




Development of a management model to address the impact of work-related stress on teachers' mental well-being in South African primary schools



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Orientation: Work-related stress has deleterious effects on mental health, resulting in disorders such as anxiety, depression and increased absenteeism.

Research purpose: The purpose of this study was to develop a comprehensive management model that addresses work-related stress and enhances the mental well-being of primary school teachers in Gauteng, South Africa. The study is grounded on the Positive Emotions, Engagement, Relationships, Meaning, and Accomplishment (PERMAH) model.

Motivation for the study: Learner achievement is inextricably linked to the well-being of teachers. Exploring how positive mental health constructs can boost teachers' resilience can result in efficacious educational quality and student success.

Research approach/design and method: Confirmatory sequential mixed-method research design was used, with quantitative Phase 1 employing a structural equation model (SEM). The Work-Related Stress Questionnaire (WRSQ) was used to collect data, yielding a return rate of $n = 251$ and ($n = 218$) valid responses. Qualitative data Phase 2 comprised nine teachers selected purposively, using semi-structured interviews with open-ended questions. Thematic analysis was used to analyse the data.

Main findings: The quantitative findings demonstrated significant negative relationships between low social support, burnout and teachers' mental well-being, accounting for 59% of the variance. The qualitative findings revealed themes of positive emotions, engagement, relationships, meaning, accomplishment and health.

Practical/management implications: This study serves as a buoy for the implementation of positive psychology principles and interventions in cultivating teachers' mental well-being.

Contribution/value-add: The study's contributions serve as a framework for the creation of evidence-based management interventions that improve teachers' mental well-being.

Keywords: work-related stress; teachers' well-being; mental well-being; PERMA; PERMAH.

Introduction

Orientation

Workplace stress has significant implications for individuals, organisations and economies worldwide (World Health Organization [WHO], 2019). The nature of work can either pose physical and psychological hazards because of unsafe conditions (Sawhney et al., 2023) or serve as a catalyst for enhancing mental health (Rugulies et al., 2023). Primary school teachers in South Africa experienced considerable problems prior to and during the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic, including colossal class sizes, under-resourced schools and socioeconomic inequality, all of which impacted their mental health (Maaga & Mokwena, 2023; Maseko & Chigeza, 2024). The pandemic intensified these challenges, compelling educators to swiftly shift to online teaching with insufficient resources, inadequate training and heightened isolation (Nhamo et al., 2024; Padmanabhanunni & Pretorius 2023). In the post-pandemic era, there is an urgent necessity for equitable access to resources and support. Addressing these issues is essential for fostering teacher resilience and ensuring educational sustainability. Indeed, teachers encounter emotionally and physically demanding tasks with limited autonomy, leading to increased work-related stress (Cavioni et al., 2024).

Note: Additional supporting information may be found in the online version of this article as Online Appendix 1.

Work-related stress has detrimental effects on mental health, leading to conditions like anxiety and depression, as well as overall poor well-being (Britt et al., 2021). This concern is particularly dire within the teaching profession, where mental health issues, especially depression, frequently remain underdiagnosed and undertreated (Gbadamosi et al., 2022). The situation is worsened by stigma and inadequate support systems (WHO, 2019).

Given this context, it is critical to understand the relationship between work-related stress and teachers' mental well-being. Essentially, this study aims to contribute to the global dialogue on promoting human flourishing in educational settings, embracing a holistic approach that recognises the importance of both mitigating negative outcomes and fostering positive mental health dimensions among teachers in South Africa.

Research has persistently highlighted the high stress levels among primary school teachers (Maaga & Mokwena, 2023; Maseko & Chigeza, 2024; Nomtshongwana & Buka, 2023). Nevertheless, prevailing research has primarily focused on the negative components of teacher functioning, such as stress, burnout, depression and anxiety. Research on the positive dimensions and psychological constructs of teachers' mental well-being is noticeably lacking, especially in the South African school setting (Fourie & De Klerk, 2024; Naidoo & Guse, 2024). Understanding positive psychological functioning, which includes aspects such as positive emotions, engagement, relationships, sense of meaning and accomplishment, is critical for advancing effective management strategies that promote teacher flourishing.

The study measured both the negative dimensions of stress, such as high job demands, low job control, low social support, burnout and work-family conflict, as well as the positive dimensions of well-being, including positive emotions, engagement, relationships, meaning, accomplishment and overall health.

This holistic approach is consistent with global trends aimed at promoting human flourishing and positive mental health (Hascher & Waber, 2021; Padmanabhanunni & Pretorius, 2023), proposing a balanced perspective on well-being that encompasses both negative and positive dimensions.

The study supports the notion that Positive Emotions, Engagement, Relationships, Meaning, and Accomplishment (PERMA) framework (Seligman, 2011) dimensions are critical for teachers' mental well-being, even in the face of job-related stress. By incorporating the PERMA model into a comprehensive approach to teachers' mental well-being, schools can gain a framework for not only decreasing stress but also boosting positive aspects of well-being. This study incorporated the health (H) component into the original PERMA, modifying it to the PERMAH framework, which is essential, as it includes both mental and physical well-being, affecting an individual's ability to thrive or experience burnout (Kern, 2022; Rettig, 2023).

Research purpose and objectives

The purpose of this study is to provide a comprehensive management model that addresses work-related stress and enhances the mental well-being of primary school teachers in Gauteng, South Africa. This model focuses on creating actionable strategies designed to alleviate stress and strengthen teachers' psychological resources, resulting in a healthier work environment. The data collection was delimited to teachers in Gauteng, South Africa.

