The participants were asked to reflect on events that contributed to their lack of well-being or ill-being in the context of their work. Below are some of their responses supporting the sub-theme.

Participants A, C, and G expressed how their concerns for learners went beyond the classroom. According to Participant A,

The lack thereof is the emotional strain that comes with it because besides the fact that these learners cannot regulate themselves emotionally, psychologically, and otherwise, it boils down

to, as a teacher who's involved on a daily basis with these kids, you tend to get too attached, to a point whereby you know each learner and their socio-economic background.

Participant G noted, "*I think I'm more worried about my children's emotional well-being now than I was at the mainstream school*." She also mentioned how her concern extended to parents when she said, "*I can't help it, always stress about how are they doing at home. How are the mommies and daddies coping with this?*"

Participant C explained about the parents of children with special needs:

I think with Diem School, where we are now, it's more emotionally draining, and sometimes you either get parents that are here, that are helping, or there's parents that's like, this is my fault. This is my fault that my child is like this, and they kind of pushed the child away to live with the granny.*

Participants D and A expressed how their jobs negatively affected their home duties. Participant D used the word "exhausted" to describe how it left her feeling:

When you get home, you don't have any, any energy left to do with your own children. … On the other hand, Participant A used the word “neglected”.

Participant A, *So, how do I deal with the stress? I read myself to sleep and then get rid of my kids when they tap into my safe space. So, I tried to just you know, when I feel empty find ways to recharge myself, go for a walk and but the sad part of it is that in the process I feel like my kids, my family gets neglected. Also, over weekends, I don't want to do anything. Over weekends I want just to do nothing and sleep because I'm so exhausted*.

I think as an ASD teacher, there is a lot of humour working with these children. And I think that if you don't see that humour, you won't be able to work with them because they're physically and emotionally very draining.

Participant C added, "*And I think we've realised how bad it must be for the parents as well. Like we only see them from eight until one. But these children need to go home*."

Being overwhelmed was mentioned by Participant E while recalling her experiences of working with learners with ASD after having come from the mainstream. Participant C supported Participant E in relating her experiences of being attacked by learners and the emotions associated with such incidents. Participant C stated, "*I've been here for only three months. Yes, it was overwhelming. I was like, no ways!!! What am I doing here?*"

Participant G touched on the suppression of her feelings that came with working with special needs learners. She mentioned how she could suppress her emotions at work but could not do the same outside the work context, saying:

Participant G, *My own well-being, it didn't really stay constant because, but the only thing that I find strange is that when I'm at work, I love working with the kids. It's wonderful. But when I go home and I watch special needs kids on the television, I can't. I like cry. I get emotional, but I do it here, and it's fine being here*.

However, when overwhelmed by situations, Participant C expressed her emotions by crying. As she said, "*I think emotionally; I think I've never cried so much in my life, working in this school, than in a mainstream. So emotionally, it's rough*."

Participant C also reflected on her experiences and remarked that a lack of support contributed to teachers venting. This was supported by Participant A who announced that teachers vented because they needed emotional support. "*We're so hungry for support; we don't even care anymore. We're just blurting out all these emotional things with a smile. And it's all because we need support*."

Feelings of frustration were shared by Participants A, E, and C. According to Participant A, "*Most of the time, the frustration comes when you have had a learner for a year, and there's nothing that comes out of it*."

Participant E reflected on some of her experiences with learners as, "*Sometimes, like in class, you find that I'm actually a very patient person, but then, when I teach, you find that when they don't get things, I'll be harsh on them.*"

Participant C,

Either you got bullied today, or you got beaten, or you got frustrated. And just going to your storeroom, and just like (pause) sometimes I just go into my storeroom because I'm like, please Lord, don't give me strength, just give me patience, please just help me.

Participant C reflected, "*Our support at this moment is the teachers that we work with at break time. That we can just tap into each other, and then we drain each other*."

Participant A, "*Venting!!"*

Adverse teacher experiences were essential to capture in this study as they contribute to the holistic picture of SPED teachers' experiences. This theme highlighted the challenges faced by the teachers and the impact thereof. The participants acknowledged various factors contributing to their physical and emotional exhaustion. They were often met with frustrating and overwhelming experiences and found themselves worried and stressed about their learners and parents. Such incidents seem to have led to emotional exhaustion, which can take a toll on teachers' personal and professional lives, resulting in them neglecting their families and children.

4.3.3 Teachers' Experiences of Support and School Culture

The third theme was the general support teachers received from the school and how that formed part of the school culture. The below sub-themes emerged from the data collected.

4.3.3.1 Perceptions of School Culture.

This sub-theme refers to experiences of values, attitudes, and operational etiquette with which the school is aligned. The participants' responses seem to suggest that perhaps the DoE officials could not support the teachers partly because of the window-dressing culture indicated by Participant C and Participant A.

According to Participant C, "*And I think by the time they come to our schools, the Principal and HoDs always take them to the nicest classes and the nicest teacher*."

Participant A added, "*And the well-behaved learners*."

Participant C, further added, "*Diem* School is the perfect school the whole time*."

Participant D emphasised the topic of window-dressing, saying that there appeared to be a sense of pretence to maintain appearances when officials visited the school. This had an impact on other areas of the school as well, such as the existence but lack of implementation of well-being frameworks. According to Participant D, "*There is a Wellness Committee, but I don't… they are not featuring, Uhm, with the teachers. Yes, I did. I don't think there is really something for the well-being of teachers at this stage at the school.*"

Participant C added to this idea when she claimed that while referral forms for learners seemed to benefit teachers, in practice, there was never any follow-up after a request for assistance. As she said,

> That I've seen on the School Based Support Team on that referral forms, there is a block where teacher Katherine sometimes says emotional support for the teacher, but mine has been ticked so many times when I had Calvin, but there was never something provided for you.

The fact that several participants seemed uncertain about the Wellness Committee's function in the workplace was an intriguing finding. Participant A clarified that the committee was established for teacher well-being, contrary to Participant C's assertion that it was established for the students. Some of the participants, namely the inexperienced teachers, were unaware of the committee's functions and existence.

Participant C noted, "*I think there's a lot of committees, like you said, Wellness, but it's for the children.*"

Participant A responded, "*It was for teachers; it was mainly put together for the support of educators.*"

According to Participant A, the Wellness Committee had been established two years prior. Yet one of the committee members, Participant C, affirmed that she had not attended any of their meetings, declaring, "*I'm on the committee, and I've never attended a meeting*."

Participant C felt support resources were all geared towards the learners, while teacher well-being was neglected.

Participant C suggested, And the psychologist, they too, but it's for the children; "*There's not really somebody or the social workers or whatever. They're almost here for the children. I think we also here for the children. So, I think teacher well-being is overlooked because we're just focusing on the children*."

The participants stated that the school had a window-dressing culture, which resulted in no support for teachers. Committees were formed to help the teachers but were never used. The participants reported that while support existed on paper, it did not exist in practice. The school's support for the learners was apparent, but teacher support was overlooked.

4.3.2.2 Perceptions of Support from School Management.

This sub-theme was generated from the third focus group discussion on exploring support experiences from the school. The following question was asked: In your experience, what is being done to facilitate teacher well-being at the school?

Upon reflecting on their experiences of teaching at Diem* School, Participants D, A, F, and C agreed on the lack of well-being support. The lack of skills and resources from management to address the well-being needs of teachers was stated by Participant C, "*Like you run to teacher Mary and like she also needs help. You run to the principal, and she needs help. You run to your HOD and like she's drowning*."

According to Participant D, "*There's, no, some support from parents, the school itself, the department.*"

Participant A indicated that, "*So, I don't think in my experience personally. Nothing has been done to facilitate our well-being, so it's every man for himself*."

By contrast, Participant C mentioned that the school had provided some support in recent months. She further indicated that this was the first time she had experienced any form of support for the teachers since she began teaching at the school, by saying, "*You know, I think the first thing that they've ever done at the school to support us was Paul* and Judith*. They came now for the restraining course*." She further expounded on her statement by saying the following:

Participant C, *Like from the beginning, and that's amazing. It helps us to support us and to support the learners. And uhm, yeah, that was like the first thing. Like we don't really have the psychologist available for us to talk to her at any time that we can, so there's a lot of support for the learners. Therapists and psychologists and social workers but there's not really for us. We have to do it on our own time, on our own*.

Participant A responded to Participant C and chose not to entertain the current "support" provided by the school. This was a rather interesting observation: "*I'm not going to touch on Judith* and Paul*.*"

Participant G reflected on a SGB meeting she had attended:

… when we talk about it, they dismiss it as if it's not important, like teacher well-being doesn't mean anything to them. They actually made a comment the other day that they're gonna stop Paul and Judith* to come because there actually helping the teachers with their well-being, and that's not why they were hired*.

Participant F: "*We don't receive anything to support us, but from where I am an SGB, we do support the teachers*."

Participant C referred to management support by saying, "*With regard to well-being, I think many of us have asked for support, but I don't think they know where to go find support to give us because I don't think it's ever been so bad*."

Reflecting on her experience of support at the school, Participant D specified emotional support as significant because of the nature of her work context: "*I think in our school because we are working with children with disabilities, we need more emotional support than people working in the mainstream; they have other problems that we don't have.*"

Participant A concluded that the lack of support resulted in feelings of discouragement, noting, "*I feel as if Participant F is saying [that] if we were given enough support, most people won't (pause) wouldn't be demoralised because you feel like I'm fighting a losing battle*."

In this case, observing how their colleagues were treated discouraged the teachers from actively participating in their well-being. Participant A spoke of the lack of enthusiasm to request support when needed, as a negative outcome was anticipated,

> *Another thing is I don't think we have even the zeal or even that push to say go seek support because you have observed, as Participant B said, one teacher had to leave. You have observed how everyone's problem is treated in as far as being given support is required, and then you realise what's the point of me going if so and so went there and there was nothing in place for them.*

Reflecting on when she had just started teaching in the ASD phase, Participant A mentioned her lack of experience to complete her duties and that there was no support to assist her in coping with this new role. She admitted that she was overwhelmed by her experiences and had to help herself:

> *But if you know that you have placed someone who has no experience with the type of learners that they are dealing with on a daily basis, there should be some consideration of looking for ways to support them, so I had to just get into the whole ocean and find my way out by myself*.

When asking for help, she felt dismissed. "*And instead of me being assisted or finding ways in order to support me, it was, I was told that no, you can do this*." She further insinuated that lack of support negatively affected teacher retention. "*So, and this boils down to, at the end of the day, without the support, teachers are going to be coming and going*."

Participant C referred to the short-term solutions given by management when dealing with a difficult day at work owing to incidents that occurred in the classroom. She stated that teachers were asked to go home and rest when they were unable to cope with their daily struggles. It might have been helpful at that moment, but they came back to the same problems the next day; this alluded to the lack of systems in place for long-term well-being support for teachers,

> *Because, like, okay, what support do I give you? What? Do you want you want a day off? Okay, so get in your car, go home, come back the next day, you're gonna feel better. But like you said, the next day you gonna come back to the same drama.*

Participant A agreed that the lack of operational support translated to her returning to the same problems after recuperating. "*If I feel overwhelmed, I can go to my doctor; then she books me off, then I can maybe get over it and come back and still face the same turmoil again, so we have nothing in place for us.*"

Although the questions asked were directly related to supporting structures at a school level, the participants felt the need to incorporate support from the DoE in their responses. Participant D spoke of the lack of well-being support from the department, where office bearers were making decisions regarding teacher work conditions but were not in touch with the realities in special needs schools and, therefore, could not support teachers. "*There is pressure for the school to appear 'perfect*", said Participant C. "*They don't have a clue what's going on in the school system, so that's why I think we don't get any support from the department*."

According to Participant A, teachers' shortcomings were reflected in their inability to report matters affecting them. She further mentioned that management should be taking practical action in their pursuit to support teachers. This statement places teachers and management as responsible parties for facilitating well-being at a school level, with each group responsible for different tasks.

Participant A: "*And sometimes we can say we are also at fault because we don't put our struggles on paper, but on the other hand, they are also at fault because they're not on the ground with us*."

The third theme dealt with well-being structures dedicated to supporting teachers. The participants reflected on their experiences regarding the lack of support from the school and its stakeholders. They further reported the lack of support for their specific job as SPED teachers requiring emotional support. They found that favourable conditions were not positioned for teachers to thrive in their unique circumstances as SPED teachers.

