Enablers and constraints to teacher educator wellbeing amidst institutional accountability cultures: a PERMA perspective

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Abstract

The work of contemporary teacher educators in university contexts is under increasing political and public scrutiny as the focus on Initial Teacher Education (ITE) reform intensifies. Consequently, there are growing concerns for teacher educators' wellbeing amidst escalating expectations and pressures. While research has explored the wellbeing of university academics more generally, less is understood about teacher educators more specifically. This paper aims to deepen understanding of the perceived enablers and constraints influencing how teacher educators experience wellbeing within their everyday work as academics in higher education contexts. Using metalogue as method, nine teacher educators from two Australian universities collectively reflected on their wellbeing during an online focus group session guided by an arts-based activity. Framed by the key constructs of the PERMA wellbeing framework, the ensuing metalogue was analysed thematically. Findings highlighted the particular importance they place on feeling a sense of value, purpose, and meaning in their work as educators for their wellbeing. Findings further showed how the impact of current external reform-driven accountabilities on their work and that of educators in the profession more broadly constrain their wellbeing. These findings have implications for institutional leaders and teacher educators in Australia and internationally where academics are experiencing performative cultures.

Keywords Teacher educator · Teacher education · Wellbeing · University · Accountability · PERMA

Introduction

The working lives of university academics have become increasingly intensified and performance-driven with the shift toward neoliberally inspired marketisation of academic institutions across the globe (MacFarlane, 2021). The Academy, and those who work within it, operate 'under a system that embraces the legitimisation of

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competition' (MacFarlane, 2021, p. 460) and accountability-centric measures, now more than ever (Griffin, 2022; Heffernan & Heffernan, 2019; MacFarlane, 2021). Each academic's professional status, value, and career opportunities are increasingly determined by their measurable outputs, with the number of top-tier publications, profusion and prestige of funding dollars, and churn of completed higher degree research supervisions counted as proof of worth to their university (MacFarlane, 2021), with teaching often not valued (Bennett et al., 2018). According to Griffin (2022), academics are largely struggling to just maintain 'work-work balance'; that is, the ability to manage the amount and complexity of competing demands in the workplace, much less find a life-work balance. Australia offers a clear case in point.

While certainly an issue Academy-wide, teacher education in Australia faces additional challenges specific to their discipline that exacerbate these already mounting pressures (Hoyte et al., 2020; McDonough et al., 2021). As part of what has been termed a 'Global Education Reform Movement' (GERM) (Ellis et al., 2019; McMahon et al., 2015) teacher education and teacher educators in Australia have seen imposed ever-changing and escalating externally mandated reforms to which they are continually required to respond. Initial Teacher Education (ITE) program requirements have, according to Dwyer et al. (2020), placed Teacher Educators (TEs) in the 'iron grip of regulation' (p. 230). Just as classroom teachers have been held up as the 'problem' (Biesta, 2015; Garcia & Weiss, 2020; Rowe & Skourdoumbis, 2019) where student outcomes have been perceived as inadequate, TEs are blamed for not effectively preparing teachers to have the knowledge and skills needed to do their jobs (Bahr & Mellor, 2016) and have been noted to be responsible for poor school students' academic outcomes (Cochran-Smith et al., 2020).

The plethora of Australian reviews into ITE, such as the Teacher Education Ministerial Advisory Group (TEMAG) Issues Paper (2014), Next Steps: Report of the Quality Initial Teacher Education Review (Australian Government, 2022), and most recently, the Teacher Education Expert Panel (Department of Education, Australia, 2023) lay testament to this assumption that teacher education is underperforming and while this assumption could be challenged as failing to consider the complex nature of schools, students, teaching, and teacher education (Nuttall & Brennan, 2016), the pressure continues to be applied. Political and media ongoing narration around teacher education's perceived failings has compounded a pressurised working context (Larsen & Mockler, 2021; Mockler & Redpath, 2022) in which TEs often feel de-valued and de-professionalised (Arnold, 2020; Cochran-Smith et al., 2018). Much less research has investigated the impact of these reform-based work pressures on Teacher Educator (TE) wellbeing, specifically those working in university contexts in ITE. Much of the research undertaken to date has considered how TEs feel positioned by current workplace demands (Alexander et al., 2020; Buchannan, 2020; Larsen & Mockler, 2021), but these studies do not have a specific focus on TE wellbeing.

It is critical we explore this issue given that TEs are responsible for developing new generations of teachers through the development and delivery of ITE programs, and the subsequent ongoing development of teachers that proceed to postgraduate education studies. As with other academics, burnout, and sub-optimal wellbeing for TEs have the potential to compromise the quality of ITE and serve as

counterintuitive to national education goals; yet these educators, particularly in the Australian context, remain largely absent from the wellbeing literature despite concerns about their working environments (Turner & Garvis, 2023). This paper seeks to address this gap in the literature.

In this study, we aim to extend extant understandings of academics' wellbeing by developing a deeper understanding of Australian TEs' perceptions of their wellbeing and the enabling and constraining factors influencing this in the contemporary university context. We argue that TEs are in a tenuous position whereby the persistent and escalating focus on educational reform agendas adds another layer of wellbeing challenge that may be less conspicuous for academics in other fields. Responding to Turner and Garvis's (2023) concerns about the limited diversity of qualitative research on this issue, we employed the PERMA wellbeing framework (Seligman, 2012) to innovatively frame this qualitative study. Drawing on the five elements posited in PERMA to contribute to wellbeing (Seligman, 2012): Positive Emotion, Engagement, Relationships, Meaning, and Accomplishment, we collected perceptions of wellbeing via an arts-stimulated focus group metalogue (Willis et al., 2018) or conversation with nine TEs across two Australian universities inclusive of the authors. This qualitative study sought to gather rich insights to respond to the following research question:

How are teacher educators experiencing wellbeing in the contemporary university context?

Next, we define wellbeing in the context of teacher education and review the extant literature on TE wellbeing. Then, we provide a detailed explanation of the PERMA framework upon which we have drawn for this study. The key findings are then presented and discussed, concluding with the implications of the findings and the authors' recommendations for further research.

Defining teacher educator wellbeing

Within the field of teacher education, there is no commonly accepted definition of wellbeing (Kiltz et al., 2020), and previous researchers have applied a variety of conceptualisations of wellbeing in their research. For example, Kiltz et al. (2020), in their study of German and Dutch university TEs defined wellbeing as being a state of flourishing, positive affect, and engagement which also includes physical, social, psychological, and emotional factors including life satisfaction, resilience and work engagement. Conversely, Roy and Roy (2016) explained wellbeing in their study of TEs in India as a harmonious condition of life where an individual maintains a healthy, happy relationship with others.

In the context of our study and building on their previous work in the field of TE wellbeing (Barton et al., 2022; Turner & Garvis, 2023), the authors apply Seligman's (2012) conceptualisation of wellbeing which is defined as a multifaceted construct including the elements of Positive emotion, Engagement, Relationships, Meaning, and Accomplishment, also referred to as PERMA. The PERMA wellbeing

framework was deemed the most appropriate for this study as it has been previously applied in studies of wellbeing in higher educational settings (see for example: Gupta et al., 2022; Inigo & Raufaste, 2019), though not specifically teacher education. For this paper, wellbeing therefore refers to how teacher educators perceive a sense of positive emotion, engagement with and through their work, supportive collegial relationships, and a sense of authentic accomplishment and meaning from the work they do in the teacher education space.

Issues affecting teacher educator wellbeing

Previous research in the field of wellbeing has shown that when an individual experiences high levels of wellbeing at work there are noticeable benefits both for the individual and the organisation (Dohaney, 2021; Pagán-Castaño, 2020).To illustrate, longitudinal research demonstrates that individuals with high levels of work-related wellbeing have better physical health (Diener et al., 2017) and are more intelligent, curious, engaged, and creative at work (Fredrickson, 2009; Seligman, 2012). Further research has shown that when employees have a say in their workplace environment including aesthetics, their productivity and self-worth increase (Barton & Le, 2023). In addition, they have better relationships at work (Diener et al., 2018), and are more likely to be successful at work (Lyubomirsky et al., 2005). Individuals' wellbeing at work also has benefits at an organisational level. For example, Krekel et al. (2019) in their study of over 1.8 million employees across 73 countries, found a strong positive correlation between employees' high wellbeing at work and organisational productivity and profits.

