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Research paper

# Teachers' job crafting to support their work-related well-being during the COVID-19 pandemic – A qualitative approach

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## ABSTRACT

We aimed at studying the job crafting behaviours teachers took to support their work-related well-being during COVID-19 pandemic. Fourteen participants were interviewed and theoretical thematic analysis conducted. Teachers increased their structural resources through variety, autonomy, and opportunity for development, and their social resources through social support, feedback, and supervisory coaching. They decreased their hindering demands through minimising the demanding aspects of their work, reducing their workload, and making sure their work does not interfere with their private life. Job crafting behaviours can be taught in teacher education to support teacher well-being even during crises.

## 1. Introduction

Meeting unexpected educational challenges, such as the crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, has led to a better understanding of the importance of teachers' agentic action to ensure the well-being, learning and development of all community members (Campbell, 2020). Teachers' perceptions of their own well-being diminished during the pandemic as teachers became increasingly aware of the challenging features in their job (Alves et al., 2021). However, according to some studies teacher stress and job satisfaction were quite well in balance during the COVID-19 pandemic (Stang-Rabrig et al., 2022). This tells us that teachers develop strategies that help them survive and thrive in their profession amidst the challenges they face (Walter & Fox, 2021), one of these means being job crafting (Taylor, 2022), a strategy through which employees optimise their job tasks and relationships to fulfil their needs (Wrzesniewski & Dutton, 2001).

Job crafting is connected with teachers' higher work engagement (Alonso et al., 2019; Pari & Azalea, 2019), higher job satisfaction (Alonso et al., 2019; Ingusci et al., 2016) and higher resilience (Groot Wassink et al., 2019). When teachers become aware of the job resources and demands they have, they can set job crafting goals to enhance their work-related well-being (see van den Heuvel et al., 2015). As teacher well-being, a balance between job demands and resources (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017), during the pandemic diminished (Alves et al., 2021), job resources buffering the job demands caused by the COVID-19

pandemic were requested (Westphal et al., 2022).

Job crafting is a natural way for teachers to combat changes in their job, but the bigger the change experienced, the less teachers typically get involved in job crafting behaviours (Walk & Handy, 2018). This is unfortunate, as employees under changing working conditions experience greater benefits from job grafting than employees under more stable conditions (Seppälä et al., 2020). The contextual conditions for job crafting were ideal during the pandemic, as social support and autonomy (Lazazzara et al., 2020) were high (Kim, Oxley, & Asbury, 2022). Still, there is little research on teachers' job crafting and how it relates to teacher well-being during the COVID-19 pandemic (see Ciuhan, Nicolau, & Iliescu, 2022; Oubibi, Fute, Xiao, Sun, & Zhou, 2022; Oubibi, Fute, Xiao, Sun, & Zhou, 2022; Taylor, 2022, as three exceptions).

In addition, there is a need for further qualitative research investigating teacher perceptions on the diverse connections between their job crafting behaviours and their work-related well-being (Peral & Geldenhuys, 2016). Zheng et al. (2023) studied kindergarten teachers' job crafting and well-being outside the context of the COVID-19 pandemic and Taylor (2022) studied schoolteachers' job crafting and well-being in the profit-bound educational sector in Japan, only shortly mentioning the COVID-19 pandemic. As our study focuses on interviewing primary school teachers during the COVID-19 pandemic in Finnish municipal, non-profit schools, it provides new insights into their job crafting behaviours. In addition, our theoretical framework for different job crafting dimensions derives from Tims et al. (2012), as opposed to the

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structural framework from Wrzesniewski and Dutton (2001) used in most of the few qualitative job crafting studies (Lazazzara et al., 2020). Therefore, we aimed to contribute to the existing literature by studying qualitatively with Tims et al. (2012) framework the job crafting behaviours that teachers took during the COVID-19 pandemic to support their work-related well-being.

## 2. Job crafting rooted in job demands and resources

Job crafting refers to employees' bottom-up adjustments to their job boundaries as opposed to (Berg et al., 2010) the top-down alterations executed by managers (Hall et al., 1978). According to Wrzesniewski and Dutton (2001), it refers to the action of an employee changing their work boundaries either physically or cognitively. The work boundaries an employee can change concern both the tasks they need to accomplish and the people with whom they collaborate (Wrzesniewski & Dutton, 2001). Job crafting can concentrate on either changes in behaviour or cognitive processes and either job demands or resources (Zhang & Parker, 2019). Further, job crafting can be either an individual or a collaborative action (Leana et al., 2009).

The four dimensions of Tims et al.'s (2012) job crafting scale include increasing structural job resources (sub-dimensions of variety, opportunity for development, autonomy), increasing social job resources (sub-dimensions of social support, supervisory coaching, feedback), and increasing challenging job demands (e.g. 'When an interesting project comes along, I offer myself proactively as project co-worker') and decreasing hindering job demands (e.g. 'I make sure that my work is mentally less intense'). Increasing structural or social job resources and increasing challenging job demands are further called promotion-focused job crafting whereas decreasing hindering job demands is called prevention-focused job crafting (Lichtenthaler & Fischbach, 2019). According to Peral and Geldenhuys (2016), the increase of structural job resources and increase of challenging job demands align very closely, which we noted in our study, as only two codes could be categorised under the increase of challenging job demands, and even they were not directly related to teachers' work. Therefore, the increase of challenging job demands was not included in the research questions (RQ) (see Fig. 1 for the theoretical construction of job crafting in the current study).

As the job crafting dimensions by Tims et al. (2012) are rooted in the

Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) model (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017; Demerouti et al., 2001), it was theoretically justifiable and in line with most of the previous job crafting research (Zhang & Parker, 2019) that we chose the JD-R model as the theoretical foundation for our investigation into teacher well-being. According to Demerouti et al. (2001), the characteristics of work can be distributed between job demands and resources. Job demands are further divided between job hindrances (e.g. work-home interference and emotional demands) that are in negative connection with job resources, and job challenges (e.g. workload and cognitive demands), that are not in a statistically significant connection with job resources (Van den Broeck et al., 2010). Job demands require continuous effort and thus have a negative impact on employees' well-being (Demerouti et al., 2001), while job resources direct one towards one's goals, decrease job demands and their negative outcomes or help one to grow and develop (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007; Demerouti et al., 2001). Further, job resources act as a buffer against the negative effects of job demands (Bakker et al., 2005), and job crafting is a strategy for employees to increase both their job resources and challenging job demands and decrease their hindering job demands (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017; Tims et al., 2012).

