Well-being and burnout in teaching

Final report from the Teacher Well-Being Project

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Executive summary

- Poor well-being is known to be a key contributor to burnout and the retention crisis in teaching in the UK.
- Drawing on a two-year project, conducted by a research team at the University of Leeds through the Leeds Social Science Institute, this report highlights causes of well-being and burnout, the consequences, and the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on well-being and burnout in teaching.
- The project involved a series of roundtable and stakeholder meetings, group discussions and one-to-one conversations between Summer 2019 and Spring 2021. Through these events, we have engaged directly with, and given voice to, over 50 teachers, school leaders, trade union representatives and officials, and HR representatives.
- Participants' descriptions of well-being focused on the effects of what they were experiencing physically, mentally and emotionally in their working lives. Rather than clinical definitions, their descriptions focused attention on the structural and institutional causes that they felt were associated with poor well-being, and burnout.

Causes of poor well-being in teaching

- Workload was identified as a key cause of poor well-being, with management behaviour and actions around workload allocation, and the intensification of work during COVID-19 seen as key pressure points.
- Performance management and accountability systems were seen by many as being very detached from what participants saw as the most important elements of teaching – learning, building relationships and monitoring progress on an ongoing basis.
- External pressures and demands, particularly budgetary constraints and some targets and national initiatives were also a cause of poor well-being.
- NQTs faced particular pressures, and as a result of the pandemic, had faced considerable disruption to their training, and their first year of teaching, which had impacted upon their well-being.

The effects

- Many teachers pointed to a long-term erosion of their autonomy and agency. The pandemic had impacted upon this, creating further constraints for many teachers, but interestingly, for some, offering more opportunity for them to exercise their professionalism and decision-making, with less day-to-day scrutiny and performance monitoring.

- Many teachers expressed that they had experienced poor mental health, with a number believing (wrongly) that they were to blame. A number of participants had left the profession entirely and others were actively considering this.

The impact of the pandemic

- Teachers have been on the frontline of responses to COVID-19 throughout lockdown, whether physically in the school buildings, or working remotely, grappling with unfamiliar technology and/or online platforms. Their critical role has been generally underplayed by the media, despite teachers facing extraordinary, but often overlooked or indeed invisible, pressures.

- Teachers have had to adapt to online learning, and the challenges of providing synchronous and asynchronous forms of teaching – these have created considerable pressures.

- Additional sources of pressures have come from government decisions, around examinations and schools reopening which have often been communicated at very short notice, with little consultation.

- Some performance management activities have been reduced or suspended during COVID-19, and where this has happened, some teachers perceive that their autonomy and well-being has improved.

- Teachers have played significant caring and welfare roles during the pandemic, often involved in providing support, food, and a source of communication for children and families in the wider community.

Recommendations

- School leaders should look to develop a culture where staff feel valued, leading by example, communicating and consulting effectively, putting in place strong support structures and mentoring arrangements, and ensuring there are communal spaces for staff.

- Sticking-plaster well-being initiatives, which place the emphasis on the individual management of well-being may be well intentioned, but there needs to be a greater focus on the causes of poor well-being, and genuine consideration of how workload and performance management processes contribute to this.

- The management of well-being needs to be embedded within the systematic and structural processes in schools. Senior leaders should look to enable teachers to do their job, ensuring that teachers can exercise their professional judgement and use their autonomy in the classroom, to achieve the best outcomes for pupils, teachers and schools.

- There are sources of support around well-being in schools, for example, through union resources and guides.

- Policy makers need to urgently consider excessive workloads of teachers in schools.

- Performance management and accountability systems, whilst necessary, all too often become the main focus of activity in schools, to the detriment of building effective and supportive relationships with children.

- Short-term, individually focused fixes around well-being are not suited to addressing the long-term retention crisis in teaching.

Introduction

There is growing media and policy interest in well-being and burnout in the teaching profession. Teachers have been found to be more likely to experience work-related stress than other professionals,[1] and the proportion of teachers leaving the profession or moving school has risen hugely over recent years[2][3]. Poor well-being and burnout have been recognised as key contributors to an ongoing retention crisis in the teaching profession.[4]

In this report, we outline the findings of our two-year project exploring well-being in teaching in the UK. We look at the causes of well-being and burnout, the consequences, and the impact on well-being and burnout of the COVID-19 pandemic, which began to affect the UK seriously from March 2020 and which is still having far-reaching repercussions on the teaching profession. We set out key conclusions and recommendations for schools and leaders, teachers and policy makers.

Funded by the ESRC Impact Acceleration Account through the Leeds Social Sciences Institute at the University of Leeds, and working jointly with the NASUWT and NEU teaching unions, our project has involved a series of roundtable and stakeholder

[1] OFSTED (2019) Teacher well-being at work in schools and higher education providers, London: OFSTED.https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/936253/Teacher_well-being_report_110719F.pdf Accessed 7/4/21

[2]Foster, D. (2019) Teacher Retention and Recruitment in England, House of Commons Library Briefing Paper 7222, 16th December 2019.

[3] https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2021/apr/08/one-in-three-uk-teachers-plan-to-quit-says-national-education-union-survey, Accessed 7/4/21

[4] Department for Education (2018) Factors Affecting Teacher Retention: a qualitative investigation, DfE: London https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/686947/Factors_affecting_teacher_retention_-_qualitative_investigation.pdf

meetings, group discussions and one-to-one conversations between Summer 2019 and Spring 2021, hosted jointly by the Centre for Curriculum, Pedagogy and Practice in the School of Education, and the Centre for Employment Relations Innovation and Change at the University of Leeds. Further details can be found at the end of this report.

