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# How primary trainee teachers' intersectionality exacerbates issues of wellbeing

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## ABSTRACT

This research, conducted in the north-west of England, examined what primary trainee teachers believe affects their wellbeing, while studying on a 1-year post-graduate course. The research adopted a phenomenological case study using semi-structured self-directed interviews. Our thematic analysis illuminates that trainee teachers' intersectionality (being both a student *and* a primary trainee teacher) places them in a vulnerable position, whereby their dual set status exacerbates any wellbeing issues. These issues include financial anxiety; difficulties managing workloads; poor relationships with school staff and perceived negative school cultures. As many of these issues are systemic, trainee teachers are often powerless to ameliorate these problems, and therefore this piece of relevance to policy makers and ITE curriculum creators.

## KEYWORDS

Primary trainee teachers; wellbeing; intersectionality; teacher identity; education policy; primary school

## 1. Introduction

There is an abundance of research on the wellbeing of student populations and practicing teachers (Education Support Partnership 2022; Eisenberg et al. 2009; Macaskill 2013; Royal College of Psychiatrists 2011, 2013; The Insight Network 2020; White 2020). However, there is much less consideration of the wellbeing of primary trainee teachers (Chaplain 2008; Goldstein 2005). There has been even less consideration of how trainee teachers' intersectionality (being both students *and* operating with and as teachers) exacerbates issues of wellbeing. The term intersectionality is used throughout this study in its mathematical context, meaning the intersection between two sets in a Venn diagram.

Wellbeing can be considered from both the hedonic and eudemonic perspectives (Ryan and Deci 2001). Hedonic pertains to enjoyment and it can be considered to encompass being happy. It is considered short-term and can be described as 'subjective wellbeing'. Eudemonic centres on self-actualisation to give meaning, connection and sense to life (Mercer and Gregersen 2020) and as such can be considered a longer-term approach. For trainee teachers, operating in short term placement to gain a long-term position teaching both perspectives are valid. The Department for Education (DfE) has its definition of wellbeing that it uses in policy documents, 'A state of complete physical and mental health that is characterised by high-quality social relationships'. (DfE 2021). This latter definition is interesting as it broadens the wellbeing lens explicitly from the individual to specific reference to relationships with others, which is a key aspect of both teaching and operating in a school environment. The trainee teachers in this study use the terms wellbeing and mental health

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interchangeably at times. Furthermore, on occasions when wellbeing literature was not available mental health literature pertaining to teachers was used.

Wellbeing is of paramount importance for those training to teach, to enable them to remain motivated, in the short term, to be successful in their academic studies and on school placements. There is some evidence which shows that when trainee teachers commence their teaching course, they are largely optimistic and engaged (Brookhart and Freeman 1992) as they progress, work related wellbeing issues may start to emerge, and disillusionment, for some, sets in (Goldstein 2005).

Recent research, considering the experiences of Early Career Teachers (ECTs) (teachers, in England, during their first 2 years of teaching) indicates that this group experiences a high number of wellbeing issues (Education Support Partnership 2022; Jerrim et al. 2020). Internationally, studies reveal that between 30% and 50% of teachers leave the profession within the first 5 years (Gallant and Riley 2014; Skaalvik and Skaalvik 2011; 2016; Struyven and Vanthournout 2014). However, poor levels of wellbeing are not just limited to those in the beginning of their teaching career. All teachers experience high levels of poor wellbeing such as stress, burnout and mental fatigue (Education Support Partnership 2022; McLean, Taylor, and Jimenez 2019; Steinhardt, et al. 2011; Wang, Hall, and Rahimi 2015). Chang (2009, 193) highlights that primary school teaching is one which is 'characterised by high levels of burnout and emotional exhaustion', both affect the wellbeing of teachers. Furthermore, she goes on to draw the link between poor teacher wellbeing and (within schools) a reduction in quality of teaching and (outside of schools) teacher attrition and teacher shortage. This is because burnout can be point at which teachers leave the profession with cynicism. However, this does not always have to be the case. Chang (2009) describes that burnout may also be a temporary state if the teacher is able to overcome it. Although, these teachers, who maybe experiencing temporary burnout, are the colleagues, mentors and guides for the trainee teachers within schools and as such relationships with the trainee teachers can be affected, as can the quality of training on offer.

