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Understanding Teacher Educators' Quality of Life: Insights from the PERMA Model

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Abstract

Teacher Educators (TE) are a specific category of Higher Education (HE) academics whose primary responsibility is the preparation of Pre-Service Teachers (PSTs) for the Early Childhood, Primary, Secondary, and Further Education and Training contexts. TEs navigate this important, multifaceted role in addition to growing work pressures and decreased resource allocations. Though these stressors often lead to burnout, negatively impacting TEs' wellbeing, productivity, and career satisfaction, many persevere in this career despite these challenging experiences. This qualitative study employs the popular PERMA model (Positive Emotion, Engagement, Relationships, Meaning, and Accomplishment) to explore the protective factors that support TEs' mental health, wellbeing, and resilience. Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA) was applied to a combination of open-ended survey responses ($n = 154$) and semi-structured interview ($n = 14$) data from Higher Education TEs in Ireland and the United Kingdom (UK). Participants reported that excessive relational demands and the undervaluation and under-recognition of accomplishments in promotion systems challenged their wellbeing. However, findings highlight how positive emotions, vocational workflow, social support, a sense of meaning/purpose, and professional accomplishment can support thriving in the workplace. Our sample further benefitted from general wellbeing practices (diet, exercise, mindfulness), professional collegiality, and boundary setting, which help maintain work–life balance. These findings suggest that HE institutions might consider PERMA-informed initiatives – such as wellbeing programmes, formal recognition of diverse work achievements, and flexible workload policies – to mitigate workplace stress and promote TE resilience. Promoting these factors may improve quality of life outcomes for TEs and enhance outcomes within initial teacher education.

Keywords PERMA · Initial teacher education · Protective factors · Teacher educators · Higher education

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Introduction

Teacher Educators (TEs) based in Higher Education (HE) are essential in shaping future teachers for the profession (Cochran-Smith et al., 2019). However, the pressures of their work are often overlooked in the literature concerning wellbeing in the education sector. The multifaceted role of the TE demands that they excel as practitioners, researchers, mentors, and supervisors. Their work involves the preparation and supervision of Pre-Service Teachers (PSTs), often requiring significant travel and administration, in addition to the typical duties facing academics. Furthermore, TEs are responsible for maintaining good relationships with placement partners including school-based leadership, teachers, mentors, and placement supervisors (Ellis et al., 2013). As with other HE academics, they work in a highly competitive workplace culture where they are expected to produce high-quality research outputs and attract funding, often crucial to their professional identity and promotion possibilities (MacPhail, 2020). However, as this snapshot demonstrates, most TEs operate at full capacity, lacking the space and time required to engage with research and continual professional development to the extent they would wish and that their role inevitably demands (Cochran-Smith et al., 2019).

More broadly, the duties of the TE are performed in accordance with external and internal accountability and quality assurance measures, including regular changes in policies concerning Initial Teacher Education (ITE) (McDonough et al., 2024). In addition, the HE sectors in Ireland and the United Kingdom (UK), like those in many countries worldwide, are experiencing significant financial pressures and cuts to staff budgets. The cumulative burden of growing responsibilities, limited resources, and funding cuts negatively impacts TEs' personal and professional quality of life (Fitzsimons & Smith, 2025; Coyle et al., 2020; Wood & Quickfall, 2024). It is therefore unsurprising that TEs – across international contexts – frequently report symptoms of feeling undervalued, stressed, and burned out within the ITE environment (Coyle et al., 2020). However, despite their essential role in education, there remains a significant research gap concerning the protective factors that sustain their wellbeing. There is a need for greater knowledge and appreciation of these factors to understand the mechanisms by which existing TEs have developed the occupational resilience to remain in their posts and to develop strategies for future TEs to incorporate these into their personal practice. While this qualitative study focuses on TEs, the insights gained may inform other occupational settings, particularly people-oriented professions that require high levels of resilience and emotional labour, such as healthcare and social work.

Burnout and Wellbeing

Burnout is an occupational-related phenomenon characterised by emotional exhaustion, depersonalisation, and a diminished belief in one's sense of personal accomplishment (Maslach, 2015). These barriers to wellbeing are linked to work overload, unrealistic expectations, insufficient reward, poor working relationships, absence of fairness, and feeling undervalued, among other factors (Lackritz, 2004). While it appears in all professions, burnout is frequently reported in people-centred professions, such as healthcare, education, and social work (Maslach, 2015). It can negatively impact the individual's mental health and productivity, and, in some cases, the organisation's reputation, through poor staff morale and high staff absenteeism and turnover (Lackritz, 2004; Wolfe, 2024). It has long been reported that those working in the education sector are susceptible to burnout (Watts & Robertson, 2011). Yet while a significant portion of research in this area focuses on teachers, there is a dearth of research on HE-based TEs' experiences (Turner & Garvis, 2023). This disparity may reflect several assumptions about the nature and challenges of TE roles. For instance, TEs are less visible than school-based practitioners, and their work is less easily defined. As HE academics, their work may also be considered more 'intellectual', and therefore less emotionally demanding than other educational roles. Moreover, there is a cultural expectation that academics must be highly driven and more inherently resilient to gain entry to and survive in the HE environment. The perception may also be that TEs have more autonomy and control over the environmental elements that contribute to stress, for example, their own competitiveness. Hence the wellbeing of TEs could be seen as a personal problem rather than as a systemic issue, and therefore less deserving of research.

Although studies on burnout among TEs are limited, they combine to create a consistent picture of how the imbalance between work demands and available resources to meet those demands contributes to it. For example, Coyle et al. (2020) report that workload, control, reward, community, fairness, and values are risk factors for burnout in New York-based TEs. Similarly, Brewer and McMahan (2003) reported a lack of organisational support as a primary cause of burnout in their study of industrial and technical TEs. More recently, Fitzsimons and Smith (2025) industrial and technical TEs. More reported how regular accountability measures, such as accreditation and inspection, can cause significant stress to English TEs. In all cases, burnout seems to occur when "the balance between give and take is disturbed" (Desart & de Witte, 2019, p. 142). Untreated stress and burnout can have significant negative implications for faculty and the University. Zábrodská et al. (2017) report that burnout leads to poorer mental and physical health and to dissatisfaction with work among the HE workforce. This can affect their commitment to the organisation, ultimately leading to the intention to leave (Sabagh et al., 2018). A recent systemic review of the research extends these findings by further suggesting that poor organisational citizenship can result from burnout among faculty (Khattak et al., 2019). This finding underscores the potential for burnout as a contagion in the workplace, spreading its adverse effects (Meredith et al., 2020). Such factors

can potentially impact a TE's ability to engage with the fundamentals of their job, teaching, research, and the creation of new knowledge. For example, many teachers have a sense of vocation and feel the compulsion to 'show up' for their work even if they are unwell, despite knowing the detrimental impacts of boundaryless work and presenteeism (Poethke et al., 2023). In such ways, the poor mental health of the TE can have a direct impact on the PST learning experience and an indirect impact on the reputation of the organisation.

The Need for Protective Factors

A primary objective of the WHO Comprehensive Mental Health Action Plan 2013–2030 (WHO, 2013) is the identification of both risk and protective factors for mental health. Protective factors may include "overt actions, observable behaviours, unobservable thoughts and events … that occur as a response to an event or in anticipation of upcoming demands" (Schaufeli, 2015, p. 902). However, coping mechanisms are dynamic; they can change over time and are subject to sociocultural factors. Hence, processes can be considered "plastic" (Aldwin, 2007). Du Plessis (2020) explains that strategies can be adaptive or maladaptive at both the conscious and unconscious levels. Adaptive strategies are linked to improved emotional regulation and wellbeing because they can change how an individual perceives a stressor. For example, in their cross-sectional study on mental health outcomes in the general population during the COVID-19 pandemic, Salah et al. (2023) found that resilience and perceived social support were associated with lower levels of anxiety and uncertainty. Adaptive strategies to support resilience might include, among other measures, mindfulness activities, meditation, and physical exercise. These activities are consistent with developing positive emotions and a sense of engagement, since they support individuals in developing self-regulatory and calming practices. In contrast, strategies that leave the problem unresolved, such as avoiding the issue, are believed to increase psychological distress. This can lead to conditions like anxiety, depression, and burnout (du Plessis & Martins, 2019). Thus Schaufeli (2015) argues that coping is an ongoing interactive process between the individual and their experiences rather than a fixed personality trait, indicating that mitigations of stress can be both taught and intrinsically applied as protective factors.

There is little exploration of the protective factors that shield against the adverse effects of burnout in TEs specifically. In a recent study of protective factors in HE, Sell (2023) highlights contextual factors that can influence the morale of HE faculty. These include recognition, work–life balance, mentorship, collegiality, interpersonal relationships, and transparency. Sell argues that when recognition is frequent and explicit, it can enhance morale and promote a sense of accomplishment. However, as the work of the TE is complex, accomplishments are often the outcome of longer-term activities, such as programmatic or module-level innovations. Consequently, the acknowledgement of successes may be delayed or overlooked. In such cases, the lack of recognition may lead to a perceived imbalance between effort and reward, exacerbating existing

stress or frustration. Without appropriate recognition, employees may feel the need to work longer hours or take on additional duties as they seek recognition. Sell suggests that supporting faculty to achieve work–life harmony is critical for reducing stress. Indeed, workplace legislation in many countries now safeguards personal time by upholding employees' right to disconnect (Lerouge & Trujillo Pons, 2022). Further, Sell highlights the importance of mentorship, which can help to build a sense of belonging and collegiality to act as a buffer against the everyday challenges (Dickter et al., 2019). Indeed, Baumeister and Leary (1995) strongly argue that the bonds built through close friendships are vital to maintaining good psychological wellbeing. Finally, Sell (2023) argues that transparency and openness in decision-making, career advancement policies, and communication are vital to workplace satisfaction, helping to foster greater trust if honesty is prioritised.

These five contextual factors – recognition, work–life balance, mentorship, collegiality, and transparency – can, according to Sell (2023), foster an environment that may buffer against burnout and boost work satisfaction. In such ways, Sell offers systemic-level recommendations for leaders and institutions. The holistic promotion of these contextual factors complements the PERMA model developed by Seligman (2011), which provides a comprehensive theoretical framework for understanding and cultivating individual flourishing through the PERMA factors.

The PERMA Framework as a Lens for Wellbeing

Several models address protective factors for wellbeing, including Bronfenbrenner's (2005) ecological framework, Ryff's (1989) multidimensional model of psychological wellbeing (PWB), and Huppert's (2009) theory of flourishing. While these models have provided valuable insight into protective factors across several professional fields, we argue that PERMA is more appropriate to this contextual setting. For example, Bronfenbrenner's framework emphasises how external environmental systems (microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem, chronosystem) shape individual growth. It has proven valuable for understanding macro-level influences on mental health and wellbeing in university settings (Smith et al., 2022). However, its focus on external systems means it is less suited for a study specifically focused on psychological protective factors. In contrast, Ryff's PWB model and Huppert's flourishing framework provide more direct insights into the experiential and psychological aspects of wellbeing, which are central to this study. However, Ryff's model is more identity-driven than experiential, while Huppert's framework focuses primarily on flourishing. In comparison, PERMA assumes flourishing emerges through the promotion of its core factors. Additionally, it explicitly includes engagement, a key factor absent from Ryff's model, making it particularly relevant to the relationality, emotional labour, and internalisation of roles within this sample. For these reasons, this study uses the PERMA positive psychology model as a theoretical framework for understanding the protective factors that support TEs' occupational quality of life and buffer against

potential stress and burnout. The PERMA model (Seligman, 2011) proposes five measurable elements contributing to psychological health and subjective well-being. These include Positive Emotion (P), Engagement (E), Relationships (R), Meaning (M), and Accomplishment (A). When applied to the context of ITE, PERMA provides a lens through which we can examine the protective factors that may support flourishing in the workplace and potentially mitigate against the stress associated with the TE role. As such, this research offers new insights into the protective factors that sustain TEs' sense of wellbeing.

Research Aim

This paper explores the protective factors that sustain TEs' sense of wellbeing as they navigate their roles within Initial Teacher Education (ITE). Guided by the theoretical lens of PERMA, this study specifically examines how TEs experience each element of the PERMA model (Positive Emotion, Engagement, Relationships, Meaning, Accomplishment) as protective factors that contribute to their flourishing and sustained wellbeing within Initial Teacher Education.

Methods

Theoretical Framework: The PERMA Model of Wellbeing

Positive psychology aims to promote wellbeing and increase human flourishing (Seligman, 2011). Its emergence heralded a move away from focusing on the negative aspects of the human condition and behaviour towards supporting optimal functioning (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). That is not to say that positive psychology dismisses life's challenges; instead, it focuses on aspects like joy, happiness, and life satisfaction. Seligman (2002) describes this approach as positive prevention: nurturing strengths and talents to support thriving and wellbeing. This approach aligns closely with the WHO's (2022, n.p.) understanding of good mental health as that which "enables people to cope with the stresses of life, realise their abilities, learn well and work well, and contribute to their community". In such ways, mental health is not just about the absence of ill-being but about being empowered to live fully and contribute meaningfully to society.

Building on the objective of fostering optimal human flourishing, Seligman introduced the PERMA model to "describe what people do to achieve wellbeing" (2018, p. 2). The PERMA elements collectively contribute to helping individuals flourish in the workplace, although individuals may draw more heavily on some elements at certain times depending on their life and work circumstances. Indeed, it is important to note that not all five components need to be equally present or emphasised for flourishing to occur, demonstrating that wellbeing is not a one-size-fits-all phenomenon.

First, the category Positive Emotion includes joy, excitement, happiness, and other natural emotions that individuals enjoy experiencing. For Seligman, individuals should be supported to enhance their positive emotions, since positive emotions can foster their wellbeing and counterbalance their negative emotions. Next, Engagement is the ability to find our lives interesting and to fully engage in what we do. In many respects, this is the opposite of burnout because it represents dedication and absorption within one's work (Taris et al., 2019). Csikszentmihalyi (1990) describes this as being in a state of flow, where the individual feels so invested, immersed, and connected within that they lose track of self-consciousness and time. This state of engagement is considered to enhance the quality and harmony of life through experiencing the benefits of being in the moment, often associated with mindfulness (Seligman, 2018). For TEs, engagement is central to the teaching–learning process because it influences not only the quality of preparation but also the quality of instruction. Teaching is, after all, 'a live show' that requires one to draw on a range of skills, such as adaptability and responsiveness to student needs and classroom dynamics. More broadly, activities such as research inherently require high levels of dedication and commitment to see projects through to completion.

The third aspect of the PERMA model is Relationships. By its nature, the work of the TE is highly relational, and therefore the PERMA lens offers appreciation of the value of the social and relational protective factors TEs draw on. From an evolutionary perspective, group cohesion and interdependence were central to survival and, thus, fundamental to wellbeing (Atkins et al., 2019). Although we have moved towards a more individualistic culture in the modern era, research reports that a sense of reciprocity and connection reduces loneliness, supports motivation, and therefore promotes good mental health (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). These facets of relationality came to the fore during the recent COVID-19 pandemic, where interdependence, friendship, and altruism helped people deal with the contextual dilemmas they faced (Elmer et al., 2020). For this reason, many would agree with Seligman's argument that "other people are the best antidote to the downs of life and the single most reliable up" (2018, p. 20). Research on early career TEs has found that their experiences of stress, loneliness, and feelings of inadequacy could be counteracted through greater community support and friendship (Izadinia, 2014). Indeed, many workplace wellbeing initiatives focus on developing team-building skills, inclusivity initiatives, leadership training, or mentorship initiatives (Sell, 2023). Interestingly, gratitude plays a vital role in sustaining and enhancing relationships, and this is of significance in relationally intense occupations, such as healthcare and education (Emmons & Mishra, 2011).