Through these events, we have engaged directly with over 50 teachers, school leaders, trade union representatives and officials, and HR representatives. Our aim has been to give voice to those in the teaching profession, gathering insights on the issues that are important to them, rather than imposing a set of themes in advance. The knowledge in this report, and the conclusions reached, have been co-produced and we gratefully acknowledge their contribution to our project.

Inevitably, the global pandemic has had an impact upon the experiences of teachers. Before the pandemic, teachers were already reporting high levels of stress, and worrying numbers had already left the profession, citing burnout as a cause. We highlight the varied effects of the pandemic on teachers, teaching and schools. Despite long hours of screen time (teaching online and in-class), changing expectations, requirements and pressures, teaching professionals continued to express great interest in the project throughout 2020 and early 2021, and participated in individual interviews and focus groups to share experiences and ideas.

The report is structured in six sections. After this introduction, we look at participants' understanding of well-being and burnout, before considering the causes of burnout and poor well-being. We then consider the personal and professional impact of poor well-being and burnout on teachers. We look at the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, and end with some conclusions and recommendations.

Understanding well-being and burnout

Well-being and burnout had a wide range of meanings for our participants. Narrow, clinical definitions of the terms were felt by participants to be unhelpful and failed to capture the range of outcomes and effects that they experienced. 'Burnout' was seen as a term that typically had negative connotations, particularly when used to imply an association with poor performance. For some, 'well-being' was seen as a term that had been appropriated by policy makers and school leaders and was associated with initiatives that centred on building individual resilience and the personal management of well-being.

'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.'

'I feel dessicated, like sucked dry of everything,'

'I think 'broken' is a better way of putting it than burnout.'

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

Participants gave descriptions that accurately expressed the effects of what they were experiencing physically, mentally and emotionally in their working lives, and which focused attention on the structural and institutional causes that they felt were associated with poor (and good) well-being, and burnout.

Throughout the report, we follow this inductive approach to examining well-being and burnout, narrow, clinical definitions.

'It's not your cakes, and your...a hug in a mug type thing. Those things that people drop on your desk. It should be how do you reduce your workload? Primarily.'

'These wellbeing meetings... they put a nice little table in and chairs...that's not well-being, that's a sticking plaster. I've heard probably some schools doing, yoga, in your own time after school or an exercise class. Yes, they may help your mental state and mental wellbeing but that is not what makes a better work-life balance.'

Factors causing poor well-being and burnout

In this section, we look at some of the key causes of burnout which our participants identified, notably high workload, performance management systems, workplace cultures and external pressures.

Workload

Participants in our project repeatedly raised high workload as a factor which impacted upon their well-being. Working into the evening and at weekends was seen by teachers as the norm, and as being necessary for them to complete essential tasks.

'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".'

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

Poor management practices had a significant effect on workload. Commonly, teachers reported that requests for additional work to be done were made with very short deadlines, and in many cases workload impact assessments in schools were not completed. We did hear examples of good practice, where leaders engaged proactively with unions and discussed changes with staff. Senior leaders, unions and teachers all highlighted how the effective management of workload within schools did crucially depend upon the capabilities, skills and attitudes of particular leaders.

> 'Government initiatives on workload...I think that they are tweaking at the edges and acknowledging that there are issues and problems....but what power do the schools actually have to take that initiative?... I think many leaders are, sort of, pushed into the corner. To what extent can the school principals actually say, right, we'll scrap this, we'll do away with that, and, you know, we will have root-and-branch change.' (Union Rep)

> 'What [teachers] really do respond to is a workplace where they feel supported, where professional learning is intrinsic and built into what they do, and then they're prepared to work hard and they see that meaningful work is well worth putting the hours in for. So, when we see that going askew, we see high stress rates'. (Headteacher)

During the pandemic, workload has intensified further, due to requirements to maintain both face-to-face and online provision when children other than key worker and vulnerable children have been learning from home. Teachers have also been focusing on caring for their pupils and managing rapidly-changing advice and guidance around teaching and assessment.

'[Sometimes you are in a meeting and you think] we've all had a really long day, and you're saying that you really care about us and that we recognize you're doing such a good job. OK well give us time. Give us some time then. Just turn around and say, do you know what? This meeting, you don't have to be here. Off you go....And there's none of that, there's no recognition that actually just some time to go and sit with the team, go and have, you know, go and have half an hour with your team and just see how each other is.'

'...we're almost double planning. So we plan for our in-class lessons, and then, as a team....we are then having to plan online lessons that can be uploaded as a PowerPoint that the students can then access and work through by themselves at home...And then you've got kids in and out, isolating, not isolating, so they've missed this lesson, but not that lesson'

Teachers were highly accommodating of such requests during the pandemic, but talked about a feeling of constant exhaustion, expressing that 'this situation cannot go on' and 'something has to give', with already unsustainably high workloads being intensified further during the pandemic.[5]

Performance management and workplace culture

Performance management and accountability systems also contributed to well-being and burnout. External accountability systems were felt to be very detached from the most important elements of teaching – learning, building relationships with pupils and ongoing assessment of progress. Individual performance management systems were seen by many teachers as a mechanism of control.

