

STOP TALKING ABOUT WELLBEING

**A
PRAGMATIC
APPROACH
TO
TEACHER
WORKLOAD**



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Acknowledgements

The most important page of them all

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built. He is a true agent of change for the profession. I cannot wait to see where he takes the #teacher5aday community next.

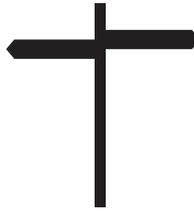
Litdrive was never a lone effort by any stretch, and it took the help, advice and collegiate approach of many, many English teachers to take it from strength to strength. Thanks to the support of #TeamEnglish, and English teachers worldwide, Litdrive has become such a wonderful place. It has an incredible team that work tirelessly behind the scenes, and they are the most compassionate, effervescent bunch of people I have ever had the honour of meeting. The friendships that I have made will be for life: conversations, shared moments and the endless, endless proofreading! This group of people has helped me more than they will ever know, so thank you to every single one of you.

The original draft of this book was a bit of a mash-up, and I struggled with the hefty task of bringing clarity to my thoughts and ideas, as is always the way! Jill Berry is one of the most inspirational voices that I have followed throughout my career. One of the first people I followed on Twitter, Jill's tenacious positivity and support has been invaluable to the entire process and she told me in the kindest of ways when things just didn't make sense. All credit for rational logic goes to Jill, and the rambling is down to me. You're welcome.

The almost-final thank-you goes to the incredible teachers that I have trained, worked alongside or connected with over the years; thank you for challenging me, inspiring me, or helping me become (to quote Carly Waterman) 'respectably objective'. If we all thought the same about the same things, it would be a very dull profession indeed.

Last of all, thank you to Noah, Ted and little Max. I am and will always be so proud and overwhelmed to be your Mummy.

And not forgetting the chapter opening icons, thanks go to Freepik, Icongeek26 and prettycons from www.flaticon.com

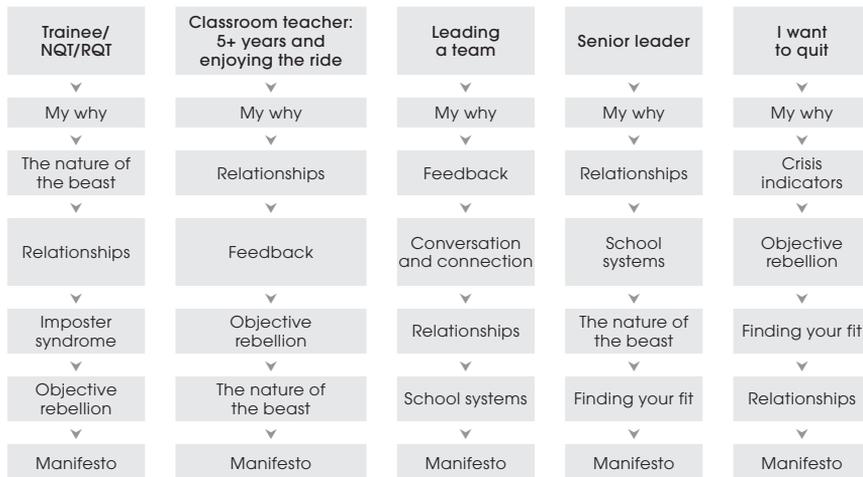


A reading route

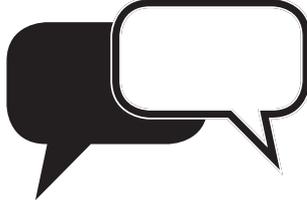
'Time isn't the main thing. It is the only thing.'

– Miles Davies

Inspired by Oliver Caviglioli, I wanted to be able to make a recommendation of routes that readers could use as a journey map through the book, dependent upon where you are in your teaching career. These suggestions make for great starting points if you plan to dip in and out and may help you to find your own point of clarity. I am mindful that at our most busy, or mentally unrested, consuming an entire book can be incredibly daunting. If this applies to you, just pick a starting point and go from there.







Preface

Why do we need to stop talking about wellbeing?