Despite the personal and organisational benefits of wellbeing, burnout has been well-reported among academics more broadly (Kinman & Johnson, 2019; Simons et al., 2019; Zábrodská et al., 2018). In their study of academics in the UK, Wray and Kinman (2022) identified that increasing job demands, a lack of manager and peer support and competitive work culture, a lack of role clarity and understanding, and ineffective change management within the university workplace are significant issues for academics' wellbeing. Lee et al. (2022) concur, arguing that academic workloads, workforce casualisation, and the 'managerialism phenomenon' (p. 63) were all contributing factors to issues of wellbeing among academics. The issue of job insecurity was similarly reported by Marongwe and Chiphambo (2020) as deleterious to academics' emotional wellbeing, alongside escalating research, teaching, and service work demands. Kim et al. (2023) discussed the direct impact of these contextual issues on positive emotion and thus, wellbeing. In these studies, these issues are linked to university expectations as they adopt managerially-driven practices in response to market competition and a lack of infrastructure to support academics' wellbeing.

In these studies, escalating and pervasive accountability requirements specific to teacher education and the teaching profession at large are not explored, revealing a gap in our understanding of the impact of such regimes on TE wellbeing. Significantly, a recent scoping review of what is known about TE wellbeing, stress, and burnout (see Turner & Garvis, 2023) revealed that globally only thirteen studies

were conducted in this field between 2016 and 2022, with most reporting on studies from the United States (see, for example, Coyle et al., 2020; Sharp et al., 2018; Padilla & Thompson, 2016). Only two studies were undertaken solely in the Australian context (Gillett-Swan & Grant-Smith, 2020; McDonough et al., 2021) with another international study of TE wellbeing in Canada, the United States, Australia, and England (Kosnik et al., 2017).

Findings of these studies suggest that exhaustion, burnout and low levels of wellbeing are common for TEs due to factors such as workload intensification and excessive workload (McDonough et al., 2021; Kosnik et al., 2017), job insecurity (Kiltz et al., 2020), supporting student wellbeing (Gillet-Swan & Grant-Smith, 2020; Kiltz et al., 2020), perceived lack of institutional support (Gillet-Swan & Gran-Smith, 2020; Coyle et al., 2020) and teacher-researcher role conflict whereby teacher educators often assume significant teaching responsibilities which are not valued by their institutions (Padilla &Thompson, 2016). While COVID-19 features in Amos-Williams et al.'s (2022) South African study of factors impacting TEs' wellbeing, the pandemic has not been a notable issue in Australian teacher educator wellbeing research to date. External accountabilities, prevalent in the Australian teacher education context, were reported among many other factors as negatively impacting wellbeing in McDonough et al.'s (2021) Australian study.

Apart from these few studies, limited address of wellbeing has been made regarding TEs and even more specifically those in Australia. Turner and Garvis (2023) concluded from their scoping review that TE wellbeing, stress, and burnout are relatively new and under-researched areas. Further to their determination that few quantitative studies have applied validated and reliable measures to this issue, they noted a lack of qualitative methodological diversification (Turner & Garvis, 2023). Thus, this study with its TE participant group and unique qualitative methodological approach makes an important contribution to addressing the current gap in knowledge around the impact of increased accountability on TE wellbeing in the Australian context.

PERMA as a framework to investigate teacher educator wellbeing

Interestingly, despite the extensive use of the PERMA wellbeing framework in education more broadly (see, Turner & Thielking, 2019), PERMA has not been used to frame teacher-educator wellbeing research to date. A search of Google Scholar, Scopus, and Proquest databases using terms 'teacher educator' and 'PERMA' and 'wellbeing' for studies published between 2012 and 2022 in English yielded zero relevant results. In 2023, Turner et al., (2023) used PERMA to report on how academics during COVID-19 experienced their wellbeing in the transition to working from home, and while this included some teacher educators, this study was also not specific to this group of academics. Thus, we have used PERMA as an innovative and useful conceptual framing for this study. The PERMA framework, as proposed by Seligman (2012) explains wellbeing to be constituted of five distinct, yet inter-related elements including positive emotion, engagement, relationships, meaning,

and accomplishment. In the context of this study, we consider these elements as they might be enabled or constrained within the work and workplace of the teacher educator.

To briefly define each, positive emotion is the subjective state of happiness and life satisfaction (Seligman, 2012), joy, and contentment (Butler & Kern, 2016). Engagement, otherwise referred to as flow, is the state of being absorbed in a task (Seligman, 2012). This is characterised by feelings of interest and excitement (Butler & Kern, 2016). Positive relationships are those satisfying connections forged with others that provide social support and a sense of interpersonal togetherness (Butler & Kern, 2016). To experience meaning is the subjective experience of feeling that one is a part of, and contributing to, something bigger than oneself (Seligman, 2012). In other words, meaning is achieved when one feels that life (such as work-life) is purposeful, valuable, and worthwhile (Butler & Kern, 2016). Accomplishment is defined as the experience of achievement (Seligman, 2012). Subjective in nature, accomplishment may equate to progression toward or achievement of a goal (Butler & Kern, 2016).