## 3. Teachers' job crafting behaviours and teacher well-being

Job crafting supported teacher well-being during the COVID-19 pandemic especially for teachers using a low amount of problem-focused coping (Ciuhan et al., 2022). There is a reciprocal association between teachers' job crafting and work engagement (Demerouti & Bakker, 2014): teachers' higher job crafting is related to their higher work engagement (Alonso et al., 2019; Pari & Azalea, 2019) and higher work engagement to their higher job crafting (Groot Wassink et al., 2019). According to Oubibi et al. (2022), who studied teachers during the COVID-19 pandemic, teachers' higher job crafting is related to their higher work engagement. Although there is already some evidence on the beneficial effect of teachers' job crafting on teachers' well-being (Ciuhan et al., 2022) and work engagement during the COVID-19 pandemic (Oubibi et al., 2022), the short mention of the COVID-19 pandemic in the study by Taylor (2022) is the only earlier finding on the exact job crafting behaviours teachers took during the COVID-19 pandemic to support their work-related well-being.

Teachers' job crafting and their career and job satisfaction are also

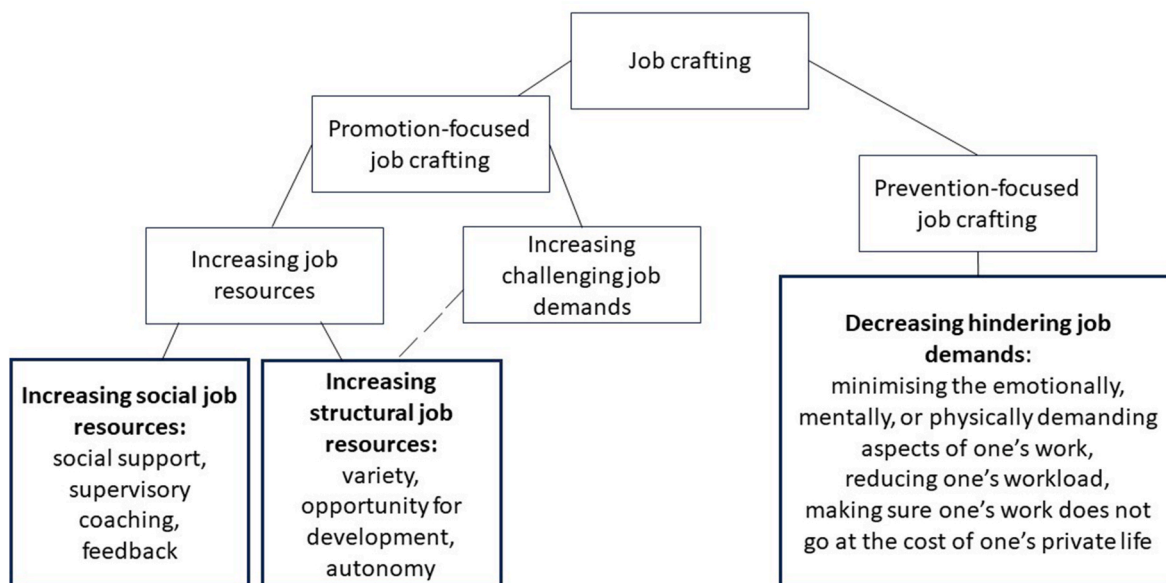


Fig. 1. Theoretical construction of job crafting according to Tims et al. (2012), Lichtenthaler and Fischbach (2019), Peral and Geldenhuys (2016) and Demerouti (2014). The job crafting dimensions used in the current study are bolded. The link between two different job crafting dimensions is marked with a dotted line.

connected. According to Oubibi et al., (2022), teachers' higher job crafting predicts teachers' higher career satisfaction, the strongest predictive subdimension being decreasing hindering job demands. On the other hand, a mixed method study by Leana et al. (2009) showed that higher collaborative job crafting is associated with kindergarten teachers' higher job satisfaction, whereas their higher individual job crafting is associated with their lower job satisfaction (Leana et al., 2009). However, Alonso et al. (2019) noted that both teachers' higher individual and collaborative job crafting predicted their higher job satisfaction. Furthermore, Walk and Handy (2018) found that teachers' internal (cognitive) job crafting is negatively associated with their job satisfaction while structural (behavioural) job crafting is positively associated with it. Thus, although there is already some prove that teachers' job crafting affects teachers' career satisfaction during the COVID-19 pandemic (Oubibi et al., 2022), the findings on what kind of job crafting is beneficial regarding teacher well-being remain inconsistent. Therefore, increasing structural job resources, increasing social job resources and decreasing hindering job demands all have to be studied separately to better understand how these strategies could be used to support teacher well-being during crises.

Teachers' job crafting and their commitment to their work are also related. Teachers' higher structural job crafting predicts lower work alienation and higher affective organisational commitment (Dash & Vohra, 2019). However, according to Leana et al. (2009), kindergarten teachers' higher collaborative job crafting, but not their individual job crafting, is associated with their higher organisational commitment. As teacher commitment was low during the COVID-19 pandemic especially for teachers who experienced higher levels of burnout (Sokal et al., 2021) and as teachers' structural (Dash & Vohra, 2019) and collaborative (Leana et al., 2009) job crafting are connected to their higher organisational commitment, both increasing structural and social job resources have to be studied to help us better understand how teachers can use these to support their work-related well-being in a crisis context.

Further, job crafting has a positive influence on teachers' experience of meaningfulness of work (Zheng et al., 2023). More specifically, according to Peral and Geldenhuys (2016), higher job crafting in terms of increasing teachers' development-based resources, comprising increasing structural job resources and increasing challenging job demands, is a predictor of higher psychological meaningfulness of work. On the other hand, higher job crafting in terms of decreasing hindering job demands is a predictor of lower psychological meaningfulness (Peral & Geldenhuys, 2016). However, Mäkikangas et al. (2023) state that when job crafting behaviours of optimising job demands and seeking job resources increase, the meaningfulness of work also increases – but only seeking job resources acts as a buffer against the decline of meaningfulness of work when meeting unreasonable tasks (Mäkikangas et al., 2023). Hence, earlier findings seem to suggest that when meeting unreasonable tasks (Mäkikangas et al., 2023), such as the online teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic (DeCoito & Estaiteyeh, 2022), seeking job resources might serve better in supporting one's work-related well-being than optimising job demands (Mäkikangas et al., 2023). However, it is important to study both increasing job resources and decreasing job demands in the actual context of the COVID-19 pandemic, to better understand, whether only one or both could be used to support teacher well-being during crises.