4.3.4 Teacher's Experiences of Identity and Competency

The fourth theme concerned the participants' experiences which led to their sense of identity and competence. The inability of teachers to see the precise course of their careers ahead leading to job dissatisfaction was the foundation for this theme.

4.3.4.1 Uncertainty and Discontentment.

In this sub-theme, the participants reflected on their experiences teaching learners with ASD and expressed how these feelings were a factor in their practice. The above factors thus contributed to teacher dissatisfaction. It is important to highlight that when asked to reflect on their experiences teaching learners with ASD.

Participant F commented that she felt "lost" when she first started teaching learners with ASD, as she said: "*They were new to me, and it's like I was lost*."

This was agreed upon by Participants A, E, and D in their statements below.

Participant E: "*Like I'm not winning with these kids, you know*."

Participant A: "*You question yourself, and then it gets to you second-guessing your abilities as a teacher and your development. Am I growing? What am I not doing right?"*

Participant D: "*It takes years, but there is improvement, and then on the other side, like Participant A said, yah, it's emotional. Very, very drowning because you get too attached and you also ….it feels like you work, you do your work, but you don't know am I doing the right thing?*"

However, when Participant B was asked the same question, she admitted that, in the beginning, she wanted to leave the profession, citing working with learners with ASD as a reason, a feeling she did not have while working in the Severe Intellectual Disabilities phase of the school. Participant B: "*When I first started, like the first weeks, I didn't want to be here anymore. I wanted so badly to go find another job or maybe do something else*."

The below responses were to a question posed regarding support for teachers in the school. Participant G reflected on her private life, although this question was asked regarding work life. This gives the impression that her workplace support perspective was somewhat connected to her personal life. Participant G stated,

Honestly, there's like no support system for me in place at the school. Air quote, unquote, there's this Wellness Committee at school. I mean, I've never seen anything being done and

honestly, Uhm, I don't feel safe sharing my private life, and my private like concerns or challenges with the people at the school coz they gossip (pause) So, I don't trust them.

While Participant D added, "*I have a child in my class, Lesego*, Uhm, I started with him in, Uhm, in SID because no one in ASD wanted him this side because he was too difficult*."

The below responses were to a question asked about receiving support from management. Participants A, G, and B reflected on their experiences, and all concurred that they were not supported when they raised issues that affected their work and, consequently, their well-being, which contributed to their feelings of discontent.

Participant A: "*I think the management should stop expecting us to be seen and not heard. That's the first approach because it seems like, at this point, we have to be seen, but we're not listened to*."

Participant G:

We will report things that like that is a challenge, and months go by, and it's like we're not being heard. I feel that, like, for me, that's what stresses me out the most, so for me, it's not really the kids like I can deal with that in class, yes there's, there's a meltdown, yes, we deal with its stressful in that moment. But I don't go home stressing about that when I, at home, I get anxious about other things like the mood or the management of the school and the lack of support, et cetera.

Participant B, *And I know that's how it was when I started here, I really wanted to contribute and do a lot of things, and then I got my numbers, and I'm at the stage where I'm thinking about leaving, and that's not a good thing, because I really don't want to leave*.

Dissatisfaction and uncertainty were caused by negative perceptions of well-being structures and a lack of management support. These viewpoints can contribute to a general sense of unease and mistrust in the school. The participants expressed feelings of powerlessness or resignation as a result of their uncertainty.

4.3.4.2 Imposter Syndrome.

This sub-theme highlights self-doubt as a significant concern as it negatively affects job satisfaction. Self-doubt intensifies anxiety and contributes to ill-being.

Participant A spoke of "second-guessing" herself, and Participant E spoke of being "anxious" about her development. Both these participants were concerned with their development as teachers. This factor relates to their identity as teachers.

Participant A, *Should I say most of the time, the frustration comes when you have had a learner for a year, and there's nothing that comes out of it. As much as you try to put yourself in a position where you say I understand they are ASD, you tend to also second guess yourself in question*.

Participant E expressed her concerns, "*What really worries me, like I'm very anxious of, like I've said before, my personal growth.*"

Participant E expanded further on her experiences in teaching in a special educational needs school and how it impacted her teacher identity and competence,

> *Honestly, ever since I got here, I don't feel, I don't feel challenged … I feel like I'm not growing. I don't know if it's because maybe in mainstream our growth, I've been measuring my growth on the level of achievements of learners, how the performance of learner (pause). I was here, you know, I was teaching Grade 11s, like 10-12, and then I'll be like okay, my learner getting 80s, wow, I'm doing well. And I'll get you know, be congratulated by other teachers; "Wow, ever since you got here, learners seem to be improving". Then there is a different story altogether. I don't want to lie; sometimes, it's emotionally draining. I'd get home, and I'm like, Am I really an educator? Am I a teacher?*

When asked if working with learners on the autism spectrum affected her stress levels, Participant F responded by saying no, but the same statement reflected how she lashed out at her son,

Then when I do have stress, as a single parent is difficult when I get home, I just want my son next to me, and then I'll grab his school bag, go through the books and then I'll juggle around….; it seems that that I'm stressed, yeah, but he cannot figure that I'm stressed.

Participant D, on the other hand, also reflected on how she lashed out at her son after work by using the term "drilling". She admitted, "*Also, I go home, and then I drill my son. My mother always says it's I'm a Sergeant major*."

Putting on a façade was mentioned by Participant G who said, "*It feels like in the mornings, I put on a certain like I'm an actress coming to work as an inner role to these people. I'm not really who like I am, who I am ….*"

According to Participant E, she experienced mixed emotions teaching learners with ASD. She expressed how her feelings might have initially begun as unfavourable, but, upon reflection, positive emotions arose. "*Sometimes you go home, of course, overwhelmed, depressed. But when you sit and reflecting on the daily, how the day went, and you're like, wow, I received love, and I gave love.*"

As SPED teachers, the participants expressed their emotions of insecurity. Their sense of uncertainty about their own personal and professional development affected their sense of competence. These factors greatly influenced the participants' dissatisfaction with their work and lack of support.

4.3.5 Facilitating Teacher Well-being at a School Level

This theme expressed ideas that the participants felt would contribute to and enable teacher well-being within the school. The participants were empowered to imagine themselves in a position to make decisions that could help them flourish in their work despite the daily stressful conditions they faced. Below is the sub-theme supporting this central theme.

4.3.5.1 Improving Teacher Well-Being.

This sub-theme focused on measures that the school could take to facilitate teacher well-being. The participants were asked the following question: How do you think that teacher well-being can be facilitated within the school environment?

Participant F mentioned that empowering teachers and recognising their hard work could be one of the mechanisms used when asked how teacher well-being could be facilitated in a school environment. She explained, "*We need to be empowered, or we need to be recognised as teachers by saying this month or on a certain Friday, all the teachers gathered together, and then this is what is going to happen.*"

Participant F also mentioned how the support of the SGB was of paramount importance in the statement, "*As long as the SGB is not involved, it's like you were talking something that is it will never happen.*"

A support group to facilitate teacher well-being was a suggestion made by Participant E. She thought it would be helpful, especially to novice teachers, as some of the experiences at the school required support,

> *A support group whereby we sit and talk about what's really happening here because some of us are new to all these things, and then it just traumatic. … I'm saying at least if we have something like this where we speak about things what we discuss how do we handle this and then that we will be fulfilled more supported rather*.

Aesthetics were cited as a positive contributor to well-being by Participant B. She expressed how having a well-to-do setting could be favourable to teachers,

> *I also think another place we can start is maybe the staff room. To redo the staff room because I've seen other schools' staff rooms and it's not like ours. It's much more nicer, that sits much more nicer chairs that's it's more comfortable. The environment is just very different; it looks different*.

She also suggested a "*chill corner*", typically associated with regulating one's emotions and overstimulation, "*where they can put in different objects for the teachers that would just calm you*"

In their responses, Participants A and D alluded to team-building activities and building relationships with colleagues from other phases for the improvement of the well-being of teachers.

Participant A,

If maybe we can adopt a culture of visiting phases, different phases. Maybe let's say the Autism phase visits the SID, Senior High support and then yeah, we just chill and then we do as we are doing now, they tell us their problems, and we tell them how we deal with them.

Participant D*, "We can do that nice stuff again that really brought us together."*

Participant A*, "We go outside and play, and we play games*."

However, Participant D mentioned that COVID-19 affected teacher relationships, as physical contact was tremendously restricted. This subsequently impacted programmes that connected teachers and forged new relations with colleagues.

I think before Covid started, we had a lot of social stuff that we were doing. Now, there's just nothing. Everyone is in their own corner or in their own phase. I don't even know the teachers up there anymore. I will see a new teacher come passing, and then I'll ask, Is it the teacher or a parent?

Participant C suggested motivational speakers, as this was previously available but did not seem to take place anymore. "*Mondays was motivational speaker Mondays, like they always had somebody come in to just get us up again*."

Being appreciated was another suggestion from Participant C, as she reflected that it used to take place. The SGB used to participate in teacher appreciation activities, which somehow motivated the staff, "*like Esther* would just go and give everyone a coffee, with like a thank you from the SGB or like something sweet. And the SGB brought a lot of like, we thank you for your hard work*."

Surprises from other teachers also made the teachers happy. The participants reflected that these events had taken place in the past, and I observed that this made them happy, as their faces lit up when they spoke of those experiences. Participant A,

Like I said, it's spooky. It was so nice; you know, when you get to your pigeonhole and find a note and a gift from somebody you don't even know it comes from. That small little thing would brighten up your day regardless of what was in there, yeah.

As parents form part of the school community, their contribution was important so parental involvement was suggested by Participant B,

> *I think another thing we can do is maybe to get the parents involved. To have like once a month or once a term. Maybe something nice for the teachers, and then we can send out letters that the parents can contribute to that just to celebrate the teachers as well*.

Finally, Participant C suggested that funds be dedicated to teacher well-being to execute some of the activities proposed for the forthcoming year. "*Now we are busy with the budget for next year. If we can maybe put in the extra amount of budget in the budget for something like that, I think it would go forward.*"

The participants were given an opportunity to become autonomous regarding their well-being. During this phase of the discussions, they initiated ideas to facilitate well-being, including team-building activities, rewards, and events dedicated to teacher appreciation. These were some ideas that, together as a group, they felt could assist, motivate, and improve their well-being at work.

4.3.6 Teachers' Experiences of a Professional Learning Community

The final theme was concerned with the participants' experiences in a professional learning community. The below sub-themes characterised this theme.

4.3.6.1 Shared Experiences, Connection, and Emotional Expression.

This sub-theme was influenced by the participants' responses when they were asked during the study to reflect on their experience of PLCs from the previous year and the current year. The participants found their experiences were relatable, and this allowed for expressive dialogue between the participants, as articulated in the following discussion between Participants C, G, A, and B.

Participant C,

> *But, yes, that kind of helped me just to realise what other people do when they're stressed and just understanding that it's normal... So, I think that was kind of just realising that everybody is having this burden, and everybody has a way to like slow down and take time for yourself, and it's allowed*.

Participant G, "*It's like Participant C also said, it felt like we were all kind of on the same page with how we feel, support-wise, well-being-wise*."

Participant A,

When you realise that we are all equally burdened even though we thought, why, why should I do this and that? Then you realise the next person is going through the same thing; then you get a different perspective of where you are, and maybe hopefully, whatever we have discussed here will help us take an initiative to bring about change.

I'm really grateful that we came together and as we share our experiences, fears and positives as well...

Participant B,

I think a positive for me is not to have to keep everything in and keep it to yourself. But to actually have a space to be able to share and to get rid of those feelings, because if we keep on keeping it to ourselves, we just get more drained. … And I think now, especially with this group. We know each other's hearts, so it makes it easier to stand together and also to help each other or to go to someone and say this is what I'm feeling. Can you please help me or something like that?

Participants B and D reflected on their experience and mentioned the ambience to be positive, allowing for discussions. Participant B noted, "*For me as well, it was very positive like atmosphere, to share and discuss what is happening*" while Participant D stated, "*I had a very positive experience. I feel like this is a place where we could offload, and it was a positive environment*."

Participant G illustrated her sense of trust in the group, offering, “This is a safe space, so you’re getting the unfiltered version of me.”

4.3.6.2 Transformation

The participants were asked to reflect on their PLC experiences. They were encouraged to consider both positive and negative experiences in order to provide a balanced account of their experiences.