If you steal another person's time you are as big a thief as one who steals another person's money ... Do you steal from yourself?

– Arne Sigurd Rognan Nielsen

People are trying to prey upon your mental health like it's something to be conquered.

You see, the media, the advertisement industry and independent consultancies have discovered the goldmine that is wellbeing. Why is it so? Because when intertwined with the possibility that you are already suffering from even a moderate amount of stress, it becomes all too easy for someone to sell you something to resolve a matter like wellbeing that is practically impossible to measure.

You will try (and fail) to eat seven vegetables a day, or clamber out of bed four days out of seven at 5.30 a.m. to attempt (and fail) that yoga YouTube tutorial, skipping over the beginner's one and straight to the eight-minute power-yoga, expert level, because that's going to help you get relaxed quicker. You will get an early night, listening to white noise – only to sit curled around your phone until an ungodly hour, comparing yourself in measurements of weight, height, age, success (in monetary terms or otherwise), achievements, or all other metrics of what you perceive to be the success or happiness

of others. You will see happiness, contentment, doing well at ‘it’ (whatever ‘it’ may be) as an endpoint, rather than the journey that you are on. You will never reach the end of your journey. There is no end. But you will never stop to consider how effective these routines are, or even why they may not be working. You will simply focus on the fact that you are failing at them.

As a teacher, you are even more susceptible. Long hours? Check. Workload that feels both unwieldy and never-ending? Check. Guilt-ridden occupation? Check. Pressures of external agencies? Check. At its most basic, lack of fresh air? Check. Daylight? Check. Poor diet? The emergency chocolate drawer.

The public sector is under the largest strain, with horror stories of schools with photocopying restrictions at best, and teachers suffering from chronic, recurrent mental health problems at worst. As a result of work, one in five of you reading will suffer panic attacks, almost half will have issues concentrating (remember the last week of term, when the words coming out of your mouth just won’t stay in the right order?) and over half will have difficulty sleeping on a regular basis.¹ If you’re reading this in January, you are all too aware that you are entering the most difficult point of the academic year, with the chances of you reading this in natural daylight slim to none. If you are reading this in the summer holidays, you will be lying on a sunbed, thoughts of results day nestled in the back of your mind. Work follows you around like a silent companion, because you care about the work. But does it care about you?

Wellbeing has become like happiness: something that we talk about; a distant concept that no one actually masters in reality. A feature on television advert or a pay-as-you-go fitness plan, accomplished by strangers and unrecognisable to any of us as reasonable or achievable within our lives as teachers. Something to be worked at. Wellbeing is hard to attain, because it is not an outcome, but part of the process. Wellbeing is a by-product of the solid grounding of several successful strategies on a teaching,

1. www.bit.ly/2D8kKzO

leading and whole-school level. It's the end result, but not the product. Your wellbeing is not a state in isolation that you can collect from the supermarket on the way home in the form of a protein shake, or something that will slot neatly into an hour of a Saturday morning in the shape of a sloth to 10k programme, which will then set you up nicely for the remaining 167 hours of your week. More to the point, if you do not have time in the workplace to feel fulfilled, or that you are meeting regular milestones that you feel are worthy of self-recognition, fitting in a run on a Saturday morning after an exhausting week is the last thing on your mind.

Considering recent responses to workload is very revealing, and an apt place to start our exploration. Under Nicky Morgan's reign as Education Secretary in 2015, 44,000 teachers completed the workload challenge, sharing the root causes of their workload and exactly where their 50–70 hours a week were being spent. Three review groups were set up, with a plethora of recommendations resulting from their respective reports. The recommendations for teachers on the planning guide? Plan collaboratively, and use guides and textbooks to save on prep time. What was lacking was the way that these would be implemented, the resources created to enable teachers to do so, and the training on how collaborative planning would be embedded into a school directive.

