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'Occasionally there are moments of light': the challenges of primary school teaching in England, and the factors that motivate teachers to stay in the profession

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ABSTRACT

This research, exploring the health and well-being of education professionals, was carried out at the behest of a Multi-Academy Trust of five primary schools. The intention was to assess the needs of educators, before designing a programme to support them. Data were collected through anonymous online survey from 244 staff in primary schools in England. Similar to previous literature, respondents reported feeling stressed and overwhelmed with their workload; as well as feeling undervalued, lacking autonomy and experiencing low morale. Our data suggest that these factors damaged educators' health and well-being and, for some, impacted negatively upon their home lives. The general negativity of responses was tempered by mentions of the more intrinsically rewarding aspects of the role. This research highlights significant changes that are needed to education funding and policy, whilst suggesting approaches that schools can take, in the meantime, to protect the health and wellbeing of their staff.

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Introduction

Over the last decade, there has been a noticeable increase in research into teachers' mental health and wellbeing in the UK (e.g. Evans et al. 2022; Gray et al. 2023; McCarthy 2019). McCarthy (2019) identifies the extreme workload, administrative burden, an increase in children's challenging behaviour and the lack of autonomy as factors impacting well-being within the teaching profession. These factors appear as common to many of the studies, and are not only specific to the UK. The UK charity organisation Education Support highlights some concerning findings from its 2022 annual survey of 3082 educators across age phases. These include that 75% of school staff regularly felt stressed, with this rising to 84% for school leaders. This report discusses how the term 'presenteeism', has emerged, describing the culture of teaching staff going to work when they are ill, for reasons of stress, insurmountable workload and a school culture which compels staff to 'power through' (Education Support 2022, 42). This report verifies the claims of numerous media articles, that the practices of working long hours, feeling stressed and going to work when unwell have become normalised in the UK education sector. This has acute consequences for the profession, as prolonged stress

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leads to fatigue, burnout, job dissatisfaction and increased staff turnover, as was verified by the latest annual survey of over eleven thousand teachers by the Department for Education (2023). This report found that 44% of primary teachers rated their anxiety levels as high (Department for Education 2023, 78), and that an extremely concerning 67% of primary teachers felt that they had no time for a personal life. 58% of primary teachers identified a negative impact on their mental health (Department for Education 2023, 85). The current level of stress that UK primary teachers are working under is clearly unsustainable.

Amid this increase in awareness of teacher stress, the CEO of a local Multi Academy Trust (MAT) of five primary schools approached our University for support in improving the health and wellbeing of staff. This CEO recognised her staff's wellbeing as a priority; and realised that although the trust had identified strategies which made a difference in some schools in some areas, a more aligned, whole trust approach was needed. As researchers, it was evident that this was an opportunity to investigate health issues more widely across the UK school workforce, and to contribute to existing knowledge regarding the current concerns and needs of the teachers that support the development of our youngest children.

An anonymous survey was created and distributed to staff from the MAT, but also made available to primary school staff in England. There were 244 responses from educators in varied roles, from head teachers (principals) to classroom assistants. The results of our survey corroborate the views found in recent literature, as unachievable workloads, lack of support and low staff morale featured throughout the responses. However, there were also some 'moments of light', as several staff described the aspects of their role which made it rewarding and fulfilling, despite the challenges. There were comments about enjoying the company of children and feeling pride in children's achievements. In this article, we discuss the multi-faceted experiences of teachers, leaders and support staff in primary schools, providing a topography of practice experiences and recommendations for future practice.

Literature review

During the pandemic, schools and staff had to take on a great deal of additional work. All of this will have left many staff feeling burnt out and we are also hearing that some have come out of the pandemic with a view to reappraising their work/life balance and quitting teaching. This is of huge concern because the situation with teacher shortages is already pretty desperate, and it seems likely to get even worse.

Julie McCulloch, director of policy at the Association of School and College Leaders (Savage 2022)

This literature review searched for the most recent research literature, covering the past four years, using the search terms: health and well-being, stress, burnout, mental health, anxiety and COVID-19, each in combination with the root term 'teacher'. Academic literature was accessed through our institute search engines (which include Academic Search Complete, Ingenta, Ebsco, Web of Science and others) but newspaper articles from recognised publications were also included in order to present a current profile of this topic.

An individual's workplace will have a direct influence on their wellbeing and mental health (Ofsted 2019), especially as it is estimated that we spend a third of our adult life at work (World Health Organisation 2014). When the UK teaching union, NASUWT, conducted a Wellbeing at Work survey of 11,857 teachers in 2022, a concerning 90% of staff felt that their job had a negative impact on their mental health in the past year. Three quarters of those polled, stated that their school did not provide staff with workspaces that promoted well-being, and that there were no measures in school to monitor and manage stress and burnout. Similarly, Ofsted (2019) found low life satisfaction in the teacher population as a whole, despite redeeming factors, such as a positive school culture and supportive collegial relationships. They cited the influential factors that erode staff well-being, such as 'high workload, lack of work-life balance, a perceived lack of resources and a

perceived lack of support from leaders' (Ofsted 2019, 1). Although factors outside of work will also affect the well-being of school staff, Oswald, Proto, and Sgroi (2015) found that when well-being was addressed in workplaces, productivity increased by 12%.

