

HOW WELL DO WE UNDERSTAND WELLBEING? TEACHERS' EXPERIENCES IN AN EXTRAORDINARY EDUCATIONAL ERA

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Abstract

COVID-19 has had a huge effect on education. While there has been much interest in the effects of school closures on children, less attention has focussed on teachers' wellbeing. This article describes a small-scale study in which we explored teachers' experiences and concerns during and after England's second national school closure in early 2021. Our aim was to improve understanding of how teachers had been impacted in these unprecedented times. 54 teachers in England completed an online survey which was based on a well-established scale of teacher wellbeing. The survey also asked about what would improve teachers' wellbeing.

Levels of organisational and student interaction wellbeing were reported to be positive both during and after lockdown, but slightly higher after lockdown. By contrast, reported workload wellbeing was slightly negative overall, and slightly lower after lockdown. Strikingly, the issues that most affected teacher wellbeing were not especially connected to lockdown. Teachers were most concerned about the time available to do their jobs and the amount of administration expected of them. Interestingly, some of the longest-serving teachers were amongst those finding that time pressure and administration affected their wellbeing. We conclude that teachers' longer-term working conditions impacted their wellbeing far more than teaching through lockdown did. Ensuring wellbeing needs are met in 'normal' times may help increase resilience when novel challenges arise.

Keywords: COVID-19, wellbeing, teachers.

1 INTRODUCTION

Much has been reported in the news and in academic circles of the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, particularly on student wellbeing and learning in the light of the national lockdowns that resulted. Across the United Kingdom, schools were closed to most children from mid-March 2020 until at least June 2020, although the great majority of children did not return to school until September [1]. A second national closure took place from early January 2021 until early March 2021. During these periods, home schooling, supplemented by distance learning through the use of collaborative technologies such as Zoom, became the norm. While there has been considerable interest in the effects of the pandemic and school closures on children, with so-called 'learning loss' a particularly salient concern [2,3,4], rather less attention has focussed on the wellbeing of teachers and school leaders. Teaching has become bound up with the availability of broadband, knowledge and understanding of technology and the ability to control student behaviour and motivation remotely [5]. Additionally, many teachers have been expected to collect evidence of student knowledge and understanding in order to justify teacher assessed grades in the absence of England's usual high stakes external examinations for GCSE and A level. Undeniably, teaching experiences have changed substantially.

In this article, we report on a study of teachers' wellbeing. We surveyed teachers about their experiences and concerns during and after England's second national school closure, during early 2021. Our aim was to improve understanding of how teachers had been impacted in these unprecedented times, and of the kinds of support that they may need.

1.1 What is teacher wellbeing and why is it important?

The term 'wellbeing' is all around us. Predominantly, it has been adopted by the media to denote such things as fitness, lifestyle, diet and good mental health. However, the psychological definition of wellbeing is not so far-ranging. Diener [6] defines subjective wellbeing as being equivalent to the concept of living a good life, or colloquially, 'happiness'. At the heart of wellbeing is the concept of agency, that is, the power people have to determine their own thoughts and actions.

Although general wellbeing is an established concept, the area of teacher wellbeing is not so well defined. Noticing that there was a need for a specific teacher wellbeing scale that encompassed these other concepts, Rebecca Collie developed such a scale for her PhD thesis and further refined it over the next few years into the Teacher Well Being Scale (TWBS), a well-regarded survey instrument consisting of 16 questions, [7]. Collie's scale, on which this study is based, drew from the concepts of self-determination theory, self-efficacy and motivation and proposed three teacher-specific factors of wellbeing:

- 1 *Organisational wellbeing* concerns the environment in which teachers work and the relationships they form with their colleagues in school.
- 2 *Workload wellbeing* concerns the time available to carry out the marking, teaching and administrative work allocated to them.
- 3 *Student interaction wellbeing* covers areas such as student behaviour and motivation, interactions with students and classroom management.