Ofsted has attempted to provide support through the infamous myth busters campaign in 2016,² which outlined eleven key principles for schools to understand perhaps not so much what Ofsted did want to see during an inspection, but that they wanted schools to stop investing energy into the wrong sort of busyness through excessive evidencing. Unfortunately, some of it fell unnoticed or disregarded: posters stuck in staff rooms gathered dust, as the processes continued to be the same, and policies remained unaltered in schools. Misinterpretation of key information from the campaign was lost as senior leadership teams encouraged staff to create arbitrary evidence folders 'to make it easier to see progress'. Seating

2. www.bit.ly/2EbWjTn

plans continued to be colour coded, pupil premium students' books marked first, verbal feedback stamps at the ready. Date stamping of marking to prove when it had been done. Minutes and minutes of time dedicated to tasks which carried absolutely no evidence of impact, because it was deemed to be effective.

The myth busters campaign was not revolutionary, brand-new information; Ofsted released a similar document in 2005 with the slightly less media-worthy title, 'Clarification for schools', which, again, made a profound attempt to break down the barriers and misconceptions that our regulators were asking for excessive evidencing or extravagant reams of data. Whilst Ofsted make an easy target for us all to poke a pitchfork at, the nuts and bolts of workload run fundamentally deeper than simply drawing the hasty conclusion that we are being dragged to account by one solitary external agency. Admittedly, the historic relationship between Ofsted and schools means that Ofsted struggles to be viewed as anything more than a measuring stick, as opposed to the support mechanism that they have provided as an organisation for many years.

Finally, November 2018 sees the publication of the interim findings of Angela Spielman's research into teacher wellbeing during summer of that year.³ The survey's reach was not equal to that of union surveys of the same nature (84% of NASUWT's membership body completed a questionnaire), but the research was finally drawing two important elements together: wellbeing, and workload. We are at last having conversations about how our workload is, of course, intrinsically linked to our wellbeing. The report also made the acknowledgement that this wasn't just about the reduction of workload, but that there were genuine concerns revealed from the HSE report that teaching was one of the top three occupations in the UK where individuals suffered from severe depression and stress.⁴ Action was required nationally because not only was the work too

3. www.bit.ly/33ifjZm

4. Health and Safety Executive Work related stress depression or anxiety statistics in Great Britain, 2018, accessed at www.bit.ly/37ADvtt on 20th May 2019.

much for teachers, but it was enough to make them leave – because, quite rationally, they were making a decision between their health and their job.

However, the gap between policy change and the reality of teacher narrative around mental health could not paint a starker image. As I write this in National Mental Health Awareness week, Education Support report that they have had their highest number of calls from educational staff this month. Their helpline report informs that 57% of their calls are from educational staff that have been in the profession for five years or less.⁵ Why might that be? The evidence provides a multitude of anecdotal responses: wrong school, challenging working conditions, poor leadership, unsupportive systems, no provisory networks, and a failure to support people on a human level. Teaching is a broken system at its very worst; and at best, a series of poorly constructed franchise outlets, all trying to do the same thing differently, for their own context, but not necessarily in the most effective way. How can we inform and empower ourselves to lessen the damage?

I have felt the weight of a hefty and unwieldy workload at various points throughout my career. I will often write in this book with reference to English as my topic of choice; I know that teachers of other subjects share a variation of this workload. A classroom teacher teaches 22 hours a week; that leaves, on paper, 10½ hours for: internal emails, marking and feedback generation, parent contact, data input, planning, resourcing, meetings, duties, standardisation, moderation, continuing professional development and everything in between. When it's stated as so much time, even with the ream of tasks, why is it that teachers are reporting such a monumentally overworked schedule in proportion to that 32½-hour ideal, with some working in excess of 60 hours a week regularly, without question, all year round?

Schools have the best of intentions: no one, at any layer of a school system – and I stand by this statement with utter conviction

5. www.bit.ly/2scL35r

– no one is setting out to do a poor job. Unfortunately, ‘educational systems seem to rush to implementation with little understanding of what new standards imply for the work of teachers and students and the resources needed to support that work, including appropriate means of assessment and evaluation’.⁶ I will start with the caveat that everything I explore or outline in this book needs time and structure to do so successfully; if we are to create a model in schools that will last to support even me to retirement then we must set out as we mean to go on: through the avoidance of a ‘plastered cracks’ approach.