Teacher stress

The World Health Organisation (2023, no page) defines stress as 'a state of worry or mental tension caused by a difficult situation'. Stress has a negative impact on both physical and mental health. In 2003, Rose found that primary teachers had one of the highest levels of work-related stress, and almost a decade later Stansfeld et al.'s (2011) research indicated that teachers were above average risk of suffering mental ill health due to their job.

Low levels of teacher wellbeing were identified by Kell (2018) who surveyed 3684 school staff in the UK and found that 66% of respondents often felt tearful at work. This statistic was mirrored in a Teacher Tapp survey, reported by School Management Plus (2021), stating that 67% of their primary school respondents had witnessed a colleague cry since the start of the academic year. Kell's (2018) findings also indicated that 54% of participants blamed the stress of their job on their experience of depression and 82% of staff linked their experiences of anxiety directly to their stress at work. The same study also highlighted unmanageable workloads in schools, a factor verified by the Times Educational Supplement's (TES) 2022 survey of over 6000 teachers, within which 67% of teachers said their workload was unmanageable.

Education Support (2022) provides useful insights into the mental health and well-being of educational professionals in the UK through their Teacher Wellbeing Index. This indicates that despite very slight fluctuations, the percentage of teachers suffering from behavioural, psychological or physical symptoms due to their work remained over 74% between 2017 and 2022, peaking at 78% in 2019 and 2022. When participants were asked whether they would describe themselves as 'stressed', this increased year on year, and was recently found to be 75% (Education Support 2022, 10). When asked what the causes of stress were, 92% felt distrusted by their line manager, 88% commented that they had a negative team culture and 86% share not feeling well supported at work (Education Support 2022, 11).

The major sources of stress for teachers were also explored by University College London (UCL, Jerrim, Sims, and Allen 2020, 20) with the most prevalent emerging factors from this study including: 'being held responsible for students' achievement' and 'having too much administrative work to do'. When UCL's participants described the factors that contributed to their stress, the results were quite different from those found in Education Support's study, being more process than relationship based (leading one to assume that the survey prompts will have played a role in this). Key factors mentioned in the UCL study included the pressure of accountability, marking, keeping up with changing government initiatives and priorities, and admin-related workload. They did, however, find strong evidence that an 'emotional contagion' existed, whereby accountability-driven stress occurred if other colleagues reported this too.

Recently Lumley (2022) reported on the emotional toll taken on educational professionals, citing research carried out by the online education provider Academy21. This research found that the majority (87%) of those teachers they surveyed, experienced disturbed sleep due to the increasing stress of handling their pupils' emotional problems. Issues such as these were significantly exacerbated by the pandemic. Likewise, in a well-being survey of nearly 12,000 teachers, carried out by the teachers' union NASUWT (2022), 87% of respondents said they had felt anxious in the last year and 81% complained of losing sleep. The same study found that 91% of teachers felt that their job had impacted negatively on their mental health over the last year, and one in three shared that they had increased their alcohol consumption. Of greater concern, 13% of respondents said they have begun using or increased their use of antidepressants, 7% had increased the amount of prescription drugs they consume and 3% disclosed self-harming because of pressures related to work. The majority of participants showed signs of clinical depression, but only 16% shared that they

had accessed counselling. These alarming figures were validated by a National Education Union survey of teachers in 2022, with 95% of their sample reporting concern about the impact that increased workload created by the pandemic was having upon their wellbeing. Demands at this time included delivering lessons face-to-face as well as online, organising children into groups (or 'bubbles') to minimise contagion and keeping up demanding cleaning routines, all whilst coping with their own and their own family's health concerns. In this same study, 71% of respondents said a reduction in their workload was needed.

School leaders, responsible for managing the stress of others, are some of the worse impacted. In 2020 the National Association of Headteachers (NAHT) published a report highlighting that 75% of their respondents felt an increase in work-related fear, worry or stress; 61% admitted that their role in school had negatively impacted their mental health and 82% said their work had 'impacted negatively' on the quality and quantity of their sleep. Similarly, 79% reported that they lacked time to exercise because of work and three-quarters said their job impacted negatively on their personal life (discussed in the TES 2020). Considering the bleakness of the situation in 2020, the 'perfect financial storm' that head teachers currently face, 'coming hard on the heels of the covid pandemic' (NAHT 2022) is likely to prove a breaking point for many.

Even prior to the pandemic, research indicated that workload was a key contributing factor to stress in teachers. For example, Kell (2018) discovered that 35% of school leaders worked more than 20 h per week above their contracted hours, and that teachers cited unreasonable working hours as their number one reason for leaving the teaching profession. In contrast to this, Glazzard (2018), argued that it was not workload *per se* that caused teachers to leave the profession. The 64 teachers that he interviewed explained that they knew from the outset that the workload would be intense, but that it was a negative school culture and a toxic environment that made the difference to the work experience. Similar to Education Support's findings, Glazzard's (2018) research described how teachers felt that they were not trusted, had no autonomy and were constantly being held to account. This de-professionalisation of teaching in England is one that has been explored extensively by Ball for over thirty years (for example: 1990, 1994, 2006, 2016). In 2006, Ball described an educational system which had become devoid of an underpinning moral purpose, where 'Ethical reflection is rendered obsolete in the process for goal attainment, performance improvement and budget maximisations' (11), and 10 years later he described the situation for teachers thus:

... within the rigours and disciplines of performativity we are required to spend increasing amounts of our time in making ourselves accountable, reporting on what we do, rather than doing it. Forms, grids, databases, reviews and audits are daily more a part of our practice. Furthermore, they do not simply report our practice: they inform, construct and drive our practice. Our sense of what is right is challenged by what is necessary or, more precisely, what is measured. There is unsettledness in all of this in terms of what is 'right' and in whose interests we act, alongside a sense of constant change and concomitant anxiety, insecurity and precarity ... (Ball 2016, no page).

For Ball the education system in England is one that has lost its commitment to humanity, and herein lies the conflict for many practitioners. Although these views are not new, for example, in James (2004), lamented the demise of the teacher's role from 'a profession that undertook an interesting range of responsibilities in organisations that were intriguingly heterodox and comprehensive' to that of a 'warehouse operative' (p.12), the research discussed above suggests that the aftershock of the pandemic, coupled with the financial struggles of a country in economic crisis, has brought many educators to a tipping point.

It should be noted that in stark contrast to the overall picture of teacher discontent, some studies, such as Bryson, Stokes, and Wilkinson (2019) have found that school staff are more satisfied and contented with their careers compared to those in other workplaces. Jerrim, Sims, and Allen (2020) claim that it is a 'myth' that teachers have poorer mental health than other occupations and that, in fact, headteachers are one of the happiest of all professionals and teachers are less likely to share feelings of low self-worth. Jerrim et al.'s report, which constitutes the largest and most comprehensive

assessment of teacher wellbeing in England to date (they scrutinised data from the last decade involving more than 60,000 teachers), concluded that there was:

... little robust evidence to suggest that, on the whole, teachers are particularly anxious, depressed, have lower levels of life satisfaction or have poorer wellbeing outcomes than demographically similar individuals in other forms of professional employment. (Jerrim, Sims, and Allen 2020, 3)

In fact, they contend that the general health and well-being of teachers in England seems to have 'remained broadly stable over the last 20 years and teachers seem to be working the same number of hours' with the difference in recent years being that that are 'more likely to report mental health problems now' than they would previously have been (Jerrim, Sims, and Allen 2020, 3-4).

Teacher retention

A very different picture is painted by the general union secretary of NASUWT, Roach (cited in Speck 2021, no page), who warned that many educational professionals were at risk of burnout (exhaustion caused by chronic workplace stress) and their morale could 'completely drop through the floor' if schools placed any more pressure on them. Roach called for a 'sustainable approach', to staunch the teaching exodus. Likewise, Wilson, the Liberal Democrat education spokesperson, was quoted as saying 'far too many teachers are facing burnout from unsustainable workloads and relentless pressure' (Savage 2022). Although the above research all clearly points towards retention issues as a result of low levels of satisfaction amongst educational professionals, again, Jerrim, Sims, and Allen's (2020) research suggests otherwise. Jerrim, Sims, and Allen's (2020) argue that experienced teachers who had left the profession were not any happier than their peers that had stayed in it, and that this evidences the fact that happiness levels are not work-related.

Research by the Early Years Alliance in 2021 identifies the pandemic as a key factor in current teacher dissatisfaction. Based upon responses from ~3,800 staff working in nurseries, pre-schools and child-minding settings in England, 20% considered leaving the sector due to stress or mental health difficulties directly related to the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic. Furthermore, 80% of their respondents admitted to feeling stressed 'somewhat often' or 'very often', and, rather alarmingly, that 67 people acknowledged that they had thoughts of suicide as a result of pandemic pressures on their role at work.

The National Education Union (NEU 2022) contend that one in three teachers plan to leave teaching within the next five years due to workload demands and waning respect for the profession. Within these statistics, 35% of respondents asserted that they would 'definitely' not be in education by 2026. Two-thirds of NEU's respondents blamed their decision on the Government for not listening and over half (53%) cited the Government more generally, or media as being the main reason they wish to leave. Workload, accountability and pay were also named as reasons.

Despite the extremely negative picture of the teaching profession in the UK portrayed through media, research around teacher satisfaction is varied and contradictory, with some studies (for example, Early Years Alliance 2021; Ofsted 2019) suggesting that teacher stress is an epidemic within education, and others (chiefly Jerrim, Sims, and Allen 2020) indicating that teachers are satisfied, and that teaching is no more stressful than other occupations. Regardless, it is unequivocal that teachers experienced high levels of stress as a 'frontline' service during the Covid-19 breakout, and it is likely that this will have impacted upon teacher well-being and retention. More recently, government ministers have appealed to Ofsted to 'reflect on the culture' of school inspections following the suicide of headteacher Ruth Perry following a poor inspection result (Kingsley 2023), highlighting the potential 'unhealthy' level of pressure that can come with the responsibility of an education role in a UK setting.