An important characteristic of the TWBS is that it takes a practice-oriented approach to measuring teacher wellbeing; that is, it focuses on the determinants of wellbeing rather than attempting to assess indicators or outcomes of wellbeing (e.g., life satisfaction) directly [7]. The practice-oriented approach has been shown to assess wellbeing reliably (Organisational wellbeing $\alpha = 0.84$, Workload wellbeing $\alpha = 0.85$ and Student interaction wellbeing $\alpha = 0.82$) [7] and offers the additional benefit of identifying the factors that might be relevant in trying to improve it. The TWBS has recently been used in several different studies and circumstances [8,9] to collect self-report data on teachers' wellbeing. It has been proved to be a robust and reliable measure that is easy to administer, yielding data that is straightforward to analyse.

1.2 Teacher wellbeing and demographic characteristics

Christian Gloria and colleagues [10] posited that positive affect (one's ability to face life with a positive outlook and interact positively with others) was positively correlated with resilience and negatively correlated with burnout. They also found that positive affect was more common among more experienced teachers and stress was more common among female teachers. Conversely, Collie et al. [7]) found higher levels of teacher wellbeing for older and *less* experienced teachers compared with younger and more experienced teachers, and no effect by gender. A further study [11] looked directly at gender, parental status, job security and years of experience in relation to teacher wellbeing. They found a positive relationship between years of experience and teacher wellbeing, a positive relationship between teacher wellbeing and positive attitudes towards their students, and a negative link between teacher wellbeing and teacher dissatisfaction. They also noted that teachers who had children of their own tended to display higher levels of wellbeing.

1.3 Teacher wellbeing and COVID-19

Given the relatively small amount of research into teacher wellbeing in general, it is unsurprising that little has been published about the effect of COVID-19 on teacher wellbeing. A working paper produced by University College London (UCL) [12] reported on the increased stress and work-related anxiety experienced by head teachers, who were expected to lead teams in ways that called on them to access skills and resources that may not have been readily available. This increased stress was not found to be reflected by classroom teachers. Allen and her colleagues' [12] findings were that teacher wellbeing, as measured using the Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Wellbeing Scale, had not changed between October 2019, before the pandemic and April 2020, when the UK national lockdown was very well established. A recent study by Kim et al. [13] from York University in the UK, highlighted that the stresses are not spread equally, with primary school head teachers and senior leaders being more stressed than their secondary school counterparts, largely because there are fewer of them in a typical primary school to shoulder the burden.

2 METHOD

Teachers and senior leaders were recruited from nine schools (eight in England and one in Wales) to take part in the survey through an article and associated blog post on the Cambridge CEM website with a view to learning more about teacher and student wellbeing during the second national COVID-19 lockdown. The survey was delivered using SmartSurvey (www.smartsurvey.com). The survey was based on the TWBS instrument [7]. It also included a single, open question designed to allow teachers

freedom to express their concerns and reflect on their wellbeing during lockdown as compared with their perceptions post lockdown. Responses to the TWBS items were analysed in R [14] and the single open-ended question was analysed using MAXQDA [15].

The TWBS was developed in Canada. In the present study, we made some very small modifications to it, to adapt its language for use in the UK. The modified TWBS consisted of 32 questions. The first 16 of these, prefaced by the phrase ‘During the lockdown in January and February 2021, how did the following aspects of being a teacher affect your wellbeing?’ related to teacher perceptions during the second national lockdown in January and February 2021. The second set of 16 questions, prefaced by the phrase ‘Currently, how do the following aspects of being a teacher affect your wellbeing?’ related to wellbeing at the point the survey was administered in May 2021. Examples of individual items are ‘Relationships with students in my classes’ and ‘Student motivation’. All TWBS questions were presented on a 7-point Likert scale that ranged from ‘very negatively’ to ‘very positively’.

In addition, prior to the modified TWBS, the survey included questions relating to the teacher’s age group, gender, subjects taught, and years of teaching experience, plus the proportion of students in the teacher’s school who were entitled to receive free school meals. At the end of the survey, the teachers were also asked what single thing would most improve their wellbeing as a teacher.