### ***1.1. Why is trainee teachers' wellbeing important?***

Trainee teachers' wellbeing is important because it underpins the quality of their professional lives as teachers: teaching, their relationships as well as their ability to remain in the profession (Jerrim et al. 2020). Poor wellbeing can also affect physical health, such as lack of sleep through worrying or being anxious and increased alcohol consumption as those suffering may use it as a coping mechanism (Jerrim et al. 2020). Day et al. (2007) and Gu and Day (2013) use the term 'quality retention' to refer to teachers who remain in the classroom, to continue their pursuit of quality, rather than to simply aim to survive to meet financial commitments. As recruiting teachers to the profession becomes more difficult and numbers for the most recent cycle 2022–2023 have been described as 'historically low' (McLean, Worth, and Faulkner-Ellis 2023) enabling trainee teachers to remain well in the profession is increasingly important.

### ***1.2. Lived experience: student***

First, the PGCE/PGDE trainee teachers experience being students. This experience includes but is not limited to the application for financial loans to support study, a reduction in ability to work and the management of workload pressures and deadlines. The number of all university students experiencing poor wellbeing has increased since 1993 (Universities UK 2018).

Trainee teachers undertaking the PGCE/PGDE course at McKinney University experience a very heavy timetable, which is not representative of other standard programmes. For example, they attend on campus lectures (9 am–4 pm) on a Monday, and then are in placement, at their 'home school' usually from Tuesday to Friday (8.30 am–4.30 pm). The term 'home school' refers to the placement setting that the trainee teacher works in from September until June/July, except for a 6-week alternative placement in a contrasting setting in January/February. During this time, they are mentored by teachers from the placement school, and work alongside the school staff, rather than being supervised by university staff. The intensity of their workloads means that the opportunity to engage

in part-time work is curtailed, as these students are engaged in academic work or attending lectures or preparing, planning and assessing work for school.

### **1.3. Lived experience: teacher**

Recently, there has been an unprecedented period of change experienced by the teaching profession in England: an overhaul of the curriculum and assessments (DfE 2018); cuts to funding (Ball 2021; Belfield, Crawford, and Sibieta 2017; Belfield, Farquharson, and Sibieta 2018) and major changes in pupil demographics (DfE 2022). The scope and the pace of these changes can be suggested to have impacted on teachers in several ways, but overall, by weakening teachers' 'decision latitude', which is the extent to which people can mediate a stressful job, if they feel that they are equipped with control and support (Ball 2021; Stevenson 2011; Wright 2012). These changes have resulted in increased workloads for teachers while at the same time resources have dwindled. Teachers report the pace of the changes coupled with these additional challenges have led over half of them to actively take steps to leave the profession (Educational Support Partnership 2022).

The numbers of primary school teachers leaving the profession have increased each year since 2012 (DfE 2022), with 62% of the current primary school workforce, in England, considering leaving their roles (Education Support Partnership 2022). The latest Educational Support Partnership Teacher Wellbeing Index 2022, a national annual survey undertaken by the charity for the education sector and policy makers since 2017, reveals that the current teaching profession have poor levels of wellbeing. According to the Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Wellbeing Scale (WEMWBS) (a validated questionnaire for measuring wellbeing) which was used as part of the Index, 35.5% of the teaching workforce 'had a WEMWBS score of 40 or below, which indicates probable depression' (2022, 28), while the overall wellbeing score of the education workforce was 44.01. Scores of between 41 and 45 should be considered as possible indicators of poor wellbeing and sit below the national published wellbeing data for the UK adult population (Education Support Partnership 2022). Teachers experiencing wellbeing issues maybe risk of depersonalisation (Bennett and Le Compte 1990; Chang 2009) and in the long term this may contribute to burnout, including the loss of enthusiasm for their job (Matheny, Gfroerer, and Harris 2020). However, it is some of these same teachers who are charged with providing mentorship, guidance, collegiality and a supportive environment for trainee teachers on placement. The Education Support Partnership breaks down wellbeing issues into how these manifest and these included but are not limited to 50% experiencing insomnia (9% increase from 2021); 44% finding it difficult to concentrating (15% increase from 2021); 41% experiencing forgetfulness (15% increase from 2021); 40% being tearful (12% increase from 2021) and 45% experiencing irritability or mood swings (10% increase from 2021). This latest Wellbeing Index reveals that many teachers maybe struggling with their wellbeing issues, resulting in affected school cultures, and mentoring relationships. The DfE have taken some recent action to try to ameliorate the current situation in schools including launching their Education Staff Wellbeing Charter (DfE 2021), the teacher retention strategy (DfE 2019) and School Workload Reduction Kit (DfE 2022); however, it is too early to ascertain if these measures will be enough to impact on the educational workforce.

