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Wellbeing leadership: Perceptions of pre-service school leaders

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ABSTRACT

This study explored pre-service school leaders' self-perceived roles as future school leaders in terms of securing the provision of wellbeing. Sixteen pre-service school leaders (participants from MA Education Leadership programs) from 14 countries participated in semi-structured interviews. Data was analyzed using theme-based analysis. Findings suggest that pre-service school leaders: (a) exhibited a narrow understanding of the concept of wellbeing; (b) attributed the role of securing students' wellbeing mainly to school psychologists, counselors and teachers; (c) assumed a greater personal role, if any, towards securing students' wellbeing, compared to that of teachers, despite showing more knowledge of how to address teacher wellbeing; and (e) did not receive any form of capacity building addressing wellbeing leadership, as part of their leadership preparatory programs.

1. Introduction

The American Psychological Association (APA) defines wellbeing as 'a state of happiness and contentment, with low levels of distress, overall good physical and mental health and outlook, or good quality of life' [1]. The concept of wellbeing is not new in education, but COVID-19 pandemic has brought it to spotlight, and exacerbated its vital role for both teachers and students. Studies have shown that, during the pandemic, teachers were more concerned about student wellbeing, far more than being concerned about their learning [2]. Concepts of isolation, dropout, sense of purpose, belonging, mindfulness, social-emotional learning and emotional safety received more attention in published work than ever [2–5].

UNICEF has raised a compelling alarm about the wellbeing of students in the Arab states during the COVID-19 pandemic [6]. Moreover, studies have shown that teachers in certain Arab countries lacked the necessary self-efficacy to effectively navigate the challenges of remote and hybrid teaching, thereby adversely affecting their own wellbeing [7]. Moreover, the demanding workload coupled with inadequate compensation has taken a toll on teachers' wellbeing, highlighting a pressing need for comprehensive support systems [8]. Another critical factor influencing teacher wellbeing in the region has been the reported prevalence of authoritarian leadership styles among school leaders [9,10]. The impact of such leadership approaches on teacher morale and overall wellbeing cannot be underestimated, warranting closer attention to ensure a conducive and supportive educational environment for both students and educators alike [11,12].

However, wellbeing in schools is a result of effective school leadership that ensures the nurturing of a positive school culture for all members of the school community and secures holistic development for students [13]. Ref. [14] suggest that effective school leaders promote teacher wellbeing, inherently enhancing their self-esteem, job satisfaction, autonomy, and relationships with others. Similarly, in terms of students, Ref. [15] consider school leadership crucial in securing student wellbeing, which leads to improved learning

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outcomes.

A large body of research on teacher wellbeing have employed quantitative assessments, focusing on positive correlations between specific wellbeing dimensions and factors such as teacher job satisfaction and organizational commitment [16]. Other studies have focused on strategies to enhance teacher wellbeing, such as yoga and mindfulness interventions [17]. However, there is a noticeable gap in the literature concerning the impact of interactions between leaders and teachers on teacher wellbeing [18]. In fact, very few studies have specifically addressed school leaders' pivotal role in promoting the overall wellbeing at the school level [19–22].

To the best of the researcher's knowledge, no studies have examined the preparation of school leaders and the extent to which it equips them for the critical responsibility of leading wellbeing initiatives in their future roles. This represents a significant area that warrants further investigation. An underexplored avenue for addressing this area in research is by examining the self-perceived roles of pre-service school leaders, particularly in terms of their comprehension of whole school wellbeing and their aspirations for its realization. This is because research findings, such as those by Ref. [23], indicate that school leaders' perceptions of their role significantly impact their effectiveness and commitment to it.

As such, this study explored pre-service school leaders' self-perceived roles as future school leaders in terms of securing the provision of wellbeing. The study was guided by the following questions:

1 How do pre-service school leaders understand school wellbeing?
2 What are pre-service school leaders' perceptions pertaining their future roles, in terms of securing the provision of whole school wellbeing?

2. Literature review

2.1. Wellbeing in schools

Research findings suggests that school climate is an influential factor in student success, including academic, social and psychological dimensions, assertive and protective coping mechanisms to bullying; mental health awareness; and a positive outlook to future lives [24–28]. According to Ref. [29] these factors can be categorized into five domains: positive emotion, engagement, relationships, meaning, and accomplishment (PERMA model). The benefits of each element of Seligman's PERMA model has been addressed in the literature.

