# Exploring teacher workload: qualitative research

## Research brief

## March 2018

**CooperGibson Research**

# Background

In response to its [Workload Challenge](#), the Department for Education (DfE) made a commitment in 2015 to undertake a regular large-scale and robust survey of teacher workload in schools in England – known as the Teacher Workload Survey (TWS).

As a follow-up to the [TWS 2016](#), this qualitative project has gathered evidence of the factors that were reported to be associated with longer working hours, how teachers perceive their workload and how schools are seeking to address these issues.

# Research Method

The sample of interview participants was derived from teachers and senior leaders who took part in the TWS 2016 and provided their email address for the purpose of follow-up research. They were contacted in March 2017 by the DfE to notify them that follow-up work would be undertaken, and offer them the opportunity to opt out. From those then remaining, the sample was drawn by CooperGibson Research to include participants from both primary and secondary schools, and to reflect a range of teaching experience and contracted hours.

Seventy five in-depth qualitative telephone interviews were undertaken during July and August 2017.[1] Interviewees represented a range of roles, phases and subjects (see section 1.3 of the main report for a full sample breakdown).

# Key Findings

A summary of the main findings from the interviews is provided below. Please refer to the full report for additional detail and discussion.

## Levels of Workload

Teachers and senior leaders commonly said that their level of workload was only manageable because of the long hours that they worked. The common reasons given for high workload were[2]:

- Administration.
- Behaviour monitoring and safeguarding.
- Changing GCSE and A-Level specifications.

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[1] Interviews were carried out in August 2017 where these dates were requested by participants.
[2] Multiple reasons for perceived high levels of workload were provided by participants. These reasons are not therefore presented in order of importance.

- Data tracking.

- Marking and assessment.

- Planning and meetings.

Supporting the findings of previous workload surveys, many interviewees acknowledged that the tasks that they undertook were all important and necessary aspects of school life. It was the volume of tasks that they felt to be unmanageable in the time available to them.

## Workload Drivers

Just over half of the teachers felt that workload pressures were driven by high expectations from Senior Leadership Teams (SLTs), although it was acknowledged that SLTs were often driven by external requirements. There was a general perception of 'mixed messages' between Ofsted requirements, the experience of receiving Ofsted feedback and the daily expectations within schools in terms of recording evidence.

Senior leaders in secondary schools noted that drivers of workload could differ by Department or Faculty. Managing part-time staff was reported to create additional workload, for example timetabling complexities and personnel management. However, senior leaders generally reported that introducing part-time opportunities had enabled their schools to retain talented teachers.

## Workload Patterns

Interviewees of all types reported 'pinch points' for workload throughout the school year. These tended to be: the start of the school year, Christmas, the run-up to exam periods and end-of-year reporting. Teachers in secondary schools acknowledged that workload in summer can lighten as Year 11 teaching reduces, although this time can then be taken over by tasks such as providing lesson cover. For primary teachers, the summer term was perceived to be especially busy due to end-of-year reporting and extra-curricular events.

## Accountability

The types of records being kept in school were reported to be continuous updates of data, lesson plans, evidence of tasks set in class/for homework and decisions made (e.g. in relation to behavioural issues).

Teachers noted frustration with tasks that did not appear to directly inform teaching and learning, or to improve outcomes for children. Software systems used for recording performance were felt to be complex, and using new software without sufficient training meant that the process could add negatively to their workload.

# Workload Management Strategies

Examples of workload management strategies that were described by interviewees can be found in section 3 of the main report. They were asked about their own personal strategies and school-based strategies for managing workload.

**Personal Strategies**

Where they identified specific strategies that they used to manage their workload or work/life balance, teachers and senior leaders suggested:

- Controlling working hours (33 interviewees).

- Administrative self-discipline (15 interviewees).

- Using pre-existing resources (6 interviewees).

All part-time teachers reported that they had reduced their hours to, or maintained, part-time contracts specifically to manage workload. They all said that they used their non-working week days as additional time to cover administrative tasks.

**School-Based Strategies**

The strategies that had been implemented across whole schools, or within Departments (rather than just by individual teachers) were most commonly:

- Reduction in reporting requirements (23 interviewees).

- Encouraging collaboration (22 interviewees).

- New marking and planning strategies (14 interviewees).