### **1.4. Background to the study**

This research investigated trainee teachers' wellbeing and was conducted in the academic year 2018–2019. Since this date the wellbeing of the educational workforce can be said to have worsened. Issues raised in this study will still be relevant, if not more so. Resources have continued to be cut, while pay, conditions and workload issues have led to recent strikes. Schools have, and continue to, dedicate time and money to a variety of additional pressures: the 'catch up curriculum'; looking after children and their families; the doubling of workloads; the cost-of-living crisis (including teacher pay

increases and school heating bills) and the recent Reinforced Autoclaved Aerated Concrete (RAAC) building issues. Teaching is a workforce and culture close to breaking point (Education Support Partnership 2022). The educational change which has taken place since this study was carried out does not render this study irrelevant, instead this research preserves an educational moment in time. Furthermore, it is important that this study provides a voice for those trainee teachers who participated in this study and illuminates their lived experiences. Finally, it should be noted that the delay in the writing up of this research also stems from some of these same additional pressures that those working in the educational sector, 2019–2023, in Initial Teacher Education have also face.

## 2. Methodology

### 2.1. Objectives

The aims of this study were to: (1) investigate what trainee teachers report affects their wellbeing during their PGCE/PGDE course, (2) explore why the trainee teachers' report that they feel how they do and (3) identify any strategies which have a positive impact on trainees' lived experiences.

### 2.2. Study design

This research adopts a phenomenological case study approach (Raffanti 2008) into the lived experience of a focus group of post-graduate trainee teachers (van Manen 1997) in the North-West of England ( $N = 8$ ). Creswell and Poth (2018) suggest that the main aim of a phenomenological case study is to describe the participants' lived experiences during an extraordinary period, a description which fits the academic year 2018–2019. This was the final year ITE providers had complete control over how they crafted their curriculums before the statutory introduction of the Core Content Framework (DfE 2018) a document which has been described as a reductionist baseline ITE curriculum (Hordern and Brooks 2023). Therefore, capturing this moment in time is important.

### 2.3. Participants

All trainee teachers who were enrolled on the PGCE/PGDE with Qualified Teacher Status (QTS) recommendation for the age range 5–11 years old education route were invited to participate in this research and 8 trainee teachers opted to participate in the semi-structured self-directed interview (Table 1). The decision to opt-in was explicitly explained to the group during a small presentation, at the beginning of a lecture, to the cohort about the nature and purpose of the research.

#### 2.3.1. Primary teacher training context

There are two main entry routes into primary teaching in England. Either a 3-year Undergraduate course or a 1-year Postgraduate course (PGCE/PGDE). This paper will focus on what primary school trainee teachers report affects their wellbeing during their PGCE/PGDE course at a single institution. The Postgraduate entry route into teaching, takes graduates through an intensive, 1 year,

**Table 1.** Participant list.

Trainee Teacher	Age	Sex
Trainee Teacher A	26	Female
Trainee Teacher B	33	Female
Trainee Teacher C	21	Female
Trainee Teacher D	29	Female
Trainee Teacher E	24	Female
Trainee Teacher F	21	Female
Trainee Teacher G	21	Female

teacher-training programme, which awards either 60 or 120 (PGCE or PGDE respectively) level 7 academic credits as well as recommendation for Qualified Teacher Status (QTS).

## 2.4. Procedure

The research project adhered to British Education Research Association's (BERA) ethical guidelines (BERA 2018). As such, the research project aims were explained at the beginning of a lecture and all trainee teachers were given an information sheet, written in plain language, and a participant sheet. Trainees were then invited to ask questions, either in the session or afterwards. It was explained that, due to considerations of power, the trainee teachers did not need to reveal to me (as their course leader) if they wanted to participate at that point, they could instead just 'turn up' to the semi-structured group interview. This ensured that the trainee teachers had time to consider if they wished to opt-in, and did not feel pressured to opt-in. When the trainee teachers did arrive to participate, they were given another copy of the information sheet and they signed their participation sheet. They were reminded that they could withdraw from the interview at any point without having to give a reason.

### 2.4.1. Self-directed semi-structured group interviews

A semi-structured group interview was used because questions planned in advance allow thought regarding how to best elicit information to better understand the phenomena under study. These allow for participants to revisit memories and reflections to revisit experiences (Lauterbach 2018). Semi-structured interviews also allow for themes which emerged from the literature review to be further examined. Drever (1995) perceives the advantages semi-structured interviews have, particularly when using a case study design, as offering a more flexible approach to deep exploration, probing answers which are interesting to further explore and 'chat about' freely.

