

# “I love this stuff!”: a Canadian case study of mentor–coach well-being

Mentor–coach  
well-being

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – The purpose of this paper is to report on a qualitative case study that examined the potential benefits, challenges and implications of the mentor–coach (MC) role as a supportive structure for experienced teachers’ well-being and sense of flourishing in schools.

**Design/methodology/approach** – The qualitative case study used data collected from surveys, interviews, focus groups and documentation. Data were coded and abductively analyzed using the “framework approach” with and against Seligman’s well-being PERMA framework. In order to include an alternative stakeholder perspective, data from a focus group with the district’s teacher union executive are also included.

**Findings** – Using the constituting elements of Seligman’s well-being (PERMA) framework, experienced teachers reported positive emotion, engagement, positive relationships, meaning and accomplishment from their MC experience. However, the MC role is not a panacea for educator well-being. Rather, the quality and effectiveness of the mentoring and coaching relationship is a determining factor and, if left unattended, negative experiences could contribute to their stress and increased workload.

**Research limitations/implications** – The data used in this study were based on a limited number of survey respondents (25/42) and the self-selection of the interview ( $n = 7$ ) and focus group participants ( $n = 6$ ). The research findings may lack generalizability and be positively skewed.

**Originality/value** – This study contributes to the current lack of empirical research on the MC experience and considers some of the wider contextual factors that impact effective mentoring and coaching programs for educators.

**Keywords** Well-being, Mentoring, Coaching, Induction programmes, Mentor–coach, Professional learning and development

**Paper type** Research paper

## Introduction

Schools need to be healthy, safe, supportive and productive sites where every child can flourish academically, socially and emotionally. With academic learning and well-being inextricably linked, international educational systems are focusing on the promotion of student well-being (Cherkowski and Walker, 2016; OECD, 2017; Seligman, 2011). Relatedly, teacher well-being has also been the subject of increased enquiry in educational discourse and research agendas (see Cherkowski and Walker, 2018; Hobson and Maxwell, 2016; Kidger *et al.*, 2016; McCallum and Price, 2010; Ott *et al.*, 2017). Considering the international consensus within research that teachers are the most important in-school factor contributing to student success, satisfaction and achievement (Danielson, 2011; Hattie, 2012; Kutsyuruba *et al.*, 2016; Sanders and Rivers, 1996; Strong, 2011), it is no surprise that there is interest in how the well-being of teachers influences the quality of their work (Roffey, 2012). As stated by Parsons (2018), “In short, students thrive when teachers thrive” (p. 231).

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What does well-being mean, and what are some of the conditions, forces and influencing factors that support educators' well-being in schools? Can taking on a mentoring and coaching role increase teachers' well-being? These are some of the questions that prompted a qualitative case study to examine the lived experiences of mentor-coaches (MCs) in a small Canadian school district. Data collected from surveys, interviews, focus groups and documentation were abductively analyzed (Tavory and Timmermans, 2014) with and against Seligman's (2011) PERMA[1] well-being framework to explore the potential benefits, challenges and limitations of the MC role as a supportive structure to cultivate experienced teachers' well-being. Whereas most research literature examines the impact of mentoring and coaching on new teachers, this study examined the impact on the MC in relation to well-being and aimed to contribute to a growing research base that responds to the question: "What's in it for the mentor?" (McCorkel *et al.*, 1998, p. 93; Holland, 2018, p. 110). In this study, most participants reported that being an MC was a meaningful experience and positively contributed to their sense of well-being. However, for others, negative mentoring and coaching relationships were reported to be emotional and added to their workload and stress level. Thus, although the MC role was found to offer powerful benefits to experienced teachers, it is not a panacea for teacher well-being.

### **The context of the study**

#### *The Western Quebec School Board*

The "case" (Yin, 2014) of this study was an English language school district in the Canadian province of Quebec. Whereas geographically the Western Quebec School Board (WQSB) is comparable in size to the country of Ireland, its population is small and comprised of 7,298 students, 450 teaching staff, 22 principals and 8 vice-principals (WQSB, 2018a). Historically, the large distance and varying contexts of its 25 schools have made attracting and retaining teachers challenging, especially in its northern and rural schools and in specialized subject areas of French and Special Education. To date, almost 25 percent of the teaching staff (110/450) are within their first two years in the WQSB. Researchers have shown that the constant hiring and training of teachers make building collaborative cultures challenging and is detrimental to student learning (Guarino *et al.*, 2006; Hargreaves and Fullan, 2012; Ingersoll, 2001; Karsenti and Collin, 2013; Kutsyuruba and Walker, 2017; OECD, 2005). In an effort to better support all teachers new to the WQSB, as well as ensure effective teaching and learning across its schools, a two-year mandatory Teacher Induction Program (TIP) initiative was implemented in 2009.