[5] https://www.tes.com/news/schools-are-not-able-go-indefinitely Accessed 9/4/2021

'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.'

Again, practice did vary from school to school. Much was dependent upon individual leaders and relationships between teaching staff, department heads and senior teams. Where there were strong, supportive relationships, and more participatory working environments, there was a perception that teaching teams and leaders were better able to work together to 'manage' external accountability systems, and to implement developmental approaches to supervision, mentoring and performance management.

During the pandemic, some schools had stepped back from some regular performance management activities. However, in other cases, schools appeared to be adopted a 'business as

usual' approach to gathering data and measuring staff performance, even though the situation facing schools and teachers could not have been further from 'normal'.

> '(during the pandemic)...we had performance management last half term as, sort of as normal really...which I was a bit surprised about at the moment really but there you go...I can't even remember what my objectives are now. And we've got reports to write for December...we used to do them this time of year and in May, but to get it flung on you at the moment just seems...a bit weird, you know, especially at the moment, when everybody is, we are feeling that, people are feeling under pressure'

External pressures and demands

External demands were also key factors contributing to low well-being and burnout, with these pressures becoming more acute. Budgetary constraints and the effects of a decade of austerity could be seen in the lack of accessible training and professional development, and the lack of textbooks and basic equipment. Moreover, new targets and initiatives created a need to 'reinvent the wheel' every year, and, as one teacher said, 'scrabbling around for resources'.

Wider recruitment and retention challenges in the sector impacted heavily upon the day-to-day work of teachers. National initiatives to attract new teachers, often with substantial bursaries, or enhanced reward packages, were seen by many to be problematic, setting unrealistic expectations on NQTs, who were often unprepared for the realities of teaching. In addition, these payments made to entice prospective teachers into the

profession were not considered helpful in preventing teachers from leaving.

> '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"?'

For NQTs who had trained or started a job during the pandemic, there was a 'double-whammy' of interruptions or incomplete placements, disruption to their first year of classroom teaching, and with schools facing challenges of implementing mentoring, observing teaching and sharing good practice. Many NQTs were still trying to 'find their feet', work out and establish their style of teaching, yet were unable to get the support they needed from colleagues, because of teaching remotely, and because social distancing when in school meant that teachers were not congregating to chat in workrooms and offices as they might normally have been. Participants reported indications from a number of NQTs in their schools that they would not continue in teaching beyond their first year, adding to already acute shortages in the profession.

'...Through no fault of yours, five of your teachers leave, you know, in summer, and you've got to replace them, and there's a recruitment problem. You'll probably get more NQTs than you would've planned for. You've already got, because of that departure, a middle leadership that's stretched to capacity. You've got to find some of them to mentor these NQTs. You can see it's a systemic thing...' (Headteacher)

'There's not that same level of support, so if something does go a bit wrong - ordinarily we would all be in the classrooms surrounding, so at the end of the lesson, if the lesson had gone a bit wrong or they wanted to just ask, oh what happened? or what could I have done differently? That's not there, and I think that, in the first half term in particular, really did take its toll. Um, we have also got some trainees in at the moment. And I really feel for them because I think this is a, it's a very, different situation to be coming into.'

Effects and responses

In this section, we examine some of the consequences and effects of high workloads, performance management and accountability systems and external pressures. We focus on the impact on professionalism and identity, and on mental health and personal well-being.

Professionalism and identity

A common issue raised amongst participants was a lack of agency as a teacher. Whilst many felt that there was greater autonomy in teaching as a profession compared to other occupations, this was increasingly being eroded by requirements to perform in a particular way, and by teaching to achieve narrowly defined targets. As has been seen in a number of other professions in recent years[6], autonomy was felt to have been eroded, and there a lack of trust in the professionalism of teachers.

Teachers' sense of autonomy was affected by the pandemic. Some teachers felt that they actually had greater autonomy over aspects of their teaching during the early stages of the pandemic, particularly where focus had previously moved away from teaching and assessing towards narrow targets. Once the majority of children (apart from vulnerable and key worker children) were told to stay at home and teaching moved online, the pressures of having to develop new ways of teaching, virtually overnight, enabled teachers to be innovative, creative, and almost improvisatory in their response to the new context in which they were working. Teachers reported that they felt senior managers were not scrutinising them as much as they normally would be in school, in that

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[6]
https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/0950017017726948 accessed 7/4/21

initial period of change and adaptation. However, teachers also faced considerable new pressures and challenges to their professional identity, for example during the assessment debacle in Summer 2020, which saw teacher assessment first denigrated and dismissed as potentially biased and unreliable, and then reinstated.[7]

Announcements by government around whether schools should be open to all pupils or closed to the majority, at times of heightened risk of spreading the virus, were also felt by many to have been made with little consultation or discussion, undermining teachers' sense of professional status.

'It's the lack of control of your own destiny which is - which has been, and is - the worst thing. There's a, you're not able to question. You're not able to say no. That's a lovely idea, isn't it, to say, no, I can't do this. The red lines is a fantastic idea but we, we're just unable to do it. You're   taking away… my professional opinion.'

Mental health and individual well-being

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

[7]
https://www.theguardian.com/education/2020/aug/17/uk-exams-debacle-how-did-results-end-up-chaos

'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.'

'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 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.'

