

The work-life balance myth

I'm going to generalise here, but teachers work hard. They work hard because they want the best for their pupils, they work hard because they are a group of people who are intrinsically self-motivated, and they work hard because they have no choice. Sitting at home on a Sunday afternoon with a pile of books, stumbling home from a full day's teaching without a proper break followed by a staff meeting, hunched over a laptop till late at night because an assessment or set of reports is due – all are part of the regular experience of teachers in our state schools. It doesn't seem to change much whatever stage of your career you're at – NQTs sometimes seem to have it worst of all, as they struggle to distinguish what is important from what's vital, and what's urgent from what needs to be done yesterday, but in my experience, it doesn't get better as you go through your career, or as you join SLT. Late night email conversations and constant checking of the phones just seem to inexorably extend the school day.

Has it got worse? It seems to have done so. Everybody accepts this is an important issue. When the teacher workload advisory report was published last November, the range of organisations contributing and in full agreement with the conclusions was striking – from unions representing both leaders and colleagues in classrooms, from the DfE to the National Governors Association to Ofsted. All agreed, workload was a problem and needed addressing, and helpfully came up with a number of suggestions to help address this.

Most astonishing of all in a perfect example of gamekeeper turned poacher, is the fact that according to the draft Ofsted framework, schools will now be inspected on how well they are helping staff to manage workload and support their wellbeing. Any English Language teachers looking for a perfect example of irony might want to point out that this will have sent many school leaders scurrying off to rewrite a whole raft of school policies over the weekend.

It certainly appears to be a question of work-life balance. The obvious conclusion is that as workload has increased, this has eaten into the amount of time available to do other, more fulfilling things like spending time with the family, exercising, or sleeping. The healthy balance between the time spent at work and the time spent outside work appears to have lost.

Nevertheless, in my view, work-life balance is an unhelpful and iniquitous term and by using it we are preventing ourselves from making meaningful progress. The word balance implies that as one side goes up, the other will come down. In this description, the more work you do, the less life you have, and vice-versa. If this is the case, then the solution, if not simple, is obvious – demand and expect less work from teachers, and you'll give them more life.

Unfortunately, this line of thinking ignores one aspect of the job that if not unique, is certainly a key element of the teacher's lot - teachers have a to-do list that can never be cleared. 'That's it, I have done all the marking, planning, assessment, curriculum development, resource preparation and classroom display that I could possibly do, and now I'm going to have a glass of Merlot and watch Endeavour with nothing nagging away at the back of my mind' said no teacher, ever. There's always another job, something else that we

can think of that might make a difference, and that's the key problem with most of the solutions suggested to deal with work-life balance issue. If life is what we get on with when the work is done, then there's always a reason to put it back on hold.

The worst job I ever did was stacking shelves on the night shift at a major supermarket. At the time, it was the most money I had ever earned, when I walked out of my shift at 7 in the morning I wasn't taking home a bag full of tins that I was going to price up at home and bring in the next evening, and the work was pretty easy and fairly relaxed. I certainly had better work-life balance than I have ever had as a teacher or school leader. However, it was boring, repetitive, unfulfilling and pointless. I brought no special skills to the role that millions of others couldn't have offered, my opinion wasn't valued, I made no decisions of any importance and I was completely anonymous.

If we want and need to improve teachers' wellbeing (and we do), then identifying tasks we can cross off the list to tilt the balance is not the way to do it. That's my issue with the workload advisory report, however well intentioned. Almost all of the recommendations are welcome, I just don't think they'll have much impact on workload, or work-life balance.

For example, restricting the number of data collection points – as a principle, that's a good one. It reinforces the importance of formative as opposed to summative assessment, it gives time for the data collected to be processed, evaluated and used to impact provision, and it reduces the incentives for teachers to see progress as a simple climbing of an assessment ladder. It's a principle we moved to in the White Hills Park Trust a couple of years ago and I hope that teachers would agree that it was a positive change. However, it isn't the aspect of teacher assessment that has the biggest impact on workload – reducing from 6 data points to 3 saved a relatively minor administrative task but our teachers continue to spend far more time on detailed feedback that promotes high-quality targeted dialogue, way beyond the limits of any proscribed policy.

