How to tackle poor teacher wellbeing for primary school teachers in England? Strategies to enhance teacher wellbeing and work conditions in teaching practice.

Sukhjagat Brar¹ & *Cora Sargeant¹

¹School of Psychology, University of Southampton, Southampton, SO17 1BJ

*Corresponding author:

Dr Cora Sargeant, School of Psychology, University of Southampton, Southampton, SO17 1BJ

Email: c.c.sargeant@soton.ac.uk

This paper draws on Positive Psychology (Seligman, 2010) and attention to the Finnish context to explore ways of improving teacher wellbeing among primary schools in England.

Key Definitions

Wellbeing

The World Health Organisation (WHO) (1946) defines wellbeing to include physical, social and mental aspects which all contribute to general health fostering productivity and building positive relationships with others (Beddington et al., 2008). Diener (1984) defines wellbeing as something that is integral and subjective to all human beings which is represented through life satisfaction. This definition inspired Seligman (2018) to create a PERMA model to define wellbeing based on the positive psychology to include elements of positive emotion, engagement, relationships, meaning and accomplishment, all factors helping to flourish in life. Despite the lack of common consensus over the wellbeing definition in research, some of the frequently used definitions include positive emotions, life satisfaction and lack of stress (Hascher & Waber, 2021). Similarly, there is no gold standard definition for Teacher Wellbeing (TW). However, TW can be defined as a positive imbalance where positive experiences are more pronounced than negative experiences rather than TW meaning complete absence of health issues, stress, or burnout symptoms (Hascher & Waber, 2021).

Self-efficacy

A person's self-efficacy represents their belief in their capability to successfully carry a given task or responsibility (Bandura 1977). Self-efficacy is one on the strongest motivational predictors of how well work-related responsibilities get carried out (Cervone, 2000). High self-efficacy is also related to lower stress and anxiety (Soysa & Wilcomb, 2015).

Work-related stress and Burnout

Work-related stress can be defined as a harmful physical and emotional response which occurs when an individual feels the requirements of the job do not match their available internal (e.g., competency, self-efficacy) and external resources (e.g., peer-support; Beehr, 2014). When internal and external resources falter, people can experience emotional exhaustion, feelings of a lack of motivation, feelings of hopelessness, and physical fatigue, also known as burnout (Hyvönen et al., 2018).

Mindfulness Based Interventions and Trainings

Mindfulness derives from 5th century BCE India (Bodhi, 2011), applied to a secular context as Mindfulness Based Interventions (MBIs). MBIs are programs aiming to teach mindfulness: the awareness and ability to pay attention and being present in the moment with an open and accepting mindset (Kabat-Zinn, 2003).

Belongingness

Baumeister and Leary (1995) suggests that humans have an innate desire to form and maintain positive, lasting and significant interpersonal relationships. Feeling of belongingness can include being related to and feeling understood by others which can be crucial for TW (Zembylas & Papanastasiou, 2005).

Introduction

Teaching is a stressful profession where half of the newly qualified teachers have been reported to either reject their first teaching position or leave it within the first five years of teaching (Madigan & Kim, 2021). Aside from teacher retention, teacher wellbeing is also associated with pupil wellbeing (Harding et al. 2019). The challenges faced by the teaching profession have been brought into sharp focus in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic, which has further added to teachers' stress and has impacted negatively on TW, particularly for primary school teachers (Kim et al., 2022).

When national lockdowns began teachers had to adapt their practice quickly, often with little prior experience of remote teaching, and with little additional support (Alves et al., 2021). The lack of support in response to COVID-19 further increased symptoms of stress, anxiety, and depression. Among 1479 teachers in Portugal, primary school teachers showed higher levels of stress compared to early years' teachers, and teachers with longer teaching careers (20-30 years) showed more dissatisfaction towards the teaching profession than newly qualified teachers (Alves et al., 2021).

The Teacher Wellbeing Report (2020) collected data from 3,034 education professionals in England during the Covid-19 pandemic finding 84% of teachers feeling stressed and 74% experiencing behavioural, physical, or psychological symptoms due to their work. Over half of the surveyed professionals considered they did not have enough guidance on their wellbeing at work and felt diffident about discussing mental health with their employer. Increased workload was further identified as one of the biggest reasons to leave the profession. Increased workload has been a persistent concern for teachers in England, who work 51 hours on average leaving them less leisure time than their counterparts in other countries (Allen et al., 2021).