3 RESULTS

3.1 Characteristics of the responses

Fifty-four responses to the survey were received from 9 schools. For the purposes of interpreting the results, it is important to note that three schools dominated the survey responses (one academy and two independent schools). To avoid comparing groups of responses from the same school with those from individuals, responses were classified into four school groups of similar size for certain parts of the analysis: Schools A, B and C each formed their own group, and other UK responses formed an “Other” group. Respondents included more female teachers than male, and although responses were received from teachers of all ages, comparison with published teacher workforce data suggests that the survey respondents represented a slightly more experienced group of teachers than average. Responses were from teachers of Arts, Humanities, STEM and other subjects.

3.2 Wellbeing during and after lockdown

As explained previously, the survey was designed to map to the three main constructs of the TWBS, (i) organisational wellbeing (ii) workload wellbeing and (iii) student interaction wellbeing. Respondents’ scores for these wellbeing factors were calculated as the mean score for all items mapping to that factor, for both “during lockdown” and “after lockdown” responses.

Fig. 1 summarises the score distributions for the three teacher wellbeing factors by time period. The TWBS uses a scale from 1-7 where 1 indicates a strongly negative effect on the teacher, 4 is neutral, and 7 indicates a strongly positive impact on the teacher [7]. Fig. 1 shows that the median levels of both organisational wellbeing and student interaction wellbeing among respondents were positive both during and after lockdown. For both factors, reported wellbeing was slightly higher after lockdown. By contrast, reported workload wellbeing was overall slightly negative. The median levels of workload wellbeing were very slightly higher during lockdown than after lockdown.

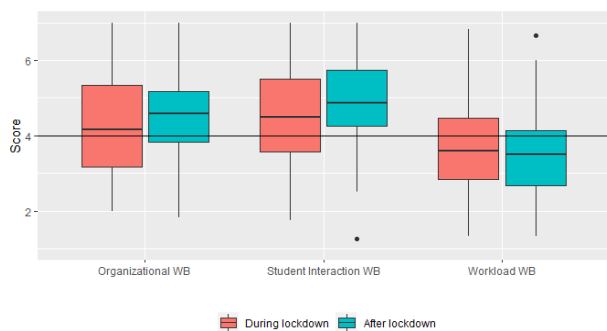


Fig. 1 Distribution of wellbeing scores by time period.

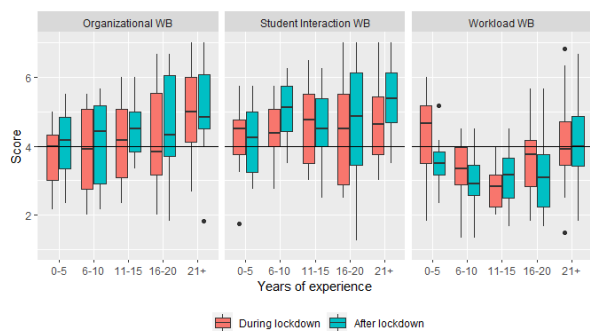


Fig. 2 Responses by years of experience.

As Fig. 2 shows, there was some striking variation in teachers' reported wellbeing by years of teaching experience. This could reflect changes in the nature of responsibilities and status within the school workforce that are associated with years of teaching experience. In particular, the increasing levels of organisational wellbeing reported by teachers with more years of teaching experience (a phenomenon that has been reported in the literature) could reflect more experienced teachers being more likely than less experienced colleagues to hold leadership positions [16]. It should also be noted that those with more years of teaching experience reflect a sample that is to some extent self-selecting, as many teachers do not persevere in the career for this long. While student interaction wellbeing also tended to increase with years of teaching experience, workload wellbeing appeared to show a non-linear relationship with teaching experience: firstly decreasing, then rising again for the most experienced teachers.

Fig. 3 indicates that there was some variation in teacher wellbeing by gender. As stated previously, some authors [10] found that this positive affect was more common among more experienced teachers and stress was more common among female teachers, whereas others [7] found higher levels of teacher wellbeing for older and *less* experienced teachers compared with younger and more experienced teachers, and no effect by gender. The results may also reflect the fact that male respondents tended to have more years of teaching experience: 38% of male respondents had 21 years or more experience compared with 27% of female respondents.

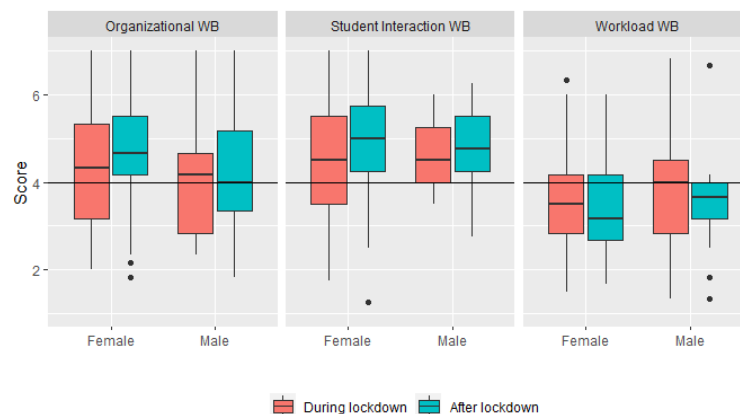


Fig. 3 Responses by gender.

Overall changes in participants' wellbeing scores were fairly modest in size (both in absolute terms and viewed in terms of standard deviation). Table 1 shows that the largest difference occurred for student interaction wellbeing, where the mean wellbeing score increased by 0.3 from 4.5 to 4.8.

Table 1: Differences in wellbeing measures.

| Measure | Lockdown mean | Lockdown SD | After lockdown mean | After lockdown SD | Change in mean |
|-------------------------------|---------------|-------------|---------------------|-------------------|----------------|
| Organisational wellbeing | 4.3 | 1.4 | 4.5 | 1.4 | 0.2 |
| Student Interaction wellbeing | 4.5 | 1.2 | 4.8 | 1.3 | 0.3 |
| Workload wellbeing | 3.6 | 1.2 | 3.5 | 1.1 | -0.1 |

Statistical modelling confirmed that the changes in mean of 0.2 and 0.3 shown in Table 1 for Organisational wellbeing and Student Interaction wellbeing were statistically significantly different from zero, and also estimated a statistically significant increase of 0.4 in Organisational wellbeing score per level of teaching experience (corresponding to an additional 5 years of teaching experience - see left hand panel of Fig. 2). As noted previously, years of teaching experience may serve as a proxy for seniority and the nature of participants' role within school. It may also reflect a degree of self-selection among those with more years of teaching experience, if teachers with lower teacher wellbeing leave the profession at higher rates earlier in their careers.

For workload wellbeing, a slightly different model structure was necessary. The results showed that there was no statistically significant effect of time period (during, versus after, lockdown) on workload wellbeing, once other factors were accounted for.

3.3 Relationships between teacher wellbeing factors

There were moderate correlations between the different wellbeing measures, both during lockdown and after lockdown (Table 2). The original TWBS [7] reported a correlation of 0.47 between workload and organisational wellbeing; 0.57 between workload and student interaction wellbeing; and 0.45 between organisational and student interaction wellbeing.

The correlations found in the survey results were broadly in line with these, with two areas of slight difference: firstly, the correlations between workload wellbeing and student interaction wellbeing (0.34 during lockdown, and 0.39 after lockdown) were lower than the value reported by Collie et al, and secondly, after lockdown, the correlations of both student interaction and workload wellbeing with organisational wellbeing were higher than the values reported by Collie et al.

In terms of comparisons between the time periods, the organisational wellbeing measure from lockdown was correlated highly with the organisational wellbeing measure post-lockdown; the correlations of workload and student interaction measures between the two time points were lower.

Table 2: Pearson correlations between wellbeing measures.

| | | During lockdown | | | After lockdown | | |
|-----------------|------------------------|-----------------|-------------------|------------------------|----------------|-------------------|------------------------|
| | | Workload wb | Organisational wb | Student Interaction wb | Workload wb | Organisational wb | Student Interaction wb |
| During lockdown | Workload wb | 1.00 | 0.41 | 0.34 | 0.65 | 0.41 | 0.15 |
| | Organisational wb | | 1.00 | 0.58 | 0.51 | 0.89 | 0.56 |
| | Student Interaction wb | | | 1.00 | 0.34 | 0.51 | 0.64 |
| After lockdown | Workload wb | | | | 1.00 | 0.62 | 0.39 |
| | Organisational wb | | | | | 1.00 | 0.65 |
| | Student Interaction wb | | | | | | 1.00 |

3.4 Did lockdown change which parts of the workload affect teacher wellbeing?

Each of the three main wellbeing measures was based on a series of questions linked to aspects of teaching work that made up the measure. In some cases, an aggregated figure (such as an overall wellbeing measure) can mask more subtle changes at the question level. In order to investigate this, the results for the individual questions were compared.

