

In the midst of a well-being crisis, what can be done to positively impact teacher well-being?

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ABSTRACT

In light of low levels of classroom teacher well-being in the UK, which have negatively impacted teacher retention, this paper aims to research the causes of low levels of teacher well-being (Ofsted, 2019a). An additional aim of this paper is to then identify strategies that can be implemented with the aim of positively impacting teacher well-being and, potentially, retention (Mitchell, 2018; Education Support, 2019). This systematic review involved a thorough search for literature in relation to teacher well-being. Upon identifying suitable literature, a theme in the literature was identified, and recommendations to address concerns relating to teacher well-being were made.

INTRODUCTION

Well-being is the shared goal of human life, which suggests that positive well-being is important for humans to live well (Newby, 2011; Vittersø, 2016). There are several definitions for well-being, with some focusing on an absence of disease or sickness (Burke, 2017; Cowley, 2019; Holmes, 2019). According to Crisp (2017), well-being is widely associated with health, and this can be partially attributed to previously

existing well-being clinics, such as 'well man clinics', which were provided by the National Health Service as recently as 2020. Crisp (2017) and Cowley (2019) argue, however, that it is unreasonable to think of an individual's physical health as the sole determiner of their well-being.

One approach to well-being is eudaimonic in nature (Ryan & Deci, 2001; European Social Survey, 2015; Joseph, 2015). Eudaimonia can be

KEYWORDS

WELL-BEING

EUDAIMONIA

HEDONISTIC

RETENTION

ATTRITION

traced back to Aristotle and has been translated to mean 'happiness', with links to it relating to the overall flourishing of a person (Ross, 2009; Newby, 2011; Russell, 2012; Huta & Waterman, 2013; Vittersø, 2016).

A hedonistic theory of well-being has to do with pleasure and pain and the concept that if an individual's measures of pleasure and pain are out of balance in favour of pleasure, then the individual will experience positive

feelings; if the balance is in favour of pain, the individual will experience negative feelings (Bentham, 2007; Diener, 2009; Joseph, 2015; Crisp, 2017). Considering that people will attribute different amounts of pleasure and pain to varying experiences, and that not all pleasurable activities lead to an improvement in well-being, thinking of well-being in such a way may be too simplistic (Ryan & Deci, 2001).

Recent definitions focus on well-being in an increasingly holistic manner, through recognising that it is multifaceted, with a range of aspects influencing an individual's well-being (Stiglitz *et al.*, 2009; Robison, 2013; Burke, 2017; Mitchell, 2018; Ofsted, 2019b). The Department for Education (DfE) (2023a) has defined well-being as consisting of complete mental and physical health, characterised by excellent social relationships. It has been recommended that schools use this definition for discussions about well-being, and so, for the purpose of this piece, this is the definition that will be used.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Stress can negatively impact mental health and well-being; it is a leading cause of teacher attrition (Mental Health Foundation, 2021). In comparison to the adult UK population, teachers and school leaders experience lower levels of well-being (DfE, 2023b). Education Support (2019, 2020) has reported increasing numbers of calls to its emotional support hotline (with numbers peaking during 2019–20, possibly due to the impact of Covid-19). An increase in contact with emotional support helplines could suggest that increasing numbers of teachers face emotional difficulties because of their occupation and that teachers are in need of measures to support their well-being. In a survey of 3,082 education staff, low levels of well-being, wanting a better work–life balance and feeling undervalued were reported as significant reasons for teachers wanting to leave the profession (Education Support, 2022).

Many teachers and school leaders in the UK suffer from consistent stress due to their jobs, with work impacting mental and physical health, as well as the amount of time they have to spend on their personal lives (Education Support & YouGov, 2017; DfE, 2023b). Negative stress can impact teacher well-being and the quality of teaching; this can then impact students' studies and progress (Education Support & YouGov, 2017; Education Support, 2019). It has been argued that without possessing a positive level of well-being themselves, teachers could struggle to encourage the well-being of their students and teach to the best of their ability with enough physical, emotional and social energy (Bajorek *et al.*, 2014). Teaching is a profoundly emotional activity and requires emotional labour to be demonstrated very frequently, increasing the likelihood that teachers will suffer from emotional exhaustion (Kinman & Wray, 2011; Tösten & Şahin, 2017). It is therefore imperative to improve the well-being of teachers to benefit them and the children they teach. The likelihood of improved pupil outcomes has been cited as a reason to prioritise improvements in well-being; however, improving the well-being of teachers should be important, regardless of its impact on pupil progress (Holmes, 2005; Bethune, 2018).