Ofsted's teacher wellbeing report (2019) found that the rise in administrative tasks crowds out teachers' limited time, resulting in teachers taking more of their primary work (marking, lesson planning) into their leisure time. Continuing work-related responsibilities during the leisure time, can result in poor work-life balance increasing stress (Kim et al., 2022) and result in emotional exhaustion and burnout over time (Alves et al., 2021).

The high workload of teachers leaves them extremely vulnerable to experiencing burnout (Paškvan et al., 2016). A reduction in leisure time further encroaches upon opportunities to enjoy quality time with support networks, contributing to feeling unhappy, isolated, and having to deal with stress alone (Kim et al., 2022). The lack of leisure time further curtails the possibility of restorative practices which could otherwise help with stress recovery and reduce the propensity of burnout. Considering all these challenges faced by teachers there is an urgent need for strategies to reduce teachers' stress and avoid widespread burnout.

In the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic school leadership and policy makers alike must return their focus to TW, particularly in primary school, and the psychology that can be brought to bear to improve it.

Solutions to improve working conditions for teachers and enhance TW

Peer-support

Collaborative work enables peer-support and has been found to be a protective factor against teacher burnout (Aelterman et al., 2007). Webb (2009) explored how effective collaborative work can be implemented in primary schools to increase TW in Finland and England. Finland was selected as a comparator because 86% of Finnish schools reported the use of collaborative work decreasing teacher absenteeism, preventing teachers leaving the profession. The results suggest how the use of collaborative pedagogy in England can improve TW.

The collaborative work among teachers in Finland is protected by the OAJ Teacher Trade Union in Finland under the 'yhteisuunnittelu ys-aika' where the Senior Management Team (SMT) gives dedicated time to primary and secondary school teachers (maximum of 120 hours/academic year) to organise and plan work-related responsibilities with the same-year-group teachers accompanied often by a Special Educational Needs Co-Ordinator (SENCo) who is designated for that particular year group(s) (OAJ). Primary teachers find collaborative work with the same-year-group teachers valuable (Atjonen et al., 2008) which can be due to the age-dependent nature of the classroom management strategies. A given strategy found effective for Year 6 pupils might not be as effect for Year 1 pupils. Time is allocated in teachers' agenda in synchrony with same-year-group teachers when effective strategies can be shared, engendering peer-support (Webb, 2009).

The given time can be used to divide responsibilities of class planning to manage workload; this exemplifies the reduction of teachers' workload via collaborative practice. Aligned with this, research shows joint class planning to be a valuable vehicle to reduce teacher workload and improve teaching quality (Atjonen et al., 2008). Enabling and protecting the opportunities to plan collaboratively the responsibilities' faced by primary school teachers by reducing the length of the whole staff meetings for instance, can be one way to manage workload faced by the profession in England.

However, the solution has limitations: smaller schools without parallel classes cannot benefit from 'yhteisuunnittelu ys-aika' as easily as larger provisions. In these situations, schools can consider having allocated planning time among different Key Stages. Furthermore, it is vital to build a supportive work environment with a shared ethos of helping others without feeling judged for asking help. Studies have shown teachers who rate their work environment more positively show enhanced job satisfaction and self-esteem and less stress (Wong & Zhang, 2014).

Supportive work environment

Teachers who experience high levels of accountability over student behaviour and have limited peer-support, perceived more stress, increasing their vulnerability to burnout (Ross et al., 2012). Thus, it is suggested that an encouraging and supportive work-environment should ensure that everyone has a shared responsibility over pupils' wellbeing and growth, not just the class teacher; this could help to tackle the negative effects of high accountability over student behaviour and allow to establish a more compassionate work culture and allow a more compassionate approach aiming to understand teachers' concerns and trying to solve them together (Gibbs & Miller, 2014).