My worry is that we could implement every recommendation, in full, and find out that at the end of this, wellbeing remains mired in exactly the same place in which it currently sits.

By its nature, teaching should be a job that provides wellbeing on a daily basis – it's got infinite variety, it's fascinating, we're working with subjects that we love and are good at, and above all, we're dealing with children and young people, who are interesting, funny and rewarding. It is just about the most important job that society has to offer.

If it doesn't it is because something has gone wrong. Teachers have become separated from the pleasure and fulfilment that should naturally accompany the role, and if we're going to change this we have to do something more fundamental than crossing a few things off the to-do list. So, what can we do to give teachers wellbeing?

- Collaboration and teamwork across the system

The belief that competition between schools and MATs will bring about improvement is deeply held by the architects of the current system. I have seen the other side of this – 'invisible' off-rolling, where students are encouraged to look elsewhere before the exclusion kicks in, open evening presentations that share the most damning part of a neighbouring

school's data. More damagingly, it prevents any prospect of sharing support and capacity, particularly in the secondary sector, and particularly where loyalty is towards the MAT, not the locality. If a school is worried that the Latin department is struggling because the Head of Department is inexperienced, then the last thing they would consider doing in the current setup is going to the school down the road to the school, with an outstanding department because of the lack of trust that has built up over time. The damage that league-table culture has done to wellbeing cannot be underestimated.

- Ability to exercise professional judgement

Many of the issues cited as workload issues are also issues of lack of control, and I believe that this is a potent source of frustration. Teaching is defined as a profession, and the key characteristic of a profession is the ability to make professional judgement. This means that tightly-controlled policy-driven systems remove our professionalism and that will inevitably affect wellbeing. We need systems and policies that allow room for teachers to take professional decisions, in areas such as curriculum planning and assessment.

- Career momentum

A minority of teachers rise through the ranks. A much larger number, with women still over represented, remain as classroom teachers. This should not be a choice that has a negative impact on wellbeing – in many ways, it should be quite the opposite. However, in a long (and getting longer) career, the sense of being stuck in a career rut can be overwhelming – we've all come across the teacher who seems to have been doing the job too long and has become embittered and cynical. We need to embrace the contribution that class teachers make to the wider system, ensure that there are opportunities to contribute to professional discussion and research, to access CPD and to have a voice in school leadership decisions. We also need performance management systems that encourage and reward teachers who make a generous contribution to professional dialogue.

- Public support and respect – no naming and shaming

My doctoral study looked at the emotional impact on Head Teachers of failure in Ofsted inspections – case studies of dedicated colleagues, most of whom found themselves in the wrong place at the wrong time. I recognise that on occasions things go wrong and in any system with accountability school leaders have to carry the can. However, the vast majority of the Head Teachers I have known who have found themselves in this position are hard-working people with integrity, who have been placed in their role because of a track record of success over many years and a variety of roles. When 'failure' of a school is laid at the door of one individual and that person is hung out to dry in public, it damages the wellbeing of every member of the profession who understands that there but for the grace of God....

- Understand and embrace change

The plaintive cry of 'No More Change' seems on the face of it to be a clear wellbeing issue, change is difficult and stressful. However, it's one that doesn't stand up to scrutiny – change is necessary to adapt to new circumstances, and being stuck doing something that isn't

working is not conducive to wellbeing. As school leaders, we need to have institutions that are ready for change, that explain the reasons behind the change well and that support people through change.

- Support networks and social interaction

Teaching can be a lonely job, particularly when things aren't going well or the pressure's on. In my time in teaching, social interaction has gradually declined. This is partly because of the pressure on time – lunchtime and after-school time is taken up with intervention, evenings set aside for marking. There are still many teachers with strong friendships and social media networks can provide a source of friendships and support, but it appears to me that the social side of teaching has declined, and where it happens it depends on a few individuals. Days spent with people who are friends rather than just colleagues are likely to make a positive contribution to well-being.