One of the challenges which was expected was the eliciting of authentic responses, encouraging the trainee teachers to express their opinions and sharing these, particularly given the possible perceived power imbalance of their course leader being the principal research investigator (PRI). Savin-Baden and Major (2013, 361) observed that participants 'will not talk freely if they believe that you do not agree with them or are being judgemental'. As such, a novel approach was taken to facilitating the group interviews: self-directed semi-structured group interviews. The trainee teachers were given the list of semi-structured questions to discuss, if they wanted, but also told that they were free to discuss all topics which arose. A Dictaphone was left, on the table, to record the trainee teachers talking. In total the trainee teachers discussed their lived experiences for a total of 1 h and 43 min. This approach worked well, conversation flowed organically, and rich data created. The PRI visited the focus group during the interview and prompted and guided the trainee teachers back to the questions if the groups had 'strayed' on to different topics, and also asked them if they felt they had finished discussing the topics/questions and each time until the last, they declined to finish.

## 2.5. Analysis

Thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2006) was used as it allows immersion in the interview material and the development of a deeper appreciation of the content. Thematic analysis was used to identify, analyse and reporting themes within the semi-structured qualitative data. A theoretical inductive approach was employed whereby the themes emerged from the data without prior theoretical guidance. Themes and codes of interest were determined independently by the three researchers, using the steps recommended by Braun and Clarke (2006) listening to interview recordings, and reading each transcript several times to establish familiarity with the whole interview, and generating descriptive codes to represent the main themes. Ongoing analysis refined the specifics and formulated the conceptual name of each theme. In total, nine themes were identified (Table 2).

**Table 2.** Themes identified in coding semi-structured interview.

Code	Themes of analysis	Frequency discussed
W1	Workload	10
W2	School relationships	6
W3	School cultures	5
W4	Part-time working	13
W5	Social media support	2
W6	Money worries	15
W7	Non-judgmental relationships	7
W8	Feeling a burden	11
W9	Peer group support	3

W = WELLBEING.

**Table 3.** Areas affecting wellbeing identified in semi-structured interview with trainee teachers.

Area	Description
Student (W1; W4; W6; W9)	Balancing studying and working part-time; financial anxiety; managing heavy workload; fees; lack of financial support.
Teacher (W2; W3; W8)	Poor relationships with school colleagues; feeling a burden; perceived negative school cultures; income generation; anxious and disenfranchised.
Positive (W5; W9)	Social media support; peer group support

These themes were then interrogated and explored generating three main areas affecting wellbeing: student issues, teacher issues and positive wellbeing experiences (Table 3). As such these areas are used to structure the findings.

The final part of the analysis was the selection of the interview extracts, relating the analysis to the research question and literature. The process of refining and validating these independent findings was conducted through a collaborative exercise creating iterative feedback loops between the researchers until consensus was achieved (Braun and Clarke 2022).

After the group interview was transcribed, and the emerging themes noted, these were then read back to the participants and member checked (Coffey and Atkinson 1996; Doyle 2007; Lincoln and Guba 1985). Alterations, when necessary, were made, and this study's credibility was strengthened (Guba 1981).

### 3. Results

#### 3.1. Student issues

Student issues, which trainee teachers reported affected their wellbeing, are those in line with existing data of what students generally find challenging (Cooke et al. 2004). These include but are not limited to living away from home; balancing studying and working part-time; financial anxiety and managing heavy workload. However, the original contribution of this research is it reveals these issues are compounded by the trainee teachers' intersectionality of being both a student and a teacher.

##### 3.1.1. Workload

Workload, while a common concern for many students, was an issue magnified for trainee teachers, due to their intersectionality. For example, while general students often cite workloads as issue which can affect their wellbeing, trainee teachers must navigate the demands of level 7 work and working in a school as a teacher 5 days a week, on average 8 am–5 pm. This makes balancing their workload incredibly difficult as 'spare time' to see family or friends is reduced, leaving them vulnerable to loneliness or feeling overwhelmed, more so than the 'average' student.

You struggle being away from home, I think that's another thing that needs to be considered, a lot of trainees don't really have time to go home and see your family on this course. (Trainee Teacher C)



I don't think I ever could have prepared myself for how much work we had to do. (Trainee Teacher D)

The workload is too much at one time and becomes quite overwhelming. (Trainee Teacher F)

Support is available for academic work and managing workloads; however, as trainee teachers have such an intensive timetable, they are often not able to access this support during operational hours. A couple of the trainee teachers spent quite a while discussing how they did not attend all their scheduled university sessions to instead prioritise writing assignments, plan their lessons or to accept paid work.

