“I’m petrified of being found to be lacking”: Exploring the issues of teacher mental health

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Key questions

• My research questions
• My methodological approach
• My findings
Research questions

• What factors influence teacher mental health?
• How does teacher mental health impact on pupils and teachers?
• What solutions are effective in addressing the issues of teacher mental health?
Methodology and methods

• Survey - 780 teachers
• Individual semi-structured interviews
Setting the research in context

• Teacher stress is pervasive. Across countries and grade levels, teachers have universally reported high levels of job stress (Gray et al., 2017)

• There has been a shift to move beyond only examining contributors to teacher stress to also explore characteristics of resilient teachers (Beltman et al., 2011)
Setting the research in context

• 75% of 1,250 school and college staff and leaders surveyed said they had experienced psychological, physical or behavioural symptoms because of work
• 19% said they had experienced panic attacks
• 56% had suffered from insomnia
• 41% had experienced difficulty concentrating

(Education Support Partnership, 2017)
• 47% said their **personal relationships** had suffered
• 28% said they had been forced to **take time off** work
• 52% had been off for more than a month during the academic year
• 45% felt they don’t achieve the **right work-life balance**

(Education Support Partnership, 2017)
Literature

Teachers experience

• high levels of anxiety and stress-related health problems (Jeffcoat & Hayes, 2012)
• burnout and retention issues (Watson, 2014)
What influences teacher wellbeing?

• Socioeconomic status / financial security
• Agency – able to shape their role / having control
• A sense of connectedness – feel that they belong
• Beliefs about their own competence

(Dodge et al., 2012)
Factors that influence teacher wellbeing

- **Demands** – such as workload and work environment
- **Control** – a person’s own influence over how their job is carried out
- **Support** – from colleagues, line-manager and organisation
- **Relationships** – to reduce conflict and deal with unacceptable behaviour
- **Role** – understanding of the job content and expectations
- **Change** – how change is managed in the organisation

(Education Support Partnership, 2017)
Factors that influence teacher wellbeing

- **Student behaviour** influences teacher burnout (Beltman, Mansfield, & Price, 2011)
- **Work overload** and **low salaries** (Schonfeld, 2001)
- **School climate** often leads to high levels of staff absenteeism, early retirement, and turnover in the profession (Grayson & Alvarez, 2008)
Mental health is defined as a state of **well-being** in which every individual realizes his or her own potential, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and is able to make a contribution to her or his community.

World Health Organisation
Inter-related aspects of well-being

- Physical well-being
- Social well-being
- Mental well-being

(WHO)
Key themes

• Teacher mental health impacts on the quality of teaching, pupils’ learning and relationships
• It is not just about workload – which is a dominant discourse
• Panoptic styles of surveillance (Foucault) operate in schools
• Power is not just hierarchical
• Teachers’ poor mental health transfers to pupils
Data collection

782 responses

• 56% declared that they had poor mental health
• Most cases had been diagnosed by a GP
• 76% agreed or strongly agreed that their poor mental health impacted negatively on their pupils

• 68 semi-structured interviews
Motivation

• I use pre-planned schemes or lessons rather than think of things myself as I struggle to think about what will work well. I doubt myself and my teaching ability.

• I am often tired and don’t spend as much time on lesson planning. Medication affects this.

• I have less energy to plan so do so simply and less creatively.

• It takes me much longer because I am desperately trying to plan for perfect lessons. I deliberate over minor details and often end up over planning, spending hours and hours only to realise that it didn’t have an impact on how successful the lesson was anyway.
Relationships

• I'm reluctant to engage in staff room jokes and chat as I am thinking "how can everyone be so happy and not stressed like me”. This makes me reluctant to stay in the staff room.

• I have a strong network of friends who are colleagues and we support each other through bad times.

• Tendency to isolate, withdraw and feel not part of the team or arguing due to discontentment with the job.

• I am much shorter tempered and less tolerant. I can be snappy and unapproachable.

• You view them suspiciously and develop a fear that you are doing everything wrong.
Losing control

• I snap more and that’s not fair on the children

• Losing control verbally i.e. Shouting rather than remaining calm

• I will be irritable with little patience which can lead to me raising my voice rather than dealing with situations in a calm manner
Botheredness

• Wouldn’t be bothered or as strict.

• *Children mirror the energy levels of their teacher. If I am eager and excited, they are. If I am grumpy and low, they are. Some days I can’t be bothered to make my lessons good because I am so tired.*

• *Less patience and less empathy – can’t be bothered some days.*

• *I am ok when with the children – I have an important job to do!*
Emotional intelligence

• *I can separate my learners’ progress from my own feelings.*

• *I feel inadequate supporting learners holistic wellbeing when I cannot maintain my own.*

• *I'm less emotionally intelligent during difficult times and may not pick up on their difficulties if I am experiencing difficulties of my own.*
Student progress

• If I'm struggling to plan and communicate concepts, and I can't concentrate long enough to write coherent feedback, I believe - over time - it can detrimentally affect students progress.

• Stressed or depressed teachers are less likely to have clarity of thought in their planning and daily teaching. Lack of sleep and anxiety can lead to poor performance.

• I was able to help my students and move them forward during lessons but being behind in my paperwork, marking and analysing my observations and assessment means I was not doing the best I could for my students.
Points for discussion arising out of the data

• Panoptic styles of surveillance
• Surveillance culture
• Learning walks, lesson observations, book scrutiny,
• Surveillance is not just hierarchical - teachers police each other
• Not feeling trusted
Improving teacher mental health: institutional issues

- Workload is only part of the problem
- Lack of trust
- Lack of agency
- Sense of belonging
- It is to do with the cultures within our schools
Improving teacher mental health: structural issues

• Curriculum changes
• Assessment changes

Leading to instability
Factors that support teacher well-being

• Leaders who support employees and see where they fit into the bigger organisational picture

• Effective line managers who respect, develop and reward their staff

• Consultation that values the voice of employees and listens to their views

• Concerns and relationships based on trust and shared values
Factors that support teacher well-being

- **Trust and openness within collegiate relationships** (Paterson & Grantham, 2016)
- ‘A problem shared is a problem halved’ (Paterson & Grantham, 2016)
- Having their **strengths recognised** by the leadership team (Roffey, 2012)
- Happy teachers produce happy pupils (Roffey, 2012)
- Video Enhanced Reflective Practice has been highlighted as a tool for providing positive feedback and developing skills that increase self-esteem and confidence (Strathie et al., 2011)
A growing body of evidence, mainly from high-income countries, has shown that there is a strong socioeconomic gradient in mental health, with people of lower socioeconomic status having a higher likelihood of developing and experiencing mental health problems. In other words, social inequalities in society are strongly linked to mental health inequalities.

(Mental Health Foundation, 2016: 57)
Whole school approach

School Mental Health Award – Leeds Beckett University

- Carnegie Centre of Excellence for Mental Health in Schools

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Thank you