- Use of specific software packages (8 interviewees).

- Increased focus on staff wellbeing (7 interviewees).

- Developing homework strategies (4 interviewees).

- Limiting working hours (4 interviewees).

- Additional administrative and/or specialist staff (3 interviewees).

Senior leaders felt that they needed to invest time and effort into reviewing policies and procedures in schools and this added to workload; however, those that had taken this step felt that there had been reductions in workload as a result.

# Perceived Impact of Workload Management Strategies

Where classroom-based strategies have been put in place – such as new marking policies, reduction in report writing, and using specialist software – interviewees of all types reported that these had reduced the number of hours that they spent on each task.

Broader strategies that focused on sharing resources/collaboration, acknowledging the efforts of staff and promoting wellbeing across the school workforce, were viewed as

being beneficial in reducing stress and anxiety levels whilst developing positive relationships among staff members.

## SLT Support

The influence of SLT attitudes towards workload reduction was a significant factor for many teachers taking part in the qualitative interviews.

- Nineteen teachers reported that they felt very supported and that they could approach the SLT with workload concerns.

- Fourteen teachers reported feeling ambivalent towards the level of support they received; they felt neither supported nor unsupported with their workload.

- Eleven teachers said that pressure received from SLT was high and that there was a lack of understanding of the challenges they faced; they did not feel supported by SLT and said that they would not approach them for support.

Senior leaders noted that it was important for SLT members to communicate clear messages to wider teaching staff, to ensure that the school workforce feels valued. They felt that simple strategies such as regularly acknowledging the time and effort made by staff worked well in maintaining morale and boosting attitudes towards workload.

## Early Career Teachers

The majority of early career teachers said that there was not any specific coverage of workload management during their Initial Teacher Training. Most of those with a mentor had appreciated the regular contact with another member of staff. Where this relationship worked well, there were clear benefits to new entrants into the profession. This included learning how to:

- Plan, particularly mid-term.

- Adapt resources.

- Locate pre-existing resources effectively.

- Learn from mistakes and develop reflective practice.

## Support for Senior Leaders

Senior leaders said that they attended headteacher and leadership network meetings, local partnerships or collaborations. These networks were used for peer support, accessing contacts for formal peer review arrangements as well as informal support and sharing experiences. However, they commonly pointed out that attending meetings, organising visits or conducting peer reviews could ultimately increase workload. They reported that little was directly implemented through these networks to find ways to reduce workload – it was perceived to be part of the role that would not change.

## Workload Reports

Participants provided mixed responses when asked about the DfE's Workload Review Group reports. Full-time early career teachers were more likely to have read the reports than other teachers.

Most senior leaders had not implemented specific initiatives as a result of the Workload Review Group reports. Small numbers said the reports had directly contributed to changes taking place, including integration of workload into School Development Plans. Some interviewees felt that the guidance included in the reports would change in the future, and this made them reluctant to spend time implementing new strategies.[3]

## Professional Development

When they spoke about access to Continuing Professional Development (CPD) or advice specifically to aid workload reduction, 31 teachers said that they had not accessed it. Senior leaders did not feel that there was very much support on managing workload available to them.

Where CPD related to workload had been accessed, the most commonly mentioned resource was internal training led by experienced members of staff. This included sharing good practice, setting up teaching and learning groups or wellbeing forums, and implementing staggered marking or 'smart teaching'.

Examples of the types of CPD that teachers said they would appreciate to help them manage workload are listed in section 5.2 of the main report.

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[3] Use of the Workload Review Group reports was also included in the most recent teacher voice omnibus survey: DfE (2017), 'Teacher Voice Omnibus Survey – July 2017', which found that more than a third of senior leaders responding to the survey (36 per cent) had used the independent reports on marking, planning and resources and/or data management as a basis to review current policies. However, more than a quarter (28 per cent) of senior leaders said that they had used none of the methods included in the survey.

# Conclusions

Whilst workload was reported to be high, individuals and schools were taking steps to try to manage and reduce it. A wide range of examples were provided in terms of the types of strategy that were put in place individually and across schools more broadly to address workload issues. These tended to focus on:

- Reducing time spent on planning and marking.

- Reducing or spreading assessment data points.

- Managing administrative burdens, and emails in particular.

- Sharing work including planning, the creