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Reclaiming teacher wellbeing through reflective diary writing

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Introduction:

Teacher wellbeing – particularly negative teacher wellbeing – is a topic regularly hitting newspaper headlines. According to results published in *The Independent*, two in five teachers plan to leave the profession within the next five years (Busby, 2019b). Couple this with the government's teacher recruitment targets falling short once again (Busby, 2019a), and it's evident that we are in a teacher recruitment and retention crisis. However, headlines such as 'I am getting out before it kills me' (Busby, 2019b, online), and 'Huge rise in teachers welling up at work' (Speck, 2019, online), demonstrate that we are also experiencing a teacher wellbeing crisis; one that is evidenced further in the recent *Teacher Wellbeing Index (TWI)* (2019). Indeed, a main finding from the report is that 'work-related stress' (p.30) levels have seriously risen during the last year, with workload, cited by 74% of teachers, 'as the main reason for considering leaving' the profession (p.7). This was followed by 65% of teachers choosing the option 'not feeling valued' – 'a new category for 2019' (p.47). Additionally, 74% of education practitioners found it difficult to 'switch off and relax' – 'a major contributing factor to a negative/worklife balance' (p.6). The results around insomnia/difficulty sleeping, which 'was experienced by 52% of education professionals in the last year' – a much higher percentage than the previous year (p.34) – further exemplifies the teacher wellbeing crisis we are currently facing. Yet, according to the *TWI*, 'more than a quarter (27%) of respondents would not speak to anybody' about 'mental health issues' they had experienced 'at work' (p. 60), which is a worryingly high percentage and, perhaps, suggests that other wellbeing approaches need to be explored.

Indeed, if we want to encourage individuals to join the profession, and to stay in it, then a climate prioritising teacher wellbeing needs to be adopted. Undoubtedly this reframing must happen at a policy and school level – and it could be argued that the DfE and OFSTED

are making progress in this area – but, for the purposes of this article, I use the *TWI* findings and the main results from a recent pilot research project ('Re-imagining the Diary: writing and wellbeing for busy people' (Brigstow University of Bristol, 2019)) to promote diary writing (i.e. keeping a diary for reflective writing) as a positive tool for individual teacher wellbeing. It is important to note from the outset that any suggestions made are done so tentatively; the small-scale nature of our research project (including sample size), as well as the relatively small data collection of the *TWI*, mean that what is proposed next is simply a springboard into further research and future conversations. Additionally, participants might have perceived an improvement in their wellbeing due to the attention we were giving it. This is an area to consider in the subsequent phases of our project, where we will be working with a larger sample size.

The study:

The 'Reimagining the Diary' (RtD) research project asked a group of fifteen participants – mostly secondary teachers at various stages of their career – to keep a diary for a week during term-time, and to reflect on the process and impact it had on their wellbeing. As a research team we were aware of the many pressures facing teachers, as summarised above, and by one participant:

As a teacher, most of my time is 'for' other people – if not classes of children, then for parents and emails to other teachers and so on. Even in the evenings, I am preparing for the next day even though I am sluggish by that point. It means I rarely have real opportunities to think about myself throughout the day. (RtD, survey)

We wanted to explore if keeping a diary (plain notebook, kindness jotter or sound journal) gave teachers this 'opportunit[y]' (RtD, survey) (Kelly, Huxford and Kelly: forthcoming). Our findings reveal that over 93% of participants perceived an improvement in their wellbeing when keeping a diary, using it as a tool for celebration, catharsis and an opportunity to look at an event or situation from different perspectives. Despite time being the biggest factor to consider, 86.7% of the group would advise other teachers to keep a diary, and 60% said they would continue this practice.

Discussion:

As noted, the main barrier facing participants, was time – finding it, making it and keeping it – which could be linked to ‘workload’ (*TWI*, p. 7) and ‘work-related stress’ (*TWI*, p.30). One member of the group was aware of the potential anxiety caused from concentrating on their own wellbeing, stating: ‘it’s that constant push pull against what I wanted to do and what I thought I should be doing’ (RtD, focus group). This tug-of-war between prioritising ourselves and prioritising others is common due to being in a profession where you are continually giving to someone else. Although it could be argued that keeping a diary is another commitment on teachers’ time, it can offer individuals the opportunity to press pause and to give to themselves. For one participant, in a job where ‘everything you did was for other people [...] whether it be marking, whether it be preparation’, diary writing gave them the ‘chance to sort of take half an hour, 45 minutes out of that, and talk about myself to myself’ (RtD, focus group). As will be discussed further on in the article, diary writing offers teachers the opportunity to reconnect to their purpose – i.e. their intrinsic motivation – which could lower ‘work-related stress’ (*TWI*, p.30) levels and present teachers with a different perspective around workload. Claire Goodley agrees, arguing that reflective writing such as that in a diary can help teachers to develop the art of ‘noticing’. For Goodley,

the discipline of noticing their own practice from a professional and personal perspective can allow a teacher to turn negative feelings into positive disruptions. Teachers may be measured and judged, but the process of noticing can be more effective to their sense of professionalism than action research, as they are capable of changing themselves, and their practice. It is possible to make the experience of being a teacher more positive, through noticing tensions and drilling down into the core reason for them, rather than finding a convenient label and dismissing it as a part of the role that is out of their control.’ (p. 177)