Methodology

This research arose from a request from a Multi-Academy Trust (of five primary schools, children aged 4-11 years) for help improving the health and well-being of their staff. Before we designed

an intervention, it was important that we had a 'starting point' for this group of staff, in terms of their current perception of their own wellbeing. It was also useful for us to know whether this group were representative of the wider, primary teaching population in England. An anonymous survey, distributed to those in the MAT, but also to other primary school practitioners across the England, was the obvious choice of tool for this task.

As qualitative researchers we had two aims for this research, the first was to gain a clearer understanding of the challenges that primary school teachers in England face (what McNiff 2010, refers to as the issue that 'troubles' us) and the second was to use that understanding to bring about positive change. Bloor (2010) refers to the two types of 'good' that the social researcher should bring about through their work and we aimed to do both: to incorporate our research findings into actions to tackle an identified issue, but also to ensure that our interactions during the research project were constructive, respectful and collaborative. Our approach to the research was an interpretivist one, with the aim of becoming familiar with participants' 'rich and contextually situated understandings' (McChesney and Aldridge 2019, 227) of their school experience and how this impacted upon their health. But we are also pragmatists and recognise that schools deal with statistical data, because of this we included several recognised measures in the survey. These were based upon:

- Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Wellbeing Scales (Tennant et al. 2007)
- Wellbeing Measurement for Schools Staff Survey (Anna Freud Centre for Children and Families & CORC, undated)
- CIPD Good Work index (CIPD 2022).

We used these scales to create an overall picture of the Health and Wellbeing (HWB) of teaching staff, which we were able to present as percentages, but we were particularly interested in what they perceived as impacting upon their health in their working life. Therefore if, for example, the participant was asked to indicate, using a scale, the positive or negative impact that their employment had upon their well-being, we then asked them to explain why they chose their answer (if they were able). Through these open-ended questions we were able to gain a glimpse of 'the complex world of lived experience from the point of view of those who live it' (Schwandt 1998, 221). We discuss how we analysed these rich, thick descriptions (Geertz 1973) in the next section.

Our objective, with this research, was to 'find new ways for positive change, which support human flourishing and well-being' (Bergmark and Kostenius 2018, 624) and as ethical researchers, it was extremely important that participants felt comfortable sharing their thoughts and feelings with us, without the fear of repercussions from their employers. Obviously, the survey itself protected anonymity, as respondents were identified only by a unique code, but we also advised respondents against sharing any information that might lead, indirectly, to revealing their own identity or the identity of the school. Because of this, all questions were optional, allowing them to miss out identifiers such as their role, or age group. This option of omission was particularly utilised by employees of the MAT, as an initial question which asked whether they belonged to the Trust meant that there was increased potential for them to be identified. All ethical processes were followed, as set out in the BERA (2018) *Ethical Guidelines*, and if a participant inadvertently included information that located them or their school, this was removed.

The link to the anonymous survey was distributed through administrators in our five focus primary schools (making up the MAT), but also through our university's existing email lists of local primary schools and through existing university social media accounts. As such we are not aware of the total number of primary school staff our survey reached. The MAT received a set of results solely pertaining to their group of five schools for their own development (comprising of 98 responses), but for the purpose of this article, and participants' anonymity, they are subsumed into the entire 244 results, which are treated as a whole.

Data analysis

Initially, each member of the research team examined the data independently, this allowed for a psychoanalytical sensibility (Frosh and Baraitser 2008), whereby each researcher's situated experiences and knowledge could infuse their interpretations of the texts. It was also important, though, as individuals and as a team, that we were aware of our own potential bias, and that we hold on to our initial hypotheses 'lightly and provisionally', accepting the possibility that we might, in fact, be mistaken (McNiff 2010, 37). The team then came together, and a shared dialogue led to the identification of agreed emerging themes. Of particular note were the overwhelming demands of teaching, the fact that poor mental health still remained a 'taboo' subject, the devastating effects of the pandemic on general health and the lack of recognition that teaching assistants received. Having identified these topics, the data were then reduced using data reduction grids (Walker and Solvason 2014), identifying strong examples to evidence the key point under investigation. Finally, the data were re-organized into a logical argument (Wellington 2015). The richness of the data made it impossible to explore all concepts in a single article, so in the discussion that follows we focus only upon the first theme.

In the subsequent section the respondents are identified by their role, with the acronyms CT (class teacher), MLR (mid-leadership responsibilities), SLR (senior-leadership responsibilities), SMT (senior management team, non-teaching), ST (specialist teacher), TA (teaching assistant) and A (administrator) for ease. Where respondents shared a very specific role that would make them identifiable, this has been placed in the most appropriate category. Some chose not to share their role, these are indicated by U for unspecified. The final 3 digits of their unique identifier are also used, apart from when there was duplication, in which case 4 digits have been used. This enables the reader to see the spread of responses across a wide number of respondents. The words of the respondents are clearly visible by being presented in italics.

Results

Although it would be reasonable to assume that most of the 244 respondents fell into the broad categories of teacher, teaching assistant or senior manager, the stated roles were extremely diverse, and individuals were very specific about those roles. Role descriptors and their percentages are found in Figure 1.

