

Teacher workload and wellbeing during the lockdown in England: insights from a teacher diary study

Conference Abstract

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BERA 6-8 September 2022

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How to cite this publication:

Johnson, M. & Coleman, V. (2022, September 6-8). *Teacher workload and wellbeing during the lockdown in England: insights from a teacher diary study*. [Paper presentation]. Annual conference of the British Educational Research Association, University of Liverpool, UK.

Abstract

In early 2021, schools in England went into a second period of lockdown. Prior to this time there was already widespread concern about the effects of the pandemic on teachers' wellbeing, including fears around coping with health concerns, managing learning and social distancing; and changing assessment responsibilities.

As researchers attached to an awarding organisation in the UK, we wanted to gather information about teachers' experiences during this time to inform our engagement in debates about future assessment policy proposals (which were at the time still unfolding). Our main focus was the impact of COVID-19 disruption on teacher workload in relation to changes to pedagogic, curricular and assessment practices. Drawing on Collie et al.'s (2015) conceptualisation of Teacher Wellbeing Factors, we also wanted to explore how these areas impacted on teacher wellbeing.

We involved 15 teachers from a spread of regions, localities, school types and sizes across England. The teachers were working with students in Year 11 or 13 across a range of subject areas (English Literature, Science, Geography, PE, or Drama). We suspected that these teachers would be particularly prone to the effects of any moves towards remote learning or any disruption to formal assessment in 2021.

To capture the teachers' lived experiences of working between January and May 2021 we used a solicited diary method. The teachers were asked to record their reflections on their teaching experiences in six separate diaries that were submitted to the researchers roughly every two weeks. We adopted this approach because we wanted to minimise the recall distance between the data collection process and the events that were the focus of the data collection. We also wanted to capture information about everyday experiences which might be missed through other methods. Our diaries also allowed the teachers to share their interpretations of these events, which unfolded over a protracted period of time.

Our diary method was supplemented by a series of teacher interviews before and after the diary data collection phase (so that we could probe information about the teachers' contexts and verify our analyses of their diary submissions). We also asked the teachers to carry out workload and wellbeing surveys at the start and the end of the study period. This use of a mixed methods approach allowed us to link the events captured in the diaries to the workload and wellbeing profiles submitted by each teacher.

Our analyses suggest that there is, as anticipated, a link between teaching and assessment-related workload and teacher wellbeing. At the same time, the analytical nuances afforded by the richness of the qualitative diary data also suggest that there are some subtle trade-offs between different aspects of workload and their impact on wellbeing. Our analyses evidence some 'wellbeing mediators' which linked with the social dimensions of teaching that had a positive impact on teachers' wellbeing.

The study has a variety of implications for practice and policy. From a methodological perspective, we explore the benefits of the use of diary methods (in a mixed methods context) for gathering situated data during a frenetic period of activity. We also capture evidence of the destabilising impact that incoherent assessment policymaking at a national level can have on teacher workload and wellbeing, suggesting the need for greater decisiveness and earlier decision making in the event of future disruptions.

Collie, R. J., Shapka, J. D., Perry, N. E., & Martin, A. J. (2015). Teacher Well-Being: Exploring Its Components and a Practice-Oriented Scale. *Journal of Psychoeducational Assessment*, 33(8), 744–756. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0734282915587990>