Indeed, this ‘noticing’ (Goodley, p.177) through reflective writing might also help lower the results around insomnia/difficulty sleeping, which was another key finding from the *TWI* (p.34). In our study, one of the emerging themes was the cathartic element of diary writing:

it offers teachers the chance to 'download' the day from their mind and onto the page – to give 'concreteness to emotional experience' (Hayes, p.46). One participant echoed this idea, suggesting that writing is 'almost like a release – it's kind of somewhere for your thoughts to go, because they don't normally go anywhere else' (RtD, focus group). Interestingly, when one individual missed a day's writing they felt 'bereft' and acknowledged that 'there were a lot more thoughts charging around in my head that I hadn't processed' (RtD, survey). Perhaps this is because reflective writing 'creates a safe place to explore your world' (Johnstone, p.xvii) and, when it isn't explored, or made 'concrete' (Hayes, p.46), we are left feeling vulnerable. As Johnstone explains: 'Journaling helps you to slow down enough to notice what is happening, allowing you to transfer your thinking on to paper, and that's where emotions like fear, anger, resentment and pain lose much of their power once their [*sic*] written down in black and white' (p. 9).

In our research project, 86.7% of participants did use the diary to reflect on their working day, finding it 'quite a stress buster' (RtD, survey), as opposed to another job on their 'to do' list. Therefore, diary writing could be a practice for the 74% of education practitioners finding it difficult to 'switch off and relax' (*TWI*, p. 6) to try. One participant discussed the lack of boundaries between work and home, resulting in teachers 'work[ing] at home so much' (RtD, survey), and 'the stress [being] inescapable'. Yet, as this person went on to explain, writing these worries down in a diary 'helped me to switch off as if they were dealt with and I could forget about them for the weekend or evening' (RtD, survey). In some way, diary writing enabled these teachers to take back control and to rebuild the boundaries between work and home.

Indeed, by 'transfer[ring] [their] thinking on to paper' (Johnstone, p.9), diary writing offered teachers an opportunity to 'talk' via the written word. Numerous participants mentioned the 'therapeutic' aspect of diary writing. It was described by some members of the group as a 'venting tool' and the 'the vault of all your secrets' (RtD, focus group). One individual summarised these aspects: 'as teachers we listen to students' issues all the time. We need an outlet as we are also people with lives and worries' (RtD, survey). Taken together, our findings suggest that the diary became a cathartic space where thoughts and feelings could be 'noticed' (Goodley, p.177) and 'released' (RtD, survey), and a connection to the self re-established.

Reflecting on past events, and then using this as a springboard into unpicking current feelings and emotions, is a powerful strategy. As well as offering catharsis, it also gives individuals the opportunity for celebration and to consider episodes and events from different perspectives – further themes emerging from our findings. As observed in our research, it is undoubtedly important that teachers document positive emotions and experiences too – such as ‘moments [...] enjoyed in the classroom’ (RtD, survey) – because this process can act as ‘a veritable multivitamin for our wellbeing’ (Hayes, p.24). In ‘The Positive Journaling Study’, Hayes explored the impact writing about positive emotions might have on individual wellbeing. Like our project’s findings, Hayes’ results reveal that positive journaling helps us to ‘feel directed’, ‘change our perspectives’ and ‘do more than react to what happens’ (pp. 28-9).

In relation to diaries offering individuals the opportunity to explore situations from different perspectives, writing a diary in an educational environment saturated with numbers and spreadsheets might encourage teachers to find their ‘why’ (Goodley, p. 169). This could stimulate future conversations, both personal and professional which, in turn, might stop teachers from ‘not feeling valued’ (*TWI*, p. 47). As one participant noted: ‘It gave me time to reflect on [my] practice and think about my role at my current school. It made me reflect on the sort of practitioner I aspire to be in terms of my philosophy’ (RtD, survey). Indeed, ‘When we regularly journal,’ writes Johnstone, ‘we start to realise that many of the beliefs, values, attitudes and what we’ve held to date (and stories we’ve held on to) are no longer serving us’ (p.xv).

Conclusion:

As this article has shown, diary writing could be a small, but important, step towards reducing some of the results published in the *TWI* and improving the lives of our teachers, both inside and outside the classroom – a step we are excited to explore further in the next stage of our project. Indeed, diary writing is a reflective space where teachers can reclaim their wellbeing and become the authors of their own personal and professional ‘narratives’ (Carr, p.320) because, as summarised by one participant, we need,

To give teachers time to be them, and [to] think about themselves for a while during the day. I find, as teachers, our role is to constantly think about others which, in itself, is an honour. Time flies during the school day, and there is rarely time to stop and rest. A diary gives that focus to stop and think solely about yourself. It showed me the importance of writing and expressing emotions to enable our minds to release thoughts and refresh. (RtD, survey)

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