First, Ref. [30] consider positive emotion essential for building the capacities of students for them to deal effectively with academic and daily-life challenges. Second, engagement inhibits the likelihood of students' encountering learning difficulties academically [31, 32]. Third, positive relationships amongst students, and between students and teachers, have been noted to foster positive learning outcomes [33]. As for meaning, research suggests that students who understand meaning through serving and doing something larger than oneself, tend to develop resilience skills, which support them in applying their strengths to live a purposeful life [30,31,34]. The last element of the PERMA model stands for accomplishment which support students in developing a perceived personal image pertaining their potential to grow and succeed, despite challenges [30,35].

It should be noted that previously, school-setting wellbeing was limited to mental health [36]. However, this view has been broadened to include a whole set of skills and behaviors that support all members of the school community, in not only being healthy mentally, but also feeling positive about themselves and adopting clear personal life-long goals [29,30,37]. Moreover, wellbeing is no more viewed as being just catering to the prosperity of few students in the school, but has taken a more generic stance that includes whole school members [19,30,38].

2.2. Teacher wellbeing

Teaching is a demanding career characterized by high attrition rate [39]. A plethora of research suggests that teachers are prune to stress, low self-esteem and efficacy, and weak job satisfaction, often reducing their wellbeing, and hence leading them to burning out [19,40]. Thus, teacher wellbeing is integral for teachers because it is a premise for securing job satisfaction, positive emotions, professional growth, reduced dropout, and successful outcomes for learners [41–43]. Moreover, teacher wellbeing often support them in managing the demands of their career, and making them live a good life [44,45].

Teacher wellbeing is multidimensional and holistic [46] encompassing overlapping and interrelated dimensions that are physical, social, emotional and psychological [47–55]. In fact, research suggests that a limited teacher agency tend to reduce teacher wellbeing, impacting negatively on teacher performance, teaching effectiveness, student outcomes, school improvement, and school effectiveness [53,55,56].

How teacher wellbeing is safeguarded in the literature is demonstrated through a myriad of factors. However, according to this literature, school climate is the determinant factor in shaping the provision of teacher wellbeing in schools [51]. Positive school climates serve as critical factors in decreased teacher absenteeism, and increased sense of belonging to school [51,53]. Moreover, in a climate of collaboration and congeniality, teachers tend to feel supported from burning out, leading to improved engagement, performance, and student learning outcomes [54,55]. Finally, the establishment and nourishment of teacher leadership construct in schools, is regarded as an effective means for addressing teachers' wellbeing [12,57,58].

Finally, poor teacher wellbeing has significant repercussions on both learning and teaching. Ref. [59] shed light on this issue by highlighting the occupational nature of teacher wellbeing, which encompasses cognitive, emotional, health, and social aspects related to their work and profession. This emphasis underscores the intricate connections between teacher wellbeing, their instructional

practices, and the broader educational system's impact on students. For instance, the cognitive dimension of teacher wellbeing, including factors such as self-efficacy, plays a pivotal role in teacher effectiveness, directly influencing instructional strategies and student achievement [59]. The distinction between dimensions of teacher wellbeing and factors influencing it is not always clear-cut, but the consequences of poor teacher wellbeing are widely recognized, casting a shadow on the quality of both education delivery and student outcomes.

2.3. Student wellbeing

The same way teacher wellbeing safeguards teachers, student wellbeing supports their overall success in school [60,61]. Student wellbeing encompasses physical, social, emotional and psychological dimensions, thus improving their overall academic performance, behavior, social integration, satisfaction, and allowing them to make responsible life choices [62,63]. When student wellbeing is secured, research suggests that students tend to be better able to cope with stress, and feel positive about themselves [41–43]. A study conducted by Ref. [62] suggests evidence-based association between student wellbeing, and student participation, recognition, and achievement.

The literature suggests several routes and approaches for securing student wellbeing in schools. At the level of the classroom, teachers are considered the crafters of student wellbeing, as part of their professional responsibilities [64]. Teachers are expected to contribute to students' abilities of coping with stress, emotional management, mindfulness and self-kindness [65]. This is supposed to be realized through the establishment of non-threatening classroom climates that are conducive for respect, accepting diversity, tolerance and self-appreciation [66]. On the other hand, and at the level of the whole school, numerous activities support students' wellbeing, on top of which comes mindfulness [67,68], moral and character education [69,70], and physical activities [71,72].