For those who chose 'other', the roles identified included: Wellbeing Lead, Catering Manager, Academic Mentor, Clerical, Executive Head, School Business Manager, School Leader, Class Teacher with Senior Leadership Responsibilities *and* SENDCo, Volunteer Teaching Assistant *and* Lunchtime Supervisor, Head teacher, Assistant SENCo, Higher Level Teaching Assistant and Behaviour and Learning Support Mentor. Although at first glance many of these roles seem to fit into the original categories presented, it is significant that respondents felt a strong sense of identity in their specific titles. For the ease of the discussion that follows, however, respondents have been placed into the most appropriate of the categories outlined above.

73% of respondents worked full-time and 27% part-time. 94% were from the West Midlands of England, where our university is based. Other, small numbers of respondents came from other

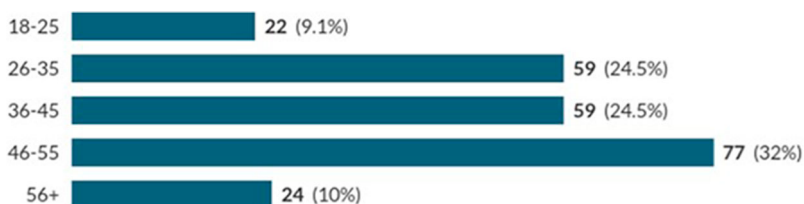


Figure 1. Employment roles in school.

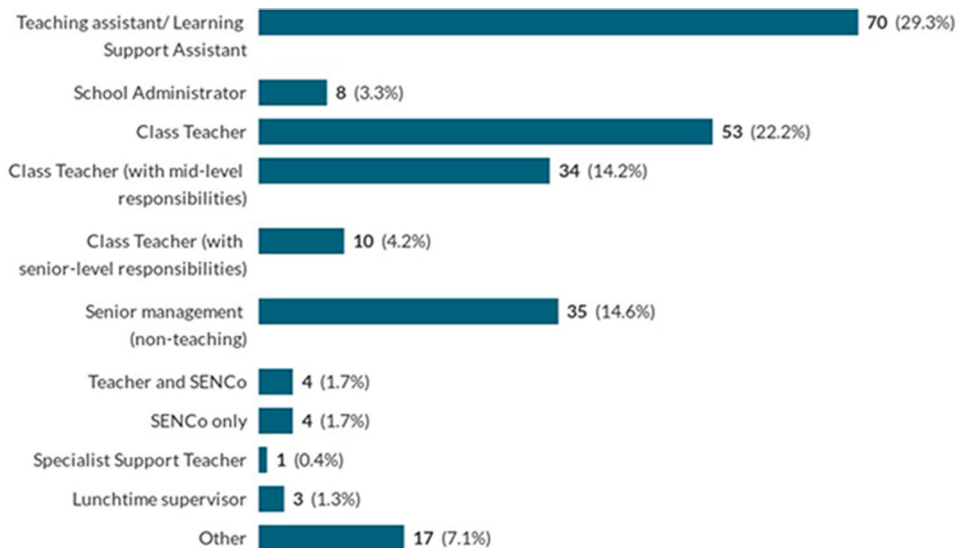


Figure 2. With age of respondents label.

regions of England, including the East Midlands, the South East and South West and from Yorkshire and Humber. As with previous research involving educators (Solvason and Winwood 2022), our sample suggests an aging workforce, raising concerns about future continuity in the profession (Figure 2).

Some figures at a glance include:

- **47%** rarely or never feel relaxed.
- **59%** are often or always nervous and stressed.
- **33%** often felt that they could not cope.
- **37%** rarely or never felt that they had things under control.
- **30%** felt that they could not overcome the difficulties that piled up.
- **31%** felt that work rarely or never had a positive impact on their well-being.

Contrary to the ambiguity suggested by some of the previous research outlined above, these figures paint a very clear picture of a workforce buckling under pressure.

When asked whether they could explain the ways in which their work impacted upon their mental health and wellbeing, 191 participants responded, some extremely fully. The themes which dominate these responses, and which are explored below, include:

- Unachievable workloads
- Lack of support leading to low morale
- The feeling of never 'being on top of things' leading to poor mental health
- The negative impact of the job upon home life
- The drivers that encourage educators to continue

Unachievable workloads

First, let us set the scene with this comment from a Special Educational Needs Coordinator (082):

External support for schools is as poor as I have known in 20+years. Schools are being asked to do everything from supporting medical conditions, families, children with significant SEN without the staff, funds or support

previously available – & on top of that, changing curriculum, Ofsted, SIAM's inspections, managing mental health of children & families before even starting to educate, manage behaviour & support children.

Upon engaging with the data there is a powerful sense of respondents feeling overwhelmed by their workload. This was felt across all staff, from administrators, to class teachers to teaching assistants. Some of the phrases used to describe the relentless nature of the work are listed below:

- *Workload too demanding, no pleasure in my role anymore. Always feel that I'm fighting a losing battle* (SENCo, 398).
- *Too much to do, not enough time* (U, 821).
- *Too great a workload for too little pay* (CT, 458).
- *Too much expectation – not sufficient time to complete a large number of things* (CT MLR, 453).
- *The workload is overwhelming* (A 072).
- *The expectations to get things done when you don't have time to get them done* (TA, 037).
- *Too much pressure and not enough time to do all that is expected* (CT, 236).
- *Overworked – the more you do the more is expected* (CT MLR, 835).
- *Too many responsibilities* (CT MLR, 754).
- *Never all done, constant deadlines, feel that nothing I do is right, unappreciated* (U, 888).
- *I mostly enjoy the challenges the job has but often feel exhausted and overwhelmed* (CT, 269).