The aforementioned PERMA wellbeing model (Seligman, 2018) was used by Turner et al. (2022) to identify useful peer-support strategies for teachers. Altruistic peer-support: teachers helping to plan classes for their colleagues, was found useful, filling teachers with a 'good feeling' knowing they had helped a colleague; this act of kindness was further identified to strengthen relationships with colleagues, with teachers reporting that peer-support was often reciprocated. Acts of kindness and altruism have a ripple effect increasing liking by others, prosocial reciprocity, gratitude, and appreciation (Lyubomirsky et al., 2005).

Turner at al. (2022) also found receiving peer-support resulted in perception of improvement in pedagogical practices as peer-support allowed to share ideas, resources, and problem-solve together. Senior leadership staff and headteachers can set an example by showing acts of kindness via reciprocal peer-support to teachers and other staff members.

Self-efficacy

Enhancing teachers' self-efficacy can help to reduce teachers' stress and help to enhance TW. Teachers' reports of low self-efficacy increased during the Covid-19 where teachers felt inadequate to meet the responsibilities set by the profession and time resulting in feeling stressed (Szabó et al., 2021). Improving teachers' self-efficacy can help with feelings of job satisfaction (Cansoy et al., 2020) reduce the risk of burnout (Zee & Koomen, 2016). Enhancing teachers' self-efficacy further carries positive benefits on pupils: higher teacher self-efficacy is related to students' higher academic achievement in mathematics (Perera & John, 2020). Teachers with higher self-efficacy are perceived more effective in classroom management by their pupils (Burić & Kim, 2020).

Cook et al. (2017) used positive psychology-based training called the ARC (Achiever Resilience Curriculum) to assess teachers' self-efficacy after providing mindfulness and gratitude practices and clarification of values. The study aim was to observe the impact on perceived workrelated stress, self-efficacy, and wellbeing; the results revealed a significant reduction of job-related stress and enhanced self-efficacy compared to a control group. Findings suggest mindfulness-based trainings to be beneficial and effective in fostering TW and improving teachers' intentions to implement high-quality practices. However, it should be noted that the study did not assess participants' baseline for wellbeing practices, thus careful conclusions should be drawn from this study on the effectiveness of mindfulness training enhancing self-efficacy and TW.

Nagle's (2015) positive psychology-based intervention (Seligman et al., 2005) on primary and secondary teachers' wellbeing and self-efficacy, found no significant differences between control and experiment group (Nagle, 2015). Similarly, Hascher and Waber's systematic literature review (2021) assessed interventions targeted to enhance self-efficacy as part of TW; they found that the lack of mutually agreed definitions of both wellbeing and self-efficacy hinders the reliability of the research in the field, making it harder to support the efficacy of specific interventions for wellbeing (Hascher & Waber, 2021).

Despite the limitations in wellbeing intervention research, valuable strategies are suggested that can be tried in schools to improve TW via self-efficacy. However, the accessibility of these strategies is often limited by access to interventions or staff training at workplaces. To tackle the nationwide concern of low TW, equitable access to strategies helping to cope and reduce stress and enhance TW, should be available to all teachers in England.

One solution could be to include strategies enhancing TW as part of all teacher training qualifications in England. Currently, there are different routes in England to become a teacher. One common route to teaching profession is one-year-long Postgraduate Certificate in Education (PGCE) compared to a five-year-long masters level qualification in Finland (Opintopolku, 2022). Updating the teacher training qualification to meet the needs of teachers and improve preparedness for the profession, is something that could be considered to improve TW and teachers' self-efficacy. **Systemic change: improving teacher training qualifications**

The five-year-long teacher training in Finland focuses on learning about the stressors faced in the profession and providing strategies to tackle these. Additionally, the implementation of an effective pedagogy and psychology-based courses to learn about mental health and wellbeing are at the forefront of teacher training where teachers have to complete educational psychology modules (Opintopolku, 2022). Teachers in Finland receive in-depth training on Special Educational Needs and Disability (SEND) and evidence-based strategies on how to tailor pedagogy to be sensitive to pupils' individual needs. Further, primary schools often have more than one SENCo working full time in a school where in some schools, one SENCo is designated to each key stage (Helsingin Peruskoulut).

Ofsted (2019) reports teachers in England often lack skills or training on how to best support pupils with SEND. Considering the increasing number of pupils with an Education, Health and Care Plan (EHCP), this can further increase feelings of low self-efficacy in teachers and increase workrelated stress, all contributing negatively to TW (DfE, 2021). Therefore, a greater emphasis on SEND training should be added to improve teaching qualifications.