#### *Teacher Induction Program*

With education a territorial and provincial responsibility in Canada, the Ministère de l'Éducation et Enseignement supérieur (MEES) establishes the aims and directives for the Quebec education system. It also governs, licences and regulates the teaching profession. However, since the province is anchored in a decentralized model, individual school boards and schools are responsible for the hiring, evaluation and professional learning (PL) and development of their teachers. As such, although the MEES provides guidance around teacher mentoring and induction (Kutsyuruba *et al.*, 2013; MELS, 2003), the TIP was developed and implemented by a volunteer committee comprised of district administrators, consultants and teachers. The TIP has three aims: first, to retain effective teachers new to the district (called teaching fellows), second, to provide leadership and professional growth opportunities for experienced teachers as MCs[2], and third, to improve the teaching and learning across all district schools (Hollweck, 2017). The TIP is most closely aligned with H.K. Wong's (2004) definition that induction is "a process – a comprehensive, coherent, and sustained professional development process – that is organized by a school district to train, support, and retain new teachers and seamlessly progresses them into a lifelong learning

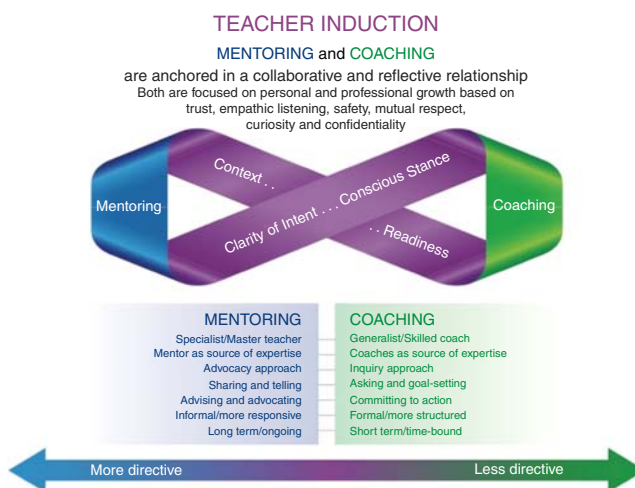
program” (p. 42). Through its three pillars – PL, a mentoring and coaching fellowship (MCF) and teacher evaluation – the TIP aims to balance quality assurance with support and professional growth. However, as Hollweck (2017, 2018), Hollweck *et al.* (2019) has argued elsewhere, tensions exist. This paper focuses on the MCF pillar and examines the experience of MCs through Seligman’s (2011) PERMA well-being framework.

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### *Mentoring and coaching fellowship*

Researchers have shown that effective mentoring and coaching supports the PL and development of new teachers (Ingersoll, 2012; Matsko, 2010; Stanulis and Floden, 2009; Villar *et al.*, 2003; Wong, 2002, 2004). In the WQSB, all TFs in their first year of the TIP, regardless of previous teaching experience, are paired with an administrator-selected MC. As outlined in the “TIP Handbook” (WQSB, 2018b), MCs are ideally experienced “master” teachers from the same school, grade and subject area as the TF. However, depending on the school context and the number of TFs, distance MCs are sometimes engaged, and teaching expertise and experience vary. Researchers have argued that the mentoring and/or coaching role can also offer powerful benefits to veteran teachers, such as professional renewal, leadership opportunities and PL and development (Bullough, 2012; Campbell *et al.*, 2017; Carver and Feiman-Nemser, 2009; Feiman-Nemser, 2012; Ganser, 2006; Hobson *et al.*, 2009; Moir and Bloom, 2003; Van Nieuwerburgh, 2012). This study examined these benefits in relation to teacher well-being.

The terms mentoring and coaching are often ill defined, conflated or even used interchangeably in the research and practice literature. In the WQSB, mentoring and coaching are conceptualized as two distinct, yet complementary, approaches anchored in a collaborative and reflective relationship (Campbell and van Nieuwerburgh, 2018; CUREE, 2005; Fletcher and Mullen, 2012; Knight, 2007; Moir and Bloom, 2003; Sharpe and Nishimura, 2017). Whereas mentoring is understood as more of an advocacy approach that is informal, directive and long term, coaching on the other hand is understood as an inquiry approach that is more formal, facilitative and short term (Hollweck, 2017). As shown in Figure 1, the stances are interconnected and positioned along a continuum within the WQSB’s TIP.



Sources: Hollweck (2017) and WQSB (2018b)

**Figure 1.**  
Mentoring and coaching in the TIP

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The mentoring and coaching literature is clear that good teachers are not always effective mentors or coaches, and that training and support is essential (Bullough, 2012; Campbell and van Nieuwerburgh, 2018; Gareis and Grant, 2014; Schulle, 2008; Timperley, 2001; Wang *et al.*, 2008; Wexler, 2019). In the district, PL activities are offered by TIP consultants and external providers and are designed to support MCs in improving their coaching skills (Van Nieuwerburgh, 2012). Through these activities and experience, study participants reported enhanced understanding of when and how to use either a mentoring or a coaching stance in response to the needs of their TF.