2.4. School leadership and wellbeing

School leaders' personal wellbeing is never less important than that of students and teachers. In fact, research suggests that school wellbeing is a direct consequence of its leaders' wellbeing [20,73] School leaders are themselves are prone to stress, emotional exhaustion, and burnout [74]. Mitigating this concern can be achieved through governing bodies. This is because the wellbeing of school leaders who feel appreciated by governing bodies is generally high [73]. In fact, governing bodies play a crucial role in determining the level of school leaders' wellbeing, and should regularly acknowledge the work and contribution of leaders, thus communicating trust; besides ensuring not to overburden them with tasks, that potentially can make them loose their work-life balance [75].

The importance of school leaders' wellbeing goes beyond their immunity against emotional exhaustion, as they are the ones who are expected to establish, nourish and safeguard the wellbeing at the whole school community. As stated earlier, school leaders create positive school cultures, which support both students and teachers to enjoy a good level of wellbeing [51,53]. In this line, the leadership style adopted by school leaders is important, because leaders who are authoritarian, tend to impact negatively on school wellbeing [76]. Democratic and shared leadership styles tend to contribute to positive school cultures, which in turn support school wellbeing [77].

2.5. Theoretical framework

This study is grounded in the PERMA model, a seminal psychological framework introduced by Martin Seligman, a leading figure in the field of positive psychology. The PERMA model provides a comprehensive and structured approach to understanding and enhancing wellbeing and life satisfaction. It is an acronym that represents five essential elements, each contributing to a holistic understanding of the factors that lead to a fulfilling and meaningful life. The elements of the PERMA model are positive emotion, engagement, relationships, meaning, and accomplishment. These will be detailed in what follows, based on Ref. [29].

Positive emotions emphasize the importance of experiencing positive emotions, such as happiness, joy, gratitude, and love. These emotions not only contribute to an individual's overall wellbeing but also play a crucial role in building resilience and coping with life's challenges. Incorporating positive emotions into daily life can lead to improved mental and physical health.

Engagement refers to the state of being fully absorbed and immersed in activities or tasks that provide a sense of flow and satisfaction. When individuals engage in activities that align with their strengths and interests, they are more likely to experience a sense of fulfillment and purpose. This element highlights the significance of focusing on activities that lead to a state of flow, where time seems to pass effortlessly, and individuals are at their most productive and content.

The relationships component underscores the vital role of social connections and interpersonal relationships in enhancing wellbeing. Maintaining meaningful and positive relationships with friends, family, colleagues, and the broader community contributes to a sense of belonging and support. Strong social ties are associated with increased happiness, reduced stress, and a greater overall life satisfaction.

Meaning element revolves around the pursuit of meaning and purpose in life. Finding a sense of purpose, setting meaningful goals, and aligning one's actions with their core values contribute to a deeper sense of fulfillment. Individuals who have a clear understanding of their purpose are often more resilient, motivated, and optimistic in the face of challenges.

Finally, accomplishment relates to setting and achieving goals, whether big or small. The pursuit of accomplishments and the sense of mastery that comes with them are essential for self-esteem and a sense of progress. Recognizing one's achievements, no matter how modest, can boost confidence and contribute to overall wellbeing.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research design

This qualitative study was based on the interpretive paradigm, aiming to explore the self-perceptions of pre-service school leaders pertaining their future roles as school leaders, in terms of securing the provision of wellbeing. For this purpose, semi-structured interviewing was selected, as it supports in delving deeply into the personal views, allowing researchers to explore thoughts, feelings and beliefs [78].

Structured interviews utilized an interview guide consisting of the questions that are presented in Table 1. Probing questions were asked depending on the answers provided by participants.

The interview guide was carefully developed through an iterative process, rooted in an extensive literature review that identified core concepts and theories related to school leadership and wellbeing, including the PERMA model by Ref. [29] which constitutes the theoretical framework underlying this study.

3.2. The sample

The sample consisted of 16 pre-service school leaders, who were selected according to the following criteria: (a) should be enrolled in a Master's program (MA) in Educational Leadership at the time of the conduction of the study, and should be close to graduation (last semester); and (b) should not be serving or has served as a school leader before.

