

Teaching Compass for teacher well-being

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Introduction

The topic of teachers' well-being has become an increasingly important focus for school leaders and policy makers due to the fact that it appears to be declining globally (I-BEST, 2023). It is well documented that teachers experience high level of stress as a result of their work, with 78% of teaching staff and 89% of senior leaders in the UK saying their work makes them stressed (Ofsted, 2019^[1]). This a concern for any profession but especially for education where teachers have a large responsibility for children's learning and welfare. It is clear why teacher well-being matters – if we want teachers to be effective at their jobs and teach well, be positive role models to their students and have a positive impact of their students' well-being, they need to have good well-being themselves. This must be a key focus for education policy makers and school leaders.

In this paper, we will look at: defining what well-being means for teachers; the factors that affect teacher well-being; how teacher well-being impacts students learning and well-being; the role that teacher agency plays in both teacher and student well-being; and the factors that help to improve teacher well-being.

What is teacher well-being?

It is worth noting here that some researchers have recently explored the idea of whether 'teacher well-being' actually exists (O'Brien and Guiney, 2021^[2]). That is, they have challenged the notion that teacher well-being is somehow distinct from the well-being of other professionals. From their research with teachers, O'Brien and Guiney found that 'we still cannot find empirical evidence which would indicate to us that teacher well-being

exists as distinct and separate from other occupational well-being.' They, therefore, refer to the 'well-being of teachers' as opposed to 'teacher well-being'. In short, when defining the well-being of teachers, it is important to simply define well-being as it applies to most people and then look at the specific challenges facing teachers and how we can mitigate them to improve their wellbeing.

Well-being itself can be a somewhat nebulous concept and, therefore, it is necessary to define it clearly. The New Economics Foundation defines wellbeing as, 'how people feel and how they function, both on a personal and a social level, and how they evaluate their lives as a whole.' (New Economics Foundation, 2012^[3]). Similarly, the What Works Centre for Wellbeing defines wellbeing for individuals as 'feeling good and functioning well' (What Works Centre for Wellbeing, 2017^[4]). These definitions both imply that there is a large subjective element to well-being and that a person's well-being is about how they feel about and evaluate their own lives. A third definition comes from well-being expert, Professor Paul Dolan, who argues that happiness and well-being are created by 'experiences of pleasure and purpose over time' (Dolan, 2015^[5]).Dolan argues that well-

being comes from the balance between pleasure and purpose – too much of one and not enough of the other creates an imbalance and, therefore, well-being suffers.

Teacher well-being is, therefore, partly affected by teachers' experiences of positive emotions, their sense of pleasure and how good they feel about their lives. This is sometimes referred to as hedonic wellbeing. When teachers feel good about themselves, when they experience positive emotions at work and when they enjoy what they do, overall, their wellbeing tends to be higher. Any work to address and improve teacher well-being must, therefore, focus on how to help teachers feel good about themselves, their lives and their work. However, well-being is not just about feeling good as the definitions above explain. Another important element is the role of meaning, purpose and functioning well.

Having a strong sense of meaning and purpose in life is associated with higher levels of well-being (Lyubomirsky, 2007^[6]). This is often referred to as psychological or eudaimonic wellbeing. Meaning and purpose are about feeling part of something bigger than oneself and doing things that are important and that really matter to the individual and to society at large. A sense of meaning and purpose is derived through things such as personal and professional relationships, feeling connected to others, being part of a team and by pursuing goals that feel important. Interestingly, Dolan notes that purposeful activities do not necessarily feel good or pleasurable at the time but they still contribute to our sense of well-being overall (Dolan, 2015^[5]). This is important for our understanding of the well-being of teachers. Teachers will often spend time on activities that do not necessarily feel good in the moment, such as dealing with challenging behaviour in their classroom or marking student assignments, but if they see value in them and if those activities are meaningful to teachers, they are likely to contribute to their well-being in the long run. The opposite is also true. The more time teachers spend on activities that feel pointless and meaningless, the less motivated and satisfied they will feel.

Therefore, teacher well-being can be thought of a balance between pleasure and purpose over time. The more teachers experience positive emotions and feel good inside and outside of their work, the better. Equally, the more teachers feel part of a team and are driven by a strong sense of purpose, where they spend time of activities that are meaningful to them and pursue worthwhile goals, the more satisfied and motivated they are likely to be.