### 3.1.2. Financial anxiety

The trainee teachers expressed the mental strain that financial worries had on them and financial support was the type of support that they would most welcome. Trainee teachers commence their PGCE/PGDE having already incurred significant debts from their Undergraduate studies (average £45,000) (Bolton 2022) with their 1-year post-graduate qualification, adding a further £9000, before living expenses, to their debt. Therefore, perhaps issues of finance weigh heavily on this group.

Travel, both the time and the cost implications, was reported as a worry. This group of students must travel to university, their placement school and sometimes an additional training venue for some (School Direct trainee teachers receive a portion of their training with a school consortium which is in a different geographical location to the university base). Some financial recompense is available for some students, depending on entry route on course (e.g. financial support is only available for most PGDE trainee teachers and not PGCE ones); however, it does not cover all costs. Travel costs are, therefore, an additional financial burden for trainee teachers, when compared with other students. Trainee teachers must travel 5 days a week, whereas other students may have compressed timetables (this is when on campus teaching is aggregated to a couple of days to facilitate student working). The issue of trainee teachers' financial anxiety and travel concerns is compounded by their intersectionality as they are often unable to work to meet their financial demands. Their intersectionality means finding and keeping part-time employment is difficult due to the intensity of the course.

I think not being able to work is the hard bit. You know, it's not like before, when I was doing my other course. I could get shifts and do them each week. Now there is just no time and they kept asking and asking me to do more and I couldn't. In the end I've just quit. That makes me stressed about the travel. It's every day. I just wish we had just one day off. (Trainee Teacher C)

You want to try having to pay your mortgage. We just rely on my partner now. It's not so bad when we come here 'cos that's closer for me. It's the consortium training that's a killer. The money thing is a worry. (Trainee Teacher D)

I do work, but then I don't have time for uni work and sometimes I have to pull an all-nighter to get my essays done. It's just at the weekends but I don't get to really see my friends that much now. I think they'll forget who I am! (Trainee Teacher C)

My friend is a secondary student at Chester, she gets a bursary. We just get more in debt. But we're doing the same job. It's not fair they get to just get money for the same thing and not work or worry about it all, like I know it's all adding up and there is nothing I can do. (Trainee Teacher G)

Must be nice not to worry. (Trainee Teacher D)

### 3.2. Teacher issues

Teacher issues are those pertaining to gaining Qualified Teacher Status (QTS) elements of the course, related to placement experiences. Previous research has shown that considered school cultures correlate to more positive teacher experiences (Collie, Shapka, and Perry 2012; Grayson and Alvarez 2008; McLean, Taylor, and Jimenez 2019; Pas, Bradshaw, and Hershfeldt 2012; Skaalvik and Skaalvik 2009). This is of importance as it is in these cultures where the trainee teachers are embedded and

mentored by staff. Furthermore, a positive environment can help to sustain a teacher's longevity and mental wellbeing (Punch and Tuettemann 1990); however, all the trainee teachers reported experiencing some form of perceived negative school culture or poor relationships with staff in schools. The overwhelming phrase which was used to describe how these trainee teachers felt was that they were a 'burden' for a workforce perhaps already encumbered by recent educational policy changes (Ball 2021).

### 3.2.1. *School relationships*

The trainee teachers discussed poor relationships with their mentor or class teacher, or perceived negative workplace cultures in schools:

In my school the school culture is negative. Yeah, all the teachers are trying to get out. And from being there since September, as a new person trying to go into teaching, having all the teachers and the staff room slag each other off, you're like, oh my God, is this what it's like? It stresses me out. (Trainee Teacher G)

I think one of the things [I found difficult] was when you hear people speaking and their language is "pull your knickers up and get on with it" or [about my work] "I think that's crap". We're actually talking about the impact on my mental health. I think there has to be a choice of language that mentors and tutors have to use because if they're expecting us to have good mental health from the beginning if you're hearing that language throughout that actually is very detrimental to actually producing good teachers. It's not banter. When you're vulnerable this year, you have to hear positive choice of language. (Trainee Teacher B)

I don't think students should be in this school because my class teacher is not being supported by her Senior Management. I get dead worried about asking her stuff 'cos I know she's got too much already. (Trainee Teacher A)

Our study reveals that the trainee teachers who reported experiencing poor workplace environments, felt anxious, disenfranchised, and lacking confidence to raise these issues or tackle problems. They worried highlighting issues would lead to them being 'penalised' or 'punished', as summed up by one trainee teacher:

I wanted to tell my [university] tutor I wasn't getting my meetings. But I didn't for ages cos I just knew that she would come in and speak to the school and then I would be in trouble. It's better to just keep your head down. It's not worth the hassle. (Trainee Teacher F)

I feel like I can't ask for what I need and I feel like just asking for a weekly meeting or asking to be observed ... like I went weeks without being observed because I was too scared to ask. (Trainee Teacher A)

### 3.2.2. *Feeling 'a burden'*

The trainee teachers discussed feeling 'a burden' for their mentors or class teachers. They felt they were an additional, unwanted task given to their mentors, often without appropriate time allocation, as three trainees exemplify:

My mentor, didn't actually speak to me unless it was weekly meetings because she was just too busy to, she had to many hats. (Trainee Teacher D)

I've actually felt like a burden and I'm actually going into my weekly meetings sobbing. (Trainee Teacher C)

I'd agree with you there when you say about feeling like a burden ... I think the school took on two students and they couldn't put them in the early years and then they couldn't/ didn't want to put them in year two with SATS, so, we're both in the year one classes. The teachers don't really get on or see eye-to-eye and neither of them actually wanted or opted to have students ... she verbally said to me like she didn't want a student. She didn't want to have to support [a student], which is like was not her fault it's fair enough. She didn't want to have to support someone on top of her own workload. She was like, it's caused me so much more work. And then I felt like I was just burdening her and couldn't ask for what I needed and speak up. (Trainee Teacher F)

Feeling a 'burden' is present in the literature for less experienced teachers in Further Educational (16–18 year olds) settings (Lucas and Unwin 2009; Orr 2012). The trainees in this study spoke

about feeling 'a burden', even if their placement was a positive experience. For example, the trainee teachers were often empathetic about their mentor's work situation. Many mentors have Senior Leadership responsibilities in addition to class teacher roles. In these cases, the trainee teachers made excuses if their mentor was unable to provide support or complete paperwork on time.

### 3.2.3. Negative school cultures

When perceived negative language was used in staff rooms about pupils, the trainee teachers felt they could not speak out. They felt that they did not belong, as they would not use this language themselves, but it was accepted practice in some settings:

It's quite shocking how, I think, banter within staff rooms can actually affect [me] because I'm a student so I can't turn around and go [this isn't right]. It's very derogatory about some of the children and I've had to stand up and walk out a few times. (Trainee Teacher G)

Feelings of exclusion (Irwin and Hramiak 2010) were expressed elsewhere as several of the trainee teachers felt that they were only invited into the school to generate income for the school. This sentiment was expressed irrespective of perceived positive or negative experience. They spoke about the first-hand impact of austerity on schools such as the lack of basic equipment and the difficulties this presented. They suggested that they had only been taken on to be used to cover lessons and playtimes, not to learn there in a meaningful way.

One day there was no cover, there was a staff member off sick. The class teacher I worked with left to teach the class [who's teacher] was off sick, and I was left with my class unsupported, though it didn't bother me. I quite enjoyed it. And I personally got a lot from it. But that day I was a teacher to them when it suited [the school], the next day I went straight back, and I was the student. (Trainee Teacher A)

Yet others had the opposite experience and reported not being allowed to teach lessons. Two trainees felt that accountability for pupils' progression was a barrier to taking responsibility for pupils' learning in schools and as such they were not allowed to teach some subjects (e.g. the core subjects in which national data is collected):

I wasn't able to teach maths ... she [my mentor] rightly or wrongly, said she was worried about SATS ... so why put me in with year six? (Trainee Teacher B)

I've had the exact same thing. I went from a year six to then a year two, who was also worried about SATS, so then went back to year six. (Trainee Teacher D)

We've been told for the next three weeks there is hardly going to be any teaching [because of SATS practice]. (Trainee Teacher B)

Chances to include these trainee teachers in teaching are missed opportunities as research shows school fears about the potential negative impact on pupils' learning are unfounded (Greaves, Belfield, and Allen 2019). Furthermore, these experiences led to the trainee teachers feeling excluded and not valued.