Participant D said the experience helped her to pause and reflect on her needs. "*I think it just brought me to a standstill (is that a correct word?) to realise that you need to look after yourself to be able to look also others*."

The word “therapeutic”, which refers to some sort of healing, was used by two participants, Participants G and E.

For Participant G, “*it was also very it was very therapeutic. Like I enjoyed coming here*.”

This was echoed by Participant E who stated, “*Yeah, I think it was very therapeutic*.”

The participants recognised the learning process that took place during these discussions; this was expressed by Participants E, A, G, and D.

Participant E, “I've learned a lot. I've somehow grown here and there. I've learned."

Participant A, "I'm actually sad that, and this is our last because, as everyone has said, we came here to offload and learn the process."

Participant G, "*This taught me to reflect more on, like, especially the weeks that we didn't come to you, then I would start journaling more and actually putting my feelings on paper which helped me a lot*."

Participant D, *"… made me to also made extra time for myself, and when I start doing that, I feel much better. So, I think that's the positive thing I took out of it*."

As a result of the PLC, the participants experienced change within themselves and wanted it to be shared by their colleagues. Participant A made the suggestion that they could take what they had learned forward, by saying, "*Hopefully, whatever we have discussed here will help us take the initiative to bring about change.*"

Participant E,

From now on, I realised that growth is actually the inner peace, taking care of yourself like somehow. I thought I was not growing academically, but then I realised that it is not only

academically that you need to grow. Your social well-being, your inner peace needs to grow, and I think this group helped me a lot.

The participants discovered that they were learning and growing as a result of being part of a PLC. They desired what they had learned to be available to other teachers at the school. This theme emphasised the transformation that occurred due to the learning process.

4.4 Summary of Data Discussion

Based on the presentation of the data, the following findings can be deduced. These results will be linked with literature and further explored in Chapter 5.

- Together, the participants defined well-being as emotional, physical, and holistic. This indicated that they understood the fundamentals of the term, even though their scope was limited, and this made way for follow-up questions. Social and family aspects were also included in the definition, and the ability to cope with daily life was an excellent feature of the findings.
- The participants found working with learners with ASD to be meaningful and felt that it positively contributed to their well-being. However, they also cited that it was stressful, with some citing other factors as contributors to their lack of well-being; this confirmed the complexities of teaching learners with ASD within an LSEN school.
- Because of the type of learners at this school, that is, those who struggled to regulate their senses and emotions, the teachers reported daily adverse experiences, which contributed to their teacher identity and competence.
- The participants reflected on the school culture and concluded that it was a hindrance to their well-being, as there was a lack of support structures in place to facilitate well-being; this was reflected in the participants' expressions of frustration in their responses.
- Well-being interventions were co-created by the participants when they were given an opportunity to explore their autonomy in facilitating their well-being; this demonstrated

the participants' creativity and motivation to solve their well-being concerns. However, management's support was necessary to execute these intervention.

The data collected confirmed that PLCs had the power to connect people through shared experiences and showed how they could contribute to the development of the participants.

4.5 Concluding Remarks

In this chapter, I presented and analysed the data collected from focus group discussions, individual semi-structured interviews, and the observations collected in the field notes. I will link my findings to the literature on my major themes, suggest recommendations, and conclude my study in Chapter 5.

Chapter 5: Discussion and Analysis of Findings

5.1 Introduction

In this chapter, I will discuss the research findings from Chapter 4, which were based on the themes that emerged from the data collection of the study. The collected data were discussed in light of the relevant literature and theoretical framework to address the main research question: How can a PLC investigating well-being at an LSEN school enhance the well-being of special educational needs teachers?

I further comment on new findings from my study that have not yet been reported in the literature and conclude the chapter.

5.2 Discussion of Findings from the Data

This section of the study refers to the evaluations made from the data analysis in Chapter 4. The research findings from this study indicate the interrelatedness between the concept of PLCs, the BPNT theoretical framework, and the themes that emerged from the research findings.

The table below demonstrates the interconnectedness of the PLC model, the theoretical framework, and the research findings.

Table 5: *Features of the BPNT Theoretical Framework, PLC Concept, and Research Findings*

BPN Theoretical Framework	PLC Concept	Research Findings
Autonomy	• A commitment to continuous improvement	• Participants' perception of the term "well-being" • Facilitating teacher well-being at a school level
Competence	• Action-orientation and experimentation	• Teachers' experiences of support and school culture • Teacher's experiences of identity and competency • Adverse teacher experiences

	• Results orientation	• Facilitating teacher well-being at a school level
Relatedness	• Shared mission, vision and values • A collaborative culture with a focus on learning • Collective inquiry	• Teachers' experiences of a professional learning community

5.2.1 Theme A: Participants' Perception of the Term Well-Being

The study's findings revealed the participants' perceptions of the term well-being, the meaningful experiences of teaching students with ASD, and how that positively contributed to their well-being.

5.2.1.1 Defining Well-Being.

The participants deliberated on the definition of well-being after being asked, “How would you define well-being?” They were asked to define this to unpack their comprehension of the term and what meaning they ascribed to it. O'Brien and Guiney (2021) assert the importance of participants defining terms that affect them, giving connotations to their experiences, and allowing them to agree or disagree as a group (see Section 2.3). They collectively defined well-being as a state of physical and emotional health, with most generally agreeing on the term but others broadening their understanding by elaborating further on the basic definition. The above demonstrates a deeper understanding of the term and was a building block contributing to the creation of the definition by all the participants involved in the study.

The data findings revealed the importance for individuals and communities of determining terms, as these were built on their beliefs and attitudes at the time. The participants agreed that an individual's emotions and physical health were both important aspects of their well-being, although emotional health took precedence. The data suggested that well-being was affected by how one felt about a particular thing or place. Notably, I observed the term becoming broader as the conversations proceeded. The definitions offered by the participants progressed; this demonstrated the learning

process as the term developed from simple to complex explanations (Michos and Hernandez-Leo, 2020).

The data demonstrated that this group of teachers connected their well-being to their families, friends, and jobs, among other facets of their lives, thus making social ties another vital component of well-being. These social ties included the teachers' families, colleagues, and communities. Socially connected people believe they are part of a community and are cared for by others (Meng et al., 2018). This is consistent with the literature, which describes well-being as a multifaceted concept (Granziera et al., 2021; Gregersen et al., 2020). It was interesting that the participants neglected to include other elements of well-being in their discussion; this suggests a lack of awareness thereof.

The literature suggests that teachers with high levels of well-being were holistically stable (Fedorov et al., 2020). The word “holistic” came up in the data, expanding on others' contributions. Another finding reflected in the data was the use of the word "coping". It was interesting to hear the participants mention that well-being relates to coping with daily living and surroundings. This demonstrated the wide variety of perspectives and different ways that this group of teachers chose to express themselves collectively, but also as individuals. Coping resources are mainly linked to psychological well-being; a lack thereof can manifest as difficulties with mental health (Kulkarni, 2022; Minghui et al., 2018).

Increasing awareness of different definitions and concepts related to well-being is just one step in furthering our understanding of this complex topic. Furthermore, it is essential that we continue exploring well-being from multiple perspectives, for example, occupational, intellectual, physical, emotional, social, and spiritual, to gain a more comprehensive understanding. Finally, by exploring the definition of one particular group of people, one may recognise why specific aspects of a term are more defined than others. In this context, the participants focused on emotional and physical well-being as they deemed those more significant for who they were as this particular group of teachers in SPED.

5.2.1.2 Meaningful Experiences of Teaching Learners with ASD Contributing to Teacher Well-Being.

When considering teacher well-being, it is essential to consider negative and positive experiences thereby highlighting meaningful experiences resulting in job satisfaction and positively contributing to teacher well-being.

Sense of accomplishment was a common theme among the participants, supported by BNP theory which suggests that humans have a fundamental need to feel competent and effective in their pursuits (Deci & Ryan, 2000). They felt a strong sense of accomplishment when they could help their learners make progress, regardless of the extent of the achievement. This finding supports previous research on teacher well-being in which Mertler (2016) indicates a sense of accomplishment as a predictor of increased job satisfaction and feelings of competence (see Section 2.3). Competence can also be linked with the participants' perceptions of "making a difference" in learners' lives. This feeling was unanimous among the participants.

In circumstances where learner achievement occurred after long periods of time, a sense of accomplishment and competence was essential for enhancing motivation, job satisfaction, and teacher well-being. A sense of self-efficacy is fundamental for teachers to maintain motivation and job satisfaction. Without this feeling, it would be difficult for SPED teachers to continue working in a career that often does not see immediate results. The positive experiences reported by the participants contributed to their sense of self-worth.

The participants in the study stated that the sense of self-worth and contribution to their households that came as a result of their employment were two major reasons why work held such meaning for them. These reasons may be linked to the financial benefits that the participants felt they received by working as SPED teachers teaching learners with ASD. Ali (2021) supports the idea that finances contribute to job satisfaction among teachers in special education, promoting their well-being.

Compassion satisfaction, which refers to pleasure that comes with assisting others, was another factor contributing to meaningful experiences of teachers teaching learners with ASD thus highlighting the socio-emotional dimensions embedded in teaching in SPED contexts. A participant

reported that observing learners suffer motivated her to stay in the profession, thereby demonstrating the emotional resources required for this job. The literature supports the view that professionals trying to relieve their clients' or learners' suffering may positively affect individuals, hence increasing teacher retention and job satisfaction. Often, learners with ASD are misunderstood or excluded by their peers and their communities, yet teachers are expected to maintain compassion and understanding for them (Lee et al., 2021). The teacher's job is, therefore, to provide a nurturing and inclusive environment for all learners. By showing compassion and patience towards learners, teachers can create a more positive and beneficial learning experience for everyone involved.

5.2.2 Theme B: Adverse Teacher Experiences

The data suggested that adverse teacher experiences negatively affected teachers, especially their physical and emotional well-being. These challenges can be significant and lead some to sickness and others to leave the profession entirely, thus threatening teacher attrition.

5.2.2.1 Physical and Emotional Exhaustion.

The data demonstrated that ASD was associated with meltdowns, which are episodes of uncontrolled behaviour accompanied by aggression and self-injurious behaviour (Murphy et al., 2009). According to the data, some of the injuries that occurred in class were directed at the teachers. While typically short-lived, these meltdowns can be physically draining. The literature supports this stance, finding that individuals with ASD are more likely to experience physical injuries during a meltdown than those without ASD and injuring themselves and others (Schnabel et al., 2020).

The data suggests that since learners with ASD have difficulty regulating their emotions, this often leads to an extreme reaction when they feel overwhelmed. Additionally, individuals with ASD often have sensory processing disorder, which can magnify the effect of overwhelming stimuli and encourage meltdowns, thus resulting in the struggle to process sensations from their tactile, auditory, visual, gustatory, olfactory, proprioceptive, and vestibular systems (Crasta et al., 2020). The inherent inability of learners with ASD to regulate themselves labours on teachers' emotional recourses, which

are reflected in the data. The participants reflected on the emotional strains derived from moments of frustration and helplessness in the classroom, leading to emotional vulnerability.

The data suggests that the participants were often too stressed to perform their jobs effectively, resulting from a lack of support from management, parents and the department. Lack of support from stakeholders contributed to emotional exhaustion, which has been reported to affect job satisfaction and the ability to teach efficiently. It was found by Ogba et al. (2020) that emotional exhaustion may also result in burnout, a condition characterised by high levels of stress and anxiety, as well as feelings of cynicism and detachment. Burnout can make it difficult for teachers to continue doing their jobs effectively and can negatively affect their health. In extreme cases, emotional exhaustion can even lead to depression (Ashkanasy & Dorris, 2017). Emotionally exhausted teachers may find engaging with their learners challenging or feel constantly stressed and overwhelmed. This can lead to challenges with their job performance and satisfaction, and lead to burnout.

Compassion fatigue, which refers to secondary traumatic stress typically associated with individuals in service careers (Lee et al., 2021; Ziaian-Ghafari & Berg, 2019), is highlighted as a contributor to emotional exhaustion. The data identified factors consuming teachers emotionally. The literature showed that individuals at risk for compassion fatigue include but are not limited to first responders, medical professionals, therapists, counsellors, social workers, and teachers (Lee et al., 2021). Compassion fatigue can lead to socio-emotional exhaustion, and feelings of hopelessness and helplessness. When left unaddressed, compassion fatigue can negatively affect an individual's well-being (Choi et at., 2018).

