WELL-BEING AND BURNOUT IN TEACHING
UNDERSTANDING THE ISSUES

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1. Introduction

What factors inhibit well-being and cause burnout in teaching? What roles do these factors play in causing teachers to leave the profession?

The worsening exodus from teaching in the UK has been widely documented, with studies indicating low well-being as a key contributing factor. However, the factors that specifically impact upon the well-being of teachers are less well understood.

In this briefing note, we report on events hosted jointly by the School of Education and Centre for Employment Relations Innovation and Change (CERIC) at the University of Leeds to examine burnout and well-being in teaching. Over May-July 2019, three stakeholder forums were attended by teachers, union representatives, school and academy senior leaders, and human resource professionals. In total, over 30 people (of whom over half were primary or secondary school teachers) attended.

The emphasis in the stakeholder meetings was on listening to participants, and on gathering their insights on issues important to them, rather than imposing a set of themes in advance, thus embedding impact from the start. This summary is designed to generate further discussion of these themes and issues through a second set of stakeholder events taking place in Spring 2020.

The briefing begins by probing meanings of burnout, before examining three key factors identified by participants as factors impacting on the well-being of teachers. We then consider some effects of burnout.

2. What is burnout?

'Burnout' meant different things to participants. Some felt that the term was unhelpful in capturing the range of outcomes and effects that they experienced. When defined as a state of emotional, physical, and mental exhaustion caused by excessive and prolonged stress, some

participants felt that they had indeed experienced, or were experiencing, burnout.

Others felt the term was clinical, too narrow, or too broad, in its meaning. Some pointed to the negative connotations associated with the term burnout, particularly any implication that it was associated with poor performance. Participants also raised a range of other effects, including (low) well-being, satisfaction, and mental health. Some wanted a more explicit term for what they were experiencing: overwork.

We do use the term 'burnout' in this report, but in a broad rather than narrow clinical sense, and in the spirit of the inductive way in which the themes in this report were gathered from individual understandings of participants.

Many of the participants were not currently teaching, having left the profession, temporarily or permanently. They reported that this was due to burnout, exhaustion and/or having been actively 'managed' out of teaching, typically through the aggressive use of performance management systems by senior leaders.

For those teachers that remained in the profession, there was widespread agreement that burnout was something that they were experiencing.

'Burnout sounds weak - why not say what it is: overwork.'

'Burnout sounds like a hard day at the office – it's so much more than that, than being a bit tired or what you feel at the end of a term.'

'Personally, I feel desiccated, like sucked dry of everything.'

'I feel like my flame has been extinguished and it's whether I want to bother to relight it again.'

' "Broken" is a better way to put it rather than burnout.'

Burnout was identified as an important issue facing the teaching profession, yet in national debate and policy discourse it continues to receive little attention. Causes of burnout were seen as neglected, even though policymakers, think tanks and practitioner studies had all highlighted an ongoing crisis in teaching due to excessive workloads, poor levels of teacher recruitment and low teacher retention.

Participants noted that fads around individual resilience and 'sticking-plaster' initiatives masked a range of factors that were causing burnout, notably: high or poorly guided workloads, workplace cultures and ill-conceived performance management.

3. Factors causing burnout

Workload

High workloads in teaching have been recognised in a range of studies, conducted by

the Department for Education, teaching unions and think tanks. The Teachers' Working time Survey (Department for Education, 2017), for example, reported teachers working on average 54 hours per week. More than 9 in 10 teachers said workload was a serious problem.

Communications from the Department for Education to schools, encouraging senior management to better manage workload at a local level, show some recognition of the problem, but the perception of participants was that local responses had had little effect.

High teacher workloads were seen as the norm, with significant work outside contracted hours a necessity to complete essential tasks. 60-70 working hours per week was not uncommon.

'I've no time in the day as the timetable is crammed, so you do all the other stuff at 4 o'clock or before school. So you are there at 7 in the morning till 6 at night.'

'The job just wasn't do-able in waking hours.'

'The head says "you have to drop something", and I say, "tell me what you want me not to do. Here's my list of deadlines".'

'My demise was about three years ago. I didn't know how I could survive if I didn't fix it, which is why I dug such a big hole.'

'I'd make it to the holidays, get lulled into a false sense of security and then back in again, and "wham".'

The effects of high workload were often made worse by poor management practices. This took the form of requests for additional work to be done (e.g. designing new policies, providing evidence/reports on pupil behaviour), with very short deadlines.

Reduced resources/budgets as a result of cutbacks, tasks previously undertaken by administrative staff being allocated to teachers, and local reductions in PPA time, were all seen to be contributing to excessive workloads. Moreover, many of the additional tasks that teachers were required to undertake were seen as meaningless, contributing to poorly designed or unclear metrics and accountability systems, not enhancing education.

Union representatives cited compelling evidence available nationally on the damaging effects of excessive workload. However, action to address it from school leaders and government was limited. Encouraging leaders to tackle workload at a local level was seen as problematic: unions regularly observed that workload impact assessments were not properly undertaken.