Comparing responses to these questions during and post lockdown (Fig. 4) showed that generally all aspects of teaching work contributing to the workload wellbeing factor were considered to have marginally negative effects on wellbeing, but that these tended to be smaller during lockdown.

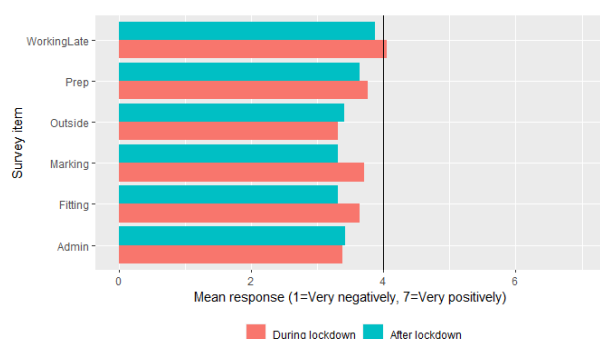


Fig. 4 Item means for workload wellbeing.

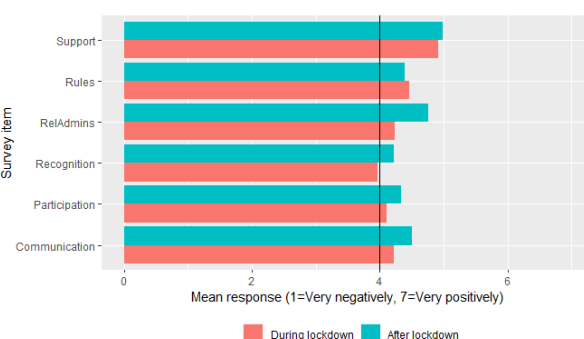


Fig. 5 Item means for organisational wellbeing.

Fig. 5 shows that aspects of work contributing to the organisational wellbeing factor were generally rated neutral or slightly positive, but improved a little post lockdown. The largest difference was for relationships with administrators which was perceived to have improved post lockdown.

The responses to the student interaction wellbeing questions displayed a mixed message (Fig. 6). Teachers felt that students' motivation during lockdown affected teacher wellbeing far more negatively than post lockdown, when its impact on teacher wellbeing was overall positive. Conversely, student behaviour was judged to affect their teachers' wellbeing more positively during lockdown – although post lockdown, it was still perceived as a slightly positive influence. Students' relationships with teachers also tended to positively influence teachers' perceived wellbeing both during and after lockdown, but teachers reported a stronger positive impact on wellbeing after lockdown.

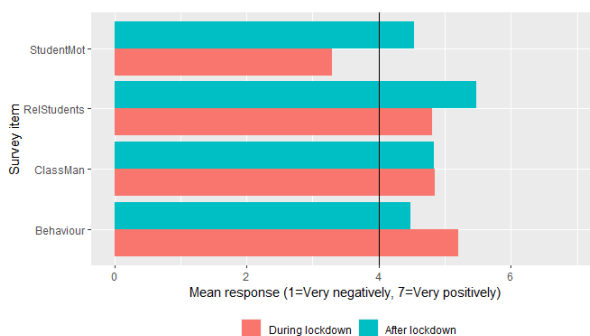


Fig. 6 Item means for student interaction wellbeing.

In terms of individual factors affecting teacher wellbeing, the largest changes between the two time periods were seen in aspects directly relating to human interactions (“Relationships with administrators at my school” and “Relationships with students in my classes”) and student motivation.

3.5 Views on improving wellbeing

The survey ended with the following open-ended question, which was analysed qualitatively:

Going forward, what single thing would most improve your wellbeing as a teacher?