In the MCF, learning is understood as social and situated (Lave and Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998, 2015). As a community of practice (Wenger, 1998), the MCF has a defined shared domain of interest, whereby the MC and TF work together as a fellowship or learning community to develop a shared practice by focusing on four key elements: the practice of teaching, navigating school and district culture, what it means to be a teacher in the WQSB and the formation of a teaching identity. Outlined in the “TIP Handbook,” the TF engages in regular mentoring and coaching sessions with their MC, reciprocal formal and informal classroom observations, as well as ongoing and documented goal setting and reflection in a “reflective record.” The MCF also provides each MCF pair with two district-funded “fellowship days” that can be used to observe teachers in different classes and/or schools. Indubitably, the district’s high-stakes (job or no job) evaluation policies frame the MCF and inform what teaching and learning looks like in the district (Hollweck *et al.*, 2019). However, since schools and school districts are “landscapes” of interconnected communities of practice (Wenger-Trayner and Wenger-Trayner, 2015), positive and effective mentoring and coaching relationships have the potential to support, nurture and promote well-being within and across schools and the district (Daly and Stoll, 2018). An overview of the scholarly and theoretical literature related to well-being follows.

### **Literature review**

#### *Stress, burn-out and toxic schools*

Students need passionate, competent and committed educators. Yet, teachers and administrators are the professionals reporting the highest levels of negative emotion, job stress and burn-out across many countries (McCallum *et al.*, n.d.; Sutchter *et al.*, 2016). Since teacher stress and burn-out have been shown to decrease teacher effectiveness (Cook *et al.*, 2017), it is important to consider the difference between healthy stress and toxic stress. Whereas healthy stress has been shown to help challenge, motivate and develop people, toxic stress refers to the type of stress that occurs when demands consistently outpace one’s ability to cope (Aguilar, 2018). When left to fester, this type of stress can not only lead to individual burn-out but can also infect the culture of the learning environment and even contribute to the creation of “toxic schools” (Woodley, 2018).

Toxic stress also differs from burn-out, which refers to a distinct condition of exhaustion that results from prolonged response to chronic emotional and interpersonal stressors on the job. In the research, toxic stress is characterized as physical and emotional fatigue, apathy, disengagement, frustration, anger, depression and dysfunction (Curry and O’Brien, 2012; Maslach *et al.*, 2001; Maslach and Schaufeli, 2017). According to Aguilar (2018), “Toxic stress first manifests as decreased productivity, and escalates to more serious symptoms such as anxiety, dissociation, frustration, and eventually, burn-out” (p. 4). There are three burn-out dimensions used in the Maslach Burn-out Index: emotional exhaustion, depersonalization and reduced personal accomplishment. Maslach and Leiter (1997) defined burn-out as the “index of the dislocation between what people are and what they have to do. It represents an erosion in values, dignity, spirit, and will” (p. 17). Not surprising, research shows that educator stress and burn-out factor heavily in teacher turnover rates (Curry and O’Brien, 2012; Howard and Johnson, 2004).

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There are many multifaceted factors contributing to toxic stress and burn-out that can differ based on a teacher's personality, experience and even career stage. Whereas researchers have linked burn-out to job attrition in early career teachers, job withdrawal in experienced teachers manifests more as frequent absences, loss of motivation and engagement or reduced self-confidence and self-esteem (Aguilar, 2018; Howard and Johnson, 2004). Toxic stress and burn-out have also been found to be more prevalent in teachers who have dysfunctional relationships with colleagues and/or administrators, and who work in urban areas, secondary contexts and hard-to-staff areas such as special education, mathematics, science and foreign languages (Aguilar, 2018; Carver-Thomas and Darling-Hammond, 2017; Howard and Johnson, 2004). Contributing factors are work intensification, punitive accountability systems, frequency of disruptive student behavior, issues with parents, low level of agency in policy-making procedures and even "compassion fatigue" (Ott *et al.*, 2017) described as the feeling that teachers are unable to support the well-being of students (Day *et al.*, 2007; Hargreaves, 2003; Kane and Francis, 2013; Koenig *et al.*, 2018). With constant change and contradictory, under-resourced and imposed reforms also frequently linked to educator stress and burn-out, caution must be taken in the discussion of yet another teacher well-being initiative, such as mentoring, coaching or teacher induction.

### *Well-being and flourishing*

Well-being and flourishing literature have re-emerged as strength-based alternatives to teacher stress and burn-out. The majority of the derivatively labeled "happiness" literature is found in the field of positive psychology (Hone *et al.*, 2014). For founder Martin Seligman, positive psychology is described on his website as:

[...] the scientific study of the strengths that enable individuals to thrive. The field is founded on the belief that people want to lead meaningful and fulfilling lives, to cultivate what is best within themselves, and to enhance their experiences of love, work, and play. (Positive Psychology Centre, 2019)

Positive psychology is about the concept of well-being. In his book *Flourish*, Seligman (2011) defined well-being as a multidimensional construct that bridges the hedonic aspect of feeling good (positive emotion) with the eudaimonic aspects of living well (relationships, purpose, mastery, growth and autonomy). Five contributing well-being elements together form the acronym PERMA: positive emotion, engagement, (positive) relationships, meaning and accomplishment. Each element has three properties:

- (1) it contributes to well-being;
- (2) many people pursue it for its own sake, not merely to get any of the other elements; and
- (3) it is defined and measured independently of the other elements (exclusivity) (Seligman, 2011, p. 16).

The combination of these five elements ultimately contributes to human flourishing (Goodman *et al.*, 2018). Flourishing is defined by the World Health Organization (WHO, 2014) as a state in which every individual can realize his or her own potential, cope with the normal stresses of life, work productively and fruitfully and contribute to his or her own community. In this research study, well-being is considered a key component of human flourishing, but the terms are not synonymous.