The MA programs in which participants were enrolled in shared a common goal, but had slightly different course offerings. In fact, it is designed to equip prospective school leaders with the knowledge and skills needed to effectively lead educational institutions and manage various aspects of the educational environment. The program typically covers a broad range of topics related to educational leadership, administration, management, policy, and organizational development. Generally, course offerings include the following, under varied names:

(1) Foundations of Educational Leadership: which provides an introduction to the principles and theories of educational leadership, emphasizing the importance of effective leadership in educational settings.
(2) Educational Policy and Governance: where explores the impact of policies on educational practices and the role of leaders in shaping policy.
(3) Organizational Leadership and Change: which focuses on leadership within educational organizations, emphasizing strategies for managing change, improving organizational culture, and enhancing overall effectiveness.
(4) Instructional Leadership: which helps pre-service educational leaders gain skills to foster a culture of continuous improvement in teaching and learning, in their career.
(5) School Law and Ethics: which covers legal and ethical issues in education, including student rights, staff responsibilities, and the legal framework within which educational institutions operate.
(6) Human Resource Management: which examines effective personnel management strategies, including hiring, professional development, performance evaluation, and conflict resolution.
(7) Financial Management in Education: which teaches budgeting, resource allocation, and financial planning for educational institutions, ensuring leaders can manage their organizations' financial resources effectively.
(8) Research Methods in Education: which provides essential research skills for educational leaders to critically analyze data, conduct educational research, and make evidence-based decisions.
(9) Capstone Project or Thesis: where students may undertake a research project, thesis, or practical application project that demonstrates their mastery of educational leadership concepts and skills. Through this, students often shadow a school leader, under the supervision of a university professor, and gain first hand experience pertaining to leading a school. While students receive academic guidance on how to navigate through this journey, no psychological guidance or socio-emotional learning training is provided.

Table 1
Semi-structured interview schedule.

Introductions.	
Conceptualizing Wellbeing	• What do you understand by the term: 'wellbeing in school'?
	• Where did you hear about wellbeing?
	• Who is responsible for addressing wellbeing in school?
Importance of Wellbeing	• What are students' benefits from school wellbeing?
	• What are teachers' benefits from school wellbeing?
Leadership Preparation	• How confident you are in terms of leading on wellbeing in your future role as a school leader?
	• To what degree, you think, you have you been prepared during you leadership preparation program to lead on school wellbeing?
	• Any recommendations you would want to make pertaining the leadership preparation program you are involved in?

3.3. Gaining access

Initially, the authors gained the ethical clearance from the IRB at Qatar University. To reach out participants from various countries, the board of a famous virtual community of practice (vCoP) (targeting the Arab States region and its beyond) was approached with a letter for linking the researchers to members, who were labeled as MA students in Educational Leadership. The number of members in this category was 71, and those members came from to 32 countries. The vCoP board gave its approval, on condition that their admin would send emails to the targeted group, along the consent form detailing the purpose of the study; participants' anonymity, benefits, right to quit at any time; and asking them if they were fine with recording the interview audio wise via Microsoft Teams (closed cameras). Members who were interested were asked to contact the authors via the email provided in the consent form. Out of the 71members, only 19 emailed the researcher, and only 16 of them fitted the selection criteria, as three were already serving as school leaders. The 16 participants who constituted the sample of the study came from 14 Arab countries. The background characteristics of the participants involved in the study are presented in Table 2.

3.4. Data collection & analysis

One of the researchers carried out all interviews. As all participants refused to audiotape the interview using Microsoft Teams, the researcher had to type answers, thanks to her proficiency in typing. She shared her screen to allow the interviewee to both see the question addressed and the data being collected from him/her, as recommended by Ref. [79] to increase internal validity of semi-structured interviews. Each semi-structured interview lasted 25 min on the average, and data was analyzed using theme-based analysis involving familiarization with data, coding, generating themes, reviewing themes, and naming themes found within a data set [80]. The analysis process involved several stages, including open coding, axial coding, and selective coding, which are recommended in the literature [81]. In order to ensure the validity of the codes and themes, peer debriefing was employed, with two researchers independently coding the data and then comparing and agreeing on the codes and themes [82].