Finally, job crafting is associated with employees' (Vogt et al., 2016) and teachers' (Groot Wassink et al., 2019; Van Wingerden et al., 2017) psychological capital (Luthans et al., 2007), more specifically teachers' resilience and self-efficacy (Zheng et al., 2023). Higher job crafting is related to higher resilience in teachers (Groot Wassink et al., 2019) and as teachers' resilience had a positive effect on teacher well-being during the COVID-19 pandemic (Papazis et al., 2023) it is important to understand how teachers' used job crafting during the COVID-19 pandemic to support their work-related well-being. Although a job crafting intervention did not affect teachers' resilience, it did however positively affect teachers' self-efficacy in the long term (Van Wingerden et al.,

2017). As teachers' self-efficacy which also affected teacher well-being during the COVID-19 pandemic (Westphal et al., 2022) decreased when compared to the pre-pandemic levels of teacher self-efficacy (Pressley & Ha, 2021), it is vital to study the job crafting strategies teachers used during the COVID-19 pandemic to understand how their work-related well-being could be supported during a crisis.

In one of the few studies using qualitative methods to study teachers' job crafting and its effect on teacher well-being, Zheng et al. (2023) found four different categories of job crafting: task crafting (e.g. changing prescribed content), relational crafting (e.g. building and improving meaningful, helpful relationships), cognitive crafting (e.g. building awareness of the nature of one's work) and work-life crafting behaviours (e.g. balancing work and personal life). However, these job crafting strategies were not studied in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. Hence, it would be important to study teachers' self-described job crafting strategies in relation to teacher well-being also in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, as teacher stress (Westphal et al., 2022), depressive symptoms (Silva et al., 2021) and some of the stressors experienced during the COVID-19 pandemic, such as workload (Robinson et al., 2023) and role ambiguity (Padmanabhanunni & Pretorius, 2023), could be combatted with the help of job crafting (Zheng et al., 2023).

In Taylor's (2022) qualitative study, teachers' used job crafting as a way to fulfil their needs for autonomy, relatedness and competence and therefore to support their motivation and well-being (Taylor, 2022). The study found, for example, that teachers' task crafting strategies of adding tasks, which had the only mention regarding the COVID-19 pandemic, and choosing activities increased their autonomy. In spite of this one mention regarding the COVID-19 pandemic in Taylor (2022) study, qualitative job crafting studies relating to teacher well-being during the COVID-19 pandemic are still lacking. Also, the study by Taylor (2022) showed that task and relational crafting strategies such as using other teachers' expertise and discussing teaching with other teachers helped fulfil teachers' need for relatedness. Although the task and relational crafting strategies described in Taylor's (2022) study correspond closely to the increase of structural and social job resources, both being behavioral, approach resources crafting strategies (Zhang and Parker, 2019), none of these strategies correspond to the decrease of hindering job demands, the strategies for which still need to be studied.

Thus, despite the evidence on the positive effect of teachers' job crafting on teachers' well-being (Ciuhan et al., 2022), work engagement (Demerouti & Bakker, 2014), job satisfaction (Oubibi et al., 2022), organizational commitment (Dash & Vohra, 2019), meaningfulness of work (Zheng et al., 2023) and psychological capital (Groot Wassink et al., 2019; Van Wingerden et al., 2017), research on the relationship between teachers' job crafting and their well-being during the COVID-19 pandemic is scant (see Ciuhan et al., 2022; Oubibi et al., 2022; Taylor, 2022 as three exceptions). This is unfortunate given the realities during the COVID-19 pandemic: teachers' lowered levels of job satisfaction (Li & Yu, 2022) and teacher self-efficacy (Pressley & Ha, 2021) and the low levels of work engagement, meaningfulness of work (Pöysä et al., 2022) and organizational commitment (Sokal et al., 2021) for some teachers (Pöysä et al., 2022; Sokal et al., 2021). Especially qualitative research of teachers' job crafting behaviours used to support teacher well-being during the COVID-19 pandemic is nearly non-existent (Taylor, 2022 as an exception) but needed to understand the domain-specific nature of job crafting: how job crafting is implemented in teachers' work, taking into account the difficulties and possibilities that teachers' work involves (see Hascher & Waber, 2021). Furthermore, qualitative studies as ours using the theoretical framework from Tims et al. (2012) are rare (Lazazzara et al., 2020). Finally, because of the inconsistent findings regarding the effect of the different job crafting behaviours on teacher well-being (Alonso et al., 2019; Dash & Vohra, 2019; Leana et al., 2009; Mäkikangas et al., 2023; Peral & Geldenhuys, 2016), further research on the different job crafting behaviours is needed to better understand what kind of job crafting could be



beneficial for teacher well-being especially during times of crises.

Thus, the unique contribution of the study was to study the different job crafting behaviours that teachers used during the COVID-19 pandemic to support their work-related well-being and to conduct the study with a qualitative research design using Tims et al.'s (2012) framework. We aimed at investigating how teachers crafted their jobs to both increase their job resources and to decrease their hindering job demands during the COVID-19 pandemic. The RQs deriving from the theoretical framework of Tims et al. (2012) were as follows.

**RQ1.** How did the teachers craft their jobs to increase their structural job resources during the COVID-19 pandemic?

**RQ2.** How did the teachers craft their jobs to increase their social job resources during the COVID-19 pandemic?

**RQ3.** How did the teachers craft their jobs to decrease their hindering job demands during the COVID-19 pandemic?

## 4. Method

### 4.1. Participants

The participants in this study were recruited as part of a larger research project investigating teacher and student stress and classroom interaction (Lerikkanen & Pakarinen, 2016). Altogether, 28 fourth grade teachers from Central Finland participated in the interviews, and 14 were included in the study. Background information was received from 11 of the 14 participants in spring 2021 (see Table 1 for the Background characteristics of the participants).

The rest of the data were omitted from the study because a saturation point according to the categories (i.e. themes) was reached (Hennink & Kaiser, 2022). This was also checked by reading two other interview transcripts to see whether any new themes possibly would arise (Francis et al., 2010). Our sample size also followed the results from the systematic review by Hennink and Kaiser (2022) who noted that the saturation point of qualitative interviews is usually reached at 9 to 17 interviews ( $M = 12$  to 13 interviews). According to the results of the independent samples *t*-test and chi-squared test, the participants included in the study did not differ statistically significantly from the 14 interviewees not included in the study regarding their age, gender, or work experience in school.