Strong emotional language was not unusual in our conversations with teachers. One participant talked of 'walking around in a fog' with other teachers who were also 'sunk'. Many participants were burdened with perceptions that poor well-being at work was their individual problem, and that (wrongly) they were to blame.

Some of those that participated in our events had left the profession permanently. Reflecting on their time in teaching, one referred to it as 'the wilderness years'; another described real anxiety triggered by the very smell and sounds of the school they were in.

One participant recounted how they had finally got their life back after leaving teaching, and that it was only with the benefit of distance from the situation that they could see the damage exerted by teaching on their mental health and well-being.

> 'I'm so glad I left, because if I hadn't left I would have gone off sick anyway.'
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> '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.'
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> 'I'm just, kind of, in recovery'
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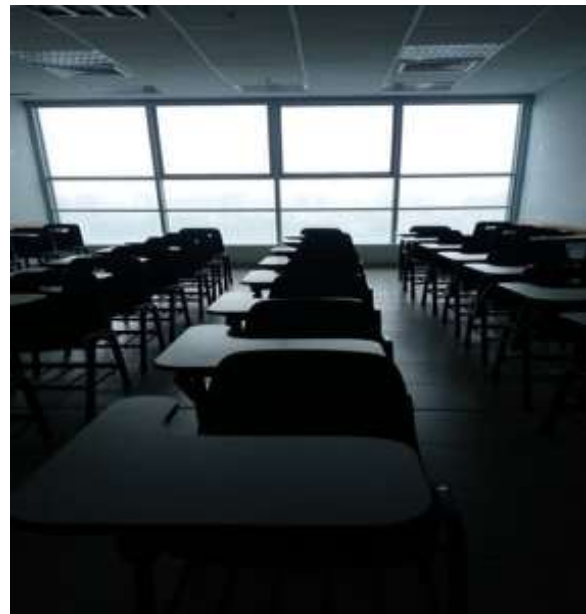> 'I have time, I have control, I have friendships, relationships, all the things I lost.'

The effects of the pandemic

Schools, and teaching, changed dramatically in March 2020, when the COVID-19 pandemic led the government to close schools to all but vulnerable and key workers' children. This has been followed by a year in which teachers have been on the frontline of responses to COVID-19 throughout lockdown, whether physically in the school buildings, or working remotely, grappling with unfamiliar technology and/or online platforms.

Their critical role has been generally underplayed by the media, despite teachers facing extraordinary, but often overlooked or indeed invisible, pressures. In this section of the report, we look at the move to online teaching alongside the continuation of face-to-face teaching for some pupils during the early part of the pandemic, the impact of external pressures (particularly government policy), the caring roles undertaken by teachers and schools, and the effects of the pandemic on stress and well-being in teaching.

The move to online teaching: March 2020

In March 2020, teachers had to convert their working practices virtually overnight, to provide remote teaching to the majority of their pupils. 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.

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, whilst also, in many cases, maintaining on-site teaching for pupils of key workers.

A key point of debate and difference between schools was the provision of synchronous and asynchronous lessons. Some schools decided not to offer any synchronous lessons in the first lockdown for safeguarding reasons. In other cases, 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 yet other schools, teachers told us the timetable had been simplified, but there was still an expectation that online lessons would be delivered synchronously. These expectations all created pressures on teachers.

'They've got pressure from the government, for remote learning is about to be put back on. So there has been sort of, this sort of balancing act...I think there is a better awareness of well-being and a desire to do more about it; on the other hand, there's an awful lot of pressure, which ultimately does sometimes get put back down on staff with an increased workload.'

External pressures

During the pandemic, teachers and school leaders faced unclear and rapidly changing guidance from government around safety, PPE, reopening, social distancing and ventilation in schools, and GCSE and A-level assessment. Teachers themselves were clear about where their priorities lay: keeping children safe, looking after their pupils' well-

being, and maintaining learning. Many of our participants took the view that guidance and policies from government had been highly problematic and unhelpful. Fundamental decisions about closure and reopening were made with little or no consultation with schools, and the guidance often left school leaders to interpret and manage government policies at a local level, often at unreasonably short notice.

> 'I don't think there has been a bigger gap between senior team and teaching staff as there is now. And that's not to say that they're not trying, 'cause I recognize that they are working really hard. They're in an impossible situation. But I think, for a lot of the senior team, 'cause they don't teach as much, the understanding of the impact that this is having on a day-to-day basis, I don't think that is there.'

Some school leaders had consulted with unions and their staff as best they could. In other cases, it was felt that, just as there had been little or communication from government,

school leaders had also consulted insufficiently with their staff. In some cases, teachers felt they were being exposed to unnecessary risks and dangers, in classroom situations.

> 'As a school...we are answerable to parents, to governors, to our local communities. We are trying to do everything because we are accountable...We need to ensure that the education is sound or that we are at least doing the very, very best that we can. But there this big cloud over our head that says, this could all change in an instant if we don't have the staffing.'

Stress during lockdown

With the changing requirements and pressures on teachers during the pandemic, it is unsurprising that studies have found that average stress levels amongst teachers have increased during lockdown[8].

> 'So from March till June we worked together, online, and it did take a lot of pressure off, jumping through the hoops. Um, there were other added pressures, however, because we had to make videos and, and things like that…So that was all new learning for us, but…what's going to happen next?'