How does teacher well-being impact on their students?

Research has shown an interplay between teacher well-being and student outcomes and teacher well-being impacts on their students in a number of ways. Firstly, teacher well-being (or lack of) will impact how effectively teachers can do their jobs which, in turn, will affect how well their students learn and achieve academically. Briner and Dewberry carried out a large-scale project exploring the links between staff wellbeing and school performance (using an online survey and standard attainment test scores). (Briner and Dewberry, 2007^[7]) They collected data from staff in primary and secondary schools between 2002-2005. They found a significant positive association between teacher well-being and SATs results in primary schools in England, with well-being accounting for 8% of school performance variance. In secondary schools, they also found a significant positive association between teacher well-being and students results. This study suggests well-being can have a small but significant effect on learning although the study had limitations. Namely, that it was not possible to confer causality. It may be that pupil performance

influences teacher well-being, although this relationship is suggested to be two-way (Briner and Dewberry, 2007^[7]). Another study, investigated the association between teachers' level of emotional exhaustion and students' maths achievement (using standardised tests) with data from over 1,000 maths teachers and around 20,000 students (Klusmann et al., 2022^[8]). They found a small but significant negative association between teachers' emotional exhaustion and students' test scores. This effect is important, as teachers with high burnout could accumulate this negative effect on several classes over the long-term. Finally, a more recent large-scale study in 840 secondary schools found that teachers' emotional exhaustion was associated with less emotional support and classroom organisation and the lower levels of instructional quality partially mediated the association between teachers' exhaustion and student outcomes (Klusmann et al., 2022^[8]). The study suggested that supporting teachers' well-being is not only important for the teachers themselves, but also it is important for students' academic development.

One of the mechanisms by which teacher well-being affects student learning and attainment is through the quality of relationships they develop with their students. There is a lot of evidence that supports the importance of teacher-student relationships on all aspects of student outcomes, including academic, social and emotional (Cornelius-White, 2007^[9]) (Roorda et al., 2011^[10]). Research shows that students with teachers that show more empathy, warmth and encouragement of learning are reported to have better cognitive outcomes (Cornelius-White, 2007^[9]). Conversely, highly stressed teachers find it harder to develop positive relationships with their students and may inadvertently contribute to a 'burnout cascade' in school (Jennings and Greenberg, 2009^[11]). This is where teachers' stress levels increase, they start to burn out and it leads to a deteriorating classroom climate. In turn, this leads to further teacher emotional exhaustion, causing them to resort to harsher and more reactive responses, which may exacerbate disruptions further. Jennings and Greenburg suggest this 'cascade' will have a disastrous effect on the relationships between teachers and students, negatively influencing both classroom and student academic outcomes.

Another factor that teacher well-being impacts on is student wellbeing. Teachers are important role models in young people's lives and students will be looking to teachers for cues on how they should behave and lead their lives as they move towards adulthood. If teachers are experiencing low well-being and burnout, then they are not setting a good example for students to follow. As asserted in the Foresight Mental Capital and Wellbeing Project Report, 'Teachers who are stressed, or demoralised, make poor role models for young people' (Foresight Mental Capital and Wellbeing Project, 2008^[12]). In the classroom, teachers and students will also be susceptible to a phenomenon known as 'emotional contagion'. It is well documented that moods and emotions are contagious among groups of people (Hatfield, Carpenter and Rapson, 2014^[13]) and students will be feeding off the moods of their teachers and teachers will be affected by the collective mood of their students. A study conducted by the University of British Columbia and published in the journal *Social Science & Medicine*, found a connection between teachers' burnout levels and students' cortisol levels, a hormone that indicates stress (Oberle and Schonert-Reichl, 2016^[14]). Researchers surveyed 17 teachers in grades 4 to 7 on their potential burnout, and then tested over 400 students in those teachers' classrooms for stress levels by collecting saliva samples three times in one day. Researchers found that in classrooms where teachers were feeling more burned out or exhausted, students' cortisol levels were higher, especially in the morning.

This is why high levels of teacher stress is such a worrying trend globally. It is not desirable to have children and young people cared for and taught by adults who feel increasingly stressed, exhausted and burned out.