The fourth component of the PERMA model is Meaning. The WHO (2022) reports that "meaningful work is a protective factor for mental health" (n.p.). Meaning may arise from a sense of contributing to the greater good, a sense of purpose about one's role, or an alignment between personal values and morals and those of the workplace. When combined with job satisfaction, finding meaning or purpose in one's work can lower levels of anxiety and stress (Allan et al., 2016). This provides a positive feedback loop, where job satisfaction amplifies the sense of being connected to work that is of personal, and potentially societal, value. In contrast, those

who report that their work lacks meaning also report lower levels of wellbeing, demonstrating the influence of interpersonal congruence (Liu & Allan, 2022; Seligman, 2018).

The final building block of wellbeing is Accomplishment, which can be pursued intrinsically and not necessarily for hedonic gain or for recognition from others. However, the latter can provide the impetus for some individuals, and thus workplaces should consider both intrinsic and extrinsic factors when nurturing a culture of accomplishment (Kronsbein et al., 2023). In their study of individuals working in student affairs and services, Seifert et al. (2022) report that assisting students in reaching their goals enhanced their sense of accomplishment and impacted their job satisfaction. While the motivation for achievement may be intrinsic, workplaces can support a sense of accomplishment by celebrating successes and publicly and privately recognising achievements with the employee. Efforts can also be made to reframe long-term goals and milestones within shorter time frames to ensure a continual system of feedback to recognise ongoing accomplishment. In such ways, the interrelated nature of the PERMA components becomes evident, as they amplify each other and contribute to overall thriving in the workplace.

The PERMA framework has been applied in a variety of contexts, for example, to guide informed interventions to reduce burnout in doctors, to guide wellbeing practices in school contexts, and to scaffold online positive education support for university students during the pandemic (Bazargan-Hejazi et al., 2021; Morgan & Simmons, 2021; Norrish et al., 2013). The model has also been used as a theoretical lens to i) explore primary school children's wellbeing during the COVID-19 pandemic, ii) measure Australian male students' subjective experiences of wellbeing, and iii) explain the sources of joy for medical educators (Buchanan et al., 2022; Kern et al., 2015; Lagina et al., 2022). The authors of this paper posit that the PERMA model's structured framework serves as a valuable tool for understanding TEs' wellbeing and identifying the protective factors that promote flourishing in the profession.

Research Design

Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA) was adopted to explore the subjective experiences of TEs as they navigate the challenges of their work (Braun & Clarke, 2019). This approach was underpinned by the theoretical lens of the PERMA model. Using the model, this study maps TEs' experiences against the five dimensions to explore how they contribute to wellbeing. In combination, the RTA approach places emphasis on openness to understanding and describing how TEs manage stress and protect their wellbeing, while the deductive framework provides a structured exploration of the wellbeing dimensions already identified within the literature.

Participants and Sampling

This study included 154 TEs based in HEs in Ireland and the UK from across the early childhood, primary, secondary, and further education teacher training sectors; they shared the common feature of being TEs working within HEs. This sample

consisted of 154 participants, with 110 (71.4%) identifying as female, 43 (27.9%) as male, and 1 (0.6%) as non-binary. This distribution reflects the gendered nature of Teacher Education. A wide age range was observed, with 23 (14.9%) aged 18–35 years, 49 (31.8%) aged 36–45 years, 44 (28.6%) aged 46–55 years, and 38 (24.7%) aged 56 years or older. The majority of participants were employed as Assistant Professors (67, 45.6%) and Associate Professors (52, 35.4%), with smaller numbers in Teaching Assistant/Teacher Fellow (13, 8.8%), Assistant Lecturer (6, 4.1%), and Professor (9, 6.1%) positions. Participants were primarily from the Republic of Ireland (69, 45.4%), followed by England (36, 23.7%), Scotland (21, 13.8%), Wales (14, 9.2%), and Northern Ireland (12, 7.9%). Regarding educational sectors, 72 (46.8%) worked in Second Level Teacher Education, while 53 (34.5%) were in Primary Teacher Education and the remainder worked in Further Education and Training, (24, 15.6%) and Early Childhood (5, 3.2%). From this cohort, TEs were selected as a purposive sample for semi-structured interviews to better understand the factors that contribute to their flourishing in the workplace. This sample was chosen to include representation across geographic contexts, gender, role, and length of time working in ITE and ITE sector.

Data Collection

An email invitation was shared with over 1500 TEs working in accredited ITE HE contexts in Ireland and the UK. The invitation included an outline of the purpose of the study, informed consent, and an invitation to participate in the follow-up interviews. One-hundred-and-fifty-four participants completed the Copenhagen Burnout Inventory (self-report inventory on burnout) and a survey related to their experiences of occupational wellbeing. The survey included the following three open-ended questions that focused specifically on identifying the protective factors that support TEs sense of wellbeing:

1. What protective factors support your general feelings of personal wellbeing?
2. What protective factors support your feelings of wellbeing in your general work as a HEI Teacher Educator?
3. Can you identify the protective factors that support your feelings of wellbeing when working with student teachers?

These questions facilitated participants' reflections on their everyday experiences of managing stress in the ITE workplace and the identification of factors that enhance and protect their quality of life. In line with the research aim, this paper focuses on participants' responses to the 'Protective Factor' questions. Results from the CBI survey and burnout-focused questions can be read elsewhere (Fitzsimons & Smith, 2025).