Our meetings with teachers revealed how pressures to adapt to remote teaching, getting to grips with the technology which this involved, and spending more time than usual preparing lessons or activities caused anxiety. Whilst the early part of lockdown provided some respite from particular sources of stress which were associated with the school workplace, such as the 'tyranny' of being observed and monitored, there was no let-up in workload. Schools remained open throughout the lockdown, despite much of the public and political rhetoric,[9] and teachers took on significant new roles and activities.

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[8] https://www.educationsupport.org.uk/blogs/coronavirus-impact-teacher-wellbeing-school-uncertainties-continue, accessed 9/4/2021

[9] https://www.spectator.co.uk/article/covid-19-update-measuring-the-damage-of-lockdown-school-closures, accessed 9/4/2021

> 'we felt a little pressurised into coming back in June...we were, I'm not saying pushed, but we were, encouraged, shall I say, to come back, to teach another year group. And that was quite stressful, coming into children that OK, you knew them because you've taught them in the past but, you were coming in to teach them two to three times a week, when you were still vulnerable yourself and you didn't know still how it was going to be when you came back into school'

Some teachers felt a greater sense of autonomy, creativity and authority during COVID-19, better able to use their professional knowledge in problem solving and reconstructing the curriculum. Having the opportunity to exercise and draw on professional expertise in some circumstances, being trusted to exercise professional judgement without constant scrutiny, was something which teachers valued highly. However, in a rapidly changing environment, these changes were often temporary, and teachers were facing constant uncertainty, and almost continuous change to their professional practice. Overall, teachers continued to face considerable pressures, from the dramatically altered demands of delivery, whether online or face-to-face, not to mention the obvious health and safety concerns for those working in person in schools with the risk of virus transmission.

Teachers, caring and the community

The pandemic has also illuminated the crucial role of schools in caring, not only for their pupils, but also for their communities. Despite the government introducing a voucher system to replace free school meals in the spring lockdown of 2020, many schools persisted with providing food bags or parcels, demonstrating the commitment of schools towards vulnerable pupils and families.

Form teachers phoned home on a regular basis to check on pupils, though the frequency varied from school to school and context to context. There was follow-up from teachers, leaders or welfare teams wherever there were concerns about a child, for example if nobody picked up the phone. Members of staff went out to visit pupils' houses, delivering packs of work, and food parcels, but equally importantly to knock on the door and make contact. Head teachers and school leadership teams were closely and personally involved in this activity.

'we've found that our families really appreciate having the face-to-face contact, having the food parcels, the welfare. We've put parents in touch with mental health workers… we've contacted the local [supermarket]…so there are parents now that they can go to the front of the queue and just walk in… So
communication with parents has
 gone through the roof'

'What became obvious as the weeks rolled by was... that half the students were struggling and a small group of the students were completely disengaged. And we were trying really, really hard to catch up with them, and it was a very depressing eye opener to begin to, you know, dig down into the lives of those students, you know. So you'd be like, why isn't the student engaged? why haven't they done any work? Why aren't they ever online? and you just heard terrible stories...I mean we had one boy...he didn't have any internet in the flat that he lived in, what he'd have to do in the morning is go up and stand near the local Sainsbury's to pick up a free signal so that he could look at his phone and find out what the work was for the day and then walk back to his house and do it. We were left to do what we can do, which is to chase these kids up.'

In some areas, local schools formed hubs, joining together with both local authority and academy trust schools to pool resources and share the responsibility for opening. Throughout, the community and welfare functions of schools, teachers and school leaders have truly come to the fore.

Recommendations and lessons

In this final section, we draw out some conclusions from our project, focusing first on schools and leadership, secondly on teachers, and thirdly on policy makers.

a) Schools and leaders

Develop a culture in which staff are valued

Throughout our conversations with teachers, leaders and unions, workplace culture has been identified as a major influence on teacher well-being. Performance management and accountability systems are key contributors to the pressure teachers say they feel, which in turn can cause stress and anxiety. Teachers told us that they needed to feel valued, and that the performativity and audit culture has the reverse effect, making them feel as though they are being found at fault.

Older and more experienced teachers report feeling especially vulnerable. A recurring view expressed in our stakeholder meetings is that experienced teachers are acutely aware that they are more expensive to employ, and they can therefore become targets within institutions which are under severe financial pressure. This phenomenon is confirmed by unions from their experiences of case work.

A further pinch point is the early career teacher: a significant proportion of new teachers are leaving the profession within three or four years of joining, and this situation appears to be worsening during the pandemic. It is essential for leaders to understand that the early years can be make or break, and new teachers need to be supported and encouraged through this period of rapid learning and adjustment. Historically, NQT status has covered only the first year of teaching, but in an acknowledgement that it is a good idea

to support recently qualified teachers (RQTs) for longer, the government is introducing an entitlement to two years of professional development, designed to help early career teachers develop their practice, knowledge and working habits.[10]

The kind of mentoring which more experienced staff can offer to those newer to the profession, whether on a formal or informal footing, is an example of the measures institutions can take to work towards establishing what one participant called a "steady ship", where staff turnover is minimal. Such stability is necessary for good morale and healthy well-being, as well as for the development of an effective community of practice. However, it is important to recognise that significant time and resources are needed for effective mentoring, and that in some cases, mentoring is established with little consideration of aptitude or interest in undertaking such a role. School leaders need to consider mentoring carefully, and look to design and implement a system which can

work for mentors, mentees and the wider school community.