During the analysis process, the interview transcripts were segmented into smaller units and assigned labels (codes), which were constantly compared and contrasted for similarities and differences. The next stage involved axial coding, whereby the codes were classified into categories and linkages were constructed between them. The final stage involved selective coding, which enabled the researchers to elaborate and formulate the story of the case by continuing the axial coding at a higher level of abstraction [83]. This process supported the supported the researchers in constructing meaning and telling a story using the collected data [84].

4. Findings

For ethical considerations, participants are identified using three letters and a number. The letters were the first three letters of the country the participant came from (ex. Egypt is represented by Egy), and the number is what identifies this participant for researchers, when there were more than one participant from the same country. For example, Leb1 indicates an input from one of the participants who were based in Lebanon.

Conceptualizing Wellbeing. All participants, with no exception, attributed wellbeing to mental health, and particularly students' mental health. They suggested that wellbeing at schools entails students who are psychologically healthy, showing no symptoms of depression, sadness, or anxiety.

Table 2
Background characteristics of participants in the study.

Characteristic	Number
Gender	
Male	6
Female	10
Age (Years)	
25–35	11
36–45	5
Above 45	0
Education	
Bachelor Degree (Education)	14
Bachelor Degree (non- Education)	2
Enrolled in a Master Degree in Educational Leadership	16
Teaching Experience (Years)	
3–10	12
More than 10	4
Current Position in School	
Not working	1
Classroom Teacher	8
Subject Coordinator	7

Finally, participants' countries included Bahrain, Egypt, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon (2), Morocco, Oman, Qatar (2), Saudi Arabia, Syria, Tunisia, and the Emirates.

'Wellbeing means that students at school are feeling well and are mentally sound' (Mor).

Moreover, all participants said that they first heard of wellbeing during Covid-19 pandemic. Some of the participants explained that their key sources were mainly social media outlets, where they read short articles about the importance of maintaining student mental health who were experiencing isolation.

'Wellbeing surfaced a lot during the corona virus pandemic. Particularly in 2021, I started seeing a lot about it in social media such as Facebook' (Egy).

Yet, other participants explained that they learned about wellbeing through their schools' professional development offerings, made available to them, during the pandemic. The focus was also on students' wellbeing and the importance of supporting them with the needed skills to cope with the stress they were encountering.

'We had a school webinar on Zoom on wellbeing. The guest speaker provided us with tips and ideas for supporting our students to avoid mental burnout' (Emi).

On the other hand, almost a quarter of the participants suggested that wellbeing was a teacher-matter, believing that teachers were supposed to secure it for their students. Two participants among this category suggested a potential role for subject coordinators and school principals.

'While wellbeing is definitely something teachers are fully responsible for, subject coordinators can help in providing them with the resources that aid them in their goals' (Jor).

Yet the other three quarters of participants thought that wellbeing was a job to be carried out by school psychologists or counselors. Through their lens, psychologists and counselors advocate for mental health needs of all students, by offering instruction that enhances awareness of mental health.

'I think the school counselor should be leading on this and should collaborate with teacher to support school wellbeing' (Emi).

Importance of Student Wellbeing. All participants thought that wellbeing was crucially important in schools at the level of students. They thought that it was necessary to secure the provision of wellbeing for all students as it saved them from mental illness, including depression and lack of interest in daily-life activities.

'Students whose wellbeing is secured are less prone to mental sickness and depression' (Syr).

According to many participants, wellbeing has an impact on students' attainment and progress. In fact, those participants thought that positive wellbeing induces positive emotions, which encourage students to learn more and learn better.

'When student wellbeing is secured, they tend to feel positive about their learning' (Sau).

Moreover, few participants highlighted the power of wellbeing on school relationships. According to these participants, school wellbeing supports students' social wellness. This aids them in securing healthy, nurturing, supportive, and trusting relationships. It assists them in fostering a genuine connection with people surrounding them, thus increasing their sense of belonging to their school community. The end benefit would be again, improved learning and greater learning outcomes.

'I think the power of school wellbeing for students lies in its ability to support them in creating positive relationships with their peers and teachers' (Oma).

Importance of Teacher Wellbeing. Almost all participants expressed that they were surprised to hear the researchers addressing teacher wellbeing. This was because they thought that teachers, through the lens of their school leaders, were never prone to depression and mental illness. In addition, they expressed that school leaders did not consider teachers' wellbeing as a priority.