The responses were entered into the qualitative software package MAXQDA and a grounded theory [16] approach was used. Themes and coding categories were derived directly from the text data, and each response was then coded using one or more of these codes. A number of themes emerged during the analysis and these were further refined, by both merging some themes and creating new ones.

The question asked in this part of the survey was concerned with the single thing that would improve their wellbeing as a teacher. We expected that the travails of teaching remotely and the issues with planning lessons in ways that had not been used before would be the main focus of the responses. That however, was not the case. It appeared that teachers took lockdown in their stride, and the things that always preoccupy them - time, administrative work, and general school life - had a far greater effect on their wellbeing. The extracts below give a flavour of the types of things that concerned the teachers in our survey with regard to wellbeing.

3.5.1 Time

Of the various themes that emerged, the one mentioned most frequently was time.

“Time to deal with emails and communication. Time to action these. More time to really develop personal support for individual students. Time to work with my colleagues to develop teaching and learning.”

“Giving teachers time to teach with support and without interference would help every teacher’s [sic] wellbeing.”

“Less teaching time and more preparation and marking time.”

“Not having to work until midnight every day to complete the majority of the work expected of me.”

3.5.2 Administrative work

Another key area that teachers commented on was the amount of administrative work they were expected to do.

"Less admin and time to actually just teach students and them to enjoy the subject."

"Less [sic] meetings and admin tasks"

"Much less administrative work"

3.5.3 Recognition

Teachers also felt that their profession did not have appropriate recognition.

"There is very little recognition of the job that teachers do from government or the DfE. Paradoxically schools are increasingly passed-on initiatives and requirements in loco parentis all of which take resources that are not provided by government to independent schools."

"Positive media coverage of the profession - it is really wearing to be berated so frequently by politicians."

"Appreciation"

3.5.4 Extra work for GCSE/A level grading

Although there was no mention of the effects of lockdown, there was a groundswell of concern about having to spend time providing grades for GCSE and A levels. In the UK, national examinations were cancelled and teacher grades were used instead. Each school was required to submit a set of grades for their students to the awarding bodies. This was perceived as work that teachers would not receive payment for.

Typical comments were:

"This year, not doing the job of a GCSE examination marker who gets paid to do this. I am doing their job about 4 times over trying to get the evidence together."

"not having to do the work of the exam boards."

"Recognition for the fact that we are now marking all of the assessments used for Year 11 and Year 13, in our own time, for no extra pay instead of the exam boards, who the schools pay to do this. There is no extra recognition at all for this."

3.5.5 Communication

A number of responses concerned communication within schools.

"Better communication from the College"

"Better communication between senior leaders and staff"

"Co-ordination between different senior levels about what is due when. At the moment, it seems everything gets chucked at us with VERY narrow deadlines from many sides"

"better communication throughout school and longer deadlines"

3.5.6 Terms and Conditions

Some teachers told us that their wellbeing would be improved most by their school addressing their terms and conditions of service. It seems that for some, having worked from home during the lockdown successfully, meant that they could do admin work from home productively under normal circumstances too.

"Ability to work from home during PPA [planning, preparation and assessment] time if appropriate".

"A work from home day every now and then on a lighter day perhaps to catch up on admin related activities. Particularly since teaching can still be to a good standard".

"better pay"

"Salary"

"Reduced workload"

3.5.7 The pandemic

Interestingly, only two teachers mentioned the COVID-19 pandemic,

“Having more staff. We are continually understaffed for no discernible reason and this means we are all stretched to miss breaks, struggle to mark and set work, teach our own classes to more than an adequate level and miss planning lessons. Although COVID restrictions have been lifted, it is being used as an excuse not to bring in supply teachers. However, this never happened before COVID and therefore is not valid.”

“And end to all virus related restrictions. Normality restored.”

3.5.8 Anything Else

Some teachers commented on things that could improve their wellbeing that couldn't be categorised within the structure proposed. Although not directly related they do provide a window onto the issues that teachers face.

