**A second companion paper to DfE advice on addressing teacher workload**

**Professionally acceptable workload: learning to act differently towards effective change.**

The Department for Education (DfE) has taken steps over the last year to emphasise the importance of addressing excessive teacher workload, in order to reduce the number of teachers leaving the profession and to encourage more entrants to teaching. This is a second companion paper in response to guidance that has been offered, for consideration by teacher education partnerships.

Advice has been published for providers and practitioners, such as *Addressing Teacher Workload in Initial Teacher Education* (DfE November 2018); *Reducing workload: supporting teachers in the early stages of their career* (DfE March 2019) and the ‘top tips’ offered in *Ways to reduce workload in your school(s)* (DfE March 2019). Toolkits for reducing teacher workload have been published, with examples from small scale research studies in twelve settings; <https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/workload-reduction-toolkit>.

The guidance is aimed at encouraging institutional and cultural change, which is vital in developing a mentally healthy workforce whose members can engage all children and young people in learning. However, if this is to become a reality, the workforce has to be central to its own reform – without significant shifts in perceptions of ‘work’ by all members of school communities, nothing can change. Although a great deal needs to be done to reduce the external pressures on schools that have impacted on teachers’ workload for many years, a further aspect needs to be addressed by teachers, teacher educators and school leaders together within schools. That is because the culture of extreme workload in pursuit of perpetual improvement is embedded in a whole generation of teachers. It is almost impossible to think differently about teaching as a profession and about what it means to be an expert teacher. This second paper about workload focuses on this particular challenge within the profession itself - to reform views of acceptable workload - whilst acknowledging that the external conditions that have produced the current conditions need to be tackled.

**Extreme workload as a proxy for excellence**

Working excessive hours has become normalised within the culture of schools – it has become a tacit indicator of teachers who are acknowledged to be dedicated and expert professionals. Trainee and new teachers frequently observe more experienced colleagues managing extreme workloads with great professionalism and resignation. They learn about what is acceptable from them. This is a dilemma facing the profession. Long, unreasonable working hours are frequently modelled by school leaders and by experienced teachers who have gained respect and seniority. Extreme workload has come to be viewed as intrinsic to achieving and maintaining standards – for example by the collection, management and communication of large quantities of data; by extensive teaching outside the school day; by disproportionate performance management; by minimal time for meaningful professional learning that has become viewed as ‘guilty time’ away from classroom teaching in a perverse reversal of ideas about being a ‘professional’ whose expertise needs to be nurtured.

**Teachers’ self-worth and beliefs about long working hours**

Try to envisage the response in a staffroom to a teacher who says ‘I don’t find my workload unreasonable and I can usually manage everything without my work taking away from family time in the evenings and at weekends’ – how many teachers would dare speak this if it were true? How would the majority of other staff respond to such a statement? How many would honestly wonder if the teacher was doing their job properly? Working very long hours has become a proxy for being good at the job. It is so much a part of professional identity that it is difficult to think of behaving differently, even while feeling deeply unhappy about the impact on personal life and mental wellbeing. It has become part of teachers’ emotional investment in their role – part of their sense of worth and efficacy. It affects informal talk among staff and the ways subliminal messages are conveyed within schools and to which trainees and new entrants are extremely sensitive - ‘it’s just the way it is my school’. There seems to be no point in having deep discussions that start with ‘but this is not making a fundamental difference to the experience of pupils in my classroom/school’ or ‘this is data production and management that does not impact on the quality of my teaching/the teaching in my school’. This is just as difficult for school leaders as for classroom teachers and mentors – and new entrants learn the talk. It is necessary for school communities to stop and consciously deliberate on this, to make the ‘unspeakable’ become discussable.

Frank talk needs to happen so that more teachers – including new entrants – come to believe that a teaching career is sustainable. This means understanding the complexity of teachers’ feelings about their workload and their identities as excellent, committed professionals – but changing the ways we talk, think and act about workload is emotional work.