More than mere "happiology," Kristjánsson (2017) argued that the re-emergence of flourishing theories harkens back to the Aristotelian ideal of the good human life (eudaimonia), and that the "best theory" is pluralistic – both objective and subjective – with different pathways leading to human happiness. However, one of the major challenges for educational researchers is that there are a number of competing theories and visions for

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well-being and flourishing in the scholarly literature. Additionally, there is no stable and uncontested definition or measure for well-being (Cherkowski and Walker, 2016; McCallum *et al.*, n.d.; Wong, 2011b; Wong and Roy, 2017). Best summed up by Kristjánsson (2017), “by broaching the topic of human well-being, one inevitably enters into a welter of controversy” (p. 28). Huppert *et al.* (2005) defined well-being in broad terms as a positive and sustainable state that allows individuals, groups or nations to thrive and flourish. In the field of education, researchers have linked teacher well-being to the nature of their work (Nias, 1981; Shirley *et al.*, in press). Specifically, teachers’ work should buoy their sense of purpose (Pink, 2011), increase competence and mastery (Pink, 2011; Ryan and Deci, 2000), be anchored in “collaborative professionalism” based on solidarity and solidity (Hargreaves and O’Connor, 2018a, b), support a sense of “collective efficacy” (Donohoo, 2017; Donohoo *et al.*, 2018) and lead to a sense of accomplishment (Pink, 2011). In summary, teachers flourish when they are working as a collective doing meaningful work that is achievable and makes a difference in the lives of students.

### *Problematizing well-being and flourishing*

Although a detailed critique is beyond the scope of this paper, it is important to note that Seligman’s (2011) well-being theory and positive psychology in general are not without their critics. According to Wong and Roy (2017), “Seligman’s PERMA theory of well-being is, strictly speaking, not a formal theory, but rather a listing of phenomena that have been shown to be related to well-being” (p. 147). Since other elements could easily be added to this list, such as Duckworth’s (2016) grit and H.G. Koenig’s (2011) spirituality, PERMA should not be viewed as an exhaustive list of basic conditions or underlying mechanisms of well-being. In referencing his own positive psychology 2.0 “deep and wide” theory, P.T.P Wong (2011a) made the case for a more balanced and inclusive approach in positive psychology, which integrates the complex interaction between both negative and positive phenomena in order to optimize positive outcomes across situations and cultures.

Christopher and Hickenbottom (2008), Wright (2013) and Warren and Donaldson (2017) are also critics of Seligman’s (2011) seemingly culture-transcendent and universal concept of human well-being. They argued that there are significant cultural differences in the definition of well-being and criticized positive psychology researchers like Seligman for excluding non-hegemonic cultural contexts in the discussion of well-being. Crivello *et al.* (2009) argued that well-being must be considered “a socially contingent, culturally-anchored construct that changes over time, both in terms of individual life course changes as well as changes in socio-cultural context” (p. 53). Also, Margolis *et al.* (2014) cautioned that it is unrealistic and unsustainable to place the sole responsibility for teacher well-being on the teachers themselves. As Berryhill *et al.* (2009) stated, “making changes in individuals when the system is part of the problem leaves basic structures intact and is unlikely to affect the problem [...] Therefore, policymakers should consider making changes for teachers rather than in teachers” (p. 9). Finally, concern was also levied by Wright (2013) against the corporate agenda that links well-being to increased productivity and performance in the workplace.

Ultimately, well-being and flourishing remain complex and contentious issues (Forgeard *et al.*, 2011; Goodman *et al.*, 2018; OECD, 2013, 2015; Tomyne *et al.*, 2013). Additionally, Seligman’s PERMA framework is only one of many models that researchers have used to measure well-being (see Diener, 1984; Huppert and So, 2013; Keyes, 2002; Deci and Ryan, 2008; Ryff and Singer, 1998). However, Seligman (2018) argued that “PERMA is a good start on the complex work-in-progress that will result in an adequate theory of the elements of well-being” (p. 335). Recent empirical work comparing PERMA to other models (see Goodman *et al.*, 2018; Hone *et al.*, 2014) offer researchers new ways to measure teacher well-being and conceptualize what it means for educators to flourish in schools. In this

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study, Seligman's holistic PERMA framework was used because it remains, in spite of the criticisms and critics, the most widely adopted well-being measure in the Canadian educational literature (see Cherkowski and Walker, 2018; Shirley *et al.*, in press) and as such was found to be a useful model to examine the relationship between the MC role and experienced teachers' well-being in a Canadian school district.

### Methodology

This study is one part of the researcher's larger qualitative doctoral project that examined the lived experience of MCs working in the WQSB. Its guiding research question was:

*RQ1.* In what ways (if any) did the well-being of experienced teachers increase as a result of being an MC?

The researcher identifies as a pragmatic social-constructivist and is interested in the processes of interaction between individuals in specific contexts, especially schools. Mentoring and coaching are conceptualized as social phenomena that require "in-depth" exploration. As such, Yin's (2014) case study design was selected as a strategy of inquiry because it "comprises an all-encompassing method – covering logic of design, data collection techniques, and specific approaches to data analysis" (p. 17).

Rigor and transparency in the research process are essential in the production of ethical and credible interpretivist research (Court and Abbas, 2013; Gale *et al.*, 2013; Savvides *et al.*, 2014; Spencer *et al.*, 2003). In this study, the researcher was positioned as a "pracademic" (Posner, 2009; Runkle, 2014; Susskind, 2013; Volpe and Chandler, 2001; Walker, 2010) – a "boundary spanner" (Katz and Earl, 2010, p. 48) who embodies the dual role of academic and practitioner. This unique positionality raised methodological issues and challenges. As an "insider" and co-coordinator of the TIP in the WQSB, the researcher was afforded greater access to the program's history, documentation, key stakeholders and ongoing practice, and easily recruited volunteer participants during the data collection process. However, there were ongoing concerns whether participants would be honest and critical of the TIP. Critical perspectives were sought and data from a focus group with three members of the district's union executive (the Western Quebec Teachers' Association (WQTA)) were included. Transcripts and interpretations were member-checked to increase credibility.

### *Data collection and participants*

Using Yin's (2014) case study protocol, data were collected using multiple methods: surveys, semi-structured interviews, focus groups and TIP documentation. An anonymous online survey was completed in June 2016 by 25 of the 42 MCs. Participants' experience as MCs ranged from one to eight years. From the survey respondents, six volunteers participated in a follow-up focus group held at the end of June 2016. Concurrently, data were collected from two semi-structured interviews with another seven different MCs in January 2016 and June 2016, respectively.

### *Data analysis*

Data were coded and abductively analyzed (Tavory and Timmermans, 2014) using the "framework method" (Ritchie and Spencer, 1994). This rigorous and transparent analytical matrix or data management tool enabled the researcher to move back and forth across as well as within individual participant "cases" until coherent codes and categories emerged (Gale *et al.*, 2013; Ritchie and Lewis, 2003). There were nine distinct methodological stages in this study: transcription of the interviews and focus groups, familiarization with the data from all sources, initiation of open coding from the raw data in the interview and focus group transcripts (Boyatzis, 1998; Saldaña, 2015), categorization of initial codes by

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individual MC “case” in order to retain the emerging unique narratives, application of Yin’s (2014) “pattern-matching analytic technique,” whereby the pattern of similarly coded and categorized data were abductively analyzed with and against *a priori* themes from Seligman’s (2011) PERMA well-being framework, exploration and interpretation of the relationship and/or causality between the empirical categories and the *a priori* themes to surface unexpected insights and emerging tensions, summarization of the data by category and theme with the inclusion of interesting or illustrative quotations by MC “case,” member-checking the unique codes, categories and pertinent quotations with the participants, and finally, reporting on the study’s findings in relation to the guiding research question.

### Findings and discussion

Overall, the findings indicated that being an MC in the WQSB provided important benefits for experienced teachers and supported their well-being. Empirical data were analyzed with and against Seligman’s (2011) PERMA well-being framework to highlight the ways participants reported positive emotion, engagement, relationship, meaning and accomplishment. However, tensions also emerged in the study around the influence of clarity transparency and challenging MCF relationships.

#### *Positive emotion*

The hedonic “positive emotion” element is a cornerstone of Seligman’s (2011) well-being theory (p. 16). It is a subjective variable and best measured through self-report. All questionnaire respondents agreed with the statement “I found the mentor–coach experience enjoyable this year,” with 60 percent strongly agreeing. All interview and focus group participants also described the MC experience as “enjoyable,” “rewarding,” “fun,” “enriching” and “fulfilling,” even if they had also reported having a more challenging MCF experience. For example, Winnie[3] described her year as having “ups and downs like a rollercoaster,” but ended her interview describing the MC role as “not even a job, it is fun. I love this stuff!” Similarly, Valerie reported experiencing relationship challenges with her TF but stated, “The overall experience, I love it. I just love it [...] It has been very rewarding, and I find that I am learning a lot from the varied experiences – positive and negative.”

Positive emotion emerged in this study as related to high job satisfaction, passion, excitement and pride. For Tim, enjoyment was linked to personal and professional growth: “Getting better is exciting and you get pride in your profession. I am good at what I do because I work at it.” Experienced MCs also reported sustained excitement and job satisfaction. As stated by Valerie, “I feel like I am getting more out of the program than I am actually giving.” Reflecting on her eight years in the role, Laurie noted, “I think it has been one of the greatest highlights of my career.” Although Seligman (2011) argued that the positive emotion variable is purely a subjective measure, the researcher noted a palpable sense of positive energy, passion and vibrancy emerging from participants in this study. This positive energy was also addressed in the MC focus group:

If you look at this room, you are all so positive and glowing with enthusiasm and happy [...] you couldn’t have picked a better group to volunteer! But really you can hear the enthusiasm around the room and the ownership of this program and personal ownership and you think, wow!