One class teacher (272) blamed senior management for being 'out of touch with the classroom' when they made demands at short notice, but it was clear that those in senior management roles also felt the pressure. Despite staff in senior management roles, on the whole, being keen to emphasise positives, it was clear that some of them were struggling with demands, describing them as 'unmanageable' (004), 'relentless pressure' (803) and 'overwhelming' (567). The cause of these mounting demands is impossible to pin to one thing, but the continued funding cuts to the education sector are clearly seen in the expansion of workloads and expectations. One teacher described how pressures increased whilst the resources needed to do the job decreased, saying, 'The list of things to do grows and grows, and there is endless scrutiny, but the support I used to have is gone and I don't get the resources or support I need to do my job well' (CT MLR, 507).

Lack of support and low staff morale

Many staff reported feeling unsupported in their work, across all roles, using phrases like: 'Lack of support and praise' (CT, 510), 'no support from the head teacher at all' (CT MLR, 154) and 'lack of leadership and direction' (TA, 840). One teaching assistant (931) described how the actions of the management hindered, rather than helped, her ability to perform effectively, when she shares that: 'changes are made without warning that often prevent me being able to carry out work that I have, meaning that I am constantly playing catch up'. Again, senior management were not immune to the demands made upon their resilience, with one sharing that they 'sometimes feel there is a lack of mental support within school and there is a sense of just get on with it' (SMT, 421).

Some respondents shared examples of a lack of sensitivity to staff's psychological needs, with one teacher explaining how she had been off for four months with work related stress, but still returned to the same 'pressure and expectations' (CT MLR, 024). There were further allusions to poor management: making work stressful (TA, 289), displaying negativity and gaslighting staff (CT SLR, 016), and making unjust appointment decisions, which impacted upon others' 'self-confidence and self-worth' and all for a job, particularly in the case of Teaching Assistants, that barely 'meets national minimum wage' (TA, 750). Such approaches, it appeared, resulted in general feelings of unfairness (TA, 301) and some staff believing that they were 'unappreciated and taken for granted' (TA, 969).

The inevitable result of such actions was reduced staff morale. Some of the many comments relating to this included:

- *A huge workload and unachievable targets make it hard to stay positive. Staff morale is very low which doesn't help to lift the mood* (CT, 181).
- *Currently morale at my school is low and lots of staff are leaving* (U, 756).
- *I work to live not live to work. The 'good will' 'extra mile' that I used to give has gone* (CT SLR, 848).
- *I am capable of making decisions about my work but having to run every minute detail through someone else makes me feel that I don't know what I am doing. Some 'people skills' are definitely lacking in top management – you can't have a successful team with the attitude of 'do what I say, not what I do'. Make people smile, not cry!* (HLTA, 561).
- *I feel unappreciated and taken for granted. Not consulted on things that concern me* (TA, 969).
- *Morale is at an all-time low within school. Lots of staff members are leaving for other jobs. Communication is poor and is done at the last minute. Therefore, work is having a negative impact on my mental health and wellbeing* (CT & SENCo, 4918).

Practitioners in all roles referred to a sense of helplessness and of a lack of stability, stating that: changes were made without warning (TA, 931); sudden changes caused unease about routines (CT, 851); quick changes led to a lack of balance (CT MLR, 453); decisions were out of their control (A, 346) and that they are reliant on others (SMT, 792). One class teacher with mid-leadership responsibilities referred to *'Constant changes, micromanagement, increasing deadlines, poor communication from management'*.

Some stressors appeared to be the results of poor setting management, but others were caused by external pressures. Two class teachers with management responsibilities commented:

- *Although there is a lot of satisfaction in my job, the fact that we are doing statutory tests when the children have gaps is very worrying for me. As is Ofsted, whose visit is looming! So many pressures in an already difficult environment* (CT MLR, 939).
- *The pressure and stress of expectations is all consuming. Exams this year have been crazy frightening* (CT MLR, 948).

Senior management also felt these pressures, with one referring to *'too much stress, excessive bureaucracy and accountability'* and, of greater concern, one referred to *'A culture of toxic masculinity from my employers'* (SMT, 602). It is sad to see such phrases which would not seem out of place in a discussion of competitive business practices, in the discussion of a profession rooted in nurture and development. Another described feeling *'stressed and anxious'* about the *'unrealistic expectations of the local authority'* adding *'It can become very frustrating when you feel things are not in your control'* (SMT, 875).