### 4.2. Procedure

Data were collected via structured interviews in spring 2021 when the COVID-19 pandemic was still ongoing but the major lockdowns of Spring 2020 affecting every school in Finland were in the past. The study was approved by the ethical committee of the university before the beginning of the study, and all participants gave written consent regarding their participation. The interviews were conducted and recorded by trained research assistants and hence the authors could not affect the participants' answers. The interviewees participated in the interviews via distance video conference programmes and the interviews were further recorded with an additional MP3-recorder. The

**Table 1**  
Background characteristics of the participants.

Gender	female = 7	male = 4	
<b>Educational background</b>	class teacher education/ Master in Education = 6	dual eligibility (class teacher and subject teacher) = 4	another qualification in addition to the dual eligibility = 1
<b>Work experience</b>	$M = 12$ years $SD = 7.63$		
<b>Age</b>	$M$ age = 41 years $SD = 6.96$		

interview questions concentrated on distance teaching, the role of guardians in students' schooling in general and during the pandemic, the effects of the distance teaching period and the effect of the COVID-19 pandemic on various aspects of teachers' job and their well-being. One of the questions under teacher well-being was slightly modified during the interview process from looking at the connections with one's job to the possible effects on one's work-related well-being and its effects on one's teaching. The length of the fourteen interviews selected for the study ranged from 27 min to 1 h and 21 min, accounting for 11 h and 4 min altogether. The recorded interviews were transcribed verbatim by trained research assistants. The transcribed interviews accounted for 146 pages (Calibri 11-point font; line and paragraph spacing 1.15; each interview started on a new page). The interviews and interview transcriptions were stored safely behind passwords to ensure the access of only the personnel working on the data.

### 4.3. Data analysis

The analysis was conducted via reflexive (Braun & Clarke, 2019) theoretical thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The first author was responsible for the analysis of the data, and the other authors contributed by commenting on the preliminary and final results. The first author's role in conducting the analysis was central (Braun & Clarke, 2019), as they chose the theoretical framework after initial reading of part of the data – JD-R according to Bakker and Demerouti (2017) and job crafting according to Tims et al. (2012) – that guided, but did not predetermine, the analysis. We chose theoretical thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) because using the same themes that had been used in earlier research would help in comparing the different studies and in building our knowledge on the matter of teachers' job crafting and their well-being (see Lazazzara et al., 2020). Further, in line with Braun and Clarke (2006, 2019), our approach was both semantic and latent. We were interested in the experiences the interviewees shared with us, but the approach we used to interpret and code these experiences and later identify their themes was based on theory. In addition, we looked at the relations between different codes, themes and levels of themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006) in order to add to the research field. The themes that we generated (Braun & Clarke, 2016, 2019) from the data identified patterned meanings within the entire data, thus providing the basis for answering the RQs (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

As Braun and Clarke (2006) recommend, the analysis process began with an initial reading of part of the data and then choosing the theoretical framework. After this, as they strongly suggest, the analysis process continued by listening to each interview and, at the same time, checking the transcript and marking in the transcript the parts of the interview relevant to the study. After this, each transcript was read again, one transcript at a time, concentrating on the parts marked during the listening process. These parts were coded as simply as possible by making a list of codes in the order they appeared in the transcript, keeping in mind the theory-driven RQs (Braun & Clarke, 2006). According to Braun and Clarke (2006), after coding, the initial codes were read and grouped into separate categories of theory-driven themes – sometimes going back to the transcript or the recording in case necessary to check for the meaning of the code. Once grouped into the different theory-driven themes, the codes were categorised according to their similarities and differences, and data-driven sub-themes were generated for the codes, the meaning of which was similar to one another (Braun & Clarke, 2006). As more interviews were listened to and read and more codes were noticed, the data-driven sub-themes evolved. With the help of theory (structural job resources) or simply being derived from the data (social job resources and hindering job demands), they were combined to form more overarching theory-driven or data-driven sub-themes. Sometimes, an altogether new sub-theme or a more overarching theme was generated, and codes were removed from under a certain sub-theme or overarching theme and placed under a new sub-theme or overarching theme. Sometimes, the sub-themes or the

overarching themes were renamed to better describe the codes included under that theme or combined or divided if new similarities or differences were noted in them. In rare cases, a code was removed from under a certain theory-driven theme and placed under another theory-driven theme, as the meaning behind the codes and theory-driven themes became clearer.

Once 14 interviews were coded and categorised under certain theory-driven themes, sub-themes and overarching themes, all these themes and the codes included under them were read again, and mind maps were drawn of each theory-driven theme to better understand the meanings belonging to each theme (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Originally data-driven sub-themes were now combined with their theory-driven equivalents. In particular, the theory-driven theme concentrating on social relations changed a lot in this phase as similarities were noted between the different interaction counterparts. Also, some changes emerged in the hindering job demands, as some minor sub-themes were combined. In this case, no overarching themes could be derived from theory, and hence, they remained data-driven.

The third cycle of analysis began when the results were written down (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Here, we found that certain sub-themes could be combined to form one sub-theme or codes that could be placed under another sub-theme. In addition, one item was moved from the increase of structural job resources to the increase of social job resources. Furthermore, a few codes were renamed to make sure that the reader could understand what was meant by them so that the text could flow better. Our full understanding of teachers' job crafting behaviours was ultimately reached (Hennink & Kaiser, 2022) as all theory-driven themes and sub-themes arising from the chosen theoretical framework by Tims et al. (2012) were found in the data. In addition, more theory was read (Demerouti, 2014), and finally, theory-driven sub-themes could also be found for the decrease of hindering job demands (see Table 2 regarding teachers' job crafting behaviours based on the theory-driven thematic analysis). Finally, data extracts were found to demonstrate each theory-driven sub-theme. When translating the data extracts from Finnish to English, redundant filler words were omitted, some expressions shortened or changed into more idiomatic expressions or order, commas were added and contextual words added in square brackets to ensure the conveyance of the meaning in the target language (Sharma, 2015). In the data extracts, the interviewees are referred to by numbers from 1 through 14 and all possible identifying information has been removed.