#### *Engagement*

According to Seligman, “engagement” is also a subjective well-being element best measured through self-reporting. It is most often reported in a retrospective state since “thought and feeling are usually absent during the flow state” (p. 17). Engagement was described by Bakker *et al.* (2008) as a positive, fulfilling, work-related state of mind that is characterized



by workers who are full of energy (vigor), strongly involved in their work (dedication) and often fully concentrated and happily engrossed in their work activities (absorption). All questionnaire respondents agreed to the statement that the MC role made them a more reflective and effective practitioner. Engagement was also reported by interview and focus group participants, regardless of whether their MCF experience was positive or negative. For example, Cathy reflected that despite a difficult relationship with her TF:

[...] it keeps you fresh and challenged [...] For me it was a learning experience and now I will know what I will do different next time because it is not like you can get more PD [professional development] on how to get along with someone you don't get along with.

MC engagement was understood in this study to derive from ongoing and job-embedded PL, intrinsic motivation and a focus on reflexivity. In total, 76 percent of questionnaire respondents strongly agreed that being an MC promoted their professional growth. They described in their comments that the role made them “more accountable to myself,” “keeps me on my toes,” “keeps us from getting stagnant in my growth” and “forces me to practice what I preach and not get comfortable and slip!” When asked what value being an MC brought to them, one participant noted:

It has tremendous value. I have challenged myself in ways that I have never been challenged before. I have also learned a lot about myself. It's almost like a reminder to yourself to reflect and grow constantly. It also keeps me on my toes and keeps me accountable. I like that I have to better myself and challenge myself constantly. (Questionnaire)

This view was echoed by interview and focus group participants. For example, Winnie remarked, “I like that I am able to improve as well and that it is not just focused on my teaching fellow growing, but it is focused on me as well.” For many participants, learning to be an effective MC was most engaging. For Laurie, although mentoring was “a more natural stance,” she stated:

You learn how to be a better and better coach, right? I think back to my first teaching fellow and I know that I was a great mentor for her, but I probably didn't push maybe as much as I do now. Now I push – when I push them it is because I believe in them and I believe in the program.

In this study, participants reported that it took them around three years to be effective as both a mentor and a coach. However, participants also reported that since every TF and MCF situation was different, there were always new opportunities to learn and improve as an MC. This is best summed up by Valerie who was working with a struggling TF as an experienced MC: “It was quite a few new learning opportunities for me because it was out of my comfort. This is not what I was anticipating as a seasoned teacher and mentor-coach.” Sustained positive engagement through learning to coach is well documented in the research literature. As stated by Lofthouse (2019):

[Coaches] go on to experience coaching as itself a formative process, one through which they learn more about themselves, the educational contexts, dilemmas and opportunities and of their own skills and capacity for coaching. Coaching in education is not a static practice with a pre-determined and acquired skills set, but one which seems to evolve over time. (p. 40)

### *Positive relationships*

Positive relationships and the care and concern for others is a critical element in well-being (Seligman, 2011, 2018). Deci and Ryan (2008) position “relatedness” in their self-determination theory as one of the basic human needs. In this study, enduring PL relationships and friendships also emerged as one of the most valuable components of the MCF. All MC questionnaire respondents reported positive relationships with their TF. For one respondent,

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“The most valuable aspect [of the MCF] is the relationship that is built and hopefully lasts as a reciprocal professional support.” The benefit of enduring relationships was also highlighted in the MC focus group: “As a past coach, someone who has been around for a long time, I have people that I have coached and we are still really good friends and we share things back and forth.”

Teachers flourish when they build empowering relationships that focus on PL and collaborative work (Parsons, 2018). Effective teacher collaboration can build a sense of collective efficacy or a shared belief that working together can improve student learning and achievement (Donohoo, 2017; Hibbert *et al.*, 2018). In this study, positive relationships were often described by MCs when they had managed to find an effective balance between support and challenge. In describing her relationship with her TF, Laurie noted:

There were some tears but I think that I had established a really caring relationship with her so I could do that and I had to do that, because I thought – wait a minute [...] I have grown into being able to do that over the years. To trust that they know that it is coming from a place of caring and affection and respect for them and for their students – those little people are counting on you.

Hence, the MC role was not only about being an advocate, cheerleader and friend to the TF, but also hinged on the MC’s ability to set high expectations and encourage professional growth. For Hargreaves and O’Connor (2018a, b), this type of relationship is an example of collaborative professionalism described as “deep and sometimes demanding **dialogue**, candid but constructive **feedback**, and continuous collaborative **inquiry**” (p. 3, emphasis in original).

From this study, positive MCF relationships hinged on trust, comfort and safety (Bryk and Schneider, 2002; Tschannen-Moran, 2014; Tschannen-Moran and Hoy, 2000). Vulnerability also emerged as a key ingredient, although it was not automatic. As defined by Brown (2015), vulnerability “is about sharing our feelings and our experiences with people who have earned the right to hear them. Being vulnerable and open is mutual and an integral part of the trust-building process” (p. 45). Alice described the role of vulnerability in the MCF: “It is the job of the mentor–coach to really give their teaching fellow the confidence to show their fallibility.” However, she also recognized the inherent challenge: “Maybe it is too difficult to let yourself be that vulnerable. [...] You can say it but to actually do it, it is asking a lot of people [...] especially when you are trying to get a job.” Laurie argued that the vulnerability of TFs should not be taken lightly: “If they have to grow then they have to bare it all so I feel really grateful that I have been that trusted person for so many of them.” Although many MCs in this study did experience positive relationships, for those who struggled it was often because trust or vulnerability was lacking. Best summed up by Cathy, “If you are a coach and you don’t have that connection and they are afraid of you or afraid of making a mistake then there is a disconnect in that.” Ultimately, positive MCF relationships are more than friendships. Rather, they are safe, supportive and trusting professional relationships anchored in mutual respect and reciprocal learning, which facilitate open and honest professional dialogue about teaching and learning.