**Emotional change**

For effective and active learning to take place, at any age, there needs to be a level of intrinsic motivation. To change practice and habits successfully, teachers at all stages in their career will need to learn anew; challenging the culturally acceptable practice that currently equates effective practice with ‘hard work’ or long hours. The Workload Reduction Toolkit (DfE 2018) promotes good practice, but it is still possible for a school to work through the contents at senior level in the spirit of consultation, without class teachers feeling empowered to take part in any reform. It is important therefore, to consider ways in which teachers can engage in their own decisions about a professionally acceptable workload. In order to reframe personal responsibility within the hierarchical systems of school management, it is important to situate discussions in the context of *emotional capital*:

‘Emotional capital is a tripartite concept composed of emotion-based knowledge, management skills, and capacities to feel that links self-processes and resources to group membership and social location’ (Cottingham, 2016)

In other words, in the context of schools and colleges, a teacher’s emotional capital is dependent on the ability to understand their feelings, use those feelings effectively within the workplace as a resource and to communicate to others how those feelings have been useful. In order to employ emotional capital, it is likely that other forms of capital, such as social capital, will also be in place. The absence of emotional capital might be a teacher who just does as they are told, feels no sense of ownership of tasks, doesn’t feel able to critique practice and doesn’t feel a probability of success that s/he will be able to effect change within the organisation.

Any discussion of ‘teacher workload’ is dependent on the relationship between the person working and their emotional response to that work, alongside that teacher’s understanding of colleagues and parents’/carers’ feelings and attitudes to that work and the policies and practices that relate to it, as decided by senior managers and governors. All this is balanced by how much the teacher feels s/he has agency over this work. The potential for a deficit of emotional capital when people feel they have no control over work demands, also applies if people feel disempowered to make the changes needed to improve working conditions.

It feels important, therefore, to articulate any discussion of workload in vocabulary that emphasises the role of the individual, the framework of a team and the professional responsibility to the learner.

**Working towards a professionally acceptable workload**

The notion of a professionally acceptable workload perhaps offers a greater chance of gaining the cooperation of various stakeholders in making the changes that are needed in our educational organisations. What is *professionally acceptable* can be a focus of explicit and honest discussion by all stakeholders, whilst being a way of capturing the differentiation needed within workload decisions (e.g. by career stage and pay grade). This does not take away from the clear need to bring wellbeing and workload into better alignment.

Reference

Cottingham, M (2016). Theorizing emotional capital, in, *Theory and Society* 45 (5):451-470.

Dr Julie Greer (Head Cherbourg Primary School, UCET Executive Committee member and Chair of UCET School Reference Group)

Dr. Caroline Daly (UCL, UCET Executive Committee member))

**What needs consideration in defining an individual’s professionally acceptable workload? Some prompts for discussion**

This paper offers discussion prompts for open talk among providers and schools. We also hope that the prompts below will be relevant to individual teachers, particularly as they start their careers. They might form the basis for conversations with mentors, tutors and as part of induction. Of course stakeholders will be able to extend these suggested topics for talking about workload.

**Feelings and workload**

‘*I feel overwhelmed sometimes, but I never feel I don’t want to come to work.’*

* What aspects of my role do I enjoy?
* Which aspects of my role do I not enjoy?
* What strategies do I have to help me manage the aspects of my role I don’t enjoy?
* Which aspects of my role do I find stressful?
* Are the stressful aspects ever related to the areas I enjoy?
* What strategies can I employ effectively to manage the stressful aspects of my role?
* Do I consider ways to develop my practice in areas I find enjoyable?
* Do I consider ways to develop my practice in areas I don’t enjoy?
* Do I feel that my ideas would be considered or acted upon if I expressed them?
* What opportunities do I have to express how I feel about my role?
* How much can I express my understanding of the payoff between types of workload and my personal gain or satisfaction?