Literature review

Positive emotions, engagement, relationships, meaning and accomplishment model as a theoretical framework

The PERMAH model serves as the theoretical basis for this research, providing a complete method for investigating teachers' mental health. Previous research on teacher wellbeing in South Africa has primarily concentrated on the PERMA model (Wessels & Wood, 2019; Botha et al., 2023; Wood & Esterhuizen, 2024; Naidoo & Guse, 2024; Eloff et al., 2024), frequently omitting the 'H' (Health) element essential to the expanded PERMAH framework. This study makes a significant advancement by incorporating the health element (H), thereby expanding the model to PERMAH. Its six components delineate an extensive framework for understanding teachers' well-being associated with work-related stressors. The study provided a theory-driven framework that accentuates both the negative aspects of stress and the positive elements of teachers' well-being. The binary cynosure guided the development of the management model, safeguarding that interventions are both proactive and reactive, advocating for a holistic well-being across all six facets of the model.

By highlighting the emotional, psychological and social facets of well-being, the model informs actionable interventions that decrease stress and ameliorate positive experiences such as engagement, relationships, meaning and accomplishment.

Research gaps

Recent research indicates a considerable gap in the investigation of a multidimensional approach to teachers' well-being (Chen et al., 2024; Morris et al., 2025; Ozturk et al., 2024, 2025), particularly within the South African educational environment (Fourie & De Klerk, 2024; Guse, 2022; Wood & Esterhuizen, 2024). Hascher and Waber (2021) pointed out that existing research has primarily focused on the negative elements of teacher functioning, including stress, burnout, depression and anxiety. This gap is echoed in South African research on these negative aspects of teacher functioning, without adequately investigating the positive aspects that can improve teachers' well-being (Dreer, 2020; Fourie & De Klerk, 2024; Wessels & Wood, 2019). Such an oversight indicates that adopting a positive psychology viewpoint could provide useful insights into teachers' mental health in this setting (Fourie & De Klerk, 2024).

Expanding on this approach, Naidoo and Guse (2024) emphasised the critical need for research into positive psychology dimensions associated with academic performance in South Africa. The authors criticised prior assessments of positive psychology literature for their broad scope, which frequently overlooks the positive psychology interventions (PPIs) in educational contexts. Consequently, focused research into positive dimensions relevant to the South African educational landscape is critical for improving positive psychology in this context (Guse, 2022). The studies shared a common goal to investigate which positive dimensions are useful in a South African context, which is in line with recommendations for more culturally relevant positive psychology research. Indeed, according to a scoping review, while research on positive psychology components and academic performance is gaining traction in South Africa, progress is slow (Naidoo & Guse, 2024).

Mpondo (2023) discovered a gap in the effectiveness of positive interventions for addressing well-being issues among primary school teachers. Maaga and Mokwena (2023) accentuate the importance of resolving this omission, which endangers the well-being of future generations. Furthermore, Marais-Opperman et al. (2021) emphasised the importance of researching how positive reframing and active coping methods influence teachers' perceived distress, self-efficacy, workplace flourishing and retention intentions in South Africa.

Botha et al. (2023) reinforced the necessity of prioritising teachers' well-being in South Africa, citing their critical role in influencing the country's future through education. Furthermore, Nwoko et al. (2023) proposed target research on primary school teachers, citing job demands and the need for increased social support as major challenges to their occupational well-being. The primary focus on student achievements has frequently overshadowed teachers' needs and experiences, resulting in inadequate attention to their mental health (Pillay & Setlhare-Kajee, 2023).

Building on previous research in South African secondary schools (Naidoo & Guse, 2024), this study focuses on the negative sources of stress and positive psychology components linked with teacher flourishing in South African primary schools, informed by the PERMAH. This work makes a substantial and unique contribution to the literature, filling a critical gap in the education sector. Mutesasira and Marongwe (2024) highlighted the need to address teachers' well-being. Neglecting this component can lead to significant burnout among educators, negatively impacting the learning environment.

Research methods and design

A mixed-method confirmatory sequential research design was used in this study (Creswell & Clark, 2018). The confirmatory research strategy involved thoroughly testing

established hypotheses to authenticate the associations between main variables with quantitative data collected and analysed first, followed by qualitative data to provide a better understanding of the results.

Setting

This study is embedded within the framework of the South African Department of Basic Education, focusing specifically on primary school teachers in Gauteng who fit the inclusion criteria. The Gauteng province is divided into various districts demarcating the schools according to their regions. The schools in these regions are divided into quintiles based on the surrounding communities. Lower quintiles (Q1–Q3) are non-fee institutions, whereas higher quintiles (Q4–Q5) charge fees. This study covered both the lower quintile (Q1–Q3) non-fee institutions and higher quintile (Q4–Q5) charge-fee schools to capture the differences and similarities in the experiences of work-related stress and well-being of teachers.

Population of interest was all the teachers working in permanent positions ($n = 94860$) mainstream public-school teachers in primary schools in South Africa's Gauteng Province, often referred to as ordinary primary schools (Record Information and Tracking System [LURITS] and Provincial Data Warehouses, 2023).

Targeted teachers comprised ($n = 42437$ teachers), having applied inclusion and exclusion criteria, derived from the education management information system (EMIS) database (2023) and Personnel and Salary Administration System (PERSAL). *Inclusion criteria* comprised full-time teachers who are compensated by the Gauteng Department of Basic Education. *Exclusion criteria*: Teachers in secondary schools, rural schools, private schools, schools for learners with special education needs (LSEN schools), as well as contract, temporary and School Governing Body-paid teachers, were excluded from the study.

A stratified random sampling method was used to select participants, and the Yamane's formula (1967) was used to calculate the sample size of each stratum with a margin of error of 5%. This resulted in an optimal sample size of 396 teachers. To accommodate for possible non-responses, 398 questionnaires were disseminated. A total of 251 completed surveys were received, with a response rate of 63.1%. Following a review of the returned questionnaires, 33 replies were eliminated because of incompleteness or invalidity, leaving a final set of 218 viable questionnaires for analysis. This resulted in a usable 54.8% response rate.

Albeit the response rate was lower than anticipated, it was nevertheless adequate for analysis, especially for structural equation modelling (SEM). Survey literature indicates that a 55% response rate is deemed good, while many experts classify a response rate of 50% or more as exceptional, signifying robust representation of the target population and dependable data gathering (Sataloff & Vontela, 2021).