Move beyond sticking plaster initiatives

Participants were frustrated with what they called 'sticking plaster' initiatives to tackle well-being – the bowl of fruit or chocolates in the staffroom and the yoga classes after school. These were often seen as token gestures, passing back the management of well-being onto the individual, and often avoiding addressing the systemic and structural processes in schools which impacted upon teachers' well-being.

There needs to be clarity over expectations of teachers, so that aspects of school life such as the directed time budget are in place,

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https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/early-career-framework Accessed 9/4/2021

allowing teachers to feel comfortable with what is expected of them. Policies around issues such as marking and email burdens should be devised in conjunction with staff, to take account of their concerns, views and suggestions, and to keep staff feeling in control of their own work. The pandemic has rendered these issues even more relevant, with changing expectations and policies having a huge impact upon teachers' well-being over the last year.

Senior leaders told us they felt it was important to think carefully about how much responsibility to give to teachers at different stages of their career, and also to take into account teachers' domestic and/or caring responsibilities, and individual capacity and ambition. They also recognised that each teacher needed to be considered individually in order to look after their well-being.

Relatively small gestures which enhance the relationship between teacher and management can be greatly appreciated. Some school leaders described how they had managed training days flexibly, so that teachers could have an extra day off at particular points during the year. Some leaders encouraged staff to take their Planning, Preparation and Assessment (PPA) time at home, giving them some flexibility about how they manage their time. During the pandemic, also, some leaders had actively sought to take into account the personal situations of their own teachers more than others had. In schools where leaders seek to look after and build positive relationships with their staff, there is more likely to be a relationship of mutual trust. Teachers who feel trusted will give more, be more creative, and ultimately be better teachers than those who feel scrutinised, criticised and micromanaged.

Enable teachers to do their job

Another important factor to highlight is the significance of the role of senior leaders in relation to their staff on the one hand and to external agencies on the other. Some leaders or managers were seen by participants as metaphorically cascading down and passing on the stresses of Ofsted and government reform to their staff, and/or using those external levers explicitly to put pressure on their staff. Other leaders were perceived to behave more like a door opening both ways,

facing external agencies with compliance, at least looking as though they are ticking all the boxes, whilst shielding classroom teachers from any ill effects of those pressures and allowing teachers to address the school's priorities and exercise their professional judgement.

In particular, some leaders recognise that change for change's sake rocks the boat, and causes extra workload and extra anxiety, and are at pains to deflect multiple initiatives before they hit staff. These kinds of leaders are highly valued and appreciated by teachers: this kind of practice, where leaders prioritise their own staff and students, and which may involve being quietly subversive, was described as "flying under the radar". As one participant put it, "Good leaders forget about themselves". There was a perception amongst participants that

good leaders put the needs of education, and the people centrally involved in education (learners and teachers) first.

Many of the findings seem straightforward: good leadership and a supportive culture help teachers feel valued at work, and facilitate their ability to exercise their professional judgement. In turn, this is likely to have positive effects on teachers' well-being. Participants felt that sharing good practice should be a much greater priority, and that the culture needs to change within the profession, moving from the current situation where it is common for unions and other stakeholders only to become involved once there is a problem, to one where senior leadership teams engage in open and continuous dialogue with teaching unions and other professional bodies. There is already an abundance of useful information developed by unions representing classroom teachers (e.g. the NEU and the NASUWT)[11] and those for school and college leaders (ASCL

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[11] See for example the NEU Mental Health Charter https://neu.org.uk/advice/neu-mental-health-charter and the NASUWT guidance on Stress at Work https://www.nasuwt.org.uk/advice/health-safety/causes-and-signs-of-stress-at-work.html

and NAHT),[12] on promoting and embedding good practice. There is great potential for these excellent resources to be used more extensively and for trade unions to be a positive vehicle for change.

b) Teachers

Well-being is not solely the responsibility of individual teachers

A consistent message that has come out of our stakeholder events and conversations with teachers is that the management of well-being needs to be embedded in the systematic and structural processes in schools. As noted above, 'sticking plaster' initiatives, which typically promote the narrative that individuals should be responsible for, and manage, their own well-being, were not seen as effective or sustainable.

The findings from our project point to accountability systems, performance management, and workplace culture as key sources of pressure and contributory factors towards poor well-being and burnout. These are not factors that individual teachers are able to manage themselves, independently.

Teachers do often come into the profession to "make a difference". There is a sense of vocation, of mission, of value. When the job does not live up to this aspiration, teachers have a tendency to think, or are made to think, that they have done something wrong. They are encouraged to believe that since something has gone wrong, it must be their fault. However, this is not the case. Often, teachers are carrying the responsibility for young people, but lack the autonomy and the power to care for them in the way they think is

[12] See for example the ASCL guidance on well-being https://www.ascl.org.uk/Help-and-Advice/Leadership-and-governance/Leading-and-Managing-Staff/Staff-Wellbeing and the NAHT resources on well-being and welfare https://www.naht.org.uk/advice-and-support/management/staff-well-being-and-welfare/

right. COVID-19 has resulted in increased pressure and stress for teachers, placing even greater responsibility on teachers, not only to teach, but also to provide pastoral care to their pupils, and even to their families and communities.

Teachers value working in high-trust environments

Teachers should be consulted over issues that affect their professional and working lives. They should be consulted about marking policies, time windows for sending and receiving emails, and other practical issues, to take account of their concerns, views and suggestions. They also need to talk to one another.