### 3.4. Positive wellbeing experiences

The trainee teachers also spoke of positive wellbeing experiences. Such as engaging in sport and trying to maintain a social life. Overwhelmingly, they found deep and meaningful support in their peer group:

I think everybody really benefited from that time to engage with one another and to really get to know each other. (Trainee Teacher E)

We understand what each other is going through and the best people to rely on. (Trainee Teacher A)

Yeah, you need each other for support. We all like lean on each other. (Trainee Teacher C)

Who knows what we're going through? I'll go home to my boyfriend, and he'll be like you'll be alright; you'll be a teacher. And I think, no, you don't understand. (Trainee Teacher F)

They said it at the start the course you'll make friends. It's something you always like shrug off, but over time I completely understand. Like I said things to my friends like ... I've gotta go I gotta do planning. They say, like it's not that important, and I'm like, well [it is] ... (Trainee Teacher C)

I think I've said to someone in uni first that I'm struggling again with my mental health before I did to my husband and my family because they get me. My husband thinks I go to work and play all day. (Trainee Teacher B)

They expressed the view that their families and other key relationships rarely understood the challenges of their course to the same degree as their trainee teacher colleagues. They felt that in part, the media was responsible for the portrayal that teachers 'have an easy life' and so their families and key relationships did not always understand their struggles.

The trainees used social media to support each other (Irwin and Hramiak 2010), particularly when on placements across North-West England. However, caution should be applied to cohort support through social media modes as it was mentioned as an activity which could sometimes cause peers to 'spiral', operating as an 'echo chamber' for insecurities or worries.

Trainee teachers spoke about a range of mentoring styles from the more nurturing to those which provide more challenge (Anderson and Shannon 1988; Daloz 1986) and it was positive mentoring (irrespective of style) which was treated as hallowed. Having a 'good' mentor or class teacher was repeatedly expressed as a positive factor:

There's no way that I'm getting through this year if I didn't have the trust and open relationship to sit-down with my personal tutor. (Trainee Teacher A)

The tutors and everything [even though] they've got so much work. It's great that their support is amazing. (Trainee Teacher D)

I really enjoyed the personalities and helpfulness of all the staff. Most members of staff are very approachable, friendly and always willing to help if they can. They are a credit to the course. I consider the support and guidance provided from my Liaison Tutor and other course directors, and lecturers, a contributing factor to my success and development throughout the year. (Trainee Teacher F)

The definitions of what is a 'good' mentor/tutor were very similar across trainees. They wanted: a non-judgmental mentor/class teacher/tutor; someone who made time for them; and who responded to them quickly when they had a problem. They needed to feel safe (nurturing model of mentoring) before constructive challenge was introduced.

Previous research (Raver et al. 2008; Roeser et al. 2012; 2013) has shown that wellbeing training and interventions in school benefit teachers. Some of the placement schools, as well as the university in this study, run specific sessions as part of the ITE (Initial Teacher Education) curriculum; however, these were not mentioned by the participants of this study. This maybe in part because the trainee teachers did not have the time to engage with these and their daily relationships, negative or positive, had much more of an impact.

## 4. Discussion

This group experiences numerous student and teacher challenges and their intersectionality can magnify these. Financial issues were one of the main causes of reported affected wellbeing on the PGCE/PGDE course. While a variety of secondary subjects attract a bursary and previously primary PGCEs did too, there are currently no bursaries available for primary teachers. Due to the historically high numbers of applicants for the primary courses it may have been felt, by the current Conservative Government, that there is no need to 'attract' students to these courses. This may be about to change. In the recruitment cycle 2022–2023, there has been a national decline in the numbers of students recruited on to primary initial teacher education courses. This maybe

in part due to media coverage of the teacher strikes, or perhaps the lack of a bursary during the cost-of-living crisis has rendered retraining as a primary teacher unreachable for many. Further monitoring of this situation is required.

This study, in line with others (Beltman, Mansfield, and Price 2011; Gu and Day 2013; Worth, Bamford, and Durbin 2015) reveals some of the protective factors which can help to enable teachers to remain well while working in primary schools. Primarily, relationships with other teachers, staff members and pupils are incredibly important in maintaining and developing resilience over time. Job satisfaction, being provided with the appropriate resources (Clark and Antonelli 2009) and being recognised and rewarded as well as feeling supported by senior leaders are also important. However, it should be acknowledged that some trainee teachers are training in challenging circumstances and access to these protective factors are not always available.

Recently, the Department for Education (DfE) may have recognised the importance of relationships and culture in developing well trainee teachers. Within the newly introduced initial teacher training (ITE) Core Content Framework (CCF) (DfE 2019) the framework defines, in detail, the minimum ITE curriculum entitlement of all trainee teachers. The document states that trainee teachers will develop as professionals by ‘receiving clear, consistent, and effective mentoring ...’ (2019, 29) and ‘following expert input, by taking opportunities to practise, receive feedback and improve at: Seeking challenge, feedback and critique from mentors and other colleagues in an open and trusting working environment’ (2019, 29). This could be described as escamotage. Some trainee teachers may be able to seek challenge, feedback and critique, however others may feel too vulnerable or too empathic with their mentor’s workload to ask. The creation of ‘open and trusting working environments’ is beyond the control of trainee teachers. The culture of a school is imposed from the top down, starting with the head teacher, not the inverse (Fry et al. 2020).