The participants indicated learner- and parent-related variables as stressors negatively affecting teacher well-being. The data revealed that the teachers were worried about their learners' well-being and general progress. They also expressed concern about the parents' ability to support their children's needs. These findings suggest that the teachers were feeling the pressure of increasing expectations from both the learners and their parents. Absent parenting and rejection of the learners by their parents were also cited. The data suggests that some learners were raised by their grandparents as they had been rejected by their biological parents. This proved to be highly strenuous

and was another reason that the teachers felt attached to the learners as a result of their personal and socio-economic circumstances. While it is natural to feel empathy for others who are suffering, when people are constantly exposed to trauma without adequate support or self-care, they can become overwhelmed.

The data also found that the teachers suppressed their emotions while working with the learners with disabilities. A participant shared how she coped with learners in the workplace but became emotional in different contexts. This suggested that she suppressed her genuine emotions in order to execute her job, or rather, to avoid conflict at work. The teachers who suppressed the expression of their emotions were likelier to be unhappy (Donker et al., 2020). According to the literature, when people suppress their emotions, they also suppress positive emotions like joy and happiness. Furthermore, expressive suppression has been linked to adverse health outcomes such as stress and anxiety, cited as decreasing well-being (Donker et al., 2020).

5.2.3 Theme C: Teachers' Experiences of Support and School Culture

According to the data, the teachers' perceptions of the school culture and support from the school managements were predictors of well-being. The availability of support and experiences of the school culture played a role in teacher perceptions.

5.2.3.1 Perceptions of the School Culture.

"Window-dressing" was a factor mentioned by the participants, and it occurred as part of the school's culture, where the teachers felt the pressure to appear "perfect". The participants felt that the true reflection of the school was not presented to the relevant stakeholders, which then affected the quality of support they received. This perception was again revealed when experiences on the Wellness Committee were shared. The revelations once again proved the incompetence of established structures in supporting well-being at the school. The main issue seemed to be the implementation of the committee as it stood.

The participants were conflicted about the role of the committee, with one stating that it was instituted for the well-being of learners and another mentioning that it was initiated for teachers. By

contrast, novice teachers were not knowledgeable about the committee and its role. This was a classic example of putting up a façade. Structurally the committee existed but practically it had no value in the lives of the people for whom it was established. This also makes one question the role of induction at this school, whether it takes place, and, if so, whether it is effective (Toombs & Ramsey, 2020; Warsame & Valles, 2018). Furthermore, a participant referred to the learners' school-based support team forms. The teachers could indicate if they needed emotional support when referring learners for behavioural or learning issues. This participant confirmed that she had stated her need for emotional support, but none was provided, and there was no follow-up.

The above occurrences show the school's available structures and the failure to operationalise them for their intended goals. The data suggests that systems are in place, but the execution thereof is lacking. The lack of accountability from people in charge of the committees thus takes the well-being of teachers for granted. The literature address the causes of stress and burnout among SPED teachers and firmly states that school-related variables are one of the three responsible categories (Onuigbo et al., 2020; Park & Shin, 2020;). The work-based emotional experiences, available resources, and support from school personnel were all contributory factors to the well-being of the teachers or lack thereof.

5.2.3.2 Perceptions of Support from School Management.

The shortage of qualified teachers has been reported on a worldwide scale and is more prevalent in special needs education, with SPED teachers lacking the necessary educational background or experience in the field (Hobson, 2022; Mason-Williams et al., 2020). The participants voiced how their placement in the ASD phase was done without consideration of their experience. They would have preferred to have been more prepared and supported prior, during, and after the transition from one phase to another.

Most of the participants agreed that there was a lack of support from management, for this school and its unique demands, and especially in terms of emotional support. The lack of support for the teachers thus discouraged others from seeking support when needed. The participants revealed

that observations from other teachers' experiences informed their decision to withdraw from seeking assistance when required.

The data collected revealed that the participants felt that some of the support they received from management was inadequate, temporary, and did not address the core issues (Naidoo, 2019). Management often relieved the teachers from their duties when incidents occurred, but they returned to the same problems the following day. The lack of support from management somehow revealed the possible lack of resources for them to support the teachers. As for the teachers who were dealing with the first-hand experiences of teaching learners with ASD, what measures were in place to equip the teachers by those who were meant to support them?

Another common theme found in the data was that the teachers' felt unsupported by the management. They felt that it was essential to have superiors who understood their challenges and could offer effective support and advice when needed. This finding is coherent with previous research on teacher burnout, which has shown that a lack of social support from colleagues is one of the main predictors of burnout (Kulkarni, 2022; Minghui et al., 2018). This is likely, since teachers who feel supported by their colleagues are more likely to feel valued and appreciated, and, as a result, are less likely to experience feelings of isolation and alienation that can lead to burnout. Furthermore, this finding highlights the importance of having supportive work structures for teacher well-being.

5.2.4 Theme D: Teachers' Experiences of Identity and Competency

It is widely accepted that a teacher's identity and competency are two of the most important factors influencing their effectiveness in the classroom. A teacher's identity is their sense of self as a professional educator, while their competency is the level of expertise and knowledge they possess concerning teaching. A teacher's identity and competency are intimately linked. A teacher's identity represents their professional identity, including their values, beliefs, and goals. Their competency, meanwhile, refers to their ability to execute their role in the classroom effectively. For teachers to be successful, they must have a strong sense of identity and competency.

5.2.4.1 Uncertainty and Discontentment.

The research findings showed that teaching learners with ASD was "unpredictable", as cited by one participant. The unpredictability was directed at learners' inability to self-regulate, which involves controlling one's emotions and reactions, and managing their behaviours (Alkobish & Algahtani, 2019). Learners with ASD are unable to stay calm in challenging situations. For novice teachers, the new experiences left them feeling misplaced and vulnerable. Their lack of prior teaching experience at a SPED school furthered their feelings of uncertainty, impeding their ability to execute their roles as teachers effectively. This influenced their feelings of incompetence and they questioned their teaching ability and lack of experience.

The data found that the teachers' challenging experiences persuaded them to leave the profession. A participant mentioned the difficulty of a teaching career as a novice ASD teacher. The difficulty in this phase was characterised by the challenging learners and the lack of training and support provided to new teachers (Naidoo, 2019; Ogba et al., 2020; Sakellariou et al., 2019; Sandra & Kurniawati, 2020). One participant mentioned that support should be considered for novice teachers in the phase, as most of them lacked experience and teaching background in this field.

5.2.4.2 Imposter Syndrome.

People with imposter syndrome, a psychological condition, have self-doubt and feel like frauds (Le, 2019). This self-doubt can be crippling, preventing people from achieving their full potential. Although imposter syndrome is often associated with high-achieving individuals, it can affect anyone. It is considered relatively common among successful people, particularly women (Le, 2019). In association with imposter syndrome, the participants' second-guessed themselves, their learners' achievements, and delays in learner progress. These factors contribute to self-doubt in the teaching profession. The teachers struggled with decision-making because they second-guessed themselves constantly. Some of the features shared by the participants during the study include not using their full potential, feeling unchallenged, anxiety about personal and professional growth, and their overall role as teachers. The participants revealed that stress at work affected their home life. Upon reflection,

they reported that they often lashed out at their children when they got home. This displays signs of anger and frustration. While lashing out may temporarily relieve the anxiety associated with imposter syndrome, it ultimately does more harm than good, alienating others and oneself. In addition, individuals may feel inadequate, despite often being successful in their work (Huecker et al., 2022). This can lead to feelings of anxiety and insecurity, both in their personal and professional lives.

The data found that the participants felt like failures when unsuccessful in intervening during learner–learning challenges. Imposter syndrome is a contradiction in how people feel and think about themselves concerning events and other people (Le, 2019). The teachers' feelings about their work environments were sometimes contradictory; on the one hand, they felt unworthy of success, while on the other hand, they felt like they were frauds just waiting to be found out. This inconsistency can lead to a lot of inner turmoil and self-doubt (Stickl Haugen et al., 2021).

5.2.5 Theme E: Facilitating Teacher Well-being at School Level

The data suggests that teacher well-being is essential in individual effectiveness and in a school's overall performance. This led the teachers to discuss how best their well-being could be facilitated at school level.

5.2.5.1 Improving Teacher Well-Being with the Support of Various Stakeholders.

From the data, I determined that the support of management, parents, and the SGB was crucial for teacher well-being. The participants viewed autonomy to be necessary. The teachers who felt a sense of autonomy in their work reported higher job satisfaction and commitment to the school (Deci & Ryan, 2012; Ryan & Deci, 2020). Moreover, I as the researcher revealed that teachers who felt a sense of autonomy and control over their work were more engaged in their jobs and had higher levels of job satisfaction. They also had lower absenteeism rates and were less likely to leave the profession. Additionally, the data indicated parental involvement and support, a tool for facilitating well-being.

Another stakeholder identified by the participants as critical for teacher well-being was the SGB, which oversees school governance and important decisions such as budgets. In this regard, the

SGB was crucial in ensuring that the teachers had the resources they required to do their jobs effectively. Furthermore, the SGB assisted the teachers with professional development and other issues. Given the critical role that SGBs play, they must be involved in efforts to improve teacher working conditions, including their well-being. SGBs can help to create positive change for all those involved in the schools by collaborating with teachers and other stakeholders.

There is a strong connection between communities and teacher well-being (Jaramillo et al., 2022), which was also found to be the case in my study. From the data, I the researcher found that the teachers wanted more opportunities to connect in order to share ideas, offer support, and build relationships. These connections benefit teacher well-being because they foster a sense of belonging. Furthermore, the participants felt the need for a support group as a source of stress relief and to help them recharge. The sense of community provided by these connections can cultivate support which can improve job satisfaction and retention in the teaching profession. Furthermore, having a support group can help teachers to cope with the stresses of the job and provide an outlet for their frustrations. The teachers' mental health and well-being may benefit as a result of this.

One of the participants specified the school environment and atmosphere as crucial for the well-being of teachers. A comfortable and serene environment can help teachers feel relaxed and at ease, while a chaotic and unpleasant environment can lead to stress and anxiety (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2018). The atmosphere of a school is also critical for fostering a positive attitude towards teaching and learning. When teachers feel comfortable and happy in their surroundings, they are more likely to welcome fresh perspectives and be enthusiastic about teaching. By contrast, if the environment is uninspiring or hostile, it can be challenging to maintain a positive outlook. Creating a pleasant and supportive environment is essential for promoting teacher well-being and ensuring that learners receive the best possible education.

Creating a quiet corner for teachers was suggested by one of the participants, who felt that it could benefit teachers in managing their emotional needs and improve their overall well-being. A quiet corner is where teachers can feel safe and welcome, be able to de-stress and unwind, be free from distractions and noise, and it is equipped with comfortable seating and calming decor. This space can

be used for relaxation techniques such as deep breathing or meditation (Maich et al., 2018). Taking breaks in a quiet corner throughout the day can help teachers to stay focused and regulated and prevent them from becoming overwhelmed by the stresses associated with their job.

Reflecting on their previous experiences, the participants suggested that motivational speakers could be invited to the school, as they used to be. Motivational talks were helpful for the teachers as they felt more positive and hopeful about their work after each one, which contributed to their overall perspective. While inspirational discussions can help teachers to feel motivated and capable of making positive changes in their lives, they also play a role in teachers' well-being.

Though intrinsic motivation is essential, it is imperative to acknowledge the value of extrinsic motivation too. The data indicated that the teachers needed to be recognised and rewarded through incentives for their hard work. Tokens of appreciation from the management, parents, and SGB were found to be essential to the teachers' job satisfaction, which translated to their well-being. Literature identifies the financial gains outside a formal salary, which includes rewards and incentives as a motivation for teachers thereby contributing to their job satisfaction and commitment (Ali, 2021).

5.2.6 Theme F: Teachers' Experiences of a Professional Learning Community

The participants found the PLC experience to be an eye-opening one. They could see the process differently and agreed with the outcome. Many people commented on the fairness of the process and how it allowed for open communication between all the members.

5.2.6.1 Shared Experiences, Connection, and Emotional Expression.

The PLCs provided the participants with opportunities to share experiences and connect with their colleagues. This collaboration can benefits teachers and learners, as it can lead to improved practices and increased student engagement (Brown, 2018). For this study, PLC was used to facilitate teacher well-being, and the participants agreed that shared experiences contributed to the teachers' positive experiences.