Senior leaders, unions and teachers recognised that effective management of workload within schools depended very much on the capabilities, skills and attitudes of particular leaders, and that there were examples of both very good and very poor practice in this area.

Performance management and workplace culture

School performance management and accountability systems were seen as key contributors to low well-being amongst teachers. Teachers acknowledged a need for performance management but felt that systems ignored or neglected the most important elements of teaching - relationships with children, engagement and learning - and focused instead on ensuring school accountability targets were met.

National targets, league tables and OFSTED requirements were seen as the key factors driving increasingly aggressive and punitive individual performance management systems.

Far from being developmental, these were seen by most teachers and unions as a mechanism for control. In some cases performance management systems had clearly been used as a means through which individual teachers had been actively 'managed out' of schools.

A number of participants pointed to instances where performance management was used as a tool to get teachers to quit a school, with one head indicating that a (perfectly legitimate) action undertaken by a teacher 'wouldn't look good on your reference'. In some cases, teachers had been told that they need to 'move on' to avoid being managed out on performance/capability grounds. This practice was also recognised by union representatives. In some cases, communications and actions by management were seen to become more hostile after respondents had said no to additional tasks or duties. These actions included: unrealistic deadlines, teachers being set up to fail with tasks that they could not complete in the time available, excessive numbers of lesson observations, and the pernicious use of 'learning walks' to create an atmosphere of continuous surveillance.

'We all know performance management is not objective - it's subjective. If they don't like you for any reason- if you've been off sick, if you have views they don't like...'

'They hide behind tick boxes. It's all about monitoring. No people management. They monitor, not manage, in the vast majority of schools.'

'That sense of accountability...you're trying to do your best for the children all the time and you've got 2 customers. The children who are in front of you and want interesting, engaging lessons and to be enthralled....but you've got management breathing down your neck saying you must make sure you do tests to make sure they've learnt things.'

Unions recognised all of these issues in their dealings with members, both in formal grievance situations and other circumstances such as resolving complaints. Some issues were also recognised by senior managers, who often knew of other institutions, or were critical of their own leaders, where this had occurred.

Again, it was clear that practice varied from school to school, and that much was dependent upon individual leaders and relationships

between teaching staff, department heads and senior teams. School leaders, it was felt, were increasingly likely to want to demonstrate what their vision was, and, in the words of one respondent, 'if people don't like it, they should move on'.

Many participants saw the rise of academies, and multi-academy trusts (MATs) as contributing to aggressive use of performance management systems, and the creation of challenging or toxic cultures in schools. Senior leaders in MATs were remote from their staff. They often came from a business rather than an education background and attempted to replicate inappropriate business management practices in schools. Human resource managers (in MATs and authority-maintained schools) were also typically remote from the schools.

> 'It's the worst thing. The inability to question or say no. Having red lines is a great idea, but we are unable to do it. Unable to say no.'

> 'It might not come straight back to you but it's banked. As in "We don't really like this person because they don't do what we need them to do to keep the whole ship going".'

> ' "Do this. Make it work." You can't just tell them it won't work - they tell you you have to make it work.'

External pressures and demands

External demands and broader agendas, particularly from government, were also key factors contributing to low well-being and burnout. These demands were multifaceted, and a widespread view was that the consequent pressures were becoming more acute.

High-stakes accountability agendas for schools impacted on individual staff, in the form of greater assessment burdens, more tracking and monitoring systems (of pupils, and teachers). These data, according to some, were also critical factors in (un)successful teacher promotion and progression applications.

Widely recognised recruitment and retention issues had resulted in national initiatives to attract new teachers, often with attractive bursaries, or enhanced reward packages. However, unrealistic expectations were often established during the teacher training period, with the result that NQTs were often unprepared for the realities of teaching. This, combined with a lack of systematic support for NQTS during their first years meant that many new teachers quickly wanted to leave the profession.

Teachers, unions and senior leaders pointed to problems with some institutions charged with training teachers. They criticised the almost exclusive focus on ensuring placement of NQTs (to secure institutional payments as agents) with little interest of these providers in appropriate fit of NQTs to schools and long-term professional development.

Budget cuts, and the impact of austerity measures on schools, were felt acutely by many individual teachers, as well as by unions and senior leaders. In some cases there were simply

fewer teachers, teaching assistants and professional staff within a school. This meant work for remaining staff was intensified. Individual staff were reminded in some instances of the need for the school to save money, and for them to play their part in this by taking on additional loads.

In other instances, budgetary constraints and the effects of nearly a decade of austerity could be seen in the lack of available schemes of work to download nationally, a lack of textbooks and equipment. Moreover, new targets and initiatives created a need to 'reinvent the wheel' every year, 'scrabbling around for resources'.

> 'There are dangers of expecting exactly the same from all teachers/all schools. Heads could become administrators. In big MATs now, they are just overseeing business, not teaching.'

> 'Management are saying: "You've got to save us money. You've got to get staff doing this," but the members are too polite and too worried. Too scared.'