## 5. Results

### 5.1. Increasing structural job resources

The answer to RQ1 concerning how teachers crafted their job to support their work-related well-being through the increase of their structural job resources, fell under the theory-driven sub-themes of *variety*, *autonomy* and *opportunity to develop oneself*. The first sub-theme, variety, included teachers making their work more diverse and making the school more diverse for the students. According to Teacher 6, 'this has been nice because one has been able to fulfil oneself in a bit different way'. The second sub-theme autonomy included teachers' understanding of the teachers', students', and parents' roles. As Teacher #12 put it: 'I try to teach in distance so that [I am] the teacher and parents are parents'. Teacher #14 added that 'In my opinion it's the students who go to school. It's not mom's or dad's job to go to school at this point anymore ...'. Autonomy also included developing an independent attitude and knowing oneself. For example, Teacher #6 said that 'I've taken quite an independent attitude to this, that in a way, I do things the way I want to'. Teacher #2 further stated that 'I have done this for many years and I know that I do my job well and that I'm good at what I do.'

The third sub-theme, opportunity to develop oneself, included teachers' ideas concerning the increase in their creativity and the digital

**Table 2**  
Teachers' job crafting behaviours based on the theory-driven thematic analysis.

Theme	Sub-theme	Job crafting behaviour
Increasing structural job resources	Variety	Making their work more diverse
	Autonomy	Making the school more diverse for the students Understanding of the teachers', students' and parents' roles Developing an independent attitude Knowing oneself Increase in their creativity
	Opportunity to develop oneself	Making a digital jump Learning to adapt their teaching and/or environment according to students' skills etc. Learning to give instructions in a simple way Learning to communicate also non-verbally Having routines and/or agreements regarding schoolwork Learning patience Learning transferability of the skills and systems Learning to accept the situation Gaining understanding regarding the realities of being a teacher Developing their well-being skills Developing their organising and problem-solving skills Developing their self-efficacy Developing a positive attitude Being present or in interaction or collaboration with the other Having good relationships with students and parents or receiving and giving peer support from and to colleagues Receiving actual help from their interaction counterparts Devices that helped their communication with the aforementioned counterparts Different communication and learning platforms that made distance teaching and learning possible Safety regulations that helped to ensure safety in interaction Feedback that helped teachers to monitor students' learning and take care of students' well-being Feedback from parents in case of problems Positivity in and enjoyment of interaction
Increasing social job resources	Social support	Strengthening students' social skills Learning from and teaching colleagues
	Feedback	Changing things if the previous way did not work
Decreasing hindering job demands	Supervisory coaching	Planning their teaching and preparing students in case distance teaching would again be required
	Minimising the emotionally, mentally, or physically demanding aspects of one's work	

(continued on next page)

Table 2 (continued)

Theme	Sub-theme	Job crafting behaviour
		Setting boundaries for their interaction to ensure their own well-being
	Reducing one's workload	Reducing the amount of corona talk, restrictions and computer use when these started to feel too daunting
		Setting boundaries for the amount of work and for what was understood to be part of the teacher's role
		Learning to delegate
		Learning not to plan too far in advance to avoid double work as the situation could still change rapidly
	Making sure one's work does not go at the cost of one's private life	Separating work and free time
		Having possibilities to recover

jump that was made. Teacher 1 noted that 'I myself enjoy hugely the creativity in the teacher's job, and I feel that during the corona time and the distance teaching period, it has definitely been needed'. According to Teacher 3, 'It increased the technical competence ... without this, if forced, I would not have taken the kind of digital jumps'. The teachers also talked about learning to adapt their teaching and/or environment according to students' skills, to give instructions in a simple, concise way, to communicate also non-verbally and to have routines and/or agreements regarding schoolwork. 'But I've tried to do them so that a child can by oneself check there [on the class website] what the assignment is', as was explained by Teacher 10. In addition, teachers noted how they learned patience and transferability of the skills and systems and how to accept the situation as well as how they gained a better understanding regarding the realities of being a teacher. Teacher 13 acknowledged that 'as a teacher of this age, or as a younger, not so experienced teacher, development areas always exist, and I don't somehow feel that it's related to this time'. Teachers also developed their well-being skills, organising and problem-solving skills, their self-efficacy and positive attitudes. 'it just demands persistence, a bit like swimming against the current. Yes, I can hold on, yes I can, I think we will figure something out', Teacher 4 explained.

### 5.2. Increasing social job resources

The answer to RQ2 concerning how teachers crafted their job to support their work-related well-being through the increase of social job resources constituted the theory-driven sub-themes of *social support*, *feedback* and *supervisory coaching*. The first of these sub-themes, social support, emerged relating to student, parental and collegial interaction. All of these relationships had three important dimensions. First, they involved being present or in interaction or collaboration with the other. Second, they included having good relationships with students and parents or receiving and giving peer support from and to colleagues. Thus, mere interaction without actual quality was not enough for the teachers. Teacher 8 said, 'both of us teachers have all the support behind us. The parents know that we do our best there, and we know that they do their best at home'. Third, teachers received actual help from their interaction counterparts: from the classroom and school community, from the parents who did their part to support their child's schooling and from the colleagues in the form of availability of help, clear messaging and protocols. Teacher 10 stated, 'I always sent one student to take some handouts and books and [other things] that were missing to the post box [of the student who was in quarantine]'. Teacher #13 acknowledged that 'we can collaborate really well with my colleague, which lightens my work a lot'.

In addition, the teachers were socially supported by devices that helped their communication with the aforementioned counterparts, different communication and learning platforms that made distance teaching and learning possible, and safety regulations that helped to ensure safety in interaction. These factors worked to ensure the success of all the aforementioned relationships during the pandemic. Teacher 10 explained that 'every day since August I put in the class website what we do [at school] and what's for homework ... [absent] one can immediately follow there what we do at school'. Regarding the safety regulations, Teacher 9 said that they 'give instructions so that the illness wouldn't be able to spread ... Taking care of washing hands and so on'.

The second of the increase of social resource sub-themes was feedback. This included feedback that helped teachers monitor students' learning and take care of students' well-being and feedback from parents in the case of problems. Teacher 4 explained that they expect from parents, 'fair, blunt feedback ... encouraging feedback is of course always nice ... if there are some other kinds of thoughts that they tell about them and not just worry about them themselves or talk behind my back with the other parents'. As students' well-being was mentioned here, it is important to note that taking care of students' well-being was a primary concern for the teachers because they seemed to genuinely care for their students, and therefore, taking care of students' well-being seemed to also increase their own well-being. As Teacher 7 said, 'I want to be there for the students, and the messages arrived in most curious times ... I care so much about my students that the interaction increased a lot, especially during the distance teaching period'. Another important form of feedback was positivity in and enjoyment of interaction, which increased drastically due to the pandemic. Teacher 14 noted that, 'based on their happy attitude and expression one could draw the conclusion ... that they enjoy that they can study here at the school and go to this school and can see mates ...'.

