

What do teachers' experiences of moving to online teaching during lockdown tell us about well-being?

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During the lockdown period between March and May 2020, we invited our teacher participants to talk to us about their experiences. We focus here on what teachers related to us about unexpectedly shifting to teaching from home.

Schools, and schooling, changed dramatically in mid-March this year, when the COVID-19 pandemic led the government to close schools to all but vulnerable and key workers' children. The individual experiences of teachers during this period varied greatly, depending on their own circumstances and the approach taken by their institution. The lack of a national strategy to manage education through the pandemic, and the transition into an unclear future, has contrasted vividly with the national strategies to protect the NHS and the series of financial schemes designed to mitigate damage to jobs and the economy.

Teachers were on the frontline of responses to COVID-19 during lockdown, whether physically in the school buildings, or working remotely, usually from their homes, sometimes grappling with unfamiliar technology and/or online platforms. Their critical role was generally underplayed by the media, despite teachers facing extraordinary, but often overlooked or indeed invisible, pressures.

We need to understand the impact of COVID-19 on teacher well-being. Prior to the pandemic, there was already well-documented crisis in well-being and retention amongst teachers ([HSE, 2018](#); [Ofsted, 2019](#)). Stress levels have been shown to be higher amongst teachers than any other profession, and, during the pandemic, anxiety levels escalated, with consequent concerns over mental health and depression ([Education Support, 2020](#), [NASUWT, 2020](#)). Senior school leaders highlighted unclear guidance, a lack of PPE and intensification of workloads as key concerns ([NFER, 2020](#)).

Working from home – teaching from home – may become a recurrent and prolonged activity, especially for teachers who are self-isolating due to their own vulnerability, or who have been in contact with someone who has tested positive. What we learn from teachers' experiences during the initial phase of the pandemic could help foster an understanding of how best to support them during the months ahead.

Stressful change

For many teachers, stress was certainly intensified. The sudden change to online working and working from home, not to mention home-educating their own children, being cooped up at home 24 hours a day, and the attendant difficulties with sharing computers and space with family, unstable wifi connections or narrow bandwidth, caused immense pressure.

Teachers had to convert their working practices virtually overnight, and without warning, to provide remote teaching to the majority of their pupils, abandoning carefully crafted curricula, pedagogies and assessments. Some schools were better placed than others to do this, depending on the extent to which each had already established IT systems, online platforms and the associated support, and also the extent to which staff were conversant with online learning platforms as part of their existing practice.

School pupils, especially in secondary schools, and teachers alike are used to having their own school email account. The virtual learning environment (VLE) has been familiar across the education sector for at least a decade, and many state schools had long since moved to using online platforms for setting assignments and hosting and sharing resources, accessible both at home and at school. Schools have had their own websites on which news, information and activities could be posted.

The move to online teaching, however, required a shift of focus and pedagogy. Schools managed this in a variety of ways. Many of the teachers in our project told us that, during lockdown, they worked even harder than usual, setting up and managing new ways of doing online education for children at home. A primary head told us that her school "did two years' worth of CPD in two days".

Teachers, particularly if they were not confident in their skills or if their experience with online platforms was not extensive, told us that they struggled with spending hours and hours on what were meant to be the simplest tasks. One of our head teacher participants described how planning an assembly, usually a fifteen-minute task, suddenly

required video editing and production skills and therefore took a lot longer. Problems were often exacerbated simply by having different software or operating systems on their IT devices at home and at school.

Another point of debate and difference between schools was the provision of synchronous and asynchronous lessons. A senior leader in one secondary school told us that they had decided not to offer any synchronous lessons at all for safeguarding reasons. Some schools did not do any online teaching at all, keeping their provision going by sending out packs of work, in paper form and/or electronically every few weeks. Not offering remote lessons could therefore be a deliberate decision, and yet was portrayed as detrimental to students, especially the most deprived, in the [media](#) and by a number of [research studies](#).

Some teachers told us that their schools expected every lesson to be delivered synchronously online, to the same timetable as if everyone were still in school. In other schools, teachers told us the timetable had been simplified, but there was still an expectation that online lessons would be delivered synchronously. A classroom support assistant in Early Years described this to us:

“The teachers have so much to do. There’s a whole timetable. The children are getting something at nine, half past nine, ten, eleven, the TAs put something on at one, then there’s something at two, and then there’s a story at four, every day.”

In many ways, the expectation of teachers to produce recorded lessons was felt to be the most demanding. In these cases, teachers felt under pressure to produce more polished, more exciting, all-singing and all-dancing lessons with presentations, video clips and animations, which is a far cry from the usual classroom work of teachers. The permanence of communication on the online platform can be problematic, even beyond the anxiety of knowing that recorded lessons may remain on the web permanently, or be spread uncontrollably. One teacher told us how a pupil called her a ‘loser’ in the online space, which proved more cumbersome for the head teacher to deal with, since the head could not go straight to the child to address the issue face-to-face.

Teachers told us they felt that the boundaries of school and home had become blurred for them and for their pupils, and that they were required to be available at all times, including evenings and weekends, as pupils contacted their teachers for help in accessing resources or tasks, as well as asking for support with the assignment itself. Some of our participants told us that, to combat this, their schools put in place protocols around the times at which pupils could expect teachers to be available to help them online.

A related issue is that of keeping track of pupils’ work. In many cases, there was simply no way of ensuring that all pupils completed all tasks, and 100% online participation was an impossible target. Teachers said they did not know where their pupils were up to, either in terms of what tasks they had completed, or what learning had been accomplished. The government’s provision of devices for schools did not materialise quickly enough and did not solve the widespread problems of access to IT reported in studies and in the media.

In conclusion, the experiences of teachers during the early part of the pandemic highlights profound changes to their work, and also that whilst other many occupations and sectors experienced lockdown, for teachers, work has continued, and in many cases intensified, throughout the pandemic. Teachers have had to rapidly adapt working practices, with no national strategy or approach, limited guidance and with varying approaches and levels of support from their specific schools. For many teachers, stress levels have increased, and well-being reduced, with teachers having to shift their focus and pedagogy, as well as their modes of delivery. Expectations of what teachers have to do have remained the same, or increased, and boundaries between home and work have become blurred. These changes to teaching observed in the early months of the pandemic, have remained throughout the year and look likely to endure for the longer-term in education, highlighting the pressing need for further work to give voice to teachers’ and their experiences.