It is important to keep the well-being of teachers in focus rather than focusing on the development of resilience to help teachers tolerate stress and difficult working environments (Holmes, 2019). It has also been suggested by Tösten & Şahin (2017) that professional relationships between teachers can help with the emotional labour required for teaching. It is for this reason that coaching and mentoring strategies could be implemented by leaders in order to provide the opportunity for discussion, feedback and constructive criticism from other professionals (DfE, 2019a).

A perceived lack of support from some senior leaders regarding issues such as accountability, pupil progress, behaviour

and workload has also impacted teachers' health and well-being levels (DfE, 2018, 2023b). A quarter of 11,177 teachers and leaders surveyed by the DfE reported that they were considering leaving the state school sector within 12 months (other than for retirement), and high workloads, as well as pressures relating to inspection and pupil outcomes, were among the most common reasons given (DfE, 2023b). High levels of teacher turnover have been shown to negatively impact student progress and this is another reason for taking teacher well-being seriously; the well-being of teachers should be improved in order to potentially bolster teacher retention but can also benefit students (Rivkin *et al.*, 2005).

The DfE (2022) published a workload reduction toolkit with the aim of supporting schools in establishing positive well-being cultures. The recommendations include conducting a workload survey, creating a well-being committee and a school workload team, a well-being action plan and programme of work to examine teachers' workloads and bolster well-being, amongst other strategies (DfE, 2022). The toolkit recommends a whole-school approach towards well-being and includes concise ways in which expectations for teachers (in respect of teaching and learning, behaviour, assessment, reporting to parents, and professional development) are outlined, with their well-being taken into consideration at each stage (DfE, 2019b). Cowley (2019) and Erasmus (2019) suggest incorporating values when considering the well-being of groups of people. These could include celebrating achievements, supporting others, showing empathy, courage and resilience (Cowley, 2019). Keeping values at the forefront of a school-wide approach to well-being and through the creation of a school workload group can help to positively boost well-being (Cowley, 2019).

METHODOLOGY

Using literature concerning well-being, this secondary research project aims to identify key strategies and recommendations to improve teacher well-being. This piece is written in the form of a systematic review, which is a secondary research study with the purpose of exploring the range of literature currently available, to gather what is known from existing research (Gough *et al.*, 2017; Newman & Gough, 2020). The process enables the researcher to find, assess and synthesise the available primary literature and evidence to formulate answers based on evidence for their research question (Cherry *et al.*, 2017; Gough *et al.*, 2017). Systematic reviews take into account a wide range of evidence, which is useful when formulating policies or actions for the future as they do not rely on findings from only one source, and as some sources cannot be relied upon and can present atypical results (Gough *et al.*, 2017). Systematic reviews are useful due to the fact that they are rigorous and outline each step, making them reproducible (Cherry *et al.*, 2017; Gough *et al.*, 2017; Newman & Gough, 2020).

SEARCH STRATEGY

Scoping searches conducted on the internet search engine Google were carried out in order to generate an overview of relevant literature sources (Cherry & Dickson, 2017; Dundar & Fleeman, 2017). To refine the search, a range of frequent keywords as well as topics were identified from literature that arose (Dundar & Fleeman, 2017). Keywords used to search were 'well-being' (and a range of different spellings – some literature contained the spelling 'wellbeing', some used 'well-being' and some used 'well being' – in an attempt to complete a more comprehensive search), 'primary teacher retention', 'primary teacher attrition', 'primary teacher turnover', 'stress', 'anxiety', 'mental health' and 'workload'. These were then used to search again for more streamlined results. In addition, searches were

conducted on Google Scholar to locate journal articles. Searches also took place on the University of East London's library database, in addition to the EBSCOhost Education Research Complete database in order to locate an increased number of sources. The Evidence for Policy and Practice Information and Co-ordinating Centre was also used as a search database.

INCLUSION CRITERIA

Literature was eligible for inclusion if: the literature is based in the UK or internationally and in the English language; the literature had been published between the years 2010 and 2022; the literature relates to a primary school context; and the literature is peer reviewed. The requirement for literature to be international was selected to identify a range of articles relating to teacher well-being and retention. This is because the scoping searches seemed to present a limited number of UK-only-based journal articles relating to well-being. It is required that the literature is in the English language to enable the researcher to comprehend it. Interestingly, Cherry & Dickson (2017) and Brunton *et al.* (2017) see a potential for language bias when selecting literature only conducted in English due to the likelihood that literature with positive findings will be reported in English language journals, over that with negative findings. Literature must also link to primary school contexts because this study is related to a primary school and strategies to improve teacher well-being and retention in such a setting. Peer-reviewed literature was selected as an inclusion criterion because it is assessed for quality prior to publication and reviewed if necessary. Cherry & Dickson (2017) also state that selecting only articles which have been peer reviewed makes it more likely that one will come across positive findings in the articles. On the other hand, peer-reviewed articles are increasingly likely to have been assessed and critiqued as a result of them being reviewed. Literature published between 2010 and 2022 is eligible due to

its likelihood of being more current and due to its potential to take into account recent government and policy changes. These criteria were applied to the studies found, and those meeting the criteria were compiled into a table, from which themes were identified.