The Work-Related Stress Questionnaire (WRSQ) used in this study was adapted from a newly developed tool originally from the University of Rome, designed to assess psychosocial risks in workplace environments with 33 items (De Sio et al., 2020). The adapted version of the WRSQ comprised 24 items (as Online Appendix 1, Section C1 is described), which were distributed across the constructs of high job demands (five items), low job control (four items), low social support (five items), burnout (six items) and work-family conflict (four items). The self-reported questionnaire is freely available via open access to be utilised by researchers. According to Hair et al. (2018), validity and reliability can be measured using composite reliability (CR) average variance extracted (AVE). The authors suggested that CR should be greater than 0.6 and preferably above 0.7 to establish reliability. The reliability and validity of the WRSQ were established through Cronbach's α coefficient analysis (from 0.600 to 0.939), resulting in excellent reliability. A Cronbach's alpha of 0.600 suggests acceptable internal consistency, while an alpha of 0.939 indicates excellent internal consistency (Hair et al., 2018). Based on the same criteria used to assess the goodness-of-fit for the measurement model, the fit indices for the proposed model indicate an excellent fit: Chi-square = 515.919, p -value = 0.000, degrees of freedom (df) = 308, Chi-square minimum (CMIN)/ df = 1.675, GFI = 0.852, Tucker-Lewis index (TLI) = 0.925, standardised root-mean-residual (SRMR) = 0.0774, comparative fit index (CFI) = 0.935 and root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) = 0.056. This suggests that the model appropriately represents the data, allowing us to examine the hypothesised relationships.

Cedrone et al. (2024) also validated the 13-item version of the WRSQ on a representative sample of Italian public health and agreed that WRSQ proved to be an excellent tool for assessing work related with a Cronbach alpha and coefficient analysis of $\alpha = 0.80$ and $\omega = 0.85$ (Hair et al., 2018). A confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) using a weighted least-square-mean and variance-adjusted estimator was conducted. The overall goodness-of-fit was assessed using the following indexes and cut-off points: CFI (CFI ≥ 0.95), TLI (TLI ≥ 0.95), RMSEA (RMSEA < 0.06) and SRMR (SRMR ≤ 0.08). Cronbach's alpha and Omega McDonald were assessed to evaluate the reliability of the 13-item questionnaire and each subscale. A p -value < 0.05 was considered statistically significant.

Section D of the questionnaire consisted of 23 well-being items aligned with Seligman's PERMA model (2011), covering dimensions such as positive emotions, engagement, positive relationships, meaning and accomplishment; however, the model also introduces health as essential components in mitigating stress (PERMAH).

Respondents provided ratings on a scale ranging from 'Never' to 'Always', with each item numbered from 1 to 10. The selection of Seligman's PERMA model was guided by its multidimensional nature, making it valuable for

comprehending employee's well-being. Prior studies, including Kun et al. (2017) and Goodman et al. (2018), demonstrated the reliability and validity of instruments based on the PERMA model, supporting its application in this study.

Data analysis

The SEM analysis was conducted using IBM SPSS AMOS version 24 to analyse the data with the aim to assess the structural interconnections among the variables delineated within the conceptual model. The analysis procedure included the descriptive analysis, such as the demographic information, key dimensions of the study, key dimensions distribution, analysis of variance (ANOVA) focusing on the level of work-related stress and well-being experienced by teachers in the primary schools of Gauteng, South Africa.

Phase 2: Qualitative phase

In the qualitative phase of this mixed-methods study, nine teachers from two primary schools in the West Rand District of Gauteng were purposively selected to provide in-depth insights into work-related stress and teachers' well-being, with participants who possess the requisite knowledge that are directly related to the research questions (De Jesus & O'Neil, 2024), framed by the PERMAH model. Sample size was guided by findings from the systematic review by Hennink and Kaiser (2022), which indicated that qualitative interview saturation is typically achieved between 9 and 17 interviews. As a result, nine participants were deemed appropriate to ensure a diversity of opinions while making data collecting manageable. Participants were chosen based on a particular criterion, including full-time work, a mix of new and experienced teachers, allowing for comparisons of teachers' stress and well-being.

The inclusion of new and experienced teachers was purposeful in order to capture a larger spectrum of viewpoints. New teachers encounter different pressures and challenges than more experienced teachers, bringing insights on early-career stress, whereas veteran teachers shared their knowledge of stress throughout time and long-term well-being. This approach provided a comprehensive view of work-related stress across several career stages.

Thematic analysis was used to analyse the qualitative data from the interview schedules that were informed by findings in a quantitative phase. This eventually provided an opportunity to identify themes used for the discussions in the study. The research instruments were informed by the findings from questionnaires and attempts to gather elaborative answers to the findings (Braun & Clarke, 2022). Several key strategies were employed to increase the credibility of the qualitative investigation. Expert opinion was sought on research design and data collection techniques, which helped to enhance the process and increase rigour. Peer debriefing discussions with peers shed light on potential biases and opportunities for development, improving the whole research process. Member checks were also used, in

which preliminary findings were shared with participants to validate interpretations and ensure they were consistent with their experiences. These strategies jointly improved the study's credibility and trustworthiness (Eryilmaz, 2022).

Ethical considerations

Ethical clearance to conduct this study was obtained from the Milpark Business School Research Ethics Committee (REC) (No. DBA2022/11/001).

Results

The descriptive statistics in Table 1 reveal the average perceptions of teachers regarding the key dimensions of the study. The mean scores provide insight into the overall trends for each dimension.

High job demand: Statements JD1–JD5; **Low job control:** Statements: JC1–JC4; **Low social support:** WCS1–WCS5; **Burnout:** Statements: BUR1–BUR6 and **Work-family conflict:** WLB1–WLB4.

The differences in teachers' well-being across various demographic variables

A one-way ANOVA was conducted to examine the differences in teachers' well-being across various demographic and professional variables, including gender, age, race, job category, level of education and years of experience.