'Your question comes as a surprise to me because in my school, our school principals deals with us as if we are made of iron and steel and we never wear out. I do not think it is a priority for school principals at all' (Leb 1).

Despite the fact that all participants attributed wellbeing to students only, when asked about their understanding of school wellbeing, all of them suggested at least one importance for teachers' wellbeing. A top answer from participants, considered teacher wellbeing as an element to combat teachers' burnout.

'The wellbeing of teachers is imperative for them not to burn out and hence stay in the career' (Jor).

Moreover, almost half of the participants suggested that teachers' wellbeing could impact positively on student learning outcomes. In their opinion, this is because teachers who feel well tend to be focused on their goals, and set high expectations for their students.

'A teacher feeling well would be satisfied enough to reflect his/her positivity on students, by raising the bar for what they can learn and achieve' (Qat 2).

Few participants suggested that teachers' wellbeing ensures that they would be more apt to cultivating supporting and caring relationships in their classrooms. Through their lens, teachers who feel well, tend to make others feel well.

' If you are feeling well as a teacher, you would be more able to establish rapport with students and this is very positive for both parties' (Oma).

Finally, few of the participants suggested that teachers' wellbeing is integral for their self-efficacy, which they thought was basic for them to handle the stress of day-to-day tasks, and to reach their desired professional career goals.

'When teachers feel OK, they tend to recognize their potentials more and hence feel better and work better and achieve more' (Kuw).

Self-confidence in supporting School Wellbeing as a Future School Leader. Almost all participants in the study expressed a lack of confidence in leading on wellbeing in their future roles as school leaders. However, the majority thought that the guidance and counseling specialist at school could support them in such an endeavor.

'I am not sure I can take over this critical role. Yet, I think the school counselor can help me lead on this effectively' (Tun).

Contrary to the above, only two interviewees among the participants were optimistic and believed they were confident about leading on wellbeing in their schools. In fact, they suggested that, because they were suffering from the lack of the provision of wellbeing in their schools, they believed they were in the best position to secure it.

'I think that I will do well because I know how difficult it is to be in the position where you do not feel well at school' (Syr).

Leadership Preparation Program. The responses of participants, pertaining the degree they were prepared to lead on school wellbeing, were split into two group. The first group (60 %) suggested that they thought they have not been prepared to lead on the role. The second stated that they were somehow prepared. To start with, participants, who thought they were not prepared to lead on wellbeing, explained their answer by suggesting that wellbeing relates to mental health and that the leadership programs they were enrolled in were not meant to address this area.

'I do not think the leadership program I am enrolled in prepared me to carry out this task, because I think it is more of a psychological health issue' (Mor).

On the other hand, participants who stated that they were 'somehow' prepared to lead on school wellbeing, suggested topics and areas that overlapped with those who thought they were not prepared for the task. Both categories suggested that through their course work, they have been exposed to topics that they could build on, in order to secure wellbeing in the future.

At the level of teachers, answers from both categories hinted on the importance of (a) establishing a positive school climate, (b) promoting collaboration and collaborative learning, (c) adopting democratic and non-coercive leadership styles, and (d) securing teacher leadership opportunities for teachers.

'I think I am somehow prepared to lead on wellbeing considering some of the topics I came across in the program such as leadership styles. I know that an authoritarian leadership style tend to impact negatively on teachers' wellbeing. Also, I have learned the importance of teacher leadership which in one way or another support teachers' wellbeing' (Sau).

At the level of students, themes emerging from both categories suggested exposure in the course work to topics covering (a) positive class climates, (b) student engagement, (c) setting high expectations for students, and (d) addressing bullying.

'When it comes to students, I have learned the importance of creating contingency plans to combat bullying. But again, this needs to be sorted out with the help of the school psychologist and counselor' (Bah).

Recommendation for Developing Leadership Preparation Programs. All participants made suggestions for improving the leadership preparation programs they were enrolled in. All participants suggested addressing the topic unequivocally in their course work, either by devoting a course for wellbeing leadership, or by linking topics addressed to concepts of wellbeing.

'I suggest linking the topics we study to the concepts underpinning wellbeing. For example, whilst studying school cultures, it would be great to lean practically, how we as future leaders can materialize it in our strategic plans' (Leb 2).