“Improved support for the more demanding pupils' behaviour / SEN [special educational needs] requirements, especially where no LSA [learning support assistant] has been allocated”

“Allowing Business A-Level students to take their exams online and to stop using paper assessments.”

“Continuous assessment of key aspects would make teaching less onerous and stressful for me to complete the syllabus on time.”

3.6 Were comments linked with any particular group?

It is possible that all the concerns listed above were from a particular age group of teacher. The issue of time was mentioned by most age groups, although not by the 60+ age group. Every age group included someone who considered administrative work to be a barrier to their wellbeing. Terms and conditions were mentioned more by the three youngest age groups and communication by the 60+ age group more than any other.

No single issue compromised teachers' wellbeing within any particular school. For the schools with many responses (schools A, B, and C) the comments cover the wide range of themes that developed from this analysis.

Although there was a wide spread of respondents with differing levels of experience, the small sample size precluded any clear conclusions relating level of experience to particular themes. Additionally, the question asked 'what *single* thing would most improve your wellbeing as a teacher?' and the majority of the responses rightly gave a single answer as requested. With hindsight, it might have been better to ask for two or three things, perhaps with a ranking. This might have provided a broader view of the issues affecting teacher wellbeing.

4 CONCLUSIONS

This analysis concerned itself with teachers' perceived wellbeing and the differences between teaching during lockdown with the situation post lockdown. It was a relatively small survey, and the majority of the responses came from three schools (two independent schools and one academy). As such, it cannot be said to be representative of the national context, nevertheless, it provides a useful way of opening up dialogue about and future research into the issue.

The survey addressed three main areas: [i] organisational wellbeing, [ii] workload wellbeing and [iii] student interaction wellbeing, and of the three, the effects of the organisation and teacher workload on wellbeing were the most prominent in the comments that teachers made. These comments clearly linked to the concept of agency, or ability to make one's own decisions, which is associated with higher levels of wellbeing. In terms of the impact of lockdown on teacher wellbeing, the picture that emerges is that, for the teachers surveyed, there wasn't a large change in any area that they felt affected their wellbeing. It might be hypothesised that teaching remotely would be more stressful and would therefore affect wellbeing more negatively than teaching in the classroom. That, however, did not seem to be the case: the results showed that teachers' organisational wellbeing and student interaction wellbeing were only slightly lower during lockdown than after lockdown, and there was no statistically significant change in

workload wellbeing. It appeared that the impact of student behaviour on teacher wellbeing was more positive during lockdown, possibly because students were not with their peers, and were instead in the presence or vicinity of their parents/carers. Conversely, the impact of student motivation on wellbeing during lockdown was negative – suggesting that teachers perceived student motivation to be lower than usual – and the impact of teachers' relationships with students was less positive than after lockdown, though still overall a positive impact on wellbeing. These findings are broadly in line with those of Allen et al. [12] who found no difference in teachers' psychological wellbeing before and during the first national lockdown, but did find students' perceived motivation to be lower.

From the qualitative data on how teachers felt wellbeing could be improved, we found that the issues teachers perceived to most affect their wellbeing were the issues that affected teacher wellbeing regardless of lockdown. Teachers were concerned about the time available to do their jobs, closely followed by the amount of administrative work they were expected to do. Some found that these issues were exacerbated by decisions made by the school leaders. What was interesting is that some of the teachers that had taught for the longest time were among those finding that time pressure and administrative work was affecting their wellbeing most. It might be assumed that among these more experienced teachers, many would be school leaders themselves and therefore be able to make changes within the school environment to address these issues. However, it also corroborates the findings of Allen et al. [12], who also found greater stress among senior and head teachers.

To conclude, despite the challenges posed by teaching through the pandemic, teachers' wellbeing during lockdown was measured to be only slightly lower than their wellbeing post lockdown. The issues that teachers reported as strongly affecting teacher wellbeing were those present more generally, such as workload. Ensuring wellbeing needs are met in 'normal' times may, therefore, help to increase resilience when novel challenges arise.

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ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

The research was conducted in full accordance with the principles stated in the research team's institutional Research Ethics Guidance document. This included obtaining informed consent from participants, protecting their privacy, and obtaining permission for use of anonymised quotes.

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