Research hypotheses of the study

Based on the results presented in Table 3, the relationships between various independent variables and teachers' mental well-being in selected primary schools in Gauteng, South Africa, were examined using SEM. The study investigated five hypotheses regarding the impact of different factors on well-being.

The purpose of the qualitative phase provides deeper insights into the research questions, supporting the quantitative findings.

Key themes and sub-themes

The positive emotions emerged prominently as a crucial issue during the interviews. Positive feelings are fundamental to overall well-being, and they are essential for improving social functioning, mental health and

resilience. A sub-theme on the feelings of happiness and job satisfaction and maintaining a positive outlook is discussed hereunder.

Positive emotions (P)

Feelings of happiness and job satisfaction: TP1, 26–35 years old, Male, mentioned: 'When a student finally understands a concept, all the effort feels worthwhile'. TP4 added:

'Hearing from former students about how I helped them gives me a deep sense of fulfilment.' (TP4, 45–50 years old, Female)

Two respondents stated that 'leadership recognition considerably increased their satisfaction'. TP4 commented:

'Being recognised for my hard work motivates me to go the extra mile.' (TP4, 45–50 years old, Female)

TP9 shared:

'Winning Teacher of the Year was a proud moment, it validated all the hard work I've put in.' (TP9, 26–35 years old, Male)

Maintaining a positive outlook: Teachers employed various strategies to maintain positivity. TP2, 26–35 years old, Female, explained, 'I concentrate on the little victories every day to keep myself motivated'. TP3 mentioned:

'Having colleagues who understand the challenges helps me stay upbeat, even during tough times.' (TP3, 36–45 years old, Female)

TABLE 2: Analysis of variance.

Demographic variables	Mean	SD	F	p
Gender				
Male	6.26	1.33	0.00	0.999
Female	6.25	1.35	-	-
Other	6.30	-	-	-
Age range (years)				
20–25	6.19	1.33	0.09	0.985
26–35	6.26	1.18	-	-
36–45	6.10	1.32	-	-
45–50	6.25	1.40	-	-
> 50	6.29	1.44	-	-
Racial group				
African	6.31	1.33	0.98	0.379
White	6.10	1.46	-	-
Coloured	5.87	1.19	-	-
Job category				
PL1	6.20	1.33	2.48	0.062
PL2	6.32	1.38	-	-
PL3	7.60	0.72	-	-
PL4	7.54	1.07	-	-
Educational qualification				
Bachelors	6.18	1.40	0.67	0.570
Honours	6.35	1.24	-	-
Masters	6.85	1.39	-	-
Doctorate	6.24	0.15	-	-
Work experience (years)				
0–5	6.22	1.10	1.14	0.338
6–10	6.33	1.41	-	-
11–15	6.18	1.46	-	-
16–20	5.84	1.44	-	-
> 20	6.46	1.38	-	-

SD, standard deviation.

TABLE 1: Descriptive statistics: Key dimensions of the study (N = 218).

Dimensions	Minima	Maxima	Mean	SD	Skewness	Kurtosis
High job demand	1	5	3.35	0.53	-0.68	0.11
Low job control	1	5	2.26	0.75	0.48	0.01
Low social support	1	5	2.91	0.71	-0.16	0.04
Burnout	1	5	2.93	0.68	-0.13	-0.43
Work-life conflict	1	5	2.62	0.76	0.18	-0.23
PERMA	0	10	6.25	1.34	-0.41	-0.29

Source: De Sio et al., (2020); Cedrone et al., (2024); Seligman (2011)
SD, standard deviation; PERMA, positive emotions, engagement, relationships, meaning, and accomplishment.

TABLE 3: Standardised regression weights and hypothesis conclusion.

Dependent variables		Independent variables	Beta value	<i>p</i>	Conclusions
H1: Job demands negatively impact teachers' mental well-being.					
PERMA (well-being)	←	High job demands	-0.08	0.364	High job demands had a negative but non-significant effect on well-being ($\beta = -0.080, p > 0.05$). This suggests that while there is a negative trend, it is not statistically significant. Therefore, H1 is rejected.
H2: Low job control negatively impacts teachers' mental well-being.					
PERMA (Well-being)	←	Low job control	0.02	0.742	Low job control had a positive and non-significant effect on well-being ($\beta = 0.021, p > 0.05$). This suggests that low job control is not significantly associated with teachers' well-being in this context. Therefore, H2 is rejected.
H3: Low social support negatively impacts the mental well-being.					
PERMA (well-being)	←	Low social support	0.49	0.000	Low social support had a significant negative effect on well-being ($\beta = 0.495, p < 0.05$). This indicates that lower levels of social support are associated with a decrease in well-being, supporting H3. Therefore, H3 is accepted.
H4: Burnout negatively impacts teachers' mental well-being.					
PERMA (well-being)	←	Burnout	-0.50	0.000	Burnout had a negative and significant effect on well-being ($\beta = -0.500, p < 0.05$). This demonstrates that increased burnout is significantly associated with lower mental well-being among teachers. Therefore, H4 is accepted.
H5: Work-family conflict negatively impacts teachers' mental well-being.					
PERMA (well-being)	←	Work-life conflict	-0.06	0.537	Work-life conflict had a negative but non-significant effect on well-being ($\beta = -0.065, p > 0.05$). This indicates that work-life conflict is not significantly associated with teachers' well-being. Therefore, H5 is rejected.

PERMA, positive emotions, engagement, relationships, meaning, and accomplishment.

Two teachers highlighted that a nurturing work atmosphere enhanced their resilience. TP6 shared:

'Positive relationships with colleagues and students make it easier to stay positive.' (TP6, 36–45 years old, Female)

Findings: Participants expressed joy in witnessing student success and receiving recognition for their efforts. Teachers felt a sense of satisfaction from earning awards and public acknowledgement, which validated their hard work and instilled a sense of pride. This is confirmatory as it aligns with the job demands-resources (JDR) theory, highlighting the role of positive resources (recognition, support) in fostering positive emotions and well-being. Self-determination theory (SDT) underscores the critical role of intrinsic motivation in promoting emotional experiences. However, the PERMAH model concentrates on the significance of positive emotions as a key element of overall well-being.