Moreover, few participants suggested learning about personal wellbeing in their course work. They drew an analogy between distributed leadership and wellbeing leadership. They said that the same way through distributed leadership, school leaders share power with middle leaders, teacher leaders and student leaders; through wellbeing leadership they should share wellbeing with middle leaders, teacher leaders, and student leaders. This is because, through their lens, wellbeing can be cascaded to all members of the school community, only when the school leader enjoys it.

' I believe in social contagion, where organizational leaders model personal behavior. That's why I think our course work should teach us how to secure personal wellbeing in the first place' (Kuw).

Furthermore, a few number of participants suggested allowing cross-disciplinary leadership preparation for school leaders. They suggested offering them courses in other faculties/schools within or outside their institutions, which would allow them to get the rightful knowledge and experiences, pertaining all aspects of school leadership, including wellbeing.

'To be honest, I think that the colleges of education preparation of school leaders is very superficial and artificial. Colleges should allow for learning all about dimensions they would encounter later on in schools, even if that requires them to go outside the college of education into other faculties in the same university or outside it' (Leb 2).

5. Discussion

This study explored the perceptions of 16 pre-service school leaders concerning their forthcoming roles in the context of provisioning school wellbeing. The findings unveiled a somewhat antiquated and confined comprehension of wellbeing among these pre-service leaders, predominantly limited to mental health and psychological aspects, potentially stemming from the intensified attention to wellbeing catalyzed by the pandemic-driven constraints on schools and the education community, as supported by pertinent research [2–4,34,37,75]. It is intriguing to observe that wellbeing was predominantly linked to the absence of negative emotions such as sadness, depression, or disinterest in school, rather than being regarded as a more comprehensive construct synonymous with leading a fulfilling life, which accords with the holistic perspective emphasized by contemporary wellbeing conceptions, encompassing social, emotional, physical, and mental dimensions [28]. Notably, this comprehensive perspective aligns with Ref. [29] influential PERMA model, encompassing positive emotion, engagement, relationships, meaning, and accomplishment. Participants exhibited a subtler grasp of emotions, but a comparatively modest understanding of engagement.

Furthermore, despite the current literature asserting that wellbeing pertains to the entire school ecosystem [29,30,38], participants in this study predominantly restricted their focus to student wellbeing. Paradoxically, when prompted to propose means of securing wellbeing for both teachers and students, they exhibited a more insightful understanding of teachers' wellbeing. This seeming paradox can be attributed to their reliance on concepts assimilated from their coursework, which emphasized the establishment of conducive positive school cultures and climates, and the nurturing of collaborative environments like professional learning communities, aiming to mitigate teacher burnout. Participants also alluded to democratic and shared leadership styles, recognizing these as potential mechanisms for addressing teachers' wellbeing in schools, a stance that concurs with some existing studies [51,53–55,57,58]. However, it's pivotal to acknowledge that while these strategies hold significance, they represent only a fraction of the broader spectrum encompassing teacher wellbeing, which inherently involves mental and physical health, as well as ensuring emotional and physical safety within the school environment, in line with established literature [44,45].

Remarkably, even as pre-service school leaders exhibited a more nuanced comprehension of how to address teacher wellbeing, they appeared more inclined toward their roles as future leaders primarily concerned with students, given its perceived impact on students' motivation to learn, directly affecting their academic achievements and overall progress. Consequently, participants implicitly indicated the importance of cultivating positive emotions that subsequently foster engagement, a viewpoint aligning with the lens of the PERMA model introduced by Ref. [29]. However, it's essential to recognize that none demonstrated a deeper understanding of how to effectively integrate such dimensions into students' school experiences, and interestingly, the majority were unaware of the PERMA model itself and its potential benefits in addressing school wellbeing.

Conversely, albeit to a lesser degree of intensity, school wellbeing was seen as a catalyst for enhancing students' social wellness, facilitating the development of healthy, nurturing, and supportive relationships. This, in turn, contributes to fostering a genuine connection with peers and educators, leading to an augmented sense of belonging within the school community. This resonates harmoniously with the existing body of literature concerning school wellbeing [3,62,63,67].