The third of the increase of social resource sub-themes was supervisory coaching. This meant strengthening students' social skills, which worked to ensure the success of these relationships during pandemic, and learning from and teaching colleagues. Teacher 9 explained regarding their own class that 'I especially want us to be a community. And we have been working towards it. And at least now we are a pretty good team where we have a common goal ...'. Teacher 9 also said that '[their] own problem-solving skill regarding the technical side ... is probably the strength, that one can help also colleagues [with things] relating to that'.

### 5.3. Decreasing hindering job demands

Regarding the answer to RQ3 about how teachers crafted their job to support their work-related well-being by decreasing their hindering job demands, theory-driven sub-themes were found from the work of Demerouti (2014). The first sub-theme was *minimising [minimizing] the emotionally, mentally, or physically demanding aspects of one's work*. For the teachers, this meant first changing things if the previous way did not work. Teacher 8 stated that 'after this burnout [I] have to lower [my] own goals a bit ... [I] don't always have to do that kind of so amazing things with the students ... [I] must make sure this doesn't require so much after work from me ...'. Second, the teachers also stated that in order to avoid the negative experiences that occurred as a result of the first pandemic school closures, they were currently planning their teaching and preparing students in case distance teaching would again be required. As Teacher 2 put it, 'all the time during this school year ... it has affected planning of the work ... first the most important [themes] and then let's leave these for later [as] these are easy to do if we are in distance'.

Teachers also set boundaries for their interaction to ensure their own well-being and reduced the amount of corona talk, restrictions and computer use when these started to feel too daunting. Teacher 6 said that 'the students don't necessarily understand that now one cannot come that close. I then say quite frankly that keep your distance. It has

required a different kind of courage than before'. On the other hand, Teacher 13 explained thinking a lot about 'where to really draw those safety distances ... [my own speaking] only produced no ... the impact ... can be very small ... [I] have limited this ... down to washing hands well and working [only] with one's own group'. Further, Teacher 10 said 'I also intentionally avoided talking about corona ... relative to students' well-being, that they could focus on something else every now and then, [that they] could think about something else'. Teacher 2 further explained that 'the interest to do things with the computer during this past autumn has been quite minimal. Even with the students we have enjoyed working with just the paper and pen method'.

The second sub-theme was *reducing one's workload*, which included setting boundaries for the amount of work and for what was understood to be part of the teacher's role. Teacher 10 talked about a lesson they had learned from the previous headmaster: 'this is big group teaching ... This is not small group teaching or individual teaching. No teacher's resources would be enough for tailoring [teaching] for every possible kind of learner and level ...'. 'The teacher doesn't have to take care of everything. Rather express one's concerns ...' was how Teacher 12 explained the teacher's role regarding student well-being. It also meant learning to delegate and to not make plans too far in advance to avoid double work, as the situation could still change rapidly. According to Teacher 9, 'delegating is something that ... I have learned in the course of life ... that one cannot do everything alone ... we thought about the structure [regarding] who does what. And then we divided those tasks [between us]'. Teacher 12 explained, 'I have tried to learn not to do work in vain beforehand or double amount of work ... it doesn't make any sense to make plans really far in advance as they can fall through anyway'.

The third sub-theme, *making sure one's work does not go at the cost of one's private life*, involved separating work and free time and having possibilities to recover. Teacher 14 said that 'for me it's enough that ... I don't for example look at work email or phone after four ... then the time is for everything else, so that somehow makes [me] also better view that I'm detached from work'.

## 6. Discussion

In this study, we aimed to contribute to the existing literature by determining qualitatively the job crafting behaviours teachers implemented to support their work-related well-being during the COVID-19 pandemic. As teachers' job crafting as a strategy to support teacher well-being in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic has previously been studied only by Ciuhan et al., 2022, Oubibi et al. (2022) and shortly mentioned by Taylor (2022), our study provides vital knowledge on how the easily decreased teacher well-being during the COVID-19 pandemic (Li & Yu, 2022; Pressley & Ha, 2021) could be supported via job crafting. With our qualitative design we were able to reach new understanding regarding the exact job crafting behaviours teachers took during the COVID-19 pandemic to support their work-related well-being, which had previously been only shortly mentioned by Taylor (2022). Our theoretical thematic analysis was based on the job crafting behaviours by Tims et al. (2012), rarely used in qualitative research (Lazazzara et al., 2020), rooted in the JD-R theory (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017) and including increasing structural job resources, increasing social job resources, and decreasing hindering job demands. As conflicting findings concerning the effect of different job crafting behaviours on teacher well-being previously existed, more studies on how teachers use different job crafting behaviours to support their work-related well-being, are needed (Alonso et al., 2019; Dash & Vohra, 2019; Leana et al., 2009; Mäkikangas et al., 2023; Peral & Geldenhuys, 2016).

As Tims et al.'s (2012) themes fit our data reasonably well, this gives further indication of the domain generalisability of these themes as opposed to the domain specificity of well-being measures suggested by Hascher and Waber (2021). However, through our study on teachers' job crafting behaviours, we were able to look at the job crafting

framework by Tims et al. (2012) from the teachers' perspective and for the first time could find examples on how each of these job crafting strategies was used by teachers to support their work-related well-being. The only category not found and theoretically so close to the increase of structural job resources (Lichtenthaler & Fischbach, 2019; Peral & Geldenhuys, 2016) that we ended up leaving it out from the analysis was the increase of challenging job demands. It might be that teachers' job in general is challenging enough as it is (Chaaban & Du, 2017; Han et al., 2020; Vandiya & Hidayat, 2019) and some of the challenges such as workload (Robinson et al., 2023) might even be increased due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Therefore, this type of job crafting might not be beneficial regarding teacher well-being.

Our first RQ concerned how teachers crafted their jobs to increase their structural job resources during the COVID-19 pandemic. When analysing teachers' answers, we were able to find the theory-driven sub-themes of variety, autonomy, and opportunity to develop oneself. Variety refers to the actions through which the teachers make the school a more versatile place for themselves and the students. This finding is supported by another study by Hascher et al. (2021) according to which the new forms of teaching helped support teacher well-being during the lockdowns. However, it is contradicted by another study by Hilger et al. (2021), according to which task variety during lockdowns was related to decreases in teacher well-being. Thus, more research is needed to see whether task variety decreases or increases teacher well-being during a crisis.