Furthermore, Ngwenya (2021) underscored the importance of participatory management, which involves teachers in job-related decisions. This approach can help prevent teachers from feeling overwhelmed and reduce their stress levels. Many participants also highlighted supportive management methods that recognised teachers' contributions, including personal acknowledgements that enhanced their emotional resilience.

Engagement (E)

Engagement is crucial in increasing teachers' dedication and tenacity. A sub-theme on the moments of engagement (flow) and barriers to engagement appeared as crucial.

Moments of engagement (flow)

Teachers felt most engaged when students were actively involved in the learning process. TP3 shared:

'When my students are engaged, asking questions, and collaborating, I feel completely immersed in teaching.' (TP3, 36–45 years old, Female)

TP6, 36–45 years old, Female, noted, 'Time flies when my students are engaged in group projects and learning together'.

Two respondents stressed the importance of interactive teaching methods in fostering their engagement. TP8 said:

'Hands-on activities and problem-solving exercises really draw me in – it's when I feel most connected to my students.' (TP8, 26–35 years old, Female)

Barriers to engagement

Classroom disruptions or lack of resources hindered engagement. TP4 said:

'It's hard to stay engaged when behaviour management takes up most of my time.' (TP4, 45–50, Male)

TP7, 26–35 years old, Female, noted, 'Without the right tools, I feel disconnected from the lesson.'

Findings: The interview responses highlighted both systemic strengths and weaknesses. Teachers felt most engaged when students were actively involved; barriers included classroom disruptions and lack of resources. Conversely, frustration with micro-management and a perceived lack of autonomy emerged as significant stressors, which diminished motivation and job satisfaction.

This is confirmatory in nature with person-environment fit theory emphasising the correlation between a teacher's skills and the teaching environment, necessary for attaining engagement. Theory of flow also illustrates how optimal engagement can lead to fulfilment and joy in teaching. However, the PERMAH model accentuates engagement as central to experiencing well-being.

Furthermore, teachers who are passionate about their jobs and find meaning in their work tend to experience higher levels of overall well-being. Therefore, to maximise teachers' engagement, organisations should create supportive work environments that align with teachers' needs (Maleka et al., 2022).

Relationships (R)

Teachers who establish healthy relationships are better at defining their roles within the educational context, which benefits both the school and the larger community (Maseko & Chigeza, 2024). This viewpoint is supported by the findings of Nambiito and Ngumenawe (2024), which suggest that favourable relational dynamics improve teacher effectiveness and student outcomes. Crucial sub-themes are impact of relationships on well-being and the importance of friendships at work.

Impact of relationships on well-being

Collegial and students' relationships were viewed as critical to emotional well-being. TP1 said:

'Without the support of my colleagues, I couldn't manage the emotional demands of this job.' (TP1, 26–35 years old, Male)

TP5 noted:

'My students keep me going, especially when the administrative side of things feels overwhelming.' (TP5, 26–35 years old, Female)

Two respondents expressed frustration with negative management dynamics, which affected their motivation. TP7, 26–35 years old, Female, shared, 'Micro-management really drains my energy and makes me feel undervalued'.

Importance of friendships at work

Friendships with colleagues were highlighted as a vital source of support. TP4, 45–50 years old, Female, said, 'Being able to talk to friends at work helps me process stressful days'.

TP9 noted:

'My colleagues are like a second family, and we rely on each other to get through the tough times.' (TP9, 26–35 years old, Male)

Finding: Strong relationships with colleagues and students were essential as negative management dynamics hindered motivation.

The findings are confirmatory, aligning with Lazarus' coping theory that focuses on the importance of social support as a coping resource in managing stress, critical for emotional well-being. Garmezy's resilience theory underscores the role of supportive relationships in fostering resilience among teachers. However, the PERMAH model highlights the significance of positive relationships in overall well-being.

Meaning (M)

Meaningful work is inextricably linked to job satisfaction, life satisfaction and self-reported health, demonstrating its critical role in overall well-being. Important sub-themes are sources of purpose and evolution over time.

Sources of purpose

Teachers consistently identified their students' growth as the primary source of purpose in their work. TP2 shared:

'Seeing my students grow into confident individuals is what makes this job meaningful.' (TP2, 26–35 years old, Female)

TP8, 26–35 years old, Female, 'It's not just about academics – it's about shaping their character and future.'

Two respondents noted that creating a nurturing and supportive environment was key to their sense of purpose. TP5, 26–35 years old, Female, said, 'I find meaning in helping my students feel valued, safe, and understood.'

Evolution of meaning over time

Respondents reflected on how their sense of purpose had evolved throughout their careers. TP3 explained:

'Early in my career, I was focused on survival, but now it's about making a lasting difference.' (TP3, 36–45 years old, Female)

TP7 noted:

'With experience, I've come to appreciate the deeper impact I can have beyond academics.' (TP7, 26–35 years old, Female)

Qualitative phase revealed that younger educators stated a need for mentorship, but with experience teachers reported a developed sense of purpose.

Findings: A sense of purpose stems from both student growth and the creation of a supportive environment, and this sense evolves throughout one's career. Prilleltensky and Prilleltensky (2021) warned that individuals' ability to find meaning in life diminishes when they feel disrespected, undervalued or unacknowledged, which can lead to a decrease in overall well-being.

This confirmatory finding aligns with person-environment fit theory, suggesting that finding meaning in work is enhanced when personal values align with professional roles. Ryff's model of psychological well-being highlights the significance of purpose and self-acceptance in professional fulfilment. The PERMAH model underscores meaning as a critical component of well-being.

Accomplishment (A)

Feelings of accomplishment are linked to student success and personal recognition, while goal-setting fosters motivation. Aligning with sub-themes of professional achievements and progress towards goals is discussed hereunder.