‘Teacher stress is the collective responsibility of teachers, principals, training programs, and superintendents, and educators ignore it at their own peril. Much can be done at the personal, interpersonal, and organizational levels.’⁷ But for some, this feels like a last-chance saloon, as teachers leave before their careers have truly begun. Teaching is a type of consumption: if well executed in schools in a way that aligns with purpose – to make staff feel as though they have found their place – it can feel like an exquisitely cooked meal: satisfying and fulfilling. At its worst? It leaves a bitter taste.

We need to talk about wellbeing in a concrete fashion, and not in the form of a cake on a Friday, or the promise of a sports club that we are too exhausted to attend. Foundations are certainly not built on sugar and fatigue, and when you are speaking to a collective who train, sacrifice and give as much as the teaching profession do – regularly and repeatedly – it just isn’t good enough. At its very core, the mental health of teachers is deteriorating because when we lose a sense of moral purpose or feel as though our moral purpose can no longer be fulfilled, the reasons that we came into teaching in the first place lose substance.

What if the professional bodies and associated agencies within education and unions accompanied teachers in looking at the

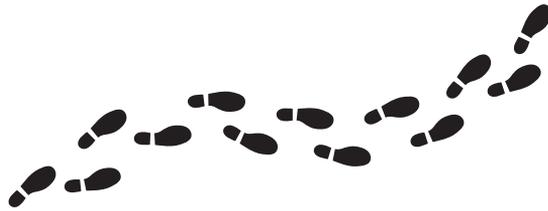
6. Prilleltensky, I., Neff, M. and Bessell, A. (2016) ‘Teacher stress: what it is, why it’s important, how it can be alleviated’, *Theory Into Practice* 55 (2) pp. 104–111.

7. Ibid.

fundamental methods that would make people feel more valued, less tired, more productive, less despairing, more successful in accomplishing their personal and professional goals, less worthless – and it didn't really cost anything, or very little? Wouldn't that be an interesting thing to act upon? What if we started examining wellbeing not as something to tick off, but as an ingrained part of school life, through our evidence-informed practice and approach – with a consideration of people at the heart?

How do we start to examine workload in a way that moves beyond the current landscape? How do we find a semblance of purpose?





A wander through

Using an evidence-informed approach underpinned by research, case studies and interviews with experts of the profession, each section of this book explores an aspect of a teacher's professional workload, and works to provide practical strategies that you will be able to apply to help you assert control over your working day, week, month, academic year – career, even. The exploration of particular aspects of teaching aims to shine a light on the nature of teaching and characteristic traits of this profession that perhaps have been overlooked, or not placed under sufficient scrutiny, so that we may understand them better. At the end of each section, I encourage you, through a series of reflections, to compile your own manageable, pressure-free intentions, allowing you to start to make small changes that will make a great impact overall. My proposal is that currently, we fail to notice that teaching as a craft has a monumental impact upon the logistical aspect of our role – the workload – and as a result, it also has an equal influence over our sense of purpose, our moral imperative. Your wellbeing is, on the whole, linked to your ability to teach so that you experience a sense of purpose and meaning. It really is that simple.

In the first section, I start with my own narrative, because it is vital to me that you in turn reflect upon your own narrative, and not only what has led you to want to teach, but also the challenges along the way that have threatened that desire. The value of good mental health is something that I have only been acutely aware of since

becoming a mother and a teacher because of the reflective nature of the role; and it is a strength that we can utilise if we revisit this core that drove and motivated us to teach in the first place.

Section two develops this notion further by exploring the individual characteristics of teaching that perhaps feel a sense of disconnect. Through a thorough examination of the traits of teaching that set it apart as a profession – such as extended breaks, fast-paced working and the peaks and troughs of the academic year, in addition to our unique approach to recruitment or the use of time in schools – this section provides ways for us to anticipate trigger points over the year, finding satisfaction in a sustainable way, and maintaining professional development that gives you a sense of fulfilment within your role.