### *Meaning*

Seligman (2011) defined his fourth well-being element “meaning” as “belonging to and serving something that you believe is bigger than the self” (p. 17). Service matters to teachers (Parsons *et al.*, 2006; Stevenson, 2019). In this study, participants noted that the opportunity to make “a contribution to my school community and colleagues” (Questionnaire) was the most rewarding aspect of being an MC. Best summed up by Laurie, being an MC was “a really honoured role and it helps me feel like I am doing something greater than just working within my own little classroom.” For many participants, the role offered them a chance to give back

for all the support they had received when they started as new teachers. For others like Valerie, it enabled her “to pass along best practices that helps to build sustainability within the school and ultimately within the board.” Improving the quality of teaching in their school was noted by many participants: “We are not sitting behind a desk. It is high stakes. We are interacting and impacting how many humans in our career?” (MC Focus Group). As such, being an MC is a meaningful role because it gives experienced teachers an opportunity to influence the teaching practice in their schools. Described by Cathy:

Ideally all students get attention and support but when I go into another class and I see the way some of these students are treated, it breaks my heart [...] we are losing and failing those students. [...] so getting [my TF] to recognize that is really important.

For Laurie, being an MC also facilitated the opportunity to spread her educational philosophy and teaching approach with her TF:

We are educators and tasked with teaching the curriculum. As critical educators, we have to question it too [...] It is an activist pedagogy, but I think that helps new teachers understand that questioning is part of being a critical thinking educator which I think we all have to be.

### *Accomplishment*

The final well-being element in Seligman’s (2011) PERMA framework is described as a sense of “accomplishment” or achievement. In this study, accomplishment emerged for MCs in three ways: through the success of their TF, their competence as an effective MC and their influence on the school culture. For union executives, tying the MCF to successful summative evaluations was problematic: “The mentors do feel like they are having an impact on the new teachers. Whether or not that is measurable is another story. But at least in their minds they feel as though they are getting them through the TIP. That’s their goal” (WQTA Focus Group). For some study participants, the MCF impact was obvious and measurable. For example, Winnie noted:

My teaching fellow’s classroom management has improved drastically. We are not having any more issues with violence in the classroom so that is really good. The kids in the class are happy in the end and they are not being sent to the office and there aren’t fights breaking out in the class; nobody is getting stabbed. So that’s nice.

Accomplishment for Winnie was also related to the fact that her TF no longer wanted to quit teaching and had begun to recognize some of her strengths: “I guess I can really see the differences between who she is now and who she started out as and it is nice to think or hope that I had an influence on that.” The influence of the MC on a TF’s practice emerged often as a source of accomplishment. As stated by Valerie, “I look at the staff who have gone through the program and I think wow they are exceptional, truly exceptional. Within this program, that is what we breed – isn’t that amazing?” The influence of the MCF on a teaching staff was best summed up by Laurie:

The most significant impact for our school community has been the more teachers we have here who have gone through the program, the better the quality of teaching is [...] Talk about the ripple effect. When you see they have been supported and have had best practices modelled and then the whole school starts to change, right? When you know these kids are being taught well and treated well [...] it is kind of neat – it is really humbling in a way.

### *Tensions emerging from the study*

Whereas being an MC contributed to the well-being of all participants in this study, caution must be taken in generalizing this to all MCs across the WQSB, especially considering the

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survey's 60 percent survey response rate and the voluntary participation of MCs in the focus group and interviews. Although the district leaders attributed the low participation to "end of year busyness" (TIP Team Focus Group), the union executives revealed that "we have [MCs] in our board who feel that they can't honestly say that I am done with this program. They feel like there will be ramifications from administration or from the board." Thus, caution must be taken that the MC role does not become a panacea for educator well-being in the WQSB. Best summed up in the union focus group, "If you get the right person and pairing and it works – then it is good." Challenging relationships, unsuccessful TFs and the TF's lack of engagement in the MCF process emerged from this study as having the potential – if left unattended – to contribute to MC stress and increased workload.

For Seligman (2011), the combination of all five PERMA well-being elements ultimately contributes to human flourishing. For Cathy, although she described her relationship with her current TF as "a mild whatever" she still considered being an MC a "positive learning experience." However, she also noted that if her experience had been "really bad," she "would need someone to step in." Another participant recommended that the district leaders might want to develop "a bit of a catch so that if [the relationship] is not working there's another try" (MC Focus Group). Also, the emotional involvement and increased time commitment needed to support struggling TFs was an area of concern raised by participants. Best summed up by Valerie:

It invades a lot of personal time because of the worry. You worry about the children, you worry about the influences of other [colleagues] the decisions [leaders] will make that will impact [your TF], you worry that [your TF] may not make the right decisions, and you worry that it is going to impact you.