Professional achievements

Many respondents described feeling accomplished when they saw their efforts translate into student success or personal recognition. TP4, 45–50 years old, Female, noted, 'Seeing the curriculum I developed succeed was a major achievement for me'. TP9 commented:

'Winning Teacher of the Year was a proud moment – it validated all the hard work I've put in.' (TP9, 26–35 years old, Male)

Two respondents mentioned that experimenting with new teaching methods gave them a sense of accomplishment. TP6, 36–45 years old, Female, shared, 'Trying something new and seeing it work makes me feel like I'm growing as a teacher'.

Progress towards goals

Setting and achieving personal and professional goals were a common source of accomplishment. TP3, 36–45 years old, Female, said, 'I stay motivated by setting small, realistic goals, and celebrating those wins'. TP7, 26–35 years old, Female, noted, 'Even when progress is slow, knowing I'm moving forward keeps me going'.

Finding: Achievement is crucial for improving teachers' overall well-being, as it reflects their competence and ability to positively impact student learning, resulting in a rewarding sense of fulfilment (Wessels & Wood, 2019).

The JDR theory stresses the importance of achievement and resources in sustaining motivation and job satisfaction. Locke and Latham's goal-setting theory indicates that clear goals enhance motivation and contribute to a sense of accomplishment. However, PERMAH highlights sense of accomplishment as vital for overall well-being.

Health (H)

The inclusion of physical health in the PERMAH model emphasises the mind-body connection, highlighting that a healthy body contributes to a healthy mind (Kern, 2022). When a person feels and functions well in one area, he or she is more likely to feel and perform well in other areas (Kern et al., 2019). Aligning with sub-themes of physical and mental health and work-life balance is discussed hereunder.

Physical and mental health

Respondents acknowledged the critical link between their physical and mental health and their ability to perform effectively. TP1 shared:

'If I don't take care of myself physically, it's impossible to teach well.' (TP1, 26–35 years old, Male)

TP6, 36–45 years old, Female, said, 'Mindfulness helps me manage stress and stay focused, even on difficult days'.

Two respondents emphasised the importance of work-life balance. TP8, 26–35 years old, Female, explained, 'I make time to rest and recharge, it's essential for my well-being'.

Work-life balance

Teachers discussed the need to set boundaries between work and personal life to avoid burnout. TP3, 36–45 years

old, Female, noted, 'Leaving work at work is key to maintaining balance'. TP8, 26–35 years old, Female, added, 'I prioritise my personal time to stay refreshed and focused for my students'.

Finding: Participants highlighted the connection between physical and mental health and teaching effectiveness, emphasising the importance of work-life balance. According to Ferreira et al. (2024), there is a positive correlation between teachers' physical and mental well-being and their effectiveness. Moreover, studies have demonstrated that poor work-life balance negatively affects job performance and satisfaction (Ademola et al., 2021).

The confirmatory findings indicate that the JDC model emphasises balancing job demands with control and recovery to promote health and prevent burnout. Bronfenbrenner's ecological model explores how multiple systems (e.g. school, family) influence teachers' health and resilience. However, the PERMAH model acknowledges health as integral to the concept of well-being.

Discussion

Outline of the results

Current educational management and support systems

In the quantitative phase (Table 1) in the area of **high demands**, teachers consistently experience significant demands in their work environment (mean score of 3.35 out of 5). Teachers generally feel they have relatively **low levels of control** over their work (mean score of 2.26 out of 5). The score suggests some level of restriction in decision-making or autonomy in their roles. They perceive a moderate level of **social support**, but some experience a lack of sufficient support from colleagues or supervisors in their work environment (mean score of 2.91 out of 5). Burnout levels are moderately high among teachers, indicating that many are experiencing emotional or physical exhaustion because of work pressure (mean score of 2.93 out of 5). Teachers report experiencing moderate levels of **work-family conflict**, indicating that their professional responsibilities interfere with their personal lives and obligations, as reflected in a mean score of 2.62 out of 5.

Given the relatively low mean score for management support in this study, the quantitative results reveal that many teachers feel unsupported by management, showing broad discontent. Notably, qualitative findings demonstrated that while some teachers felt supported by recognition and collegial interactions, others encountered negative management practices such as micro-management. The intricacy of how support is viewed and experienced in practice is shown by these contradictory findings.

Nonetheless, the research underscores that inadequate leadership skills and resource limitations are significant obstacles to successful micro-management and student

success (Ramos & Malangen, 2023). This affirms the important role that supervisors, managers and leaders play in impacting employee mental health (De Jesus & O'Neil, 2024). They are critical for policy execution, resource allocation and the development of supportive social support.

Impact of work-related stressors on teachers' mental well-being

When testing the research hypotheses, the results indicated two statistically significant but negative relationships and three negative and non-significant relationships (Table 3). The quantitative data revealed lack of significant impact of high job demands, low job control and work-family conflict, on the mental well-being of teachers in primary schools in Gauteng, which warrants further research. However, low social support and burnout are negatively and statistically associated with teachers' mental well-being in the primary schools in Gauteng, South Africa.

The qualitative phase accentuates the importance of relational support in curbing the impact of teacher burnout. TP3 mentioned:

'Having colleagues who understand the challenges helps me stay upbeat, even during tough times.' (TP3, 26–35 years old, Female)

TP6 shared:

'Positive relationships with colleagues and students make it easier to stay positive.' (TP6, 36–45 years old, Female)

TP1 said:

'Without the support of my colleagues, I couldn't manage the emotional demands of this job.' (TP1, 26–35 years old, Male)

TP5 shared:

'My students keep me going, especially when the administrative side of things feels overwhelming.' (TP5, 26–35 years old, Female)

TP4 said:

'Being able to talk to friends at work helps me process stressful days.' (TP4, 45–50 years old, Female)

TP9 noted:

'My colleagues are like a second family, and we rely on each other to get through the tough times.' (TP9, 26–35 years old, Male)

Overall, the findings from this quantitative and qualitative phase highlight the importance of a supportive workplace that prioritises teachers' well-being. This finding aligns with the conservation of resources (COR) hypothesis elaborating on this dynamic, emphasising that the availability and management of psychological resources play a critical role in influencing burnout levels (Hobfoll & Freedy, 2017). The conservation of theory further states

that people are driven to safeguard and conserve their resources (such as social support and emotional energy) in order to alleviate stress and sustain well-being. These findings are consistent with the JDR theory, which states that insufficient resources can increase the negative impacts of job demands, emphasising the need for social networks and emotional resilience in the workplace (Nwoko et al., 2023).