> 'There's pressure to come in when you're ill, cover for colleagues etc…they shouldn't ask...[but] what teacher in the current climate feels able to say "I'm not coming in to my class tomorrow"?'

Other effects of budgetary cuts included: reductions in time to do administration and planning, bigger class sizes, and pressure on staff to undertake additional voluntary activities. Some teachers also reported their perceptions that their length of service (with longer-serving teachers being higher on a pay scale, and thus more costly) was a factor adversely affecting decisions around staffing, promotion and progression.

4. Effects and responses

Participants reported that these factors had a range of effects on them. Here, we look at three issues raised: a loss of professionalism and identity; effects on mental health and personal well-being; and efforts to overcome burnout in order to continue in the profession.

Professionalism and identity

A common issue raised amongst participants was a lack of agency as a teacher. It was felt that teaching was still marketed as a profession with considerable autonomy and an ability to make a difference through teacher actions. However, this rhetoric of autonomy bore little resemblance to the reality.

The need to demonstrate and perform in a particular way, teaching to achieve narrowly defined targets, was cited by participants. They highlighted a lack of trust in the professionalism of teachers. As one participant noted: 'Management do not trust teachers to do the tests they want them to do to show that kids have learnt, so they make them do it on pro formas…. it's all about teaching to the tests and getting to the next target'.

Participants also pointed to a decline in the pastoral roles being undertaken by teachers. This was partly driven by budgetary pressures, and partly by a clearer demarcation between teaching and pastoral roles in schools. Participants questioned whether the well-being of students was being adequately addressed. Teachers felt a huge sense of responsibility towards pupils, but providing effective pastoral support was beset with challenges and difficulties in the current teaching environment. Parents and pupils had high expectations, and schools had target grades, but austerity, social deprivation, and poor understanding of social responsibilities meant that these targets were sometimes impossible to achieve. Individual teachers were left to bear the brunt of managing these conflicting demands.

Mental health and personal impact

Participants (teachers, unions and senior managers) highlighted the effects of these pressures on their mental health and well-being. A number reported they had suffered with poor mental health as a result of their experiences in teaching.

One teacher described how she had developed a fear of the smells and sights of the school. This phobia of the workplace was a direct result of her experiences. Such strong emotional language was not unusual. A teacher referred to their time in teaching as 'the wilderness years'. Another talked of 'walking around in a fog' with other teachers who were also 'sunk'.

Wrongly blaming themselves

'It's me, it's me, I can't cope with this. This is how (the job) is, but I can't cope with it.'

'This is just the nature of the job and others are coping - welcome to teaching in 2019.'

'I'm just rubbish, everybody hates me, this is the worst thing I've ever done in my life.'

'You can't see it when you're in the middle of it.'

'I wasn't sleeping. At that point in my life, I wasn't able to sleep well at all, and I'm still finding it difficult now.'

Many participants were burdened with perceptions that poor well-being at work was an individual problem. A significant number of participants said they felt (wrongly) that they were somehow to blame for the position they found themselves in.

Self-care in these circumstances became essential but problematic. Carrying the responsibility for young people but without power to effect change was undermining. As one teacher highlighted: 'You put yourself out for them, often to your own detriment...at what point do you go, actually, it's more important for me to look after my state than it is to look after theirs, because they are the young people, they are the vulnerable ones'.

'It's been awful. I've had panic attacks, not being able to go into the classroom at school. It's been hell to be honest.'

'I have reached various points where I have just wanted to quit over teaching at a couple of schools'

'Things were drip, drip, drip and then the button that pushed me over the barrier [causing me] to ring my GP.'

'I became very ill as a result of a brutal academy chain.'

The aftermath

For many, the effects of burnout continue. Some who left the profession have returned, but often in different roles. One teacher was now undertaking supply and had developed a mind-set of 'going home at 4 o'clock and 'see you later...if I don't get PPA time, I don't do the work'. Others had found more supportive school environments. One reported that they had now 'gone back to liking the profession - I feel as confident and as good about teaching as I did previously.'

Others had returned to teaching, or were continuing, but were constantly ready to 'anticipate the shit coming your way, because it happens every year...having things in place meant you could do it'.

However, for others, there had been a permanent retreat from the teaching profession. They had left unwillingly, but the quotes below provide insight into the potentially long-term scarring effects of burnout.

'I'm so glad I left, because if I hadn't left I would have gone off sick anyway.'

'I burnt all my performance management files in the garden. I thought: "what the fucking hell was I doing for 25 years?" What was all this for? To take to performance management because I want to get, "Okay, you can go up the pay scale"? Honestly.'

'The thought of doing supply fills me… makes me feel sick at the moment'

'I'm just, kind of, in recovery'

'I have time, I have control, I have friendships, relationships, all the things I lost.'

Conclusion

This report has highlighted a number of important factors causing burnout amongst teachers. Some of these, such as workload, are already well documented, and this report provides further evidence of their impact. Others, such as the performance management culture in schools, and external factors, require closer scrutiny. There is an urgent need for such scrutiny, as our analysis points to the significant and long-lasting effects of burnout.