Interview Data

Fourteen in-depth interviews were conducted with TEs. The interview questions mirrored the three open-ended questions outlined above. This allowed the researchers to explore the themes in greater depth. Interviews lasted 45–60 min and were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim.

Data Analysis

The data analysis followed the six phases of RTA (Braun & Clarke, 2019). Step one involved refamiliarisation with the survey data (462 individual responses) and interviewee long-form responses to the key 'Protective Factor' questions. Next, an initial set of codes was generated inductively based on the data and deductively in line with the PERMA theoretical framework. Codes were grouped into potential themes through an iterative process. The analysis focused on identifying the protective factors that participants described as central to their wellbeing and flourishing. These factors were linked to the five domains of the PERMA framework. Themes were reviewed to ensure they represented coherent patterns across the data sets and that each theme demonstrated internal coherence. The themes were classified and written up in line with the PERMA model categories, with further connections made to the existing literature. To support the reliability and rigour of the findings, the research team engaged in discussion during the analysis and write-up process to challenge assumptions and interpretations (Guest et al., 2012). As such, using PERMA as a theoretical lens, the analysis was able to structure the exploration of TEs' lived experience of the factors that they draw on, and from, to protect their mental health while working in ITE against the five PERMA dimensions as well as the existing literature on protective factors and wellbeing.

Positionality

The primary author has worked as a teacher educator for twenty years, and has therefore amassed extensive first-hand experience with the phenomenon being investigated. This work was partially inspired by her seeing little research addressing this population's wellbeing or exploring their unique pressures and responsibilities. The team cannot discount the possibility that her experiences have impacted the ways in which data are interpreted, since it can be difficult to neutralise the influence of researchers – if this sort of bracketing is even possible (Olmos-Vega et al., 2023). On the contrary, her reflections on the emotional labour and competing demands integral to the role informed both the research aims and the theoretical framework employed, and these experiences were used to connect with the data to enhance understanding and theme generation. The team does not view this as a limitation, since research exploring wellbeing will (almost invariably) be motivated by improving outcomes. An awareness of factors impacting the population can therefore be an asset when identifying areas on which to focus research questions. Moreover, the

decision to employ a popular theory of wellbeing has meant that the interpretive frame was based on the conceptualisation of the PERMA model. Though this does not remove the need for reflexivity – since inductive and deductive approaches are better considered a continuum than a dichotomy (Braun & Clarke, 2021) – it provides a distance between the experiences of the primary researcher and how the data are understood. Collaborating with two researchers who have not worked as teacher educators has also expanded the scope of the write-up and ensured that assumptions and expectations have been questioned throughout. For example, initially, the analysis was going to be more inductive. However, before it was carried out, the third researcher suggested recruiting the second as an additional voice because of his prior work utilising PERMA. This expertise proved invaluable when coding and interpreting the data. Thus, the team's combined experiences have been employed throughout and have shaped how themes are defined and written up.

Ethics

See ethics approval statement. Data were handled in accordance with current GDPR measures. This paper combines survey and interview responses and removes all direct and indirect identifiers, such as demographic data and personal details. As Saunder et al. (2015) argue, the right approach to anonymisation is always a "balancing act" to ensure participants in a relatively small community cannot be re-identified whilst respecting the integrity of the data. This is of particular importance here, as this paper fits within the frame of a larger project on burnout and wellbeing in Teacher Educators in Ireland and the UK. The approach adopted ensures that the participants cannot be identified, even when cross-referenced with other publications by the authors (Tilley & Woodthorpe, 2011).

Findings and Discussion

Positive Emotion and Personal Wellbeing

TEs intentionally work to maintain their wellbeing by engaging in various self-directed protective or coping practices that help cultivate Positive Emotion. These protective factors include physical activities, mindfulness practices, and nurturing social connections, all of which contribute to emotional wellbeing by fostering feelings of joy, contentment, and gratitude. For example, many TEs reported they take time during the working week for physical activities, such as "taking long walks, coast or countryside" (survey), going to the gym, or gardening. While these activities impact physical health, TEs also reported their impact on mental health: "My personal wellbeing is very much impacted by the amount of fresh air and gentle exercise that I get in a day" (survey). Indeed, regular physical activity helps with emotional regulation and can potentially buffer against worry and rumination (Bernstein & McNally, 2018).

Other TEs reported purposefully cultivating resilience through yoga, mindfulness, prayer, journaling or meditative practices. These activities can promote

self-awareness and help to process negative emotions: "I try to focus on the positive and ignore the metrics" (survey). Such intentional and personalised practices are integral to positive psychology, which argues that optimism and self-efficacy play a role in enhancing wellbeing (Seligman, 2018). However, for most TEs in this study, there was a clear social aspect to the cultivation of positive emotions, namely spending time with family and friends, which was identified as the primary source of joy for many TEs. Indeed, the significance of social connections to maintaining wellbeing during challenging times is well documented (WHO, 2022). As one TE summarised: "When I can spend time with my family completely away from work, I feel refreshed, rejuvenated, and more committed to personal wellbeing" (interview).