The feeling of never being on top of things leading to mental ill health

What is of significant concern is the amount of data which indicates the impact that this work environment is having on the mental health of education practitioners. These class teachers shared how the insurmountable nature of the work led to them feeling *'overwhelmed'*, that they are *'not doing a good enough job'* (642) and are *'inadequate'* (389). Others shared that they were *'often so overwhelmed with work that it negatively impacts my mental health'* (CT, 145), and that *'when you feel that your best is not enough it is emotionally exhausting'* (CT, 719). A teaching assistant (597) described how the pressure to reach unobtainable standards caused constant stress and a practitioner in an unspecified role (119) shared how the *'Work with children with behavioural difficulties ... drains my reserves of positive mental health'*. This teacher simply stated: *'My work is one of the largest stressors in my life'* (CT, 133).

A class teacher with senior leadership responsibilities shared ‘I do feel overwhelmed at times – not enough hours, feel like I’m letting people down’ (540) and a head teacher (783) described the pressures of their role making them feel ‘very down and not able to switch off’. A senior leader stated that ‘Work provides the majority of negative impact on my mental health’ (SMT, 620). This teaching assistant shared her frustration that the pressures that educators had endured during the pandemic were not sufficiently acknowledged by the government, commenting:

There are times when I wonder if ‘the powers that be’ have forgotten what we’ve all endured over past two years in the pursuit of academic achievement. There are many needs to be addressed, not just learning ones (TA, 476).

Work pressures affecting home life/ the inability to ‘switch off’

These class teachers, all with varying levels of additional responsibility, discussed how workload demands inevitably ate into their evenings and weekends, they said:

- *Work is often done at home and in the evenings. The setting is always asking for ‘more!’ (CT SENCo, 957).*
- *There is a high workload which can often mean work continues into evenings (CT SLR 136).*
- *I work long hours and never stop thinking about work (CT MLR, 429).*
- *... still working after school most days and weekends (CT, 762).*
- *At times, workload can be overwhelming, and it is difficult to switch off at home. The expectation to work at home is still evident and this can be tough with a family (CT SLR, 204).*

Several comments were made about the struggle to switch off and relax (ST, 497) and becoming upset at home when reflecting upon events during the day (TA, 29).

It would appear that many teachers and school leaders struggle to find a balance between their working lives and their home life. One class teacher (395) commented that ‘I rarely have time to myself anymore’ and another that the profession dominates her life (893). Another cynically commented ‘work life balance- there is not one’ (CT, 272). A class teacher with mid-leadership responsibilities (926) commented that they’d ‘Never been able to find a work life balance and always feeling pressured to put work first’. This class teacher with SENCo responsibilities (113) concluded:

There are not enough hours in the day to do the job expected of you. You are never ‘on top’ of your work as a teacher and this just seems to spiral as the terms go on. There isn’t really a ‘work life’ balance (it is very difficult to find any kind of balance).

Perhaps most concerning of all, was that some respondents recognised that their work not only impacted negatively on their own health and wellbeing, but also upon their family and friends outside of school. One class teacher (374) talked about their career having ‘a negative impact on relationships and friendships due to being too stressed/busy to have a life outside of teaching’. Similarly, this class teacher discussed the stress caused by work ‘resulting in poor work life balance and putting stress on my relationships’ (CT MLR, 274). Another teacher (176) specifically mentioned the negative effect that her work had on her family dynamics and the relationship with her husband. Finally, a senior manager (937) shared how they felt that their ‘work impinges on family life and introduced stress and worry at an unacceptable level’.

Why do staff stay in the role?

Occasionally there are moments of light – when a child or adult is clearly impacted by a change or decision that you have made (SMT, 522).

When reading the negative comments above it is very easy to understand why the education sector is currently struggling to recruit, and difficult to understand why people stay in the profession. Amidst the negative comments there were of course, some positive ones; the statistics, after all,

indicate that not *all* teachers are unhappy. So, what are the drivers that keep teachers in the profession? Feeling supported by a caring team, it would seem, is vital. Having someone in the workplace to talk to about work or personal matters was important to most of those who responds positively (for example, CT, 970, TA, 711, ST, 753, TA 0047). This senior manager shared *'If I'm struggling in my personal life or my work life, I know I can talk to a colleague and they will support'* (SMT, 090). Work friendships (TA, 2620) and a positive working environment (ST, 114) were also beneficial for educators' health and wellbeing. Staff want to feel valued (TA, 600, CT, 718) and cared for (TA, 500, TA, 038, SMT, 998).

It is no surprise that the driver for many is *'Knowing that I can make a positive impact on the children'* (CT MLR, 499). A teaching assistant (038) commented: *'I have true passion and care about the children which enables me to work to the best I can'*. An administrator (153) identified the children as *'the best part'* of their job. Other comments related to the uplifting energy of children included:

- *The children keep me happy, and I am satisfied with my job* (CT MLR, 153).
- *I love my job, the children in my class and the people I work with. I come to school looking forward to the day and often leave happy. Mostly because of the children and people I work closely with* (CT, 475).
- *I love what I do. Working with children is joyous! They keep me sane, they have so much enthusiasm for life* (CT MLR, 701).
- *I work in a primary school, a place of energy and children so it is a positive, inspiring work setting* (SMT, 109).

