Investigating the barriers to mental flourishing in trainee and early career teachers

Background

Mind with Heart is an international charity which aims to develop positive emotional wellbeing and individual flourishing within schools. They provide young people and their teachers with mindfulness-based tools for emotional health, self-care and social connection. This approach starts with the teacher. Teachers' wellbeing is simultaneously integral in its own right and provides a basis for the promotion of students' wellbeing. Mindfulness exercises reach their full potential if they form part of a school's ethos and permeate the student-teacher relationship.

According to research conducted by Education Support last year, 72% of education professionals describe themselves as stressed. Therefore, it is vital that there is ongoing work into mitigating stress among young teachers and nurturing wellbeing.

Research into wellbeing is also integral for a school to maximise its attainment of positive outcomes. A study by Jennings and Greenberg (2009) found that 'when teachers lack the resources to effectively manage the social and emotional challenges within the particular context of their school and classroom, children show lower levels of on-task behaviour and performance'. A randomized controlled trial by Jennings, Frank, Snowberg et. al. (2013) similarly found that teacher wellbeing directly correlates with children's educational outcomes, and that prevention of teacher burn-out can also help to prevent a high staff turn-over and absenteeism. Improved teacher wellbeing also helps to enable schools to reach 'outstanding' status in OFSTED inspections, by enabling growth in character, personal development and leadership skills among its students through learning from their teachers' outlook.

The purpose of this research project was to determine what support trainee and early career teachers need for their overall mental well-being. The research questions we sought to answer were:

1) What do trainee and early career teachers perceive as being most helpful to support their mental well-being?
2) What are the different experiences they have of the mental well-being support available at home and in work?

The benefit from this study could not only aid student teachers to reflect on their own mental wellbeing but could also inform future programmes to the wider population of beginning teachers.

Ethics

Appropriate steps were taken to ensure that participants understood the research they were participating in and that confidentiality was strictly maintained, and data stored securely. GDPR regulations were adhered to. Mental wellbeing can be a sensitive topic, and this was kept in mind when designing survey questions and conducting focus groups. Further, participants were given information relating to helpful resources should any issues discussed during the course of the study adversely affect their mental wellbeing. Mind with Heart has conducted several similar projects previously, and, as a well-established charity working with young people, had its own ethical standards and broader ethical purposes to adhere to.

Method and participants

The research study was a mixed method approach, consisting of a questionnaire, developed specifically for this study, and a focus group. The researchers were able to connect with the University of Exeter's teacher training department, who agreed to being a part of this study. Further, two multi-academy trusts agreed to take part in the research. These were Academy Enterprise Trust and ARK academy trust. The survey was sent out to all trainee teachers and teachers within the first 5 years of their career.

The questionnaire was made available online through Qualtrics and was distributed through the institutions directly. The questionnaire took approximately 7 minutes to complete. The questions included responses that required qualitative answers and answers that utilised a 5 point Likert scale. Seventy-four responses were received in total but five were excluded due to lack of data. Of the 69 responses analysed, 1 was from ARK, 26 were from AET and 42 were from Exeter. 48 were female, 20 were male and 1 prefer not to say. 51 were still in training, 13 were in their first year of training, 1 was in their third year and 1 was in their fourth year.

The participants were asked if they would be happy to be contacted for further involvement in the study. Those who consented did so by leaving their email address. Twenty-four participants left their email. Of those 24, 8 were later invited to participate in an on-line focus group. However, only 3 responses confirmed attendance to the focus group, therefore the invites were extended out to all those who left their email addresses. The focus group was held with two participants due to the unavailability and non-attendance of the other invitees.

Results

Questionnaire

Some items on the questionnaire were reverse coded, so that a high score on all items would correspond with a positive wellbeing score.

The first stage of analysis was to investigate the effectiveness of the questionnaire itself. The questions were analysed using a statistical procedure known as factor analysis. This way the researchers could be confident in the findings from the results of the questionnaire.

Exploratory factor analysis was conducted on the data, with the aim of extracting the main constructs in the area of research, i.e., barriers to healthy mental wellbeing. A scree plot was used to determine a cut off point for the number of factors to extract (Childs, 2006). In a scree plot the eigenvalues are plotted against the factor number. The resulting curve is used to determine a cut-off point, where the gradient of the graph flattens out. Using the scree plot, a cut-off point of three factors was identified. Using a varimax rotation, the rotated component matrix with loadings over 0.3, revealed three distinct factors. These were labelled as *wellbeing and work*, *wellbeing and the pandemic*, *teaching and education*. This is a subjective process, however, these three factors seemed to fit the data very well.

Cronbach's alpha scores were used to assess the internal consistency of the extracted factors. This gives a statistical value on how well the items in each factor relate to each other. An alpha score of over .7 is considered very good and .6 is acceptable (Tolmie et al., 2011). The items for each factor are shown in table 1 below, together with the alpha score for consistency.

Table 1: Item list by factor with Cronbach's alpha score

	Cronbach's alpha
Wellbeing and work	**0.79**

I feel connected to the present and I am able to enjoy the moment without worrying about the future or the past.