In addition to these activities, many TEs reported that a positive attitude helps to sustain them. Gratitude, for example, plays a role in shifting focus towards positive experiences and achievements: "I have gratitude for the education I have received and the opportunity to give back in meaningful ways, and work with great colleagues and young people" (interview). As Fredrickson (2004) explains, gratitude may contribute to happiness, and happiness can feed off gratitude, creating a cycle of virtue. Another TE reported: "I'm grateful for my work, and recognising the privilege of getting to teach and research in a field that I love also helps protect my wellbeing" (survey). Others spoke about the importance of having perspective and connecting through fun and humour, as succinctly captured by one TE: "having the craic [fun] can never be underestimated" (survey).

It is also interesting to note that in the context of Positive Emotion, TEs also reported that a peaceful work environment contributes to wellbeing via a sense of calmness and comfort. One described the underrated significance of having the basics, such as "tidy, modern offices, clean and plentiful toilets, and effective IT systems" (survey), allowing employees to focus on their work rather than being distracted by infrastructural or technical issues. Moreover, a "peaceful work environment" (survey) enabled them to feel relaxed and contributed to emotional balance and reduced anxiety. Thus, by creating an environment where TEs can thrive emotionally, HEs support immediate wellbeing and promote longer-term emotional resilience, which has longer-term implications for overall mental health (Seligman, 2018). These findings underscore how cultivating gratitude, perspective, humour, and calmness – all core components of Positive Emotion – can combine to contribute to the emotional resilience that TEs can draw on during challenging times. However, Positive Emotion does not work in isolation, and many TEs indicated that it extended from their social experiences and their sense of Engagement and Accomplishment.

Engagement

Engagement, particularly through teaching and research experiences, serves as a second pillar of wellbeing. Engagement is "the loss of self-consciousness during an absorbing activity" (Seligman, p. 11). This aspect of engagement is thought to have a bidirectional relationship with burnout; that is, flow acts as a buffer against burnout, and conversely, burnout can inhibit the experience of flow (Aust et al., 2022).

One participant reflected on the experience of being immersed in the shaping of PSTs: "For me, teaching is where I get all my energy and focus; it's exhausting, but it also keeps me going" (interview). Another commented on the intrinsic motivation: "Working with student-teachers gives me energy, so I don't see myself as burned out" (survey). The sense of accomplishment and mastery from feeling engagement was also evident in the data: "I get so much back from students when I work with them and being able to see their progress" (survey). Despite the intense nature of the work, some TEs derived a deep sense of fulfilment that satisfies their emotional wellbeing. One reported: "It's a delight actually to teach them; they are dying to learn, they are hanging on your every word"(interview). For other TEs, engagement with research provides a stabilising force: "For me, it was the research that kept me grounded during the hardest times, even if it was not always easy" (survey). In such cases, the intellectual challenge and purpose associated with research also serves to sustain motivation.

Interestingly, many TEs claimed that excessive workload eroded their sense of engagement: "you feel that work is kind of taking over your family time, and you don't have a proper work–life balance" (survey). Working under stressful conditions is not conducive to maintaining engagement. To address this, some highlighted the active step of boundary setting to enable them to be fully present and engaged in their professional or personal lives. This involved "reading, walking, taking a break" (interview) or more deliberate activities: "I turn off my emails at the end of the day" (survey); "I refuse to work after 9 pm and have at least one full day off at the weekend" (survey). As one advised: "Things don't get worse when you tighten your boundaries; they get better" (interview). So, while teaching and research act as intrinsic motivators, providing a sense of emotional fulfilment, an unmanageable workload can significantly undermine this state of wellbeing. Moreover, it may also undermine TEs' ability to develop creative teaching and learning approaches and impact their research productivity, both of which can impact the student experience and career prospects of the TE. This finding highlights the importance of addressing systemic issues, such as workload. However, the reality of this happening is questionable as we move further into the funding crisis in Higher Education.

Relationships

TEs highlighted the importance of social connections through family, colleagues, or PSTs that help protect against being overwhelmed by daily challenges. Across the data, there is evidence that colleagues' diverse roles, from emotional support to professional mentoring, are fundamental to sustaining TE wellbeing. Developing a sense of "camaraderie" through "talking to people about sport and joking and laughing with colleagues" (interview) offers relief from work pressures. As Sell (2023) argues, social support provides reassurance that issues and challenges are felt collectively and are not unique to the individual: "Colleagues have been in the system for a while – I think they've nearly seen it all" (survey). One TE confirmed that this can boost morale, as colleagues "can advise and empathise" (interview). Colleagues also act as sounding boards: "You can express your frustration with what is going

on around you, and that can be helpful" (interview). Many highlighted the support on offer within their HEs: "Generally, my institution and leaders are supportive, and I know that if I am overwhelmed, they would be understanding and would provide a good buffer of support" (survey). In the context of both internal and external HE pressures, the shared sense of purpose can act as a counterbalance (Wood & Quickfall, 2024).

Additionally, although TEs may not agree on every topic, "there is a structure to allow you to disagree constructively, and this is tremendously valuable" (interview). The ability to engage in constructive professional conversations is central to professional growth (Thompson and Trigwell, 2018). As one TE remarked, "people have different skills and talents to share"(interview), and the ability to exchange ideas can strengthen professional relationships and collective success. This is interesting, because academia is often viewed as individualistic: "An individual does things for their own career or trajectory" (interview). In this study, many TEs reported that the ITE space is more collaborative and kinder: "It's much more of a team setting, more nurturing" (interview). Examples of reciprocity included goal-directed activities such as "co-teaching students, collaborating and developing creative assessment approaches, researching aspects of higher education pedagogy with colleagues" (survey), which contributes to a shared sense of purpose and belonging. However, there was an acknowledgment that the protective value of the team approach is often overlooked within the competitive university culture: "The promotion system should put more value on the team experience. How good of a colleague have you been? How collegial are you? Because, let's face it, none of us are brilliant at everything" (interview).