The data suggested that the participants' experiences aided them in building connections between themselves through shared experiences. Members of the PLC made solid bonds and

developed a deeper understanding of each other, fostering trust among them. This deeper understanding led to more effective collaboration and communication, which was essential for successful learning (Gorman, 2019; Hallam et al., 2015; Many, 2021; Molina & Lopez, 2019). The PLC also provided a space for emotional expression and support, which was helpful for the teachers struggling with the challenges of their profession. Ultimately, the PLC played a role in providing the teachers with the opportunity to promote professional growth and development, and in the case of this study, personal growth.

The data showed that sharing best well-being practices and new ideas were part of the process, allowing the participants to connect. This was done within the community of like-minded individuals who could offer support and guidance to one another, share suggestions and advice on dealing with difficult situations, offer encouragement and understanding, and provide a sense of camaraderie. This sense of community can be invaluable for teachers struggling to navigate these challenges, especially those teaching learners with ASD.

The data suggested that this group of teachers in SPED found it easier to express their emotions during the PLC meetings, deeming PLCs a channel for self-expression. This was mainly because they constantly felt the need to "look" like they were coping and they found it hard to let their guard down when surrounded by learners who required so much care and attention. However, teachers must express their emotions to create a positive and supportive learning environment (Gutierez & Kim, 2018; Kayiwa et al., 2017). Suppressing their feelings hinders their well-being.

The data collected from various sources indicates that having a support system at work is essential and talking to someone who understands the challenges of special needs education can be beneficial. Therefore, channels for communication were regarded as important by the participants in this study, as the PLC experience offered such a platform. The PLC provided an environment where educators could share their experiences and expertise and offer support and advice to those struggling with certain aspects of their job. This was seen by the participants as a valuable resource that contributed to their overall job satisfaction.

5.2.6.2 Experience of Change and Transformation.

In this study, a PLC was used to explore teacher well-being, and aided the teachers in identifying and addressing their well-being needs collaboratively as SPED teachers.

The participants reported feeling supported and valued. They appreciated having a space where they could openly share their thoughts and experiences without judgement. This allowed them to develop a deeper understanding of their well-being experiences and how best to address them. Through this PLC, the participants valued learning about a topic that affected them professionally and personally. Additionally, being part of a PLC gave the participants a sense of belonging to a larger community of like-minded people working towards similar goals. The experience allowed them to explore new ideas and perspectives, challenge themselves and their assumptions, celebrate their successes, and learn from their disappointments.

The data revealed that the teachers' perceptions of well-being had been altered over time from a narrow view to a much broader one, and they viewed the whole experience as a learning experience. The data revealed that the teachers experienced the PLC as having have played a role in their change and growth. The data found the overall PLC experience to have positively impacted their teacher well-being (Ashkanasy & Dorris, 2017). Having had the opportunity to share best practices, identify areas of need, and receive feedback from their peers proved to have promoted a positive experience. This support proved to have led to increased job satisfaction and a sense of collective efficacy, meaning that the teachers believed that they could improve the lives of both present and aspiring educators. Research has shown that PLCs can also help reduce stress levels and burnout among teachers (Minghui et al., 2018), and feel more supported and valued by their colleagues. They also had higher levels of job satisfaction and were more likely to stay in the teaching profession (Ortan et al., 2021).

The data showed that most of the participants were content with having an outlet for their emotions; upon reflection, one of the participants expressed that she was concerned about the negative emotions that arose during the discussions. Her concern was that she did not know what to

do with those newly found emotions. This is cause for concern but also an opportunity to consider when planning for PLCs addressing sensitive topics.

5.2.7 Summary Of Discussion

Theme A: The participants collectively defined well-being and the meaning ascribed to it. Emotional and physical elements were most significant for SPED teachers thus deeming them essential elements affecting this group of people. Sense of accomplishment was highlighted as a predictor of increased job satisfaction contributing to meaningful experiences by the participants. Other meaningful experiences impacted learners' lives, thereby contributing to households and compassion satisfaction.

Theme B: The study's results indicated that physical and emotional exhaustion were the leading components of adverse teacher experiences. Owing to the difficulties in regulating ASD, the teachers often found themselves in unpredictable circumstances, resulting in harmful outcomes. Their emotional exhaustion often led to stress, burnout, and anxiety. Compassion fatigue and learner- and parent-related variables were also pressures associated with stress and burnout.

Theme C: The participants felt unsupported by the school management when meeting the well-being needs of SPED teachers. This lack of support led to a negative ripple effect where the teachers felt that the structures designed to support them were inadequate and not employed effectively. As a result, the school culture suffered, and the teachers felt that their needs were not met. This is an issue that needs consideration to improve the well-being of SPED teachers and the school's overall culture.

Theme D: Teacher identity and competence were influenced by the challenging behaviours of the learners in class and the lack of SPED background, which affected self-efficacy. When the learners display such challenges, this can trigger feelings of doubt and inadequacy in teachers. This led to problems with teachers’ perceptions of competence, including a lack of confidence and expertise.

Theme E: Ideas for improving teacher well-being were shared by participants, with a focus on support by the various stakeholders at the school. Firstly, strong partnerships are required for the success of teachers and the whole school community. Secondly, participants identified a positive atmosphere and environment as a contribution to their job satisfaction, therefore, well-being. Lastly,

participants highlighted rewards and incentives as extrinsic motivations, that they felt could positively contribute to their job satisfaction, thus, well-being.

Theme F: PLCs are beneficial for connecting teachers and facilitating more profound understanding. This greater understanding can lead to more effective collaboration and communication, which are necessary when working with special needs learners. Support structures, environments, and a safe workplace were deemed essential for the teachers and promoted well-being. Change and growth were thus the results of this experience.

5.9 Conclusion

In Chapter 5, I discussed my research study's data interpretation and analysis. The themes and sub-themes that were developed were presented and thoroughly explained. In the following chapter, Chapter 6, I will conclude my research study. This will be based on an overview of my findings from the literature and research. I will also present my conclusion based on my main research question and contribution of the study. My conclusion will follow recommendations for future research, practice, and policy.

Chapter 6: Conclusions, Recommendations, and Reflection

6.1 Introduction

In Chapter 5, I discussed the themes and sub-themes that emerged from my research study. In this chapter, I summarise the overall findings of the study. Furthermore, this chapter will answer the research questions in detail. I conclude the study by sharing recommendations and my reflections throughout my research process.

6.2 Summary of the Overall Findings from the Literature and Research Findings

This section will summarise the literature review about SPED teacher well-being and a professional learning community. This section will also include a summary of the findings, conveying what my study's research has revealed.

6.2.1 Revisiting the Synthesis of Findings from the Literature Review

The literature confirms that teachers can experience high levels of stress and burnout. This is especially true for those who work with learners with special educational needs and ASD. Teachers teaching learners with ASD often face unique challenges in their classrooms. In addition, they may also deal with challenging behaviours that can be frustrating and exhausting. As a result, ASD teachers can easily become overwhelmed and burnt out (see Section 2.4.2).

The literature review highlights the many potential benefits for teachers offered by PLCs, including increased collaboration and morale, improved instructional practices, and student achievement. PLCs can be particularly beneficial for SPED teachers, who often work in isolation and can benefit from the support of colleagues. PLCs can help SPED teachers stay current on best practices and share resources. However, PLCs can also present challenges, such as time commitment and tension among members (see Section 2.2.3).

Furthermore, the literature indicates that teacher well-being is an important consideration when examining the impact of PLCs on educators. PLCs have the potential to reduce stress and promote teacher well-being, as well as foster a supportive network of colleagues who understand the challenges they face as ASD teachers (see Section 2.2.2).

Finally, the literature review found the features of PLCs to be significant in cultivating the relationships required to develop trust among teachers. The features of PLCs thus provide space for shared experiences, collective enquiry, collaborative teams, action-orientation and experimentation, continuous improvement, and results orientation (see Section 2.2.1).

6.2.2 Summary of the Findings of my Study

The lived experiences of SPED teachers on well-being were documented for this study through transcripts from focus group discussions and semi-structured interviews. The participants reflected on their experiences and formulated possible solutions to their well-being challenges. Below is a summary of the findings of the study from Chapter 4.

The findings prove that there is no one-size-fits-all answer to teacher perceptions of well-being. Every teacher has unique experiences, beliefs, and values that contribute to their understanding of feeling well. Thus, teacher perceptions of well-being are relatively complex. There is no single answer to the question of what makes a teacher feel well but understanding the individual experiences and needs of teachers is an important step in supporting them in their work.

The study revealed that adverse experiences significantly impacted a teacher's well-being and job satisfaction, leading to increased illness, absenteeism, and turnover, and negatively affecting teaching and learning. The study indicated the lack of experience in SPED to be disadvantageous to novice teachers, as it affected their professional identity and competency. Participants had an additional layer of complexity added to their identity and competency as they worked with learners with diverse learning needs. Knowledge about various disabilities and how they can impact learning was vital. Teacher also needed to be experts at differentiating lessons to meet the unique needs of each learner they worked with, and this could hinder their confidence and self-esteem when they failed to meet such expectations.

The data established that support and school culture were misleading, indicating that support for the teachers was lacking. Therefore, the best way to facilitate well-being is to promote proactivity and advocacy on well-being through PLCs. This will allow teachers to build relationships with other special needs teachers through shared experiences and collaboration.

Additionally, the findings explored the importance of establishing communities for well-being and promoting support for teachers. The results show that teachers who felt supported by their communities were more likely to feel satisfied with their work. In addition, teachers with a strong sense of community were more likely to engage in professional development and feel like they belonged to a supportive group. These findings suggest that communities play an important role in promoting teacher well-being and ability to flourish.

6.3 Addressing the Research Questions

The purpose of this study was to investigate the research question, How can a PLC investigating well-being at an LSEN school enhance the well-being of special educational needs teachers?

Four secondary questions were addressed to answer this question:

1) What are SPED teachers' experiences of teaching learners with ASD?

2) What is being done to facilitate teacher well-being at school level?

3) What contribution do SPED teachers' jobs make on their well-being?

4) How did SPED teachers experience a PLC?

The emotional support of SPED teachers was found to be related to their well-being, job satisfaction, and retention. Various aspects, such as incentives, school management, SGB support, and co-worker relationships, were considered significant predictors of teacher well-being.

To answer the main research question, a qualitative study was conducted with a sample of eight teachers from an LSEN school. Autonomy in the workplace and management support were the most important predictors of teacher well-being. These findings suggest that management in schools should focus on these factors to improve SPED teacher well-being.

6.3.1 Secondary Research Question 1

What are the SPED teachers' experiences of teaching learners with ASD?

The SPED teachers who participated in the research study experienced various emotions in their jobs, ranging from positive to negative. These experiences had a significant impact on their teacher identity and competency. The teachers reported feeling both empowered and disempowered by teaching learners with ASD thus deeming their experiences intricate. They also felt supported by their teacher colleagues but unsupported by their management, which led to discontentment. These conflicting experiences created a contradiction in the teachers, which affected their self-efficacy and well-being. For example, the teachers felt pride in their learners' accomplishments but were overwhelmed by the challenges posed by their condition, which led them to feel self-doubt. On the other hand, positive experiences served as reaffirming moments that reinforced the teachers' sense of self-efficacy and job satisfaction. In conclusion, the experiences of the SPED teachers working with ASD learners were complex and multifaceted and they were sometimes difficult for the teachers to articulate.

6.3.2 Secondary Research Question 2

What is being done to facilitate teacher well-being at school level?

The data revealed that teacher well-being was not facilitated at the school. There was an absence of operational well-being structures to support the teachers with the physical and emotional exhaustion from teaching learners with ASD. Therefore, teacher well-being was a neglected topic at the school. The one structure available for well-being at the school was the Wellness Committee, with which the teachers were unacquainted.

6.3.3 Secondary Research Question 3

What contribution do SPED teachers' jobs make on their well-being?

The data revealed that the teachers working in special needs found their jobs satisfying and challenging thus contributing to their well-being or lack thereof. The data showed that the teachers found their work both demanding and rewarding. These factors led to complex feelings.

The data revealed that some of the challenges that the SPED teachers faced led to stress and illness. This was due to several factors, including high-stress teachers' experiences, lack of parental,

SGB, and management support, and a general feeling that they were not appreciated. These conditions can lead to a vicious cycle in which the teacher becomes increasingly isolated and depressed. The challenge facing teachers in SPED is a lack of prior special needs training or background, which can lead to increased self-doubt and professional insecurities among teachers.