Section three moves towards the topic of feedback, marking and assessment – an area that, along with planning, 53% of teachers reported was a key driver of burdensome workload. We start by looking at the most recent recommendations around both formative and summative assessment, particularly within English as an example of where marking takes a large proportion of teacher working time. Our motivations and driving factors with regards to marking have a range of influences, some not linked to the outcomes of students, and this is where re-evaluation is possible. We will then look at various methodologies that have been developed to reduce teacher workload – not as a compromise, but that actually improves the quality of assessment as a result.

The next section will consider effective resourcing, looking at successful examples of departments and school communities that have created systems to approach resourcing in a way that supports staff and students, in addition to those teaching communities farther afield that act as support mechanisms to the teaching profession. We will examine the connection between resourcing and workload, and how we can work as a conglomerate to connect with one another from what can feel like the isolation of a classroom. The medium with which we teach the rich tapestry of our subject

can be burdensome when coupled with time constraints, and this section offers a multitude of workarounds for purposeful resourcing in classrooms.

Relationships are the focus of section five: considering the impact that negative or unsupportive relationships can have within the educational workplace and between the various agencies with which we work: colleagues, students, and parents. It is then possible for us to examine ways that frontline teachers and management can improve and adapt their working culture, informed by the practices in other professions that may have more substantial knowledge of effective leadership than perhaps the training systems within teaching currently provide. Using my experience of management within the financial sector, and drawing upon the experiences of key school leaders, I explore how sometimes, as a result of excessive workload, personable qualities can get thrown by the wayside – and, more importantly, what can be done to remedy that.

As this moves us towards school systems and processes, section six will look at the practical ways in which we can develop people-friendly schools. Reviewing a series of examples (from both outside and within teaching) of how we can re-centre our approach to human resourcing, this section will explore what many different organisations and schools have done to develop their approach using a ‘life first, work after’ attitude to employment, and how this mindset could essentially develop teaching as an enviable profession, rather than an unfavourable one.

The final section reviews readings that speculate on the future landscape of teaching, and wellbeing’s place within that. Looking at campaigns and systems that have been developed to assist with wellbeing in a meaningful and strategic way, I propose a manifesto for workload in order to start conversations around what we can do at a local and national level to ensure that teachers are able to continue to carry out roles in school. The section also provides narratives from a wealth of schools getting it right in a multitude of ways. This should give even the most despairing of teachers some

semblance of hope that there are schools out there that care deeply for their staff. I close with my manifesto for wellbeing, outlining the pragmatic ways in which we can keep teachers in schools until they actually want to leave or retire (rather than reluctantly leaving because they do not have the energy to be in our schools anymore).

Drawing upon research, my own perspective and the experience and ideas of experts in their field, this book is not an answer, but a proposal that we look at wellbeing in the same way that we want to approach provision for children in schools: the best bet for the many. As I will mention countless times during this book, context is key, collaboration is king and there are no silver bullets. It's about making informed choices about your practice that will ultimately help you to feel like you're not chasing your tail, as such. I draw many English-based examples (as this is my forte) but have called upon respected teachers and leaders to debate the place of wellbeing within schools. Readdressing wellbeing really could be as straightforward as shifting the way in which we look at it and opening up conversations so that we can drive change from the bottom up.

This book aims to stop senior leadership, middle management and you talking about wellbeing. No more aromatherapy INSETs, after-school yoga classes or biscuits on a Friday. No more payday cakes, sports socials, meditation that no one can fit in because, ironically, they cannot see past the marking pile or even get the time to leave their classroom for long enough to participate. Instead, let's get down to business and apply research and evidence to improve the standards of teaching for teachers and pupils, because that is what is going to improve teacher wellbeing. A sense of resolution and a sense of fulfilment are what teachers crave, not their sixth chocolate bar of the week – well, perhaps that too, but it certainly isn't going to remedy the impact that their workload is having on their lives. If we are going to make a concrete effort to reduce workload and improve the conditions of our schools for teachers, we are wasting time in chasing the tokenistic. Instead, let us return to our purpose and reason.

To begin our examination of wellbeing, and to explain the importance of keeping our why, I want to share my own sense of purpose – and how it has sometimes been threatened.