Interestingly, one teaching assistant (8047) saw her role at the school not as a cause of tension, but as a privilege, and an escape from stresses in her personal life. However, it is worth noting that approximately half of the more positive comments still had a barbed edge, some examples are given below:

- *Although work can be a cause of stress/ anxiety, overall the positive feelings gained from working with others and particularly children outweigh this* (SMT, 342).
- *When you see the impact that your work has had on those you teach it is an amazing feeling but when you feel that your best is not enough it is emotionally exhausting* (CT,719).
- *I feel proud of what I do but sometimes find it difficult to cope with my workload* (CT, 660).
- *It is a very stressful job with too much workload, but it does make me feel valued and that I can make a positive contribution* (SMT, 406).

Many educators identified a sense of pride that they were doing something worthwhile as a key driver to stay in the role. Helping others (CT, 5918, TA, 703), having a positive impact (CT, 729, CT, 742), making a difference (TA, 421, SENCo 128) and a sense of achievement (CT, SLR, 027, SMT, 875) were all also mentioned in the responses. One senior manager stated that it was their profession that gave them an identity and a sense of purpose (SMT, 159).

Discussion

Echoing previous research such as that by Kell (2018) and the TES (2020) the majority of the school staff who responded to our survey felt stressed, overworked and taken for granted. Many were overwhelmed by their workload, leading to exhaustion, poor mental health and low staff morale. All of these issues had been significantly exacerbated by the pandemic and to the persistent cuts to schools' funding, resulting in staff and resource shortages. Contrary to Jerrim et al.'s claims (2020) that teachers are generally satisfied with their profession, many of our respondents had become disenchanted and, just as the National Education Union (2022) found, were planning to 'speak with their feet', and leave the profession in the near future.

Our data, similar to that collected out the NASUWT (2022) and the Early Years Alliance (2021), indicates that a high percentage of staff in schools are suffering from increased levels of stress and anxiety. But, unlike previous studies, our data also provides a vivid picture of extremely varied lived experiences of support in education settings, ranging from dismissal of the very concept of poor mental health, to full understanding and professional support. It is clear through the data that the levels of understanding and support demonstrated by leaders in the setting had a significant impact upon the wellbeing of the practitioner, and the extent to which they viewed themselves as being valued.

In line with research by Ofsted (2019) and the TES (2022) many of our respondents referred to unmanageable workloads. Although this clearly causes the exhaustion and lack of work-life balance that Ofsted (2019, 1) describe, a *lack of appreciation* for the efforts put into managing this work appeared to be the greatest source of stress, anxiety and work dissatisfaction for our respondents. In particular, a lack of thanks or recompense for practitioners redoubled efforts throughout the pandemic appears to have left a very bitter taste. Additionally, our data suggests that rather than workloads abating post-pandemic, and a period of rest and rehabilitation ensuing, pressured workloads have persisted or even increased. This is despite school staff's struggles with both mental and physical ill health, despite severe staffing shortages and despite fiscal restrictions. It is clear that the downward spiral mentioned by one respondent (CT and SENCo, 113) caused by unreasonable workloads and staff absence, is set to continue into the near future at least.

What is deeply concerning within our data, which has not emerged through previous research, is the impact that these thankless working conditions can have had not only upon educators themselves, but also upon those in their support networks. That so many educators referred to work stresses impacting negatively upon their family life and relationships, extends the toxicity of professional demands beyond the parameters of the workplace and into every quarter of the educators' life, placing them in a position of isolated vulnerability which cannot but impact negatively upon their mental wellbeing.

Conclusion and recommendations

What is made extremely clear by our data is that the working conditions currently experienced by many primary educators in the UK, as a result of ever decreasing funding and ever increasing demands, cannot persist. The government cannot continue to turn a blind eye to increases in alcoholism, abuse of prescription medication and the other forms of self-harm that those in the education profession relying upon in their attempts to cope with the insurmountable demands of their role (NASUWT 2022). The government needs to recognise that the continued de-professionalisation of the sector through ever-increasing accountability is not the answer, and that, instead, respect of professional expertise and increased autonomy, clearer working parameters and respect for individual health and wellbeing, will go some way to resurrecting a once highly respected and admired profession from its technocratic malaise.

Whilst there is much that our Government *should* do, in terms of adequate funding being made available to schools and support services, greater autonomy for schools and less technocracy, that fact remains that schools are left struggling for economic survival, and struggling to retain staff, in the current, denuded climate. As such we offer some suggestions to those schools:

1. More realistic expectations of staff and a more healthy work/life balance. Clear working (and work-related communication) hours for teaching staff should be established and upheld. If it is impossible for work to be completed within the working week, then workloads needs to be reappraised. Do not allow ten-hour working days, working when ill and working evenings and weekends to be normalised within your settings. Instead push back with 'this cannot be done'.
2. Work needs to continue into developing open school cultures where discourses around mental health are normalised and encouraged. Physical and mental health should hold equal status in all settings. Management and/ or whole school training may be required to enable this.

3. Supportive school environments should be nurtured in which all staff feel valued and cared for. Identifying active listening skills and emotional literacy should be part of the selection process for senior leaders, and these skills modelled and perpetuated in their settings.
4. Schools should celebrate the joys of working with children. Just as the children's achievements are celebrated, celebrate the 'golden' moments that staff experience with children. Share the laughter, the silliness and the bursting pride still to be found in a profession that remains hugely, immeasurably significant despite the many ways that our government has diminished it.

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