6.3.4 Secondary Question 4

How did SPED teachers experience a PLC?

Teacher well-being is a critical issue that should be addressed to improve the quality of education. There are many ways to support teachers, but one of the most important is through conversation. The critical conversations on teacher well-being provided a space for teachers to share their experiences and connect with others going through similar challenges, thus contributing to the relatedness component of BNP theory. The critical conversations that took place during the study helped transform the teachers' attitudes and beliefs. By engaging in open and honest dialogue about the challenges faced by teachers, the teachers began to develop more supportive and practical tools for supporting their well-being which contributed to their professional development.

The data revealed that the SPED teachers' experiences of the PLC during the study, were generally positive which helped the teachers to co-create meaning as a team, supported by the autonomy component of BNP theory. As stated above, a sense of connection emerging from shared experiences was a significant indicator of well-being among the teachers. Finally, the teachers found themselves to have learned in the process and subsequently wanted to pass their experiences on to others. Competence is a powerful predictor of teacher well-being, which is supported by BPN theory. The theory posits that when individuals feel competent, they experience positive emotions and are more likely to approach tasks enthusiastically and confidently. Connection is crucial to well-being; many of the teachers found that sharing experiences and expressions with others in similar situations could be transformational. PLCs provide an ideal setting for these conversations, allowing teachers to connect more deeply and share resources and ideas. Teachers can better care for their learners when they take care of themselves.

6.3.5 Primary Research Question

How can a PLC investigating well-being at an LSEN school enhance the well-being of special educational needs teachers?

The data disclosed that PLCs offer a unique opportunity for SPED teachers to connect and openly discuss the challenges they face. Social interactions and discussions about well-being among the participants seemed to have improved their overall well-being in this study. This is in line with BPN theory which posits that humans need to feel a sense of competence, connection, and relatedness to thrive. Well-being discussions among participants allowed them to share their experiences, concerns, and strategies for managing stress. These conversations also helped raise awareness of the importance of self-care. In addition, being part of a PLC can help build a sense of community and support among colleagues, leading to increased job satisfaction and retention for SPED teachers.

6.4 Contributions of the Study

- My findings supplement existing literature on the well-being of teachers, specifically those teaching learners with ASD in LSEN school contexts.
- My study provides insight into the various challenges that teachers face when teaching learners with ASD and the impact on the health of teachers and the school. Additionally it provides a unique insight into the well-being of teachers in the South African context.
- My study indicates the specific support required by SPED teachers to facilitate effective teaching and learning.
- My study highlights the need for compulsory undergraduate modules in special needs to prepare prospective teachers in this field.

6.5 Limitations of the Study

As a researcher, participant observer, and facilitator during this study, I may have been biased in my interpretation of the results since I took on multiple roles. As a facilitator and participant observer during the focus group discussions, I found it burdensome to switch roles. This role conflict caused me to miss some crucial observations. Furthermore, the study was conducted with a small sample size to

collect in-depth and rich data; this may have resulted in me only obtaining a limited perspective on the phenomenon under investigation.

6.6 Recommendations

The findings revealed the need for SPED teachers who experienced limited opportunities to connect with colleagues to engage in critical conversations. Therefore, I recommend opportunities for SPED teachers to engage in critical conversations to explore the various issues that teachers face in this field. Critical conversations open dialogue for teachers, offering different perspectives on an issue and allowing expansion and growth (Harste, 2000). The core values of critical conversations are engagement, learning opportunities, and resolving issues within a community. Critical conversations should take place within PLCs, opening paths for reflection on the part of teachers (Cox et al., 2018). Reflections alone do not suffice in these discussions; they also need to be critical, requiring teachers to be mindful or "critically conscious". These discussions provide teachers with new ways of thinking about old problems and allow for innovative solutions (Vetter et al., 2020; Zúñiga et al., 2012). They also help build stronger relationships with colleagues.

The data revealed that well-being support structures were in place but underutilised. This is concerning as it suggests that schools are not effectively measuring or taking accountability for teacher well-being. The study recommends that LSEN schools monitor the effectiveness of support structures to track teacher retention rates. If retention rates increase after supports are put in place, then it is likely that the supports are adequate. Another way to measure the effectiveness of support structures is to survey teachers before and after support is put in place. If there is an increase in satisfaction levels, the supports are likely adequate. Another recommendation is for the school management team to acknowledge the emotional needs of SPED teachers and support them adequately by making provision for professional support through the school's budget.

Support from school management and the SGB is key to retaining well-trained, talented teachers. The study recommends training opportunities and team-building activities to foster connections among SPED teachers. This will help teachers feel more supported and appreciated for

their valuable contributions. Additionally, giving SPED teachers more autonomy will help improve job satisfaction levels.

There is a lack of training for teachers who work with students with disabilities at all levels of education, and teachers with special needs have little or no training in teaching and coping with learners with disabilities. I therefore recommend that the higher education sector aim to improve this gap, which results from burnout, stress, a lack of experience, as it leads to detrimental health issues. The lack of training in this field fails SPED teachers and learners. For this reason, I further recommend that all undergraduate teaching qualifications include modules based on learners with disabilities to open pathways for teachers, giving them future opportunities to work with learners with special needs.

6.7 Suggestions for Further Studies

In this section, I make suggestions for future studies.

- Principals' perspectives on well-being support for teachers in special needs contexts.

By exploring principals' perspective on well-being support for teachers in special needs contexts could be valuable for future studies.

- Implementation and monitoring of well-being structures for special needs teachers, focusing on improving teacher well-being and retention.

By implementing structures and monitoring them over a period, a clear indication of teacher well-being and retention can be assessed.

6.8 Personal Reflection

I began my research journey in 2021. My initial interest in mindfulness in education soon changed after experiencing well-being challenges as a novice SPED teacher. I had just started teaching at my place of work six months prior as a newly qualified teacher, having been trained in the Senior and FET phases. I was, therefore, unprepared for this new role, making it a stressful experience. As a result, I initiated a PLC at the school as a means of support for myself and the teachers in my phase and to facilitate support and professional development for all teachers facing similar challenges. My experiences led to a conversation with my supervisor, Dr Sarina de Jager, who

advised me to adopt this experience as a possible future research study. After some reflection, I decided to take on the challenge and took it up as my current research study.

I then explored literature on teacher well-being and PLCs, which I determined to be the most suitable theoretical framework aligned with my topic, and selected BPN theory. On 1 October 2021, I successfully defended my proposal with minor changes required. In January 2022, I started with the application for my Ethics Clearance, which was granted in March 2022. Permission was obtained from all the relevant stakeholders, which included the school's principal, the SGB, the Gauteng DoE, and the participants.

In April 2022, I started collecting the data, which was completed in July 2022. The data was collected through observations, focus group discussions, and individual semi-structured interviews. I then audio-recorded the sessions and transcribed them verbatim. During this time, I experienced personal and health challenges, which were shortcomings affecting my completion time.

In August 2022, I began my data analysis, which I found to be a challenging yet valuable experience. This process allowed me to experience "behind the scenes" of the research process and the work that goes into co-creating knowledge. Throughout the process, my supervisor, Dr Sarina de Jager, provided regular virtual meetings to check in, provide support, and provide feedback on previous and forthcoming chapters. Her availability was invaluable and highly appreciated. I completed my data analysis in October 2022, after three months. At that time, I addressed my supervisor's comments and adjusted my manuscript accordingly, deeming it challenging. In November 2022, I completed my research study under the supervision of Dr Sarina de Jager.

In conclusion, the participants suggested initiating a proposal on teacher well-being for the school management team and the SGB. After the data collection, the interested participants and I drew up a proposal for the relevant stakeholders to consider (see Appendix D).

6.9 My Place in the Research

My research journey has been a great learning experience, not only in the study but also in life. Through this experience, I have learned about my tenacity and that of my special needs teacher colleagues, who were the participants in this study. Teachers in special needs education face a great

deal of stress, and this study has helped me to identify some of the origins of those stressors, deeming it insightful. During the data collection of this study, the teachers shared their experiences. Some were pleasant, while others were traumatising to hear. Although I had an idea of some of my experiences as a special needs teacher, I was unprepared for what others shared. The thought of a colleague being admitted to a psychiatric hospital as a result of her experiences and a lack of support at the school was disheartening. However, this did not diminish the joyous experiences teachers had. Through this experience, I learned about the complexities of special needs teachers and how their multiple roles daily influenced their professional identity and competence. This experience helped me to name some of my own emotions towards my job and the learners I teach. As one participant said, "the good days were good and the bad days bad"; this reinforced for me that within one set-up, people can feel contradictory feelings, which was sometimes confusing for me.

The most important aspect I have learned during this study was the power of using what was already available to us and making it work. Though teachers in special needs are faced with multidimensional challenges, in my experience, solutions are derived from conversations. Platforms such as PLCs support teacher conversations in a safe space, assuring confidentiality. As a result of engagement in the PLC, I experienced colleagues transform from being reserved to outspoken. Furthermore, the PLC provided the teachers with engagement on matters that affected them professionally. I experienced advocacy from the teachers on their well-being. Through this journey, I experienced them becoming vulnerable and fostering connections yet being empowered to solve some challenging aspects of their jobs by initiating solutions. Autonomy is an influential tool that a school can use to improve SPED teacher well-being, as only teachers can deem what they require to thrive in their workplace. Teacher perspectives should thus be considered. This study indicated that social support and conducive work environments with operational support structures could be an answer to SPED teacher well-being.

6.10 Conclusion

Based on the findings of my study, SPED teacher well-being should be given more attention as it directly contributes to the school's overall health. Many factors contribute to teacher well-being,

including job satisfaction, workload, support structures, and working conditions. Teacher well-being is thus a critical issue as it directly affects the quality of education that learners receive. SPED teachers are especially vulnerable to high levels of stress and burnout, consequently leading to early retirement. Therefore, it is essential to have support structures in place to promote teacher well-being and prevent high turnover.

This study indicated the many reasons why teacher well-being is so essential. First, when teachers are happy and healthy, they are more likely to be effective in the classroom. Second, healthy and satisfied teachers are more likely to stay in the profession, which leads to continuity for learners and stability for schools. Third, promoting teacher well-being can help attract and retain talented individuals to the SPED teaching profession. Finally, supportive structures for teachers can create a positive ripple effect throughout the whole school community. When teachers feel supported, they tend to be more engaged with their work and invested in their learners' success. This creates a positive feedback loop that benefits everyone involved.

The bottom line is that teacher well-being is essential for ensuring high-quality education for all involved. A conducive environment where everyone can thrive can be created by investing in support structures for teachers.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A: GDE Research Approval Letter

GAUTENG PROVINCE
Department: Education
REPUBLIC OF SOUTH AFRICA

8/4/4/1/2

GDE RESEARCH APPROVAL LETTER

Date:	**26 October 2021**
Validity of Research Approval:	**08 February 2022– 30 September 2022** **2021/328**
Name of Researcher:	**Matjeni. M**
Address of Researcher:	**1037 Avocet Ave**
	Zambezi Country Estate
	Zambezi Country Estate
Telephone Number:	**081 319 1702**
Email address:	**madiramatjeni@icloud.com**
Research Topic:	**A Community of Wellbeing: Exploring LSEN Teachers Wellbeing Through a Professional Learning Community**
Type of qualification	**Master's in Education**
Number and type of schools:	**1 LSEN School**
District/s/HO	**Tshwane South**

Re: Approval in Respect of Request to Conduct Research

This letter serves to indicate that approval is hereby granted to the above-mentioned researcher to proceed with research in respect of the study indicated above. The onus rests with the researcher to negotiate appropriate and relevant time schedules with the school/s and/or offices involved to conduct the research. A separate copy of this letter must be presented to both the School (both Principal and SGB) and the District/Head Office Senior Manager confirming that permission has been granted for the research to be conducted.