The emotional toll of the MCF was not always because of a struggling TF. For Alice, the TF's teaching context needed to be addressed:

I think we just put [TFs] in really difficult positions and expect them to work miracles. They leave. I would have left [...] For another teaching fellow I coached [working in this same context], it has been really hard on him emotionally and health-wise [...] and I can see it in him, and it is really hard to watch.

Other participants reported that it was both time consuming and emotionally draining when they were working with TFs who were unable or unwilling to make changes to their classroom. For some MCs, like Mary, these challenging MCF experiences resulted in their having to "take a little break from it." As she stated:

It took up a lot of my time. And I questioned the profession and who is coming out of university [...] it was so negative. It was not a good experience [...] one struggling teacher has a huge impact [...] it was scary for the kids taking that class!

Although Mary had since returned to the MC role at the time of her interview, she credited her supportive administrator and the opportunity to debrief confidentially with other MCs in her school and the TIP team for helping her work through this negative MCF experience.

Finally, tensions also emerged in this study around the need for greater clarity and transparency around the MCF process for teachers not involved in the TIP and how MCs were selected. According to one union executive, "I find at the school level people feel like they are stepping on other people's toes. They are not holding that [MC] title [...] and you know when you are a more seasoned teacher and you have been overlooked, I know that has definitely caused some ripples at our school" (WQTA Focus Group). Conflict among colleagues was also highlighted by other participants. In his interview, Tim recounted the experience of one "jaded" MC in his school. He questioned whether greater clarity around the MC role and more involvement by other teachers in the school might have led his colleague to return to the MC role and not have felt "blamed" for her struggling and

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ultimately unsuccessful TF. Union executives also suggested that the MCF simply reproduced the status quo: “You might only be getting one perspective as a new teacher. You are being told this is how you do it and then all of a sudden it is turned into a cookie cutter approach” (WQTA Focus Group). The danger of mentoring and coaching becoming “performative” (Ball, 2003) has been discussed in the research literature (Lofthouse, 2019; Stevenson, 2019). For MCs like Laurie in the WQSB, the role is not about reproducing a “mini me” but can be an enriching leadership opportunity and a chance to role model that experienced teachers are “always learning and changing and growing and working within the system and pushing against it at the same time.” Thus, clarifying the purpose and process of mentoring and coaching across the WQSB remains an area that needs further consideration in order to cultivate MC well-being.

### Conclusion and implications

Overall, this Canadian case study found that being an MC increased experienced teachers’ sense of well-being. Data from interviews, focus groups, questionnaires and TIP documentation were abductively analyzed with and against Seligman’s (2011) PERMA well-being framework to reveal the presence of all five well-being elements: positive emotion, engagement, relationships, meaning and accomplishment. Ultimately, participants reported that being an MC in the WQSB was an enjoyable and rewarding experience, even when they experienced a challenging MCF relationship. Additionally, participants reported that the MC role helped them to develop positive and trusting collegial relationships, supported their PL and development and engaged them in challenging and meaningful collaborative work. With teacher stress, burn-out and attrition a concern for many educational jurisdictions, an induction program developed to support and retain TFs that is also found to offer powerful benefits to its experienced teachers is worth maintaining, funding and improving. Thus, these findings have important implications for the case study context, the WQSB. First, clarity around the key terminology and transparency of the selection criteria, roles and responsibilities of the MC must extend beyond the MCF and across the school district. Second, administrators play a critical role in the selection and pairing of MCs and TFs, providing support during challenging MCF situations, and encouraging flexibility in the role. Third, MCs need meaningful PL activities and support to better understand how and when to use a mentoring or coaching approach in response to the needs of their TF. Fourth, MCs need a supportive MC community to share best practices and discuss MCF challenges. Fifth, the district must be open to critical feedback in order to adapt and improve the MCF process.

Although small in scale and not generalizable across contexts, this study provides a Canadian example of how effective mentoring and coaching embedded into a TIP has the potential to cultivate MC well-being. However, further empirical research is warranted. In particular, future studies might consider other models than Seligman’s (2011) PERMA framework to measure MC well-being. Also, future research is needed to explore the influence of the MCF on teacher attrition in the WQSB in relation to the international teacher well-being and attrition literature. In particular, it would be useful to examine how the experience and skill of the MC influences the TF’s success and/or decision to stay in the school district. Finally, future research examining the relationship between educator well-being and student achievement is warranted, especially considering the findings from this study that indicate the MC role increases experienced teacher well-being. Specifically, does the increased well-being of MCs influence the well-being of TFs, and what is the overall influence of teacher well-being on student learning and achievement? For Hargreaves *et al.* (2019), “There is no student wellbeing without teacher wellbeing” (p. 97). Thus, any program that is shown to support teacher well-being and has experienced teachers like Winnie proclaiming, “It is not even a job, it is fun. I love this stuff!” is an important contribution to the field of education and worth celebrating.

## Notes

1. The PERMA acronym stands for positive emotion, engagement, (positive) relationships, meaning and accomplishment and will be discussed in more detail later in the paper.
2. The terms teaching fellow and mentor-coach will be explained in more detail later in the paper.
3. All MC names from the interviews are pseudonyms.

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