The link between teacher well-being, autonomy and agency

A theory worth noting in the context of teacher well-being and agency is Self Determination Theory (Ryan and Deci, 2000^[15]). Self Determination Theory (SDT) is a theory of human motivation, emotion and development that attempts to explain factors that promote or prevent people from intrinsically engaging in positive behaviours. For a long time, psychologists believed humans were motivated primarily by biological drivers (to find food, water or a mate), or extrinsic factors (punishments and rewards). SDT proposed that humans are also motivated intrinsically – that is, they act and behave in certain ways not to gain a reward or avoid a punishment, or for biological reasons, but simply because they find the task rewarding in and of itself. Volunteering can be an example of intrinsic motivation and explains why some adults give up evenings and weekends to coach a local sports team. They do so because they find that task intrinsically rewarding.

SDT assumes that all people have three basic needs that have to be met for them to be intrinsically motivated: competence, relatedness and autonomy. The need for competence is the desire to master our environment and outcomes. Feeling competent is about knowing we have the requisite knowledge and skills to complete a task well. If people are learning something for the first time, competence is then about making progress and feeling like we are improving and progressing towards mastery. Relatedness is about our desire to feel connected to others and be part of a team, family or community. Humans are a hyper-social species and the need to feel a sense of belonging fulfils a deep-seated psychological need. Research shows that increasing a sense of belonging in schools is associated with increases in staff wellbeing, job satisfaction and motivation (Riley et al., 2020^[16]). Lastly, autonomy relates to people's needs to have full volition and choice over what they do. It doesn't necessarily mean acting alone, it means acting with choice and so autonomy can be about acting independently or interdependently with others. Not only are competence, relatedness and autonomy essential ingredients for being intrinsically motivated, it turns out that they are fundamental for wellbeing too. A very large study led by Frank Martela from Helsinki University looked at over 45,000 adults across 27 European countries and found that when people feel connected, competent and in control, it strongly related to increases in life satisfaction and senses of meaning and purpose in life (Martela et al., 2022^[17]).

Teachers' sense of autonomy

Given that a sense of autonomy and control are so fundamental to being intrinsically motivated and experiencing higher levels of wellbeing, it is concerning that, at least in England, teachers report low levels of autonomy. A report by the National Foundation for Educational Research looked into the links between teacher autonomy, job satisfaction and teacher retention (Worth and Van den Brande, 2020^[18]). The report found that teachers are 16 percentage points less likely than similar professionals to report having 'a lot' of influence over how they do their job. The average teacher in England also reports a lower level of autonomy over what tasks they do, the order in which they carry out tasks, the pace at which they work and their working hours, compared to similar professionals. Moreover,

38 per cent of teachers say that they have ‘a little’ or ‘no’ influence over their professional development goals.

Where teachers did report having a strong sense of autonomy was in areas associated with classroom management and practice, such as classroom layout, teaching methods, planning and preparing lessons, use of classroom time and rules for behaviour. This is important because the report found that teacher autonomy is strongly associated with improved job satisfaction and a greater intention to stay in teaching. Finally, the researchers involved in this report found that increasing teachers’ reported influence over their professional development goals from ‘some’ to ‘a lot’ is associated with a nine percentage point increase in intention to stay in teaching.

Teacher wellbeing is not just about workload

When teacher well-being is discussed, the issue of workload will always arise. Anecdotally, teachers say that there is simply too much to do and not enough time in which to do it all. It is clear how this, over time, will lead to a sense of frustration, incompetence and dissatisfaction. However, improving teacher wellbeing is much more than just trying to reduce workload. Interestingly, the NFER report (Worth and Van den Brande, 2020^[18]) showed that teacher autonomy is also strongly associated with workload feeling more manageable despite not being associated with working hours. Essentially, the more in control teachers feel about their workload, the more manageable it feels even if there is no discernible change in their working hours. This shows how important a sense of control and autonomy are.

Similarly, research by O’Brien and Guiney found that rather than workload being the issue, the nature and purpose of work became the issue that can have a negative impact on the wellbeing of teachers (O’Brien and Guiney, 2021^[2]). In short, when the type of work feels meaningless and teachers talk about ‘hoop-jumping’, ‘box-ticking’, ‘to do with external accountability’, ‘duplicated’, ‘bureaucratic’ and ‘all about performativity’, then this leads teachers to feeling stressed, anxious and as though they lack control. However, work that was seen as being directly or indirectly related to becoming a better teacher – and making life and learning better for the children and young people – might increase workload but was viewed as being of value by teachers (O’Brien and Guiney, 2021^[2]). Therefore, we need to move away from just focusing on reducing teacher workload and, instead, focusing on the nature and the purpose of the work we are asking teachers to do. The more we can increase teachers’ sense of control and autonomy, and the more meaningful we can make their work the better.