**Can we express valid reasons for fluctuation in workload expectations, (ownership) or do we find ourselves making excuses for it (acceptance)?**

‘*It doesn’t get less, it just becomes different’* – e.g. staff member who had taken on management role and reducing class teaching

* It’s that time of the year again…
* I’ve been given a new responsibility, on top of everything else…
* This new class I have …
* If the last teacher had done this properly…
* I’ve got higher levels of pupils with SEN within my class than I’ve had before…
* Data is due
* We’re due an Ofsted…

Or

* It’s the first major transition point in my career…
* I put myself forward for the TLR and got it…
* I can really see how this will make a difference to children…
* This week is always such a pressured week in the year, but I’m away this weekend…
* I’ve been asked to run a staff meeting
* If I put in the time to know what to feedback, I can see it makes a big impact…
* I feel bad when a child gets stuck in their learning, but I’m encouraged to keep finding solutions

**What would make a difference to teachers feeling they had control over their workload – what/who needs to be involved in changing school cultures?**

*‘The need to put on your ‘Boudicca pants’ to stand up and have your voice heard.’*

* Clear, reasonable deadlines – with enough time to work towards them.
* Clarity about tasks being optional and why this is so – if optional, being allowed to say no without repercussions; being empowered to say ‘no’.
* Recognition that when extra tasks are added to demands, what things need to be dropped.
* Recognising and supporting those who don’t have the confidence to speak out – what inclusive mechanisms for staff voice are available?
* Agreement of rules for hours of working, locally decided; e.g. Year 6 teaching team meet each Monday evening for an hours planning in a café, Year 4 teachers both like early starts.
* Flexible time – recognition of working hours of working parents, e.g. ‘I like to leave at 4pm to spend time with my children, but then the best time for me to work is after 9pm. I know that wouldn’t work for everyone’.
* Clear and fair processes about for how to ask for more time.
* Getting the balance right between time to complete required procedures (teaching tasks) and time to develop and learn.
* Running sessions on the polite way to say ‘no’.
* Clear process for requesting one to one sessions with managers, or wellbeing champions for example – Additional mentoring should not just be for those who have the skills and confidence to ask for them.
* Better recognition of part-time working.
* Clear procedures for sickness absence and respectful return to work process.

**What can teacher educators do to encourage and promote professional, acceptable workload practices in trainees?**

* Make professionally acceptable trainee teacher workload an explicit item in ITE partnership agreements, with boundaries that have been discussed with all parties. This goes beyond stipulating teaching hours. It includes the total hours that it is calculated the trainee should be spending on the training programme. Agree what is reasonable on a weekly basis.
* Agree partnership processes for trainee teachers to articulate where their workload becomes unreasonable, without fear of repercussions.
* Develop knowledge and understanding of individual trainees’ circumstances – e.g. where childcare needs need to be a prime consideration in allocating placements.
* Provide clear guidelines to support students with financial pressures.
* Make well-being and workload management a standing item in regular mentor meetings.
* Train mentors in understanding appropriate workload and how they model professionally acceptable workload management.
* Encourage reflexive practice – giving trainees the skills to take ownership of their pedagogical thinking and techniques for returning to their reflections and developing them further. This can be a powerful way to hold emotional capital in relation to your practice and workload.
* ITE programmes can develop new teachers to be able to articulate the ‘non-negotiables’ within workload issues and why these are so important.
* ITE programmes can prepare trainee teachers and school partners to approach workload and wellbeing as a major feature of induction for newly qualified teachers.
* Provide non-taxing ways to keep a dialogue during placements, e.g. reflective weekly journals through a few lines in an email, a vlog, or visual diary.
* Act as an advocate for the trainee where necessary, e.g. if second placement is very different from the first placement and trainee is finding different expectations difficult.
* Encourage discussions between trainees, and between teacher educators, to promote critique on workload practice, not criticism.
* Review the protocols for mentors and university tutors to liaise where there are concerns relating to management of workload.
* Make well-being and workload a standard focus of mentor discussion with the university tutors when they visit.