They need physical space in which to share their experiences, support one another, and develop a sense of community. Schools where a spirit of community is encouraged and promoted are likely to have staff who enjoy a better sense of well-being. Teachers who support one another learn from one another. Our study reveals that sharing good practice should, our participants felt, be a much higher priority in schools, because it enhances their professional knowledge and practice, and in turn raises the standards of teaching across the whole school.

Teachers value autonomy and respect for their professionalism and judgement

Teachers generally know how to be teachers. In schools where staff turnover is minimal, teachers are trusted, and the head teacher can develop what one called a "steady ship". Stability of the school community, of a team learning and developing together, is necessary for good morale and healthy well-being. Successful leaders have confidence in their teachers and in what they are doing in their classrooms. Teachers who feel trusted will be more creative, and ultimately will be better teachers, than those who

feel micromanaged. The COVID-19 pandemic has clearly demonstrated how teachers are well placed to exercise professional autonomy and judgement around teaching, progress monitoring and assessment. The pandemic has also shown how teachers take seriously their responsibility to provide care and support for their pupils, families and communities.

Sources of advice and support in schools that can help teachers

Trade unions can be a vital source of advice for teachers around well-being and burnout. Teacher unions can give you advice about workload impact assessments in your school, for example. Your teacher union can give you advice about what to do if you are concerned about performance

management, or if a manager speaks to you about capability procedures or informal support plans.

Trade unions can be a vital source of advice for teachers around factors which impact on well-being and which can lead ultimately to burnout. Teacher unions offer advice about workload impact assessments in school, for example. They can also advise on issues such as what to expect from performance management, what to do if managers mention capability procedures or informal support plans, if excessive monitoring is taking place, or if something is being imposed without due consultation. The Department for Education itself, working with school leaders, teachers and other sector experts, has done a considerable amount of investigation into workload, and has produced a toolkit of practical resources to reduce workload, which teachers can take to their manager and also discuss with their union if there are any concerns in these areas.[13]

c) Policy makers

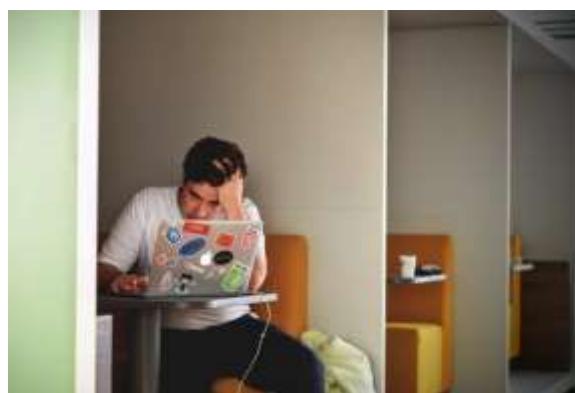[13]https://www.gov.uk/guidance/schoolworkload-reduction-toolkit Accessed 9/4/2021

Excessive teacher workload needs to be urgently addressed

The workload problem within teaching has been widely recognised, though it is not necessarily the *amount* of work teachers have to do which is the problem – teachers have always worked long hours – but the *nature* of the work. [14] 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 this is not sufficient to make a substantial change for the better. Unions regularly observe that workload impact assessments within schools are not properly undertaken, a problem which has worsened during the pandemic.

The use of the Department for Education workload reduction toolkit[15] is encouraged by unions and government, and can be a means through which some of the sources of excessive workload within schools can be identified. However, this means that much of this discussion and resolution takes place at a local level, with responsibility for managing and tackling excessive workload being pushed onto individual teachers, teaching teams, local union representatives and individual school leaders.

Alongside this, there needs to be a wider and realistic discussion, at national level, and with policy makers over workload. Policies around workload should acknowledge the importance of work-life balance and ensure that PPA time for teachers is protected and sufficient. Good practice and effective management of teacher workload is dependent upon the actions of individual school or team leaders, but also requires realistic, evidence-based frameworks and policies which reflect the realities of teacher workload.

[14] https://blogs.ucl.ac.uk/ioe/2019/09/18/seven-key-findings-about-teachers-working-hours/ Accessed 9/4/2021

[15] https://www.gov.uk/guidance/school-workload-reduction-toolkit Accessed 9/4/2021

Performance management and accountability systems are a key contributor to low well-being amongst teachers. Teachers acknowledged that performance management is necessary, and that external accountability systems can play a role in ensuring and monitoring teaching. However, all too often these accountability systems become the core focus of activities, to the detriment of building effective and supportive relationships with children, and ensuring pupil engagement and progress. National targets, league tables and OFSTED requirements were seen as driving increasingly aggressive and punitive individual performance management systems, with highly detrimental effects on well-being.

The Teacher Workload Advisory Group, in 2018, commissioned by the Department for Education, made a series of recommendations about how the DfE, Ofsted and other organisations can support schools to adopt proportionate and sustainable approaches to performance management and accountability. This report called for an audit and overhaul of how performance management is undertaken, with key recommendations calling for a move away from solely quantitative measures and pupil attainment data.