However, it is important to also acknowledge that positive relationships and collaboration may present challenges, even though they are vital for wellbeing. For example, much of the research on burnout reports that excessive relational demands can contribute to compassion fatigue and emotional exhaustion (Maslach, 2015). In such cases, the relationship dynamics that typically support wellbeing may exacerbate stress. For example, as TEs develop their reputation for collegiality, they may become overloaded with requests for collaboration. In such cases, taking on too much collaborative work may exacerbate the feeling of being overwhelmed. This possibility is particularly relevant in the broader context of diminished resources within ITE. As one TE highlighted: "I have learned to say no, to communicate my needs more clearly and forcibly so that they are heard, asking for support" (survey). While acknowledging that the team approach is central to ITE, over-relying on that goodwill to "get things done" (interview) can have negative consequences in terms of emotional exhaustion. With HE institutions facing a funding crisis, they must find innovative ways to support a shared sense of relationality in a way that respects work–life boundaries.

Meaning

Many TEs, who often transition to academia from the classroom, have a heightened sense of awareness about the impact of their work on young people's lives.

> Of greater importance to me is to understand and empathise with my students' concerns and anxieties. To be a role model to them in demonstrating that ranking and competition is not important but embracing the uniqueness of each student is. To play a part in where they have come from and where they will be in the future is the greatest gift of being a teacher educator. (survey)

This vocational commitment is a common theme in the narratives of TEs in this study. As one respondent expressed: "There's the strong vocational thing of wanting to bring on the next generation of teachers, helping students to become really good teachers" (survey). This sense of values-driven Meaning aligns closely with Seligman's conception of Meaning as a sense of contributing to something greater than oneself (2018). In many ways, the TEs in this study derive a deep sense of purpose from supporting PSTs: "it's the bigger picture that keeps you going, knowing what you do really matters" (interview). During periods of stress, TEs may battle on because of this mission to contribute to the field of education: "I find it very rewarding that I'm sort of having a ripple effect, for example, they are taking those values we have introduced them to with them" (interview). Indeed, research suggests that individuals who consider their work as purposeful are likely to report lower levels of stress and anxiety (Liu & Allan, 2022).

Understandably, Relationships are essential to sustaining the values-driven Meaning for TEs. It is unsurprising then that most, if not all, TEs in this study reported that the sense of connection with PSTs can be highly fulfilling: "It's lovely when you go out to school to see them – this is the really life-giving part of the job, seeing them doing so well"(interview). The core work of the TE is relational, and this may help to reaffirm their values and contribute to their sense of Meaning (Dickter et al., 2019). However, it is important to acknowledge that Meaning, while a protective factor, can also become a double-edged sword when it causes TEs to overextend themselves. As Maslach (2015) has argued, those with a deep emotional investment in their work, such as teachers and social or healthcare workers driven by values and empathy, can often have difficulty setting boundaries as a result of their vocational commitment. The blurring of boundaries can impact work–life harmony and mental health: "Sometimes I can't switch off, and this causes anxiety and stress at home, which manifests in sleepless nights" (survey). Others acknowledged that "working with young people is the part of the job that energises us, seeing them do well, so we want to support them, but there is a cost to that as well" (survey). It is clear from the data that Meaning is the existential anchor that guides TE commitment and sustains them in the face of challenges. The challenge for HEs is to nurture and support the commitment of the TE workforce by promoting policies that prioritise work–life harmony in order to negate the longer-term effect of emotional exhaustion. Moreover, HEs must recognise the limitations of goodwill that extend from an individual's sense of vocation to their role.

Accomplishment

Accomplishment is a sense of achievement that can bring feelings of personal validation, motivation, and fulfilment (Seligman, 2011). As previously outlined, juggling duties is often challenging, but may be exacerbated by the inherent pressures within ITE. However, for Seligman, the individual has agency and autonomy, even in the face of diminished resources. Therefore, individuals can still achieve a sense of accomplishment: for example, day-to-day achievements can support intrinsic motivation and wellbeing.

At a basic level, many respondents reported using organisational strategies to reinforce their sense of day-to-day achievement. For example: "I try to keep a to-do list and view the log when I am done to have a feeling of accomplishment" (survey). These small personal actions create a sense of everyday progress and thus, in the longer term, promote feelings of mastery over the work (Schaufeli, 2015). More significantly, TEs reported a distinct sense of personal achievement and self-efficacy concerning teaching and research, which supports their motivation and morale. One remarked: "When you see the positive difference in students' work, whether academic or professional placement, that is extremely rewarding" (interview). Witnessing PSTs' improvement during their professional practice provides a tangible reminder of the TE's contribution to society, which is significant given the vocational vision of some TEs.