Autonomy included acknowledging different counterparts' roles, and mentions of independence and self-knowledge. This is especially important as role ambiguity decreased teacher well-being during the COVID-19 pandemic (Padmanabhanunni & Pretorius, 2023). Autonomy has been earlier reported as a job crafting outcome of teachers' task crafting strategy of adding tasks during the COVID-19 pandemic (Taylor, 2022) and of the relational crafting behaviour of redefining and clarifying one's role and responsibilities (Zheng et al., 2023).

Opportunity to develop oneself consisted of an increase in creativity and digital skills, development of teaching and well-being skills, and an increase in positivity, patience, acceptance and understanding concerning the situation and teachers' work in general. Creativity (Anderson et al., 2021), digital skills (DeCoito & Estaiteyeh, 2022) and well-being skills, such as self-efficacy (Westphal et al., 2022) and resilience (Papazis et al., 2023) were vital to combat the new demands brought by the COVID-19 pandemic. These align with the cognitive crafting strategies of not seeing one's job as difficult and hence increasing one's competence (Taylor, 2022) and of building awareness of the nature of one's work, with the task crafting behaviour of bringing new resources into work, and the job crafting outcomes of creativity and development of professional skills (Zheng et al., 2023). Positivity being a means for developing oneself, it is important to note that job crafting could increase (Oubibi et al., 2022) the lowered levels of teachers' job satisfaction (Li & Yu, 2022) during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Our second RQ focused on how teachers crafted their jobs to increase their social job resources during the COVID-19 pandemic. According to the teachers' descriptions, we were able to find the theory-driven sub-themes of social support, feedback and supervisory coaching. A supportive community around teachers during the COVID-19 pandemic (Eadie et al., 2022; Kupers et al., 2022), including colleagues (Chan et al., 2021), students and parents was vital for teacher well-being (Hascher et al., 2021). This is strongly associated with the relational crafting strategy of building and improving meaningful, helpful relationships and with the task crafting behaviour of working as a team found in Zheng et al.'s (2023) study. Hence, teachers' job crafting behaviours are not a solely solitary activity, noted also by Leana et al. (2009), who found that collaborative job crafting is related to teachers' higher job satisfaction. Technology and safety regulations were found to be factors that supported these relationships and hence the necessary digital skills (Chan et al., 2021) and safety protocols (Logan et al., 2021) are vital for teacher well-being during crises.



Second, the teachers received feedback regarding students' learning and well-being and in the form of the enjoyment that each interaction counterpart experienced in the social relationships. The teachers genuinely cared for their students, and thus, the students' learning and well-being seemed to affect their well-being as well, which was why teachers wanted to do their best for the students. In previous research it has been noted that a positive teacher–student relationship relates to higher teacher well-being (Aldrup et al., 2018). Seeing the fruits of their efforts helps teachers experience job satisfaction and simply being there for their students helps them experience meaningfulness of work, thus supporting teacher well-being (Nilsson et al., 2015). Focusing on reasons for doing one's job also increases teachers' relatedness and hence their well-being (Taylor, 2022). This is especially important as some teachers experienced lower levels of meaningfulness of work during the COVID-19 pandemic (Pöysä et al., 2022), which could be increased via job crafting (Mäkikangas et al., 2023; Peral & Geldenhuys, 2016; Zheng et al., 2023). Positivity and enjoyment in school interaction increased during the COVID-19 pandemic (Kim, Fields, & Asbury, 2022; Larivière-Bastien et al., 2022; Soltero-González & Gillanders, 2021), perhaps due to the decreased levels of interaction in general (Gadermann et al., 2021). Third, teachers experienced supervisory coaching when they helped and received help from their colleagues, and when they helped to strengthen their students' social skills. Teachers' higher collaborative job crafting is related to their higher organisational commitment (Dash & Vohra, 2019; Leana et al., 2009), which is especially relevant during the COVID-19 pandemic when some teachers experienced lower levels of commitment (Sokal et al., 2021). Our findings further align with the task crafting strategy of working as a team (Zheng et al., 2023) and with the task and relational crafting strategies of, for example, using other teachers' expertise and discussing teaching with other teachers, which help to fulfil teachers' need for relatedness and thus support teacher well-being (Taylor, 2022).

Our third RQ concerned how teachers crafted their jobs to decrease their hindering job demands during the COVID-19 pandemic. Looking at teachers' descriptions, we were able to find the theory-driven (Demerouti, 2014) sub-themes of minimising the emotionally, mentally or physically demanding aspects of one's work, reducing one's workload, and making sure one's work does not go at the cost of one's private life. The teachers minimised the emotionally, mentally or physically demanding aspects of their work through planning, preparing (see also Chan et al., 2021), setting boundaries, limiting daunting aspects of work that were not necessary, and changing things that did not work (see also Kim & Asbury, 2020). These actions were especially important, as the demands experienced in teachers' work during the COVID-19 pandemic were related to teachers' lower levels of well-being (Sokal et al., 2020). Further, teachers reduced their workload by setting limits for the number of tasks and for their role as a teacher, and by delegating (see also Trafford et al., 2021) and not planning too far in advance, which is crucial as high workload decreased teacher well-being during the COVID-19 pandemic (Hascher et al., 2021). Finally, the teachers made sure that their work did not go at the cost of their private lives with the help of separating work and free time (see also Hayes et al., 2022) and having opportunities to recover (see also Hascher et al., 2021), which is especially important as work-home interference was increased during the COVID-19 pandemic (Robinson et al., 2023). The above-mentioned sub-themes are in line with the findings from Zheng et al.'s (2023) study: task crafting behaviours of changing prescribed content and optimising the work process, cognitive crafting strategy of adjusting one's expectations of work achievements and work–life crafting strategy of balancing work and personal life.