According to Seligman (2012), high PERMA as measured by the PERMA scale is a state of optimal wellbeing, with individuals experiencing a state of flourishing. For the purpose of this paper, the PERMA framework provided a clear and relevant framework that could guide our investigation of enablers and constraints to the work-related wellbeing of teacher educators guided by the PERMA elements.

Methods

This paper drew on a rich interpretative paradigm of research, involving nine TEs across two universities (Table 1) in an arts-stimulated focus group metalogue (Willis et al., 2018) or conversation. As Berrnauer (2023) explains, metalogue as method is a conversational 'encounter' (p. 44) provoked by 'painting, playing, sculpting, writing, and other creative endeavours' (p. 44). Among the participants were the four members of the research team. Participants were all employed in teaching and research roles in their respective university's Schools of Education and varied in

Table 1 Participant information

Participant	University context	Academic Position
Sam	University A	Level B
Jayden	University A	Level B
Arlin	University A	Level C
Jan	University A	Level E
Taylor	University B	Level B
Morgan	University B	Level B
Nic	University B	Level C
Riley	University B	Level C
Jay	University B	Level E

academic positions from Level B lecturers to Level E Professors. Of the total participants, four were members of the research team. All participants were allocated a pseudonym and only broad participant details have been reported to protect the anonymity of participants.

Data collection commenced following ethics approval from all relevant university institutions (H22REA067). Participants attended an online workshop to discuss their experiences of wellbeing as TEs. One member of the research team facilitated as well as participated in the online workshop. Participants were asked to have available to them a range of drawing tools and art materials for the session such as pencils, scissors, coloured paper, and a simple 'petal' template emailed to them before the session. After a chance for the participants to introduce themselves to the group, participants were given simple instructions for creating a simple patterned flower artwork.

As participants drew, coloured and cut to create the form of a patterned flower, the workshop facilitator invited participants to first consider negative aspects or constraints related to their work and wellbeing. They were asked to identify words or phrases that represented their thinking and to add these to the each petal of the flower. As they did so, participants were invited to share their thoughts and perspectives as well as respond to others' thoughts and ideas. The generative conversation or metalogue (Willis et al., 2018) that ensued was then furthered with participants asked to add phrases that were opposite to these negative feelings and perceived constraints, hence transforming their perspective (Barton, 2020) and stimulating participants' conversation about potential enablers to their wellbeing. The generative nature of metalogue among all participants preserves individual voices (Staller, 2007) while enabling all participants to guide the direction of the conversation, unlike a more didactic interview approach.

Metalogue (Willis et al., 2018) is a form of organic and expanding conversation. This methodology has been demonstrated to reveal deep insights through its highly relational and reflexive approach. It enabled participants to 'engage in dialogical exchange' (Willis et al., 2018, p. 49) regarding TE wellbeing. During the process, participants were provided with time and space to individually reflect on the topic, and as they chose to, they drew on their creative work and semi-structured conversational prompts provided by the workshop facilitator to discuss their experiences of work-related wellbeing and how they understood their wellbeing to be addressed both personally and by their university context. Pauses in conversation were woven throughout, with participants left to offer spontaneous contributions from which further conversations emerged. For instance, the workshop facilitator used prompts to the group such as, 'That's really interesting, how does that resonate with you?' where necessary but similarly embraced pauses to give participants time to take up the conversation and lead the way. This allowed for differing ideas and opinions to emerge and ensured that the ideas and reflections of the participating research team were not prioritised or privileged.

The metalogue (conversation) was audio-recorded and subsequently transcribed using university Panopto software. The transcript was further reviewed by two team members to ensure the accuracy of the transcript against the recording. The transcript was then made available to all participants for their review. The ensuing

artworks in this instance served as the stimulus for reflection and conversation and therefore not included in the analysis process per se. The transcribed metalogue was analysed using King's (2012) guided template approach. Guided template analysis is appropriate where there are clear constructs that frame the research (King, 2012), whereby a priori concepts are identified and then deductively applied to data.