It also concluded starkly that 'If teachers are held to account for things that are largely outside their own control, such as a pupil's test performance or progress based on flight paths, it is not only unfair, but induces high levels of stress and is likely to lead to burnout and ultimately attrition from the profession'. [16] Whilst some recommendations have been implemented locally, as with workload, practice remains variable, and change appears to be patchy. Without full implementation of the principles

[16] Teacher Workload Advisory Group (2018) Making Data Work: Report of the Teacher Workload Advisory Group, https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/754349/Workload_Advisory_Group-report.pdf

identified in the report, the negative impacts on well-being are likely to continue.

The pandemic has also shed light on the crucial pastoral and caring roles undertaken by teachers, and their commitment to these roles. Such activities have been undervalued, and their importance minimised, by leaders and policy makers in the past, yet they have been of vital importance over the last twelve months. There needs to be greater recognition of the roles played by teachers in contributing to the care and welfare of pupils, families and communities, aspects of teachers' activities that are typically not captured in narrow performance management and external accountability systems.

Short term fixes will not address the retention crisis in the profession

Poor well-being and burnout are key factors behind teachers leaving the profession early, for both established teachers and NQTs. Department for Education strategies to address the recruitment and retention crises in teaching have highlighted the importance of creating positive workplace cultures, reducing workload pressures on teachers, providing greater support for NQTs and making teaching an attracting choice of career.

There remains a lot of questions for future research and consideration by stakeholders in education. How can teacher workloads be more realistically measured and reduced? What are the key features of supportive environments that allow teachers to thrive? How can teacher well-being be promoted effectively and what are the key imperatives around teacher well-being beyond the pandemic? Our project has showed that there remains much to be done. Action to address these issues needs to be undertaken not just at a local level, but coordinated nationally, and involving unions, school leaders, teachers and other stakeholders in any process of reform.

About the Teacher Well-Being Project

Between Summer 2019 and Spring 2021, a research team at the University of Leeds (Dr Judith Hanks, Dr Rachel Mathieson and Professor Chris Forde) have been working on a project jointly with the National Education Union (NEU) and the National Association of Schoolmasters and Union of Women Teachers (NASUWT), examining the causes of well-being and burnout in teaching, generating a range of practitioner-focused guides and support materials, focused on tackling stress, improving well-being and mental health, and reducing burnout.

The project has sought to analyse the *causes* of burnout and poor well-being rather than the symptoms. Through stakeholder meetings, workshops and one-to-one conversations, we have looked to give voice to teachers and teachers' unions, seeking to co-produce knowledge and solutions with them. Over the course of the project over 50 teachers, union representatives, senior leaders and HR professionals have contributed to the project.

Throughout the project, we have developed resources designed to promote understanding of well-being and burnout in teaching, and to provide guidance on managing and addressing poor well-being and reducing burnout. All of these resources are available on our project website.

The project has been funded in part by the *Leeds Social Science Institute* through the *ESRC Impact Acceleration Account*, in partnership with the two largest teaching unions, the *NEU* and the *NASUWT*.

Project resources

All resources can be found on our project website:

https://leedsteacherwellbeing.leeds.ac.uk

Final report

https://leedsteacherwellbeing.leeds.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/sites/103/2021/04/iaa-final-synthesis-report-April-2021.pdf

Blogs

1. Burnout in teaching: a problem that is widely recognised but poorly understood (April 2020) https://leedsteacherwellbeing.leeds.ac.uk/outputs/blog/april-2020-burnout-in-teaching-widely-recognised-but-poorly-understood/

2. What can be done within schools and colleges to support teacher well-being? (May 2020) https://leedsteacherwellbeing.leeds.ac.uk/outputs/blog/blog-what-can-be-done-within-schools-and-colleges-to-support-teacher-well-being/

3. What do teachers' experiences of moving to online teaching during lockdown tell us about well-being? (December 2020)

   https://leedsteacherwellbeing.leeds.ac.uk/outputs/blog/what-do-teachers-experiences-of-moving-to-online-teaching-during-lockdown-tell-us-about-well-being/

4. Teachers' experiences of working away from their school environment during the Spring 2020 lockdown (January 2021)

   https://leedsteacherwellbeing.leeds.ac.uk/outputs/blog/blog-4-remote-control-teachers-experiences-of-working-away-from-their-school-environment-during-the-spring-2020-lockdown/

5. What a difference a year makes: Changing priorities for schools (March 2021) https://leedsteacherwellbeing.leeds.ac.uk/outputs/blog/what-difference-a-year-makes-changing-priorities-for-schools/

Teacher Resources leaflets

 Designed for teachers, offering practical guidance and sources of support:

1. Well-being and burnout in teaching: understanding the issues
   https://leedsteacherwellbeing.leeds.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/sites/103/2020/12/Teacher-leaflet-1-Dec.pdf
2. Why are some teachers happier than others?
   https://leedsteacherwellbeing.leeds.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/sites/103/2020/12/Teacher-leaflet-2.pdf
3. The impact of COVID-19 on teachers and school leaders
   https://leedsteacherwellbeing.leeds.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/sites/103/2021/01/Teachers-leaflet-3-january-2021.pdf

Briefing documents

Designed for a range of stakeholders, including policy makers, school leaders, unions, HR representatives and teachers, providing more detailed analysis of project themes

1. Well-being and burnout in teaching: understanding the issues
   https://leedsteacherwellbeing.leeds.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/sites/103/2020/04/Well-being-and-burnout-in-teaching_understanding-the-issues_final-version.pdf
2. Supporting Teacher Well-Being
   https://leedsteacherwellbeing.leeds.ac.uk/outputs/briefings/84-2/