EXCLUSION CRITERIA

The exclusion criteria will outline the attributes in studies which prevent certain studies from being included in the review (Cherry & Dickson, 2017); they set the boundaries for pieces which will not be considered by the researcher (Brunton *et al.*, 2017). Literature is eligible for exclusion if: the literature has been published before 2010; the literature does not engage with the primary school context; the literature is not in the English language. These criteria were applied to the studies found, and those meeting the criteria were compiled into a table, from which themes were identified.

LIMITATIONS

There are several limitations of this paper, one being the inclusion of a single international study (Margolis *et al.*, 2014). This is a limitation because international studies and literature may limit the generalisability of the recommendations when applied to a UK context. Selecting studies and literature conducted solely in the UK could more closely align with the UK context of teacher well-being and retention; as well as policy relating to UK primary schools. Selecting studies conducted in the UK to aid with the creation of recommendations to improve well-being for future teachers in the UK could boost the likelihood of recommendations being more generalisable for the context. A second limitation of this paper is the inability to access several journal articles that appeared during the search for literature. This may have limited recommendations for improving well-being due to the inability to access information and recommendations for the improvement of well-being within those articles.

Insider research is an additional limitation of this paper. Due to being a teacher and working within a personal context where well-being is of concern leads to bias being a limitation with this study as this could have impacted the development of this research (Costley *et al.*, 2010). The actions of colleagues in relation to leadership are likely to have impacted and influenced the research topic (Costley *et al.*, 2010). Researchers are in a position of power as a result of having an element of control over the information collected and its analysis (Hamm, 2014). Researchers can control what is presented in their research and what is omitted, which gives the researcher power over what is shown to the reader (*ibid.*). Whilst care was taken to be as transparent as possible, it could be that the position of power and the associated control over what is presented to readers has become a limitation of this paper. A further limitation of this paper is that it was conducted using external research. This is a limitation because it was not conducted within the context of a school, and therefore the strategy formed with the recommendations from the studies may not be as generalisable or as relevant as it could be, to a particular setting. A limitation of this research is that several of the studies included in this systematic review were small in scale. This leads to a challenge when it comes to the generalisability of the findings, as they may not be applicable to other contexts. These findings were used to arrive at a series of recommendations, which then has the ability to impact the generalisability of those recommendations.

FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

A theme that was identified during this research relates to the causes of low levels of teacher well-being. Research demonstrated that low levels of teacher well-being are caused by a range of factors, such as a lack of work–life balance, working long hours, challenging behaviour and accountability measures (Holmes, 2019; Ofsted, 2019b). It was also found that a lack of support from senior leaders, experiencing feelings of being undervalued and a lack of respect from parents can also contribute to low levels of teacher well-being (DfE, 2015; 2018; Education Support & YouGov, 2017).

The following recommendations have been consolidated through accessing the literature as part of this systematic review. These recommendations are suggested as a way forward to improve the well-being and retention of staff members. Based on the literature accessed during this research, recommendations for teachers to engage with to improve their well-being could include engaging with physical exercise, connecting with nature and taking part in mindfulness (Margolis *et al.*, 2014; Holmes, 2019). Employee therapy has been suggested as a strategy for improving well-being, as well as a reduction in workload by planning collaboratively to avoid ‘reinventing the wheel’ (Margolis *et al.*, 2014; Education Support & YouGov, 2017; DfE, 2018; Glazzard & Bostwick, 2018; Cowley, 2019). Addressing and streamlining policies in relation to

marking, planning and data collection to trim out unnecessary tasks would be beneficial in reducing the workload of teachers, creating the potential to boost well-being. An introduction of a school well-being programme and having a consistently implemented and reviewed well-being policy could also support the well-being of teachers. The development of a positive and trusting environment in schools, and a reduction in pressure (both in general and from Ofsted inspections), has also been suggested as being able to contribute to positive well-being in schools (Education Support & YouGov, 2017; Education Support, 2019).

CONCLUSION

It is imperative to improve the well-being of teachers in the UK; this may not only improve teachers’ experiences in the workplace but it also has potential to improve teaching (Education Support, 2019). Low levels of well-being can impact the physical, social and emotional aspects of teachers’ lives; effective teaching requires physical, social and emotional energy which is something that teachers may find difficult to exert if suffering from low levels of well-being (Education Support, 2019). Improved well-being for teachers has the ability to improve teaching and therefore improve the outcomes for students (Rivkin *et al.*, 2005; The Work Foundation & Teacher Support Network, 2014). ■

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