First, the guided template for this study was created to include the five elements of the PERMA framework (positive emotion, engagement, relationships, meaning, accomplishment). Second, the participants' talk was deductively coded individually by two of the research team for these elements. Next, further sub-codes were added, such as enabler or constraint, and further, institutional, or personal in terms of locus. At this stage, the individual coders met to discuss any discrepancies, reach a consensus, and ensure that all participant voices were present. This approach enabled a deep exploration of Seligman's (2012) elements of wellbeing. Finally, themes emerging from this guided analysis were collaboratively developed by the research team. The following section presents the key findings from this approach to analysis.

Findings and discussion

In this section, we present and discuss the findings concerning each of the key elements underpinning the PERMA framework. In doing so, we draw on direct quotes from the arts-stimulated focus group conversation that illustrate both constraints and enablers to wellbeing for these TEs.

Positive emotion

The participants in this study were able to, at times, find moments of happiness and satisfaction—in essence, a sense of joy in the work they undertook as teacher educators. To do so, however, they perceived that they needed to actively seek out ways of deliberately interrupting times of stress to enjoy such positivity. As Sam explained,

> The main thing is that you find your support network and I'm not talking here about your research networking teams or anything like that. [It is those] things that can be the circuit breakers when your wellbeing is compromised in whatever way, whether that be physically or emotionally. I think your support networks act as a circuit breaker to that. And they offer a different world, even if it's just for a moment. And that can make you happy.

Importantly in this instance, Sam was not referring to aspects of the work itself that brought happiness, but more so about a strategy that could be employed to counter feelings of negativity that thwart this aspect of wellbeing. While previous studies have reported that a lack of peer support was a significant barrier to academics' wellbeing (Wray & Kinman, 2022), it would seem that teacher educators are more likely as a group to intentionally work to find and provide the kinds of collegial support essential to maintaining a sense of positivity.

Lim also consciously engaged in regular activities that they found enjoyable and fun, stating that 'every week, it's just for me—it is me time. Not looking at students' emails, not responding to media releases and media information about how to advocate for the profession'.. According to Arlin, the work context constrained the level of positive emotion that could be found in their work. As they stated, 'There's instability and change that you have to counteract … it's a moving feast pretty much all the time, and I think that can bring some sense of apathy.' In work that seemed to lack consistency and predictability, Arlin found that it was difficult to remain 'up' and instead perceived that there was a threat of losing the ability to 'look for the good'. This 'moving feast' reflects the constant and ever-increasing pressures on teacher educators to respond to the demands of accountabilities that shift with each ITE review, an issue reported in other studies (Arnold, 2020; Heffernan & Heffernan, 2019).

While two of the respondents commented on moments of positive emotion, the others expressed their concerns about the workload pressures, the rapidity of change and other stressors that were part of their work as teacher educators and the negativity that generated for them. As Morgan and Taylor explained,

Morgan I think it's really interesting when you are stressed, you go into what they call the dark side and you actually flip and respond in the opposite way that you would normally. Then if you are stressed, then you don't want to talk to people, you don't want anyone near you.
Taylor And so I think that when you do embrace a change that comes along, then when that change is over and the next one comes along, I think it makes it harder to embrace the next one and to see that as being something that is positive for you.

For many of the participants, the levels of stress encountered were high and they often commented on how they felt solely responsible for finding the joyous moments in their work and life and not necessarily their employers. This finding, situated in the teacher education context, contributes to previous studies that have similarly identified a tendency to delegate responsibility for identifying possibilities for joy and positivity at work to the individual academic in other higher education contexts (Smith & Ulus, 2020; Watermeyer et al., 2021).

Engagement

These teacher educators recognised a level of flexibility that was afforded them in the university context that catalysed engagement in their work and enabled their wellbeing. As they discussed:

Morgan And I love that one of the things I noticed early on was the flexibility of how you can use your time. I can organise stuff so that I can really focus on the bits of the job I enjoy.
Riley True, because you can't do that in schools. You're really locked in and this is when it's scheduled or this is.

Nic And then working from home has changed things again. Like that's just, you know, I mean, yes, people do get longer hours, but I know I'm more productive.

A feeling of flow and therefore engagement seems to be achievable for teacher educators when they think about those aspects of their research that they can 'get lost in' (Jay). Some participants indicated that there are aspects of their work in which they can feel a real sense of immersion, such as illustrated by Jay in the following excerpt:

What I love about my role is being able to do pure research. I feel blessed to be able to do this and spend time working on topics that I am passionate about. I get so absorbed in this.