Interestingly, pre-service school leaders expressed reservations about their confidence in effectively leading wellbeing in their forthcoming as school leaders. Notwithstanding initially attributing the role of ensuring school wellbeing to school psychologists or counselors, participants demonstrated keen interest in identifying improvements that could be incorporated into their enrolled leadership programs to better equip graduates for wellbeing leadership. They advocated for a curriculum component that they coined as 'Wellbeing Leadership,' denoting the acquisition of knowledge and skills crucial for the proper provision of whole-school wellbeing. Although the term 'Wellbeing Leadership' hasn't been prominently noted within the existing literature, a handful of studies have indeed touched upon the role of school leaders in securing the provision of school wellbeing [76,85,86].

Furthermore, the study posits that the starting point for pre-service school leaders should be a personal wellbeing focus as potential future leaders, integrated into school leadership preparation programs. This suggestion resonates harmoniously with pertinent literature, notably Ref. [73] and Ref. [87]. This premise underlines the notion that only by mastering personal wellbeing can pre-service leaders effectively extend their support to others, mirroring the way they acquire leadership knowledge to disseminate it across their educational communities. The acquisition of wellbeing leadership skills and knowledge, akin to the knowledge in leadership principles, is deemed essential for the seamless propagation of wellbeing throughout the entire school, presenting a novel insight that, to the best of our knowledge, remains largely unexplored within the reviewed literature.

Finally, the findings of this study underscore the potential benefits of instituting a cross-disciplinary leadership preparation approach for aspiring school leaders. Such an approach would enable these pre-service leaders to broaden their horizons by enrolling in courses across various faculties or schools, both within and outside their institutions. This strategy is poised to provide pre-service school leaders with a diverse skill set and a comprehensive repertoire of competencies, spanning all facets of school leadership, and inclusive of wellbeing considerations. This approach encourages a multidisciplinary approach to leadership, affording aspiring leaders the knowledge and skill foundation required for the holistic development and wellbeing of the educational community.

6. Conclusion

This study sheds light on the critical role of higher education in the development of school leaders capable of fostering and maintaining school-wide wellbeing. Our findings indicate that current 'school leadership preparation programs' are falling short in adequately equipping future school leaders to ensure comprehensive wellbeing within their future roles. Pre-service school leaders demonstrated a limited and non-holistic understanding of the school wellbeing concept, often associating it solely with mental health, thereby attributing the role of ensuring wellbeing to school psychologists or counselors primarily. This limited perspective ignores the

broader scope of wellbeing, which encompasses social, emotional, psychological, and physical dimensions, all of which significantly impact student learning outcomes.

Interestingly, despite this narrow view of wellbeing, pre-service school leaders did display a broader understanding of how to address certain aspects of wellbeing, particularly within the teacher community. They recognized the importance of creating positive school cultures and climates, as well as fostering collaboration among teachers through the establishment of professional learning communities, effectively shielding educators from burnout. However, it's notable that these insights stemmed from the general leadership concepts they acquired during their coursework, rather than being explicitly emphasized within their leadership preparation programs.

In conclusion, the study underscores the need for a fundamental reevaluation and revision of pre-service leadership preparation programs to incorporate a strong emphasis on wellbeing leadership. To ensure wellbeing thrives in schools, it is imperative that these programs provide future school leaders with a comprehensive understanding of wellbeing, covering not only mental health but also the broader spectrum of factors that contribute to a thriving school environment, encompassing both students and teachers. Integrating wellbeing leadership into higher education curricula for aspiring school leaders can better equip them to create nurturing, supportive, and successful school communities that prioritize the holistic wellbeing of all stakeholders. Higher education can help leverage school wellbeing by incorporating wellbeing-focused coursework into leadership programs, providing practical training on creating positive school cultures, emphasizing teacher wellbeing, and fostering partnerships with schools to implement evidence-based wellbeing initiatives.

7. Limitations

This study was conducted with a relatively small sample size of 16 pre-service school leaders, which may restrict the generalizability of the findings. Furthermore, the research relied exclusively on self-reported perceptions from participants, potentially introducing a subjective bias to the results.

Informed consent

All participants in this study were informed of the purpose of the study and how data will be used. They were assured that their identities would remain anonymous across the study.

Ethical clearance

This study gained the ethical clearance from the IRB of Qatar University QU-IRB 1643-E/21.

Data availability

The authors do not have permission to share data.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Norma Ghamrawi: Formal analysis, Methodology, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. **Hessa Al-Thani:** Conceptualization, Investigation, Project administration, Resources, Writing – review & editing.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data to this article can be found online at https://doi.org/10.1016/j.heliyon.2023.e21706.

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