26/10/2021

The following conditions apply to GDE research. The researcher may proceed with the above study subject to the conditions listed below being met. Approval may be withdrawn should any of the conditions listed below be flouted:

1. *Letter that would indicate that the said researcher/s has/have been granted permission from the Gauteng Department of Education to conduct the research study.*

1

Making education a societal priority

Office of the Director: Education Research and Knowledge Management
7th Floor, 17 Simmonds Street, Johannesburg, 2001
Tel: (011) 355 0488
Email: Faith.Tshabalala@gauteng.gov.za
Website: www.education.gpg.gov.za

Appendix B: Principal and SGB Permission Letter

PRINCIPAL AND THE SCHOOL GOVERNING BODY REQUEST FOR PERMISSION TO CONDUCT A RESEARCH STUDY

Title of Study: Exploring teachers' well-being through a professional learning community

Dear (Principal) and the School Governing Body,

My name is Madira Matjeni, and I am writing to request permission to conduct a research study at ……. school. I am currently enrolled in the Masters in Education program at the University of Pretoria and am writing my Master's dissertation. The study is entitled: ***"Exploring teachers' well-being through a professional learning community".***

The aim for conducting this study is to explore how Professional Learning Communities can facilitate the well-being of teachers in a special educational needs school. As a researcher, I would like to understand how teaching within the autism spectrum disorders (ASD) phase of the school affects the subjective well-being of teachers. I am working under the supervision of Dr Sarina de Jager from the Department of Humanities Education at the University of Pretoria. Ethical guideline will be provided by the Ethics Committee of the Humanities Department of the University will be followed throughout the study.

The study will take place in two phases. The first phase of the study will be a focus group discussion among teachers who teach learners with autism spectrum disorders (ASD). A focus group is where a few people, usually about 6 to 10, gather with the researcher to discuss a specific topic. If clarification is required on some of the discussions held over the study, the second phase of the study will be implemented where semi-structured interviews will be arranged. Both the focus group discussions and semi-structured interviews will be audio-recorded and transcribed so that accuracy may be maintained and reporting on findings may be accurate.

Interested teachers, who volunteer to participate, will be given a consent form to be signed (copy enclosed) and returned to the researcher at the beginning of the research process. All data collection will take place after contact time and will not interfere with teaching time. Teachers will participate focus group discussion and/ or semi-structured interviews for 45 minutes per session. The focus group discussion will take place over four (4) sessions. The individual face-to-face interviews will be held once, where teachers will be requested to elaborate on some of their responses for clarity and greater understanding. With your permission, the discussions will be recorded on a recording device and transcribed to ensure accuracy. During the data collection process, COVID-19 protocol will be followed, this includes the wearing of masks, sanitising of equipment and social distancing.

I ask for permission to utilise the schools' premises between 13:45 and 14:30 every second Wednesday for the duration of the study. The research findings will be merged for the dissertation project and group findings of this study will remain confidential and anonymous. Should this study be published, only group findings will be documented. No costs will be incurred by either the school or the individual participants.

I would appreciate if you could grant me the permission to conduct my academic research at …… school.

Please fill in the consent form provided below if you agree to allow me to conduct this research at …..school. If you have any questions, do not hesitate to contact my supervisor or me.

Sincerely,

Researcher: Madira Matjeni

Contact: *u20756862@tuks.co.za* /081 319 ****

Supervisor: Dr Sarina de Jager

Contact: *Sarina.dejager@up.ac.za* /

cc: Dr S. de Jager, Research Supervisor, University of Pretoria

INFORMED CONSENT FOR THE PRINCIPAL

I,_____(your name), the undersigned, in my capacity as a Principal at **…….. School** hereby grant permission for Madira Matjeni to conduct the above-mentioned research at our school.

I understand that the researcher subscribes to the principles of:

- *Voluntary participation* in research, implying that the participants might withdraw from the research at any time.
- *Informed consent* means that research participants must be fully informed about the research process and purposes and must give consent to their participation in the research.
- *Safety in participation*; put differently, that the human respondents should not be placed at risk or harm of any kind.
- *Privacy*, meaning that the *confidentiality* of human respondents should be protected at all times.
- *Trust*, which implies that human respondents will not be respondent to any acts of deception or betrayal in the research process or its published outcomes.

Signature:_____ Date:_____

INFORMED CONSENT FOR THE SCHOOL GOVERNNING BODY

I,_____(your name), the undersigned, in my capacity as the School Governing Body Chairperson at **……. School** hereby grant permission for Madira Matjeni to conduct the above-mentioned research at our school.

I understand that the researcher subscribes to the principles of:

- *Voluntary participation* in research, implying that the participants might withdraw from the research at any time.
- *Informed consent*, means that research participants must at all times be fully informed about the research process and purposes, and must give consent to their participation in the research.
- *Safety in participation*; put differently, that the human respondents should not be placed at risk or harm of any kind.
- *Privacy*, means that the *confidentiality* of human respondents should be protected at all times.
- *Trust*, which implies that human respondents will not be respondent to any acts of deception or betrayal in the research process or its published outcomes.

Signature:_____ Date:_____

Appendix C: Informed Consent Letter to Participants

INFORMED CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH - EXPLORING TEACHERS' WELL-BEING THROUGH A PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITY

My name is Madira Matjeni, and I am currently studying towards my Master's degree at the University of Pretoria. The title of my research project is "Exploring teachers' well-being through a professional learning community."

THE NATURE AND PURPOSE OF THIS STUDY

The aim of this study is to explore how Professional Learning Communities can facilitate the well-being of teachers in a special educational needs school.

In pursuit of this aim, the following aspects will be studied:

- The perceptions and experiences of teacher well-being in a special educational needs school.
- How experiences within a special educational needs school impact teachers' well-being.
- The available structures within the school to facilitate well-being.
- Teacher's perceptions and experiences of a Professional Learning Community.

EXPLANATION OF PROCEDURES AND WHAT WILL BE EXPECTED FROM PARTICIPANTS

The research will be conducted at one (1) special educational needs school in Gauteng, and you are invited to be part of the project. Should you wish to participate, you will be asked to participate in a semi-structured interview for 30 to 45 minutes. The individual semi-structured interviews will be held once, where you will be requested to elaborate on some of your responses from the focus group discussions for clarity and greater understanding. With your permission, the semi-structured interviews will be recorded on a recording device and transcribed to ensure accuracy. During the data collection process, COVID-19 protocol will be followed; this includes the wearing of masks, sanitising of equipment and social distancing.

RISKS AND DISCOMFORTS INVOLVED

This study hopes to understand teachers lived experiences. No foreseeable physical or emotional discomfort or risk are anticipated. If you need support or counselling during or after the focus group discussion or the semi-structured interview, you can contact Ms Elmarie La Grange, the school's Psychologist for support. She can be reached at the school's support offices for face-to-face interaction; she may also be reached on **083 346 2258**. You may also contact the South African Depression and Anxiety Group (SADAG) on their 24-hour toll-free helpline on **0800 456 789.** Both the SADAG and Ms Elmarie La Grange's services are free of charge.

POSSIBLE BENEFITS OF THIS STUDY

Your participation is important to better understand how special educational needs teachers can be supported with the everyday challenges they face in the classroom, dealing with some of the most challenging learners. The information you give may help the researcher improve the support structures of teachers in special educational needs environments and provide coping mechanisms for such teachers.

COMPENSATION

You will not be paid to take part in the study. There are no costs involved for you to be part of the study.

VOLUNTARY PARTICIPATION

Your participation is completely voluntary, and you have the right to withdraw from the study at any time without any consequences.

CONFIDENTIALITY

Your identity and responses will be kept confidential and will be used solely for the purposes of this project.

I also would like to request your permission to use the data collected, confidentially and anonymously, for further research purposes, as the data sets are the intellectual property of the University of Pretoria**.** Further research may include secondary data analysis and using the data for teaching purposes. The confidentiality and privacy agreement applicable to this study will be binding on future research studies.

Your participation in this study will be greatly appreciated.

Sincere regards

Madira Matjeni (Researcher)

Cell: 0813191702

Email: *u20756862@tuks.co.za*

Dr Sarina de Jager (Supervisor)

Office Telephone: 012 420 5555

Cell: 083 644 1701

Email: Sarina.dejager@up.ac.za

Research Ethics Committee – Faculty of Education

Tel: 012 356 3085

LETTER of INFORMED CONSENT

VOLUNTARY PARTICIPATION IN THE RESEARCH PROJECT TITLED

"Exploring teachers' well-being through a professional learning community"

I, _____hereby agree to voluntarily participate in the individual semi-structured interviews of the aforementioned research project to be conducted by Mrs Madira Matjeni, a Masters student from the University of Pretoria.

I declare that the nature and aim of the research has been clearly outlined and the data collection methods were fully explained to me by the researcher. I have been assured that my confidentiality and anonymity will be honoured throughout the study.

I give permission for the generated data to be used for further research purposes, and understand that the data sets are the intellectual property of the University of Pretoria.

_____	_____	_____
Participant's name (Print)	Signature	Date

_____	_____	_____
Researcher's name (Print)	Signature	Date

Appendix D: Well-being Proposal

Well-being Support for Educators @ ….. School

Originators: Ms A*, Ms B*, Ms C*, Ms D*, Ms E* , Ms F*

Date: 2 September 2022

Executive Summary

- We have identified the emotional needs of educators as a primary well-being obstruction to the whole school community, as it affects educator retention rates, educator absenteeism and morale;

-Our proposed initiative to solve the problem includes full-time professional support for educators, One Monday afternoon a month to socially and professionally engage with other phases in order to gain professional insight and knowledge, funding for initiatives that foster social engagement such as sports day for teachers, teacher's day celebrations and so forth;

- These ideas will benefit the school, as they nourish some of the basic psychological needs of humans, which include relatedness, competence and autonomy, allowing educators to initiate programmes suited to their needs and goals;

-This initiative will benefit the whole school community.

Idea Details

Problem: Emotional well-being and support of special educational needs teachers

Idea: Well-being initiatives @ Diem* School

Benefits: Educator well-being and the general well-being and functioning of the school

Cost Projections and Return on Investment

We will need funds for some of the programs which will be employed quarterly, such as Sports day, where refreshments will be required for the day. Most of the anticipated events will be creatively planned to minimise funding.

Resource Requirements

We will need one Monday off monthly, preferably the first Monday of the month, to be utilised for well-being initiatives.

S.W.O.T Analysis

This is a strategic planning exercise to evaluate the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats of the initiative.

Strengths: Supporting well-being, emotional and social aspects of special educational needs educators, as only like-minded can relate to our challenges;

Weaknesses: Time may be a challenging aspect to consider; hence we are asking for one Monday to organise and execute this programme;

Opportunities: elements in the environment that the organisation could exploit to its advantage (by pursuing proposed initiative);

Threats: Lack of support from the school management team and the school governing body; time management (to be included in the strategic planning weekend, and make necessary space on the year plan for 2023)

Metrics & Milestones

We want this programme to begin in 2023 to support novice and experienced teachers, as research proves that all teachers in special educational needs schools need emotional and social support from their peers and other professionals.

A survey will go out to all educators to probe their needs and professional goals so that relevant support may be provided. The programme will be monitored, and a report will be completed and submitted quarterly.

Key milestones will be indicated in educator retention rates, absenteeism rates, and job satisfaction levels. Key milestones will be indicated in educator retention rates, absenteeism rates as well as job satisfaction levels.

The expected timeline for this initiative is provisionally for 12 months. After a full report is completed by the end of 2023, a permanent proposal will be drafted depending on the program's results.

Evaluation

At the end of each quarter, a survey will be sent to the school WhatsApp group to engage educators' experiences of the programmes and events.

We would like to take this moment to thank you for reading this document. We hope it will be considered.

Appendix E: Interview Protocol

INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

TITLE

Exploring teachers' well-being through a professional learning community

AIM OF STUDY

The aim of this study is to explore learners with special educational needs (LSEN) teachers' wellbeing through a professional learning community (PLC). As a researcher, I would like to understand how working within the autism spectrum disorders (ASD) Phase of the LSEN school affects the subjective wellbeing of teachers, as well as the structural support provided for teachers at a school level.

Primary questions that will be asked are:

a. How would you define wellbeing?
b. Upon reflection on your experiences of working with learners on the autism spectrum disorders, how would you describe your experiences over the years?

Sub-questions that will be asked are:

a. In your experience, what is being done to facilitate teacher well-being at the school?
b. How do you think your work contributes to your well-being or lack of wellbeing?
c. What are your feelings towards working with learners on the autism spectrum disorders? And how does this affect your well-being?
d. What support structures do you have at the school with regards to your well-being?
e. What can be done to positively influence your well-being within the school environment?
f. What is your experience of Professional Learning Communities?