Despite the many connections between our results and the results of the earlier qualitative studies on teachers' job crafting and well-being (Taylor, 2022; Zheng et al., 2023), differences were also found, probably due to the different context: the COVID-19 pandemic instead of 'normal' times and Finland instead of Asian countries. Thus, the current study provides novel insights into teachers' job crafting behaviours

during the COVID-19 pandemic in Finland, whilst further bringing new perspectives with Tims et al. (2012) framework into the earlier studies conducted with the Wrzesniewski and Dutton (2001) framework. First, when compared with the Zheng et al. (2023) study, the sub-theme feedback does not have an equivalent in the job crafting behaviours described by Zheng et al. (2023). One reason for this may be that for many teachers their online formative assessment during the COVID-19 lockdowns was actually more conscious, frequent and diverse than formative assessment in face-to-face situations (Veugen et al., 2022). In addition, parental interaction increased to some extent during the COVID-19 lockdowns and there was a mutual effort to try to keep the interaction positive (Soltero-González & Gillanders, 2021). Further, enjoyment of being at school increased after the COVID-19 lockdowns especially for the students (Larivière-Bastien et al., 2022) and in some measure also for their teachers (Kim, Fields, & Asbury, 2022). Secondly, we could not find a relational crafting action of avoiding or decreasing unpleasant interactions in our study. This is probably because the number of interpersonal conflicts decreased during the COVID-19 pandemic (Hilger et al., 2021), probably due to the decrease in the opportunities for interaction in general because of the COVID-19 pandemic (Gadermann et al., 2021). Thirdly, the work–life crafting strategy of taking advantage of work–life synergies did not have an equivalent in our study which may be due to the increase in work-home interference caused by the COVID-19 pandemic (Robinson et al., 2023). Finally, when compared with Taylor's (2022) work, the only finding not existing in ours was the task crafting strategy of having others observe one's lessons, which contributed to teachers' feelings of competence. This difference is probably due to the high autonomy that Finnish teachers have (Paulsrud & Wermke, 2020; Salokangas et al., 2020): it is rare to have other people observing what one does in the classroom – and with the COVID-19 pandemic, this probably would not even have been allowed.

Our study also highlighted the importance of both increase of job resources and decrease of hindering job demands when aiming at supporting teacher well-being during crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic. This is an important finding because earlier studies had conflicting evidence on which job crafting behaviours actually would support teacher well-being (Alonso et al., 2019; Dash & Vohra, 2019; Leana et al., 2009; Mäkikangas et al., 2023; Peral & Geldenhuys, 2016). This is also in line with Mäkikangas (2018) who stated that combining different job crafting behaviours, for example, the ones with less positive well-being outcomes (e.g. decreasing hindering job demands) with the job crafting behaviours with more positive well-being outcomes (e.g. increasing structural and social job resources) can be beneficial.

### 6.1. Practical implications

We have tried to understand teachers' use of job crafting strategies to support their work-related well-being during the COVID-19 pandemic (see also Draper, 2004). However, we acknowledge that our results tell us about the meaningful job crafting actions of our participating teachers during the COVID-19 pandemic that might or might not work for teachers in other contexts (Biesta, 2010; Biesta & Burbules, 2003). Still, through theoretical generalization (Draper, 2004), i.e., through connecting our findings to earlier research (Ferguson, 2004; Hegyvary, 2002), we were able to find support for job crafting actions that might serve in supporting teacher well-being in crises settings also in the future (Biesta, 2010).

We recommend that the job crafting strategies described for example in the current study be taught to pre-service and in-service teachers so that they can develop their well-being repertoire to support their work-related well-being from the beginning of their teaching career and throughout. Furthermore, we recommend targeted interventions for increasing teachers' job crafting behaviours (Van Wingerden et al., 2017) as earlier studies both in Finland (Seppälä et al., 2021) and according to a systematic review (de Devetto & Wechsler, 2019) have

shown that job crafting interventions serve well in enhancing the job crafting behaviours and hence in supporting the well-being of workers (de Devetto & Wechsler, 2019; Seppälä et al., 2021; Vandiya & Hidayat, 2019). In addition to the different job crafting behaviours that teachers could adopt, this study offers hope that teachers are able to produce solutions that help them thrive, despite the adversity they might face.

## 6.2. Limitations

This study does not come without limitations. First, the study sample was small and comprised only Finnish primary school teachers, which affects the generalisability of the results. It would be valuable to examine whether teachers use similar job crafting at various grade levels and in other countries where the educational systems differ from the Finnish school culture where primary school teacher profession is a popular career choice (Pollari et al., 2018), teachers are trusted by the authorities, parents and students (Sahlberg, 2007), get involved in the curriculum process (Pollari et al., 2018) and have a high autonomy in their work (Paulsrud & Wermke, 2020; Salokangas et al., 2020). However, despite its small size, the study sample was large enough for a qualitative interview study (Hennink & Kaiser, 2022) and as we drew connections to earlier research, it allowed theoretical generalizations (Draper, 2004).

Second, job crafting and its relation to teacher well-being was a theoretical concept introduced and analysed by the researchers of this study based on what was found in the data; it was a latent construct not visible in the interview questions. This had the potential of weakening the validity and reliability of our results. However, as we have pointed out, our approach to thematic analysis was reflexive (Braun & Clarke, 2019). Therefore, we acknowledge the central role of especially the first author but also the discussions with the co-authors in interpreting the data and thus affecting the research from the theoretical constructs and aims chosen, to the method of analysis chosen, to the results of the study that we have arrived at. However, in order for us to ensure the trustworthiness of our study, we have first of all engaged in theoretical triangulation, connecting our findings to the theories of job crafting and JD-R and to the earlier findings in job crafting research (Stahl & King, 2020). Secondly, we have tried to explain each choice and part of the research process as carefully, clearly and concisely as possible, thus supporting the transferability of the study (Stahl & King, 2020). Future studies should use in-depth interviews with participants asking directly about their job crafting behaviours to discover more about their experiences, thoughts and opinions regarding job crafting.

Finally, we did not look at the possible neutral or negative outcomes (see also Emigh, 1997) of teachers' job crafting and hence this aspect, mentioned in some earlier literature (Harju et al., 2021; Zheng et al., 2023), should be considered in future studies. Future studies should also study teachers' task variety to see whether it supports (Hascher et al., 2021) or hinders (Hilger et al., 2021) teacher well-being during a crisis.

## 7. Conclusions

The current study contributes to job crafting research by providing important and novel information related to the job crafting behaviours teachers can take to support their work-related well-being during crises such as pandemics. This study was among the first to investigate teacher job crafting behaviours during the COVID-19 pandemic and using a qualitative approach. The results show that through job crafting, teachers may actively shape their work and work-related well-being. Not only does our research offer specific action steps for both pre- and in-service teachers, but it also offers us hope that teachers indeed are able to develop strategies that help them stay well in their job even in the harder times.

## CRedit authorship contribution statement

**Anna-Mari Aulén:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Funding acquisition, Formal analysis, Conceptualization. **Eija Pakarinen:** Writing – review & editing, Supervision, Project administration, Funding acquisition. **Marja-Kristiina Lerkkanen:** Writing – review & editing, Supervision, Project administration, Funding acquisition.

## 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.

## Data availability

The authors do not have permission to share data.

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