What next for teacher well-being?

This brings us to the important question of what needs to happen at a school and policy level to improve the quality of teachers’ lives. How can we help teachers find greater satisfaction in their work and maximise their positive impact on their children they work with? Below is a non-exhaustive list of recommendations that can help improve the profession for teachers and students:

Autonomy:

- School leaders should consider incorporating a teacher autonomy lens to regular reviews of teaching and learning policies.
- Meaningfully involve and engage teachers in the way the school defines its organisational development priorities and makes decisions more widely (NFER, 2021^[19]) Allow teachers greater control over their professional development goals.
- Encourage teachers to engage in action-research projects related to areas of research that intrinsically interest them to increase their sense of agency (O'Brien and Guiney, 2021^[2]).

Relatedness:

- Increase a sense of belonging in school by helping staff and students feel safe, part of a team, with clear values and goals.
- Create a positive and collegial working environment in which staff feel supported, valued and listened to and have an appropriate level of autonomy (Ofsted, 2019^[1]) Increase teachers' access to professional representative bodies. For example, The Chartered College of Teaching in England exists to celebrate and raise the profile of the teaching profession, support teachers through access to research and high-quality professional development and connect teachers through events.

Competence:

- Increase teachers' access to high-quality professional development opportunities (either online or in-person).
- Encourage the production and take-up of high-quality curricular materials and textbooks so that teachers can spend less time on lesson planning, which takes up a large part of non-teaching time (Ofsted, 2019^[1]).

Workload:

- School leaders should reduce and eliminate any work that does not directly or indirectly positively impact either teachers or their students.
- Regularly reflect in school as to whether the work teachers are being asked to perform is meaningful and valuable. Meaningless tasks should be eliminated or delegated to technology where possible.
- At government level, reduce unnecessary data collection, as all data requests typically translate into additional workload for school leaders and teachers (Ofsted, 2019^[1]).
- Governments can invest in new technologies such as AI that reduce the burden of administrative tasks for teachers, freeing them up to focus on the more rewarding aspects of their roles – namely teaching and building positive relationships with students.

Student behaviour:

- School leaders must support teachers with challenging behaviour when it arises. This can be in the form of having a greater physical presence around the school, in corridors and classrooms but also in the form of emotional support and listening to teachers' concerns regarding behaviour.
- Fully support teachers to implement behaviour policies consistently and ensure that the overall school culture helps to optimise pupils' behaviour.
- Teachers should have access to good-quality professional development opportunities focused on dealing with challenging behaviour and fostering positive relationships.
- Greater funding should be given to support schools with student mental health issues and for children with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND).
- The wider ecosystem of public services must also be properly funded (Education Support, 2023^[20]). This relates to the external services that support children and their families so that the burden of support them does not fall disproportionately on schools.

Meaning and purpose:

- Departments of education must keep in mind why teachers chose to join the profession which is namely to 'make a positive difference to children and young people' (Bethune and Kell, 2020^[21]).
- Divisions of education to continue to spread the message that teaching is a highly valued and important occupation and to communicate the many positives of teaching (Ofsted, 2019^[1]).
- School leaders should regularly reflect and discuss with staff why they chose to teach, remind them of their sense of purpose and ensure their roles and tasks are aligned to that sense of purpose as much as possible.

Conclusion

When teachers are healthy, have a strong sense of purpose, enjoy and are in control of their work, their well-being increases and they perform their jobs better. In turn this positively impacts their students in a number of ways. More effective teachers have students that learn more and achieve better academically. Less stressed teachers develop better relationships with their students. Teachers who are well rested and who are not burnt out respond more empathically rather than react harshly when faced with difficult behaviour. Teachers with higher well-being also set a good example for their students to follow. There are no downsides in the research literature to teachers enjoying higher levels of autonomy, respect and well-being. In contrast, research demonstrates many positives behind having healthier and happier teachers in the profession. Teacher well-being must be a priority for any country that wants well educated, well adjusted, healthy and happy children. Teacher well-being must be a priority for any country that wants to attract and retain the best teachers. Without well teachers, any education system is doomed to fail.

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