SOURCES OF DATA TO BE COLLECTED

The first phase of data collection will be through a focus group and the second phase will be collected by conducting semi-structured interviews with novice and experienced teachers within the autism spectrum disorder Phase of a learners with special educational needs (LSEN) school.

PROTECTION OF CONFIDENTIALITY

Participant identity and responses will be kept confidential and anonymous. All collected data will be used solely for the purposes of this study. Participation in this study is voluntary and you are free to withdraw at any time should you wish to do so. Participants will not be harmed in any way throughout the study, and you will receive an opportunity to clarify yourself should you wish to during the study. Transcript will be available to all participants for verification purposes.

All findings will be reported in a complete and honest way without any misrepresentation using formal yet comprehensible English. I will not fabricate data or alter findings to suit interest groups. I shall give credit and acknowledgments appropriately and disseminate the practical implications of our

research in a comprehensible way. As a participant, you will not be party to any acts of deception or betrayal in the research process or its published outcomes.

DURATION OF THE INTERVIEW

We will be conducting semi-structured interviews that will take around 45 minutes. I may ask you to elaborate on your answers, for clarity. The interview will be audio-recorded and transcribed. I will be taking field notes throughout the interview. Should you not feel comfortable to answer any questions during the interview, you may refrain from answering the questions. You are welcome to stop the interview at any time, you will not be penalized in any way.

PARTICIPANT INFORMATION

Pseudonym	Number of years teaching

Appendix F: Transcript (Focus group discussion)

FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSION 4

9 June 2022

Title: Exploring teachers' well-being through a professional learning community

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Time: 14:00

Venue: Class 56

Present Participants:

- **Participant A**
- **Participant B**
- **Participant C**
- **Participant D**
- **Participant E**
- **Participant G**
- **Researcher**

Absent participants

- **Participant F**

Researcher: How did you experience this professional learning at community discussions, or the focus group discussions how has it been for you?

Participant C: *Uhm, I actually enjoyed them. think I started looking forward to having these discussions, and just talking a little bit how were feeling. And I think just realising that more of us were feeling the same. So yeah, it was overall a positive experience.*

Participant G*: For me, it was also very it was very therapeutic. Like I enjoyed coming here, and it's like teacher C* also said, it felt like we were all kind of on the same page with how we feel, support wise, well-being wise and yeah, I think I really enjoyed this.*

Participant B: *Yes, for me as well it was very positive like atmosphere, to share and discuss what is happening. And I think it was helps us to stand together moving forward, uhm, in what we have discussed and helping each other to get to the goals that we want to achieve. But yeah, I think it really meant a lot and it was nice to have a place to say what you feel.*

Participant E: *Yeah, I think it was very therapeutic. I've learned a lot, I've somehow grown here in there, I've learned. Yeah, it was very… it impacted positively in my academic "whatever".*

Participant A: *I'm actually sad that, and this is our last, because as everyone has said we came here to off load and learn the process. But when you come to the realisation that we are all equally burdened even though we thought, why, why should I do this and that? Then you realise the next person is going through the same thing, then you get a different perspective of where you are and maybe hopefully whatever we have discussed here will help us take an initiative to bring about change.*

Participant D: *I had a very positive experience. I feel like this is a place where we could off-load, and it was a positive environment. It was not just all negative, yeah, I would like for us to have a group like this where we can.*

Participant C: *A permanent one.*

Participant D: *Yeah, a permanent one.*

Researcher: *Okay thank you and let's look at the second one is: What has been positive about your experience, can you name it?*

Participant C: *Uhm, you taught me about taking a nap when I get home (laughs), like seriously, I really like recommend that, but without children at home. But, yes, that kind of helped me just to realise*

what other people do when they're stressed and just understanding that it's normal. Like all of us feel kind of the same in all of us all but drained when we get home, and just to ... (inaudible)... with yourself before you have to go to your second job and take care of your family. And uhm, I think time to just like slow down, you are allowed to do that. So, I think that was kind of just realising that everybody is having this burden, and everybody has a way to like slow down and take time for yourself and it's allowed. So, I'm not feeling bad about that anymore so, yes.

Participant G: *So, for me what was positive was a lot of things, but I think I'm this taught me to reflect more on like especially the weeks that we didn't come to you then I would start journaling more and actually putting my feelings on paper which helped me a lot. And not only just reflect on well-being but like also how can I be better for the children, because if you better for yourself you can, but it has to start with your journey has to start with you, so I've actually taken time to reflect, journal and I've been listening to a lot of self-affirmation podcasts and I, I, especially in the mornings. Now it's like my thing, it's like let's get this going, let's like start the day with a positive something. Yes, this was like very, very therapeutic.*

Participant D: *Yeah, I think it just brought me to a standstill (is that a correct word?) to realise that you need to look after yourself, to be able to look also others. So made me to also made extra time for myself, and when I start doing that, I feel much better. So, I think that's the positive thing I took out of it.*

Participant B: *Ok, I think a positive for me is not to have to keep everything in and keep it to yourself, but to actually have a space to be able to share and to get rid of those feelings, because if we keep on keeping it to ourselves, we just get more drained. So, it was really nice to know there's a place that we can go to and just release everything and just start again. Yeah, it was I think that is a positive for me. And also, that you have to look after yourself, like it's important nobody else is going to look out for you you're the only person that can look out for yourself. And I think now especially with this group, we know each other's heart so it makes it easier to stand together and also to help each other or to go to someone and say this is what I'm feeling can you please help me or something like that.*

Participant E: *Indeed, I think I've, I've came to realise that growth is in only measured by… I think the beginning of mentioned that out measure my goals in mainstream with the pass rate or rather yeah, the pass rate of the learner, the achievements of the learners. From now on I realised that growth is actually the inner peace, taking care of yourself like somehow, I thought I was not growing academically but then I realised that it is not only academically that you need to grow. Your social well-*

being, your inner peace needs to grow, and I think this group helped me a lot. I've learned to grow my, like in inside of nearer than measuring the growth in the success or achievement of the learners.

Participant A: *Uhm, for me it will have to be it the positive that came out of this whole thing. I think I can safely say that it gave me a wakeup call to reflect and be reminded that you need to plan and prioritise. So, each day you look at what's ahead of you and your priorities are supposed to be put first. So, I'm really grateful that we came together and as we share our experiences, fears and positives as well, uhm, out of it I picked that well step back look at your life and you know where to go.*

Researcher: Let's get our third question and that is: what has been negative about the experience if experience anything negative, I mean there's room for growth everywhere.

Participant C*: I think the only negative here is that it's ending (laughs). I think like, it's the end, so like there was not really something negative, I think that's the only thing. Like it's ending, like we have to get to place now keep what now? from now on like what are we going to do now? because it's the end but now we have to like to take it kind of in our own hands, to decide what are you gonna do now.*

Participant G: *So, she took the words right out of my mouth. To me, this coz this is like a safety bubble. It's almost like you know those things you get in the snow globe. It's like a safe little place and it feels like I'm gonna go out of this bubble as the snow globe into the world out there again and the session is not going to be here anymore. So, and obviously the I missed one session coz I was sick, so that was negative for me.*

(All participants laugh)

Participant D: *Yeah, I feel the same as the previous two*.

(All participants laugh)

Participant G: *I think there was not really a negative for me, maybe all the sessions that I missed. I didn't miss just one. Yeah, I was booked off for a long time so and also what they said like is ending and what, what do you do now? Like where do you go from here? because now you can't go next week to someone, and all have this again and discuss what, but you feel. So, there should be a new method to get rid of those feelings.*

Participant E: *I think for me it was, there were negatives here and there. Having heard other people experiences, like bad experiences, rather, how they have suffered how like the experiences in general. How they've been treated, how the learners have behaved around them. I think for some reason I got scared for myself, I'm like wow, so, I'm here now, am I gonna go through the same things? What is it that could, should be done rather so that I don't I don't experience the same thing that they have experienced? So, for me some of the things we very much scary. I was like very much sad, feeling sad for my emotional… like how will I deal with this should it happen to me? Like for me some of the experiences that you get shared with me was just, scary, scary.*

Participant C: *You guys are so bad. (Sarcastic tone)*

Participant A: *OK I'd be lying if I said there were negatives from this experience as everyone has alluded. The thing is, I think we, we were too comfortable, and we were short sighted we failed to plan to have such set-ups going forward after this. So, maybe she needed to remind us from time to time, this is our second last then we need to pull up our socks and work something out.*

Researcher: Thank you so much. Participant C, you know, because you're a new educator at the school it's refreshing to hear your perspective because it differs from everyone else's. And it's actually it's refreshing because and I like I like your…I love your honesty you know, and I… I hope that what we have shared here as much as it is frightened you, but I hope that it is prepared you. You may experience them, you may not experience what some of us have experienced but I think with what we have shared, hopefully you are empowered to deal with those circumstances, because I think most of us were not ready for them no one told us beforehand what to expect. So you kind of have the upper hand now, because you kind of know what could be coming but it may not happen with you, because every year you may get different learners and they warm up to you differently you know, and every child is comes with their own unique needs and demands and sometimes an educator has the resources to deal with those needs and other times we don't have those intrinsic resources that we need. And I would like to hope that these sessions helped to facilitate that, you know to help us facilitate the strengths that we need to have within in order to deal with some of the circumstances that we come across. So, thank you very much.

Now we look at the final question which is: how do we take everything that we have discussed and learned through this experience forward?

Participant C: *Okay, I think one of the things that like we can never go back now and say like we don't know. Like I think we've learned a lot, and we've heard a lot and I think we need to do something*

about it. We cannot like to turn a blind are now and like when a new educator comes in and not just like support them. So I think we have to, Diem school always had this if a new education comes in we had like a, what was it? Like a little pamphlet and we would take him through the school, and I think sometimes we fail to still do that because we do not get to all the other phases. I think it's important to have that again. If a new educator comes in to make them part of the school immediately. Take them to all the educators, like show them the school. What was it again? What was it called? it was like a …*

Participant A: *Induction.*

Participant C: *Induction, and I think we haven't been doing that for a long time now, anymore. Because I don't know the new educators, so I think it will be important to have that induction. I think to make everybody just feel more comfortable with discussing problems that they have. And I think just to, to start talking up more, just speaking your heart.*

Participant G: *I think it could help if we could have the type of support group like this, if we can implement it like that Wellness committee that never happened, that, like where is it? and I think especially, it's good to have one within your Phase, but sometimes I think it's good to have people from other Phases so that you can like hear what they experienced coz it might still be common grounds that are positive and negative. So, I think everything that we've mentioned here if we could just make them like goals, you know like I know there's a lot of contextual factors as well but if we could just make it into reality and like build a team and yeah, ok.*

Participant D: *Yeah, I think through this we learned that others also feeling the way we do and that can be there for each other, to listen and to just be. Yes, yes, and I also think that it will be nice if we can continue with groups like this, and I think it's it first starts with you. You need to take responsibility for your well-being at school, at home or wherever you go.*

Participant B: *Ok, I would say I think we would need to get management involved because everything flows from them. So, I think it is our responsibility now to create new systems that can help new teachers and then present them to the principal and present them to management so that when it flows through it comes from above. And yeah, if we have them on our team and we have been working with us it will go so much better, but that was only to give us a chance to say how we feel and how we experience working here and ideas of how we think we can do this better, and how we can change it. Just to make the systems better, and I agree with teacher 4, it also starts with ourselves. If we believe we can do it, then it makes it easier to just push through and present something that we think will work*

and we can always discuss it with other teachers, hear how they feel, if they agree to that, or if they would like something like that. Yeah, so that's from my side.

Participant E: *I really feel that something should be done. Something should be done, so that new teachers don't be as scared as I was, I mean all this entire three months. Something should be done. You know during and after school and during breaks, I would just stay in the corner and stare at the learners it was really frightening. So, our researcher right here, should just make this happen. Yeah, we must, we… something should be done, there must be more of this. We need more of this yeah, we need to support each other guys.*

Participant A: *Uhm, you all have said a mouthful, so I'm left with nothing to say. But if it's allowed, I think I need I have a suggestion for the name of what we can call these sessions, we overlook we put the well there, will be positives coming out of it, but how about you call it a renting and venting session?*

(All participants laugh)

Researcher: No, we we won't be able… we won't be able to handle it that way. (laughs)

Participant A: *We will change the name as we go*.

Researcher: I think we started off with the venting and as the sessions progressed it became more positive, more empowering. I would like to really thank you all for being part of this research and for contributing to my study. I'm going to switch this off, thank you.