Evidence-based coping strategies such as how to cope and reduce work-related stress, could be included in the teacher training. An effective stress recovery practice suggested for professionals in stressful occupations, is to immerse themselves in nature during their leisure time (Hyvönen et al., 2018). It has been found that being in nature impacts wellbeing increasing motivation in employees and helping them tackle work-related stress (Hyvönen et al., 2018); this is because nature provides restorative benefits to human brains, helping to recover from stress and tackling reaching burnout (Hyvönen et al., 2018). Being in nature affects emotion regulation: nature can help to feel calm, more regulated and relaxed by altering autonomic nervous system activation (Gladwell et al., 2012). Studies have also found that nature can contribute to people's vitality and life satisfaction (Barragan-Jason, 2023; Korpela et al., 2017).

However, despite the clear benefits that can be gained from spending leisure time in nature, teachers have a restricted ability to benefit from this due to reasons such as not having the awareness of it, or time to use it effectively. Incorporating such evidence-based strategies as part of teacher qualifications, can be beneficial to increase teachers' resiliency in a stressful occupation.

An increase of salary is something that could be considered aligned with the suggested increased length of teacher training qualifications. Ofsted (2019) reported that only 30 per cent of 2293 teacher respondents were happy with their salaries. Studies have shown that not only the quality of relationships with your peers and pupils and workload contribute to higher engagement with your work among teachers, but also receiving financial rewards (Heidmets & Liik, 2014). Sixty-eight per cent of teachers believe that the teaching profession is not valued in the society (Ofsted, 2019). This is echoed in Kim et al.,'s recent study (2022).

Educational Psychologists' (EP) input could be used in enhancing teacher qualification and providing staff training as part of the existing teacher qualification routes in England, to ensure all aspiring teachers receive sufficient teacher training with an awareness of wellbeing and related strategies.

Implications for Educational Psychology practice

EPs have a central role in promoting wellbeing and are in an ideal position to support school staff on an individual, organisational (school level), and systemic level (policymaking, national level). While there has been an emphasis on promoting wellbeing outcomes for children and young people, there has been comparatively little emphasis in relation to TW. EPs' practice has been at risk of becoming primarily a reactive statutory service (Roffey, 2012). However, the Covid-19 pandemic has brought a shift in EPs' practice with a greater emphasis placed on promoting wellbeing for all service users, including teachers; this creates a greater scope for EPs to intervene preventatively. Evidence suggests that teachers struggle to support pupils' socioemotional development if teachers' own socioemotional needs are not met (Weare & Grey, 2003). In relation to this, EPs can provide supervision training to senior leadership teams and headteachers, helping to support teachers with their socioemotional regulation. Additionally, EPs are encouraged to continue involvement in staff training, interventions, and workshops targeted to enhance staff wellbeing in schools. However, to reach a systemic nationwide positive change around TW and their working conditions, more effective measures are needed.

Ideally, EPs involvement would encourage the Government to make changes on teacher training qualification yielding positive outcomes on TW. EPs can share evidence-based best practice holding pedagogy and psychology of wellbeing at the heart of the improvement suggestions for teacher qualifications; this is a more effective solution than solely relying on EPs' intervention and training services as it has a far greater reach.

Improving the teacher training qualification is an example of the kind of policy change that is needed for effective solutions that would reach every aspiring teacher; implementing such solutions

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can help to not only enhance TW, improving outcomes for teachers and pupils, but also contribute towards a healthier and happier society.

Conclusion

Teachers sculpt our moral, social, and intellectual selves in some of our most formative years, and it behoves us to give them the respect, the time, the emotional support, their jobs deserve. In the UK teachers experience overwhelming workloads, inviting some to leave the profession soon after getting started, and others to burning out sometime later. Yet, the application of psychology and learning the lessons from other pedagogical systems in Europe can yet offer our teachers the support they need: better pay and working conditions, supported by collaborative working modelled on Finnish teachers' protected 'yhteisuunnittelu ys-aika', and the lessons of positive psychology informing teacher training can, together, help us to better support some of the most important professionals in our society.

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