Teacher educators in this study appreciated the opportunities that their passion-driven research afforded them and associated a sense of wellbeing with these work responsibilities. This has also been recognised in other countries such as China (Yang et al., 2021) and Jordan (Al-Jarrah & Al-Rabee, 2020). The teacher educators in this study counted these opportunities as few and far between, with excessive workload constraining the extent to which such opportunities were available to them (Barton et al., 2022). As Taylor suggested,

If you actually looked at people's workloads and worked out how many people are over workload…if you added up all of the additional workloads they're doing... would be interesting. And that's going to have an impact on how people are feeling.

While moments of flow and engagement at work were appreciated and provided some much-needed satisfaction, a plethora of tasks made it challenging to find such opportunities (Watson & Barton, 2020). According to Nic, 'There's too much workload. There's too much paperwork'. Some teacher educators in the study questioned the equitableness of workload distribution across their institutions, with Jan asking 'whether it's always the same in every school so it is equitable'. Such concerns resemble the perceptions of inequity that academics in the education discipline have reported in other studies (Larsen & Brandenburg, 2021).

Morgan went on to explain how in their university, recent redundancies have contributed to limited opportunities for real engagement in their work.

Those forced redundancies happened a lot more than I think. Teacher education was definitely impacted [we]lost a lot of staff…And the consequence of that is that those educators who are still there when they don't get replaced, take on that workload.

This was reinforced by Jay who commented that when people leave their workplaces, they are often not replaced which places more pressure and burden on those who remain to take on this load.

The consequence of that is that those educators who are still there when they don't get replaced, take on that workload…and despite the fact that [there are] workload models, that work has to be done by someone.

Previous research by Griffin (2022) has reported that multiple, complex, and conflicting job demands, often essential to meet performative expectations, constrain not only work-work balance but also work-life balance. This study has gone further to show that such work intensification serves to specifically intrude on moments of flow and engagement.

Relationships

The influence of positive relationships on wellbeing was clearly reported among some participants. Riley, among others, felt that the forging of strong and supportive relationships was key to teacher educator wellbeing, sharing that, 'It's through relationships and opportunities to connect into new networks and meeting new people and growing in that way' that their wellbeing is nurtured. According to Yavuzkurt and Kiral (2020), workplace friendship is important for overall job satisfaction. Generally, these participants echoed earlier findings by Hökkä et al. (2017), commenting on the importance of their work colleagues and how often these relationships helped them get through some of the challenging times.

While teacher educators from one university felt that their efforts to create these relational networks acted as an enabler to their wellbeing, others noted that such relational work was not easy. Jan, for example, stated, 'I find teacher education isolating. I find it one of the most isolating professions I've been in'. In their institution, networking did not occur easily. As such, what served as an enabler of wellbeing for some teacher educators seemed to be unavailable to others.

In contrast, some teacher educators actuallyof found that the relational nature of being a teacher educator has the opposite effect on their wellbeing. For example, Arlin felt drained by the level of social interaction they were required to engage in as part of their work and thus believed it to be a constraint to wellbeing. They pointed out that,

The way that we teach in the classroom…is I think... highly emotive and that kind of emotional interaction is even more draining in terms of your wellbeing. If you can't then find a space to revitalise those energy sources or if you just continually working and you never actually have that quiet moment to re-energise.

In this instance, Arlin foregrounded the need for teacher educators to find time away from their work, and that relationships at work, even though they may be positive (such as with students), can take a toll. This has also been observed in other fields such as pharmacy (Abraham et al., 2021) and paramedics (Pavoni & Phillips, 2022). Jay went further to explain that it is essential 'to consider how you will balance social management and self-management'. Research would indicate that such time for personal rejuvenation may be very challenging for the teacher educator to

find (McDonough et al., 2021; Kosnik et al., 2017) in the current workscape, indicating that relationships may, in the teacher educator space, present as a double-edged sword to wellbeing. This finding contrasts with many other studies that espouse the importance of relationships for academics' wellbeing (Marongwe et al., 2020; Wray & Kinman, 2022), highlighting that different kinds of relationships may impact wellbeing differently. Teacher educators' work is underpinned by an array of relational demands that may when combined, prove to compromise wellbeing.