I feel confident in my ability at work.

I am too hard on myself.

When faced with challenging situations I have coping strategies open to me.

My workplace goes beyond simply managing stress and tries to positively enhance our emotional health and wellbeing.

The resources to support my wellbeing provided in my place of work are insufficient.

Wellbeing and the pandemic	**0.78**

I am currently struggling with my mental wellbeing

I feel disconnected from others

I am too hard on myself

I feel overwhelmed with my workload

I am pessimistic about what the future job market will be like for teachers

Increased isolation during lockdown has had a negative effect on my wellbeing and personal relationships

I feel less in control of my decisions due to the pandemic

I am worried about the impact of Covid-19 on education

Teaching and Education	**0.82**

I find my work as a teacher fulfilling

Working as a teacher has improved my wellbeing

I believe that the education system will improve in the future

I find the prospect of starting or continuing a career in teaching exciting

Following an assessment of the questionnaire itself, the responses were analysed. These are presented below by factor.

Wellbeing and work

These questions were largely concerned with the workplace. Most respondents felt confident in their ability at work (70%) and felt valued by others at work (65%). However, 54% of respondents said they disagreed with the statement that 'I feel connected to the present and I am able to enjoy the moment without worrying about the future or the past'.

62% of respondents believe they have coping strategies open to them. 42% believed that resources provided by their place of work are insufficient vs 22% who disagreed with that statement. 36% believe that their place of work does not go beyond managing stress to try and positively enhance emotional health and wellbeing vs 29% of respondents who do.

Wellbeing and the pandemic

These questions referred to general wellbeing at the current moment, however as we are in the middle of a pandemic, the responses may well have reflected the effect of the pandemic as well. For example, teachers' workload at the moment has significantly increased and the responses reflected that 64% either agreed or strongly agreed with the statement 'I feel overwhelmed with my workload'.

Most respondents felt that they were struggling with their mental health (54%), felt disconnected from others (61%) and were too hard on themselves (77%).

In response to 'I am pessimistic about what the future job market will be like for teachers', 41% disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement compared to 32% who agree or strongly agreed with it.

Respondents felt an increased sense of isolation (75%), less in control of their decisions (74%) and worried about the impact on education (83%) due to effects of the pandemic.

Teaching and Education

These questions focused on the motivations for teaching and beliefs about the education sector. 87% of respondents found their work as a teacher fulfilling. 42% said work as a teacher improved their wellbeing vs 33% who disagreed with the statement. 25% were undecided. 40% agreed with the statement that the education system will improve in the future. A large majority found the prospect of starting or continuing a career in teaching exciting, 78%.

Overall, teachers were optimistic about their future in teaching and felt excited, confident, valued and fulfilled in their work as a teacher. Overall levels of wellbeing were also generally around the mid-point with the mean at 51 (out of a total of 90), so slightly elevated levels of overall wellbeing.

The lowest score was on the Wellbeing and Pandemic scale, with the mean lower than the mid-point (17 out of 40).

Qualitative Analysis: Survey questions

When asked to describe their mental and emotional state in three words, participants overwhelmingly described themselves as stressed. Tired and overwhelmed were also common responses. Out of a total of 210 words, 55 were positive and 155 were negative.

Worries that were commonly held related to family and health. For example, *Health worries, my children's mental health*; *Family life, health worries, relationship issues.* Despite the question specifying worries other than Covid 19, the impact of the pandemic is inextricable with life concerns.

The response to '*why has your work as a teacher impacted your wellbeing, for better or for worse?*', was largely split between the negative impact of too much workload and a positive impact of giving purpose and making a difference to others. Stress and workload were also the reasons many people may leave the profession in the future.

The important question of *what changes or additions to mental wellbeing support measures, if any, would you make if you were in charge of your workplace?,* received diverse responses. Some examples: *Promote more social interactions between staff in different key stages; improving communication; more senior staff to check in some colleagues, more chance to discuss worries/ concerns, support team for things that get too much.*

Many of the qualitative responses highlighted a need for more communication, more peer support and more supervision from senior members. The message was one of feeling lost, alone and overwhelmed. Having a connection with others in a similar situation can serve as a 'life line' of sorts and such a simple thing as having a connection to sympathetic listener can mean the difference between negative and positive wellbeing. One specific response from a participant sums up what it takes to have a positive experience of a school placement, "*school is wonderful, opening the floor constantly for wellbeing checks. It is open and nurturing*".

The question asking about the impact of the lockdown on wellbeing also elicited insightful responses. Mostly participants felt increased isolation and coupled with lack of opportunities for social interaction, these had a negative effect on wellbeing. There was an overwhelming sense of wellbeing being negatively impacted due to the loss of connection with others, such as colleagues

and friends. The few positive responses related to having more time to spend with family. This quote reflects the feelings of many participants, "*being isolated away from other trainees in the school takes away that support system in school with my peers*".