For trainee teachers, the placement environment is important as workplace conditions can empower or disable resilience for teachers (Burge, Lu, and Phillips 2021; Day et al. 2007) and negative wellbeing can be exacerbated in a poor workplace culture (McLean, Taylor, and Jimenez 2019). The CCF (DfE 2019) assumes that all trainee teachers can receive good mentoring and are able to work in positive environments. However, without implementing any of the structural changes required to change the culture of many primary schools is akin to blowing in the wind. Post-2010 accountability and scrutiny of teachers’ work has led to a de-professionalisation performance culture in some schools, where ‘intensification’ has increased while ‘control’ of their work has decreased (Ball 2021; Galton and MacBeath 2008). The effects of the Covid-19 pandemic and the cost-of-living crisis have only worsened this situation as many teachers, take on extra duties and work with fewer resources. Many teachers feel ‘burnt-out’ (Education Support Partnership 2022). If the DfE really wishes to support trainee teachers to develop positive relationships with their colleagues in school, then schools need to be enabled to change, through policy changes, funding, support and valuing teachers.

ITE curriculum design may have, prior to 2019, been able to consider how to better facilitate the development of trainee teachers’ wellbeing (McLean, Taylor, and Jimenez 2019) and where possible influence their partnership schools to consider their role in this area. Some ITE providers have already started this work (e.g. Leeds Beckett Initial Teacher Education Partnership Mental Health Award). McLean, Taylor, and Jimenez (2019) signpost research which shows developing strategies such as emotional regulation can help teachers (Day 2008; Newberry 2013) and they further highlight the reported benefits of attending mindfulness training (reduction in stress and burn-out); suggesting if wellbeing interventions are planned into ITE it could have a protective impact. However, many ITE providers are now struggling to implement the new Quality Requirements (DfE 2022) which are needed to be compliant for 2024. ITE curriculum wellbeing initiatives could empower trainee teachers to make informed choices around attendance and where possible fostering good relationships with peers and teacher colleagues. However, on a PGCE/PGDE course time is a precious commodity which ITE curriculum designers often do not have enough to facilitate these interventions as well as meeting their statutory duties.

## 5. Conclusion

Illuminating trainee teachers' lived experiences while on their PGCE/PGDE course and how they express their affected wellbeing offers stakeholders the opportunity to hear trainee teachers' voices and the chance to consider how wellbeing can be embedded within the structural fabric of teacher education.

We highlighted trainees' positive experiences which included good relationships with both school and university staff, as well as the role that cohort peers played in person and on social networks. Time to develop these relationships further, within the curriculum, was a recommendation which we took, internally, from this study. However, we are no longer able to implement these changes due to the introduction of the CCF (DfE 2019) and the Quality Requirements for 2024 (DfE 2022). The curriculum is now 'full-up' with the prescribed content. The current lack of ITE provider freedom in determining their curriculums is lamentable.

We also gave insight into the trainee teachers' more challenging lived experiences which they felt affected their wellbeing. These issues were exacerbated by their intersectionality of belonging to two sets: student and teacher. Affiliation of both identities places them in a more vulnerable position than compared with if they were simply members of either group and sometimes the issues exacerbate each other. The challenges are often beyond the trainees' operational control such as school cultures and teachers experiencing their wellbeing challenges or the lack of financial support, e.g. no bursaries for primary trainee teachers and as such may require governmental intervention and reform.

Since conducting this research there have been further difficulties experienced by students and teachers such as the cost-of-living crisis and the Covid-19 pandemic. While at the same time there has been a tightening of control over ITE curriculums by the DfE (Hordern and Brooks 2023) which has seen the limited space for embedding wellness reduced. The further study of how best to support trainee teachers' wellbeing, in this current climate, is required.

Wellbeing matters and it very much matters for trainee teachers: for their quality of life; retention and 'quality retention' (Gu and Day 2013). Currently trainee teachers are entering into a profession which could be described as not being well (Education Support Partnership 2022). While at the same time navigating the wellbeing issues associated with being a student (Campbell et al. 2022). Regrettably, many of these issues lie beyond their control.

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