Meaning

Interestingly, the concept of meaning as a specific element essential to wellbeing is less conspicuous in some previous research on academics' wellbeing (Wray & Kinman, 2022), yet for these teacher educators, the ability to perceive meaning in their work was strongly articulated. As seen in several studies about teachers and the reasons for why they enter the classroom (see, for example, Fokkens-Bruinsma & Canrinus, 2014; McLean et al., 2019), teacher educators in this study also held very altruistic motivations for becoming a teacher education in the first instance. As a means of countering perceived negatives about their work, they tried to hold fast to these motivations as a means of maintaining the positivity that came from finding real meaning in the work they did, and believing they really did make a difference. As Jayden explained,

> Really sticking to the sense of why I came… I came into teacher education because I'm interested in research, I'm interested in working with pre-service teachers, and sharing those skills that I have with them. And that keeps me here.

Sam similarly felt that preparing teachers for the profession gave real meaning to the work they did.

These teacher educators felt, however, that maintaining their belief in their ability and opportunity to really make a difference through their research and teaching is challenging in the current ITE environment which is heavily invigilated and seemingly out of their own hands. Arlin lamented that 'TEs have been excluded from the conversation' about quality teacher education. Previous studies, such as that by Larsen and Mockler (2021), have found that teacher educators feel disempowered and frustrated by their lack of political and policy voice in teacher education decisions. As Jay succinctly put it, 'TEs are positioned as the problem instead of the system that we're working in', creating an environment in which teacher educators find it 'very hard to get on board…or it's very hard to be seen as being a valuable part of any change'. The opportunity for teacher educators to draw on a sense of meaning as an enabler for wellbeing was compromised as they felt they had limited agency to have any substantial kind of impact on the direction of their work (Larsen & Mockler, 2021).

This study further highlighted the inherent correlations that teacher educators perceive between the external stressors impacting the wellbeing of their teaching

colleagues in schools, as evidenced in numerous studies (Brandenburg et al., 2024; Heffernan et al., 2022) and their work lives:

> *Morgan* Whatever is happening with teachers in schools is happening to teacher educators because the two are inextricably connected.
> *Nic* And I find that what's coming, what happens to us, what happens to teach educators, happens first before it happens to teachers.
> Lim And I always say to teachers, if you want to see what's coming, look what's happening to teach educators and you get a good idea.

In essence, teacher educators do not necessarily see constraints to their wellbeing as teacher education specific, but rather as a broader issue of working in education. This finding contrasts with previous studies of academic stress and wellbeing that largely identify university-based constraints (Lee et al., 2022; Wray & Kinman, 2022).

From a wellbeing perspective, the sense of meaning and purpose essential to wellbeing is seemingly eroded by the accountabilities and regulations of the ITE environment, also observed in other professional contexts (Watermeyer et al., 2021). Moreover, educational reform agendas at large that frame educators as a problem (Towers et al., 2023) place a strain on the extent to which teacher educators feel they can and are engaging in meaningful and valued work. Their sense of value diminished, and as such workplace motivation may be compromised (Butler & Kern, 2016). As Taylor explained, the current workplace 'actually takes away the very thing that makes us teachers'.

Accomplishment

In the current era of accountability and performativity, accomplishment or achievement is foregrounded as central in what could be described as an outputs-centric profession (Liu & van der Sijde, 2021). Interestingly, while the teacher educators did report that this challenged their ability to maintain a strong sense of meaning, as discussed in the previous section, they seemed to be less inclined to consider in this study that these accountabilities diminished their perceived achievements. To illustrate, after discussing the many and increasing expectations of them in research and teaching, Arlin stated the following,

> Well, that's just ridiculous. Because if you actually looked at performance through the eyes of what you've achieved, then that's a really positive way of thinking about performance.

Nic followed with:

> So celebrating the wins that we have, celebrating the opportunities to explore new things and meet new people and create change ultimately.

Riley concurred, suggesting that while some work that they may value does not 'count' at the institution (such as small, unfunded research), 'that's actually quite self-elevating and that achievement is more aligned to doing what is personally and

professionally valued'. Nic went further to suggest that a sense of achievement in teacher education came from, 'Just having a more realistic plan, sitting down every morning going, what can I achieve today?… When I've achieved that, my day is done'. While other studies have foregrounded teacher educators' challenges to feel that they can achieve in this performative context, most specifically in their research lives (Barton et al., 2022; Larsen & Brandenburg, 2021), these teachers educators sought to try and retain realistic expectations of themselves.

Despite this approach, a number of the participants felt that in addition to the institutional accountabilities in the current environment that constrained their capacity to make progress, ITE-specific accountabilities such as seemingly rigid ITE program standards and accreditation processes placed restrictions on their work that delimited their opportunities to experience accomplishment even in areas in which they were personally invested such as their teaching. For example, Arlin and Sam found that with the external control over initial teacher education programming, they were restricted on the extent to which they were able to 'do planning that is highly responsive and highly contextualised', and in doing so, the opportunity to feel a sense of accomplishment that comes from that work was lost. This demonstrates that for teacher educators, their commitment to achievement in their teaching is foregrounded (Arnold, 2020) and it is in this aspect of their work that they, dissimilar perhaps to other disciplines, may experience exacerbated challenges to their wellbeing.

Limitations

The authors acknowledge several limitations to the study. First, the study is of a small scale involving nine teacher educators from across two Australian universities; thus, the findings may not represent the perceptions of teacher educators or academics in different universities or contexts. Second, the study drew on one discreet data set and therefore provided insights into the participants' perceptions at that particular time. Further research drawing on multiple data sets or using a longitudinal design would extend these findings. Finally, the use of metalogue as an essentially participant-driven conversation, while appropriate to the aims of this study, was limited to some extent to what participants chose to discuss. The authors encourage future research to employ a range of data collection and analysis methods that may build on the findings from this study.

Conclusion

The current context in which teacher educators work is fraught with challenge and change due to increasing workload as well as constant pressures to meet unrealistic and ever-shifting expectations within university contexts (MacFarlane, 2021). Like other studies about academics' wellbeing (Lee et al., 2022; Marongwe et al., 2020; Wray & Kinman, 2022), this study has foregrounded how escalated managerial

practices and performance demands of the university sector, in general, have impeded TEs capacity to experience a sense of positivity, engagement, and accomplishment in their work. However, teacher educators' wellbeing is also impacted by a profession-specific layer of challenge as education reform (Ellis et al., 2019; McMahon et al., 2015), the problematising of teacher educators and teachers (Towers et al., 2023), and additional accountabilities (Alexander et al., 2020; Buchannan, 2020) permeate and dictate their work.

More specifically, this study has shown the impact of education-specific reform agendas (Alexander et al., 2020; Buchannan, 2020; Larsen & Mockler, 2021) and the politicisation of their work (Mockler, 2020) and the work of their teacher colleagues (Mockler & Redpath, 2022), on their ability to find and maintain a sense of meaning in their work. Our study also revealed that while collegial relationships are generally enabling to their wellbeing, the plethora of relational demands on teacher educators can also compromise feelings of wellbeing. Despite these challenges, this study shows teacher educators to be generally proactive, engaging in activities and strategies that will enable them to find times in which they can experience the five elements of wellbeing posited within the PERMA framework Seligman, 2012) and concurrently support others to do so.

An interesting insight from our study showed the extent to which the responsibility is placed upon teacher educators themselves to build or protect their own wellbeing, rather than their employers, was high. The intensified pressure on an individual to be 'self-governing' (McLeod, 2017) has placed the task of maintaining wellbeing at work largely in the hands of the teacher educators themselves, as opposed to institutional contribution to this effect; this is even though strong teacher educator wellbeing will reap institutional benefit. The teacher educators in this study accepted this responsibility, in part, with Sam stating that 'we take risks, we should be taking responsibility to a certain extent for our own wellbeing – but there must be that shared responsibility'. In sum, we argue that institutions should take more responsibility in ensuring their TEs' wellbeing is at the optimal level. Without this, we could also be at risk of huge attrition and burnout, like the teaching profession (Brandenburg et al., 2024; Heffernan et al., 2022). We suggest firstly that institutions take account of the professional landscape in which their education-academics are working. For example, contextualising performance expectations and accountabilities within the education context would go some way to enabling teacher educators to experience a sense of accomplishment and engagement in their work. Furthermore, institutional advocacy for education and teacher educators may assist teacher educators in feeling that their work is recognised as meaningful and valued. Finally, we suggest leadership teams consider the PERMA model in their planning and interaction with staff and offer new ways of exploring wellbeing as presented in this study.

Data availability NA.

Declarations

Competing interests The authors do not report any conflict of interest, financial or otherwise.

Ethical approval Ethical approval was obtained from the first author's university HREC (ETH2022-0067) and subsequently from the HREC of all authors' affiliated universities.

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