Analysis of interventions

In one question respondents were asked to rate ten different options that are commonly used as methods to improving wellbeing. These were: a training course to develop tools to improve mental wellbeing; peer support; going to the pub; playing a team sport; self-compassion, self-care and emotional health exercises; support from mentor; fun activities; pilates & yoga; mindfulness and breathing and counselling. The resource that was the most highly rated was peer support. This was the case for both genders and across the different institutions. This isn't altogether surprising when taken together with the qualitative data; many responses referred to a lack of connection, interaction and support as reasons for struggling with good wellbeing. Table 2 shows the order of usefulness of the interventions.

Table 2: Interventions ranked in order of perceived usefulness

1. Peer support
2. Support from mentor
3. Self-compassion, self-care and emotional health exercises
4. Counselling
5. Fun activities
6. Mindfulness and breathing
7. Playing a team sport
8. A training course to develop tools to improve mental wellbeing
9. Going to the pub
10. Pilates & yoga

Focus group analysis

Twenty-four participants left their email address on the initial survey, indicating their consent to be contacted again. Of the 24 who left their email, 3 agreed to take part in a focus group. However, only two participants were able to confirm attendance for the date of the focus group. Despite this smaller number the focus group revealed many points of interest, related to the survey. A thematic analysis carried out on the video recorded focus group revealed 3 main themes. These are discussed below, with an emphasis on the themes relating directly to the research questions.

Trust

One participant spoke a lot about the lack of trust – in reference to the schools lacking trust in the trainees but also the trainees losing trust in the University or teaching program. This particular participant had had a difficult experience in their first placement, where they felt that the school treated them in a resentful way, not trusting them to be capable of leading a class. They further mentioned a breakdown of trust between the trainees and the University. The first term when the training consisted of University lectures and the trainees were in attendance full time, there was on campus support in respect of wellbeing, e.g., access to counsellors and regular meetings with supervisors. However, once placement was started, the University absolved themselves of any responsibility towards the trainees and no longer saw themselves as responsible for their wellbeing needs.

Support

The issue of support took up a lot of the discussion during the focus group. One participant from the session, who was training to be a science teacher, had a very positive experience of his work placement. He attributed this to the very supportive environment of his science department. The team were supportive, helpful and available. There was an open-door policy with his supervisor on top of regularly scheduled meetings. The department would organise social events, even during lockdown to maintain social connection, which was deemed incredibly important by the participants. In contrast, the other member of the focus group felt a severe lack of support leading to a detrimental effect on mental health and general wellbeing. The lack of support received by the University and by the place of work left the participant with severe feelings of isolation. Coupled with the pressure of workload, this had a negative effect on wellbeing and mental state. When asked about how the experience could have been improved, they responded with points relating to connectedness, for example, the value in peer support is feeling understood and having their difficulties recognised. This is discussed further in the next theme.

Connection

This theme was explored mainly in response to the researchers probing ways to improve the experience in the workplace. One participant, who experienced a profound lack of support, suggested that had there been ways to connect with other trainees or peers, this would have offset the lack of direct support from the workplace. It could have helped alleviate the intense feeling of isolation felt as a result of lockdown and unsupportive workplace. As a contrast to this experience, the other participant was able to show how building connections with colleagues led to an overall positive work experience which then contributed to positive wellbeing.

Discussion

The current study was an exploratory investigation into the difficulties faced by new and trainee teachers, that can cause low levels of wellbeing and stress and ultimately contribute to teachers leaving the profession. The quantitative analysis showed that the questionnaire compiled by the researchers was internally consistent to a high degree and that the items on the questionnaire fell into three distinct categories, namely, wellbeing and work; wellbeing and the pandemic; and teaching and education.

Overall, the responses to the Likert scale questions showed that the pandemic has had a large, negative effect on the wellbeing of the participants; leading to increased feelings of isolation, lack of control and increase in concern about the impact on education. In respect of general wellbeing, a large percentage of respondents felt they were too hard on themselves, felt disconnected from others and that they were generally struggling with their mental health. Despite this, many still feel excited about pursuing their career in education and the vast majority found their work as a teacher fulfilling. It is valuable to know that despite the challenges faced by trainee and early teachers, many pursue this career because they feel it is fulfilling. However, given the high rate of early leavers, trying to understand the barriers facing trainees in realising that fulfilment is of vital importance. The qualitative analysis of this study pointed clearly to high levels of stress faced by trainee and beginning teachers due to high workloads and lack of support. Informed by this study, that support would be most welcome in the form of peer support. This was by far the top-rated intervention, followed closely by support from a mentor. Focusing on emotional health by including self-care exercises was third and counselling fourth. These forms of support were explored further in the focus group. The participants of the focus group were in agreement that the single most effective resource to support trainee teachers is peer support. 'Peer' in this context can mean both other fellow trainees but importantly those who are 1 to 2 years ahead in their careers. In this way valuable experiences of others can be used to support those currently struggling.

To conclude, this study has highlighted the need for every teacher training school or institution to be able to provide ample opportunity for social connection and peer support. This can be in very informal ways or more structured support. However, the results of the focus group showed that a resource to support wellbeing would not be welcome as a synchronous, taught course, but rather something asynchronous that trainees can access as and when needed, and something that can foster connections between people, in order to reduce negative feelings of isolation.