Horizontally expressed recognition from PSTs and colleagues further enhances this sense of achievement: "I really enjoy positive feedback from students, the feeling that I am making a difference" (interview). Others concurred: "We frequently (& quietly) go out of our way to help a student who may be struggling for a range of reasons; the note or word of gratitude which often comes a long time after is very re-affirming" (survey). These kinds of acknowledgement and validation from others are essential for sustaining morale and promoting wellbeing (Sell, 2023). As the data demonstrate, external validation can complement the intrinsic satisfaction that TEs derive from their work, which may reinforce professional identity and motivation. However, while Accomplishment is a powerful protective factor, it is important to acknowledge the external challenges to maintaining a sense of achievement within the current academic environment. Relying on competitive research and performance metrics to evaluate productivity doesn't capture the full complexity of the work of the TE (Fitzsimons & Smith, 2025). In this study, there was limited expression of superordinate recognition of TEs' achievements. This form of formal recognition may reinforce job satisfaction and professional fulfilment. Addressing accomplishments through HE-based initiatives is of value, but a more systematic approach to recognising and rewarding the significant and diverse contributions of TEs should be explored.

Concluding Remarks

The findings of this paper underscore that the PERMA framework is foundational in supporting TEs' flourishing, with potential broader societal impact. The PERMA

protective factors interact dynamically to support the development of resilience, with Meaning serving as an existential anchor that provides direction and stability during challenging times. The knowledge that one is contributing to something larger than oneself offers TEs a deeper sense of purpose and may be sustaining in the short term. However, while Engagement, Relationships, Meaning, and Accomplishment are critical components to support thriving, it is essential to manage these factors to prevent overwork and emotional exhaustion. Leveraging these components in times of financial burden to 'get the job done' may lead to stress, which has a cascading effect on the broader educational environment. For example, stressed TEs may inadvertently model negative attitudes or burnout, shaping how young PSTs perceive the teaching profession and potentially reducing their motivation and commitment. Therefore, HE institutions should focus on reducing stress for TEs, emphasising Positive Emotions and Relationships within the PERMA model to foster a healthier work environment and positively influence PSTs' engagement with the profession. These findings are not only relevant to TEs, but also to other people-oriented professions, such as healthcare and social work, where burnout is prevalent and there is a clear need to understand the protective and generative factors of quality of life and wellbeing. Indeed, the theoretical approach adopted in this study may be of value for exploring protective factors in other work contexts to facilitate staff retention through the enhanced understanding of how wellbeing can be promoted and protected in various disciplines and occupational environments.

The challenges facing TEs extend beyond individual HE institutions and reflect broader sector-wide concerns about the sustainability of the HE workforce. Institutional and sector-level policies that prioritise educator quality of life will help to ensure the longevity of the TE profession. By recognising the role of Meaning and Accomplishment in a way that has due regard for the unique role of TEs, HE institutions can nurture environments that enable TEs to find purpose and recognition in their work. While HE institutions are, for the most part, making strides in creating healthy campus environments that foreground student wellbeing and flourishing, the authors believe there remains a need to extend similar robust support systems for TEs. These initiatives include stress management workshops, peer support networks, and mental health resources grounded in Engagement and Relationships, which may reduce stress and promote positive professional attitudes. Such support contributes to sustainable work practices for TEs. In practical terms, HE leadership must recognise that promoting faculty wellbeing is a strategic necessity that impacts teaching quality, student experiences, and institutional reputation. Institutions should implement PERMA-aligned strategies within their workplace health and safety policies to operationalise these commitments. As outlined, proactive interventions could include structured mentoring programmes, addressing sustainable workload policies within ITE, and formalised recognition of diverse accomplishments. Further to this, organisations should consider greater opportunities for teamwork, assist TEs to establish boundaries in their work practices, and optimise conditions to support the state of flow that is necessary for deep academic work. At the same time, we acknowledge that an independent assessment of the feasibility (human resources, funding, and management) and effectiveness of PERMA-based initiatives should be undertaken. Finally, broader structural and policy-related issues affecting ITE and

the wider HE sector must be addressed to ensure the longer-term sustainability of these efforts.

Limitations and Future Research

This study offers valuable insights into the protective factors that sustain TEs' occupational wellbeing. However, a number of limitations should be acknowledged. First, the PERMA model is often critiqued for being overly positive. However, this study identifies both strengths and challenges in participants' experiences, demonstrating that wellbeing is complex and extends beyond purely positive factors. Future research could further explore other protective factor models, such as Ryff's and Huppert's models of wellbeing and flourishing, and consider how they intersect with our findings for a more nuanced understanding, specifically the exploration of wellbeing with a focus on occupational identity. Second, in addition to theoretical considerations, we acknowledge that there are methodological limitations. This study drew on two data sources (survey and interviews), but we recognise that perceptual bias can exist in self-reported data. For example, participants may focus more specifically on their coping strategies rather than on organisational supports, which could influence results. Given this potential bias, future research might focus specifically on trialling interventions or further exploring the organisational support available to TEs. It would be valuable to include teacher educators, leadership, and HE management perspectives in such a study. Triangulating these data with HE policy, psychosocial workplace safety regulations (if available), and workload data would offer more holistic and contextualised perspectives of experiences. In line with this goal, we strongly believe that structural support interventions such as targeted wellbeing policies and workload redistribution should be evaluated. Without such studies, burnout will remain framed as an individual vs organisational responsibility. Third, our study draws on TEs working in Ireland and the UK; however, workplace stressors, workload expectations, and institutional support structures are highly context dependent. This may limit the applicability of findings to other geographic contexts. Finally, while the PERMA model provides a useful analytical lens, alternative ecological systems frameworks could offer additional perspectives on flourishing within HE.

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