Addressing the highlighted themes can help to inform strategies for increasing teacher resilience, efficacy, reducing burnout and, eventually, improving student educational outcomes. Recognising and cultivating these variables allows educational institutions to build a more resilient and successful teaching profession, highlighting the critical role teachers play in influencing future generations.

Positive dimensions of teachers' mental well-being

In the quantitative phase, PERMAH (a measure of well-being) has a mean score of 6.25 (out of 10), indicating a moderate level of well-being. While not extremely low, it suggests that there is room for improvement in terms of teachers' overall positive emotions, engagement, relationships, meaning and accomplishment.

The study's findings support the notion that PERMAH dimensions are critical for teachers' mental well-being, even in the face of job-related stress. In the qualitative phase, key themes emerged, including the relevance of pleasant emotions, supportive relationships and a feeling of purpose, which supported quantitative data on the PERMAH model. Participants identified joy in student success and recognition as employed strategies to maintain a positive outlook. On the engagement dimension, teachers felt most engaged when students were actively involved and barriers included classroom disruptions and lack of resources. Strong relationships with colleagues and students were essential; negative management dynamics hindered motivation. Sense of purpose stemmed from student growth and creating a supportive environment, evolved throughout careers. Feelings of accomplishment linked to student success and personal recognition goal-setting fostered motivation. Teachers also emphasised the link between physical and mental health and teaching effectiveness and work-life balance was crucial.

By incorporating the PERMAH model into a comprehensive approach to teacher mental well-being, schools can gain a framework for not decreasing stress but also boosting positive aspects of well-being. This approach highlights that enhancing well-being entails not stress reduction but also encouraging good characteristics of the workplace that lead to long-term health and job satisfaction.

Differences in well-being across demographics

Quantitative data (Table 2) revealed that demographic variables such as gender, age, race and tenure had no influence on the well-being. Conversely, for job category,

the ANOVA yielded an F -value of 2.484 and a p -value of 0.062, which align with Emeljanovas et al. (2023) who discovered that criteria such as teachers' age, seniority, place of residence and marital status had no effect on their emotional well-being.

For **job category**, the ANOVA yielded an F -value of 2.484 and a p -value of 0.062. The F -value, while not extremely high, indicates that there is more variance between the well-being scores of different job categories, PL1 ($M = 6.20$), PL2 ($M = 6.32$), PL3 ($M = 7.60$) and PL4 ($M = 7.54$), than within the groups. However, the p -value is slightly above the threshold for statistical significance ($p = 0.062$).

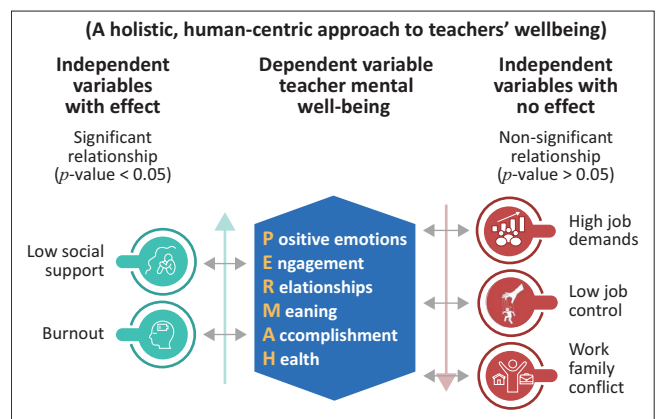
The impact of job category on teachers' well-being is explained by differences in job demands, leadership roles and levels of responsibility. Teachers undergo substantial emotional labour but have more predictable workloads, whereas Heads of Department (HODs), Deputy Principals and Principals confront more administrative duties, increasing stress and burnout risk. It suggests that job category may be an important factor influencing well-being and warrants further investigation.

The qualitative data revealed that age, gender and years of experience had a substantial impact on teachers' mental well-being. Younger educators stated a need for mentorship, but more experienced teachers reported a developed sense of purpose. Early-career teachers often face significant challenges, including inadequate support and feelings of being unprepared for their roles. Effective induction programmes and professional development can help alleviate these stressors and improve well-being (Admiraal & Røberg, 2023). This aligns with Ferreira et al. (2024), demonstrating that older preschool educators and those with greater experience exhibited a markedly higher teaching efficacy score compared to their younger and less experienced peers. There is no consensus on the demographic variables and their interplay to well-being. In conclusion, future research can further explore the interplay of demographic factors and job demands on teacher mental well-being.

Development of a management model – Contribution

The management model underpinned by the PERMAH framework promotes targeted strategies aimed at enhancing social support, burnout reduction and fostering a positive work environment, thus empowering teachers to flourish in their respective roles and not just survive (Figure 1).

Burnout and social support are directly linked to personal well-being by affecting internal states of psychological flourishing. Understanding the function of social support and resilience in burnout prevention is critical, as supportive interactions increase teacher resilience (Marcionetti & Castelli, 2023). The SDT underscores the critical role of intrinsic motivation in promoting emotional experiences. Conversely, the non-significant correlation of high job demands, low job control and work-family conflict represents external conditions (hygienic factors) that do not inherently



Source: Selebano, T.E., Huisamen, A.P., & Pellissier, R. (2025). Development of a management model to address the impact of work-related stress on teachers' mental well-being in South African primary schools. *SA Journal of Human Resource Management/SA Tydskrif vir Menslikehulpbronbestuur*, 23(0), a2924. <https://doi.org/10.4102/sajhrm.v23i0.2924>
Note: $y = 0.495x_1 - 0.500x_2$, y = teacher mental well-being, x_1 = low social support, x_2 = burnout.

FIGURE 1: Graphical representation of the management model.

dictate well-being unless they engage with an individual's internal resources. These factors influence workplace stress, but their effect on mental flourishing is contingent upon psychological buffers such as positive emotions, social support, engagement and meaning (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017). A key distinction is whether these elements directly influence personal flourishing or serve as reactive workplace stressors. This explains why social support as an internal factor correlates strongly with burnout, whereas external stressors demonstrate weaker associations.

The study addresses a gap in literature on teachers' mental well-being, adding theoretically to the burgeoning body of knowledge in positive psychology. This contribution is specifically noteworthy because it shifts the emphasis from reactive to proactive methods to strengthening teachers' mental and emotional well-being.

The study's confirmatory, sequential mixed-method approach was able to provide nuanced insights that contribute meaningfully to our understanding of work-related stress and its impact on the mental well-being of South African primary school teachers.

The WRSQ was employed for the first time in a South African setting. It has undergone meticulous testing to ensure its efficacy and validity. This foundation allows future studies in South Africa to build on this tool and validate it in diverse circumstances, so broadening the corpus of knowledge about mental health.

Practical implications

Given the inherent link between teachers' mental well-being and student outcomes, it is critical to prioritise clear policy implementations at the school level in the suggested management model. Recognising that teachers' well-being has a direct impact on overall educational quality, this model promotes targeted strategies aimed at enhancing relational support, burnout reduction and fostering a positive work environment.

Structured peer support networks and mentoring programmes are critical for developing good interpersonal relationships among teachers.

It is critical to put in place methods for recognising and celebrating teacher achievements. This might range from formal awards to informal recognitions that make teachers feel respected and motivated. Recognition provides feedback and recognition for accomplishments, contributing to a positive work environment.

Administrators should prioritise open communication, teamwork and strong connections between teachers and school leadership. Regular team-building exercises can improve collegial support and overall morale.

Policies addressing teacher burnout must prioritise effective workload management, engagement hurdles, such as classroom disturbances and limited resources ought to be addressed.

Resource audit should be done to allocate resources effectively, giving teachers the tools they need to create engaging learning environments. The suggested model's versatility makes it applicable to a wide range of school environments, whether resource-rich or resource-limited. For example, schools with lower resources can offer peer support efforts and recognition programmes, but those with more resources can provide complete mental health services and professional development opportunities.

Micro-management and classroom disruptions negatively impacted teachers contributing to high stress levels and job dissatisfaction. To alleviate the detrimental effects of micro-management, schools should provide teachers with autonomy in their instructional practices, enhance classroom managing techniques and offer professional development on how to deal with disruptive conduct to reduce stress.

Teachers who associated their health to work-life balance and those who were able to properly balance their personal and professional obligations reported improved mental health and more job satisfaction. Schools can foster a good work-life balance by introducing policies like flexible scheduling, mental health days and encouraging teachers to draw boundaries between work and personal time to reduce burnout and increase overall well-being.

Limitations

Accessibility and logistical constraints made it difficult to gain agreement and participation from many teachers, resulting in a smaller sample size. Such difficulties are widespread in educational research and can have an impact on the results (Feni, 2022).

The classification of educators by school phase posed a significant issue, especially in combined schools, where the EMIS cluster teacher numbers without differentiating between

primary and secondary levels. More complexity evolved as teachers taught across both phases, making precise classification difficult. To address this, a probability sampling approach known as stratified random sampling was used to assure proportionate representation across critical strata. In addition, inclusion criteria were meticulously applied, and demographic data were cross-checked using PERSAL. While these may impose some restrictions on the categorisation process, they do not imperil the overall validity or reliability of the study albeit caution is advised when interpreting the results.

The research design used was cross-sectional and correlational, which, while useful for discovering correlations between variables, limits the capacity to draw conclusive causal conclusions. A longitudinal approach could provide more in-depth knowledge of how work-related stress affects teacher mental well-being over time.

The study's sole emphasis on public schools excluded, secondary, independent and special schools, limiting the scope of the findings. Incorporating a broader range of educational settings into future studies would improve the inclusiveness and representativeness of insights into work-related stress and teachers' health.

Conclusion

This study fills a gap in the literature on teacher well-being in South Africa, which theoretically adds to the expanding corpus of knowledge in positive psychology. This approach enriches theoretical frameworks championing for a more holistic understanding of teachers' mental well-being, which includes fostering positive emotions, engagement, relationships, meaning, accomplishment and overall health. This theoretical innovation will lay the groundwork for future study and intervention strategies in educational environments.

The integration of findings from both phases of this study demonstrates the complexities of teachers' well-being in Gauteng's primary schools. The quantitative phase offered critical statistical data about the influence of certain stressors, whereas the qualitative phase enhanced this understanding by presenting teachers' personal experiences. The study used a confirmatory design to thoroughly test and validate hypotheses, providing useful acumen into both theory and practice while maintaining methodological rigour and replicability. These findings suggest that interventions aiming at increasing social support, preventing burnout, recognising accomplishments and strengthening management methods are critical for promoting teachers' well-being. Through the creation of a comprehensive management model, this research sought to offer practical solutions that reduce the impact of work-related stress and improve psychological resources available to teachers.

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Competing interests

The authors declare that they have no financial or personal relationships that may have inappropriately influenced them in writing this article.

Authors' contributions

T.E.S. devised and formulated the management, collected data, collaborated with experts to analyse data and facilitated the manuscript writing process. A.P.H. supervised the initial research study and guided T.E.S. R.P. aided in refining the study framework and data analysis and supervised the initial research study.

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Data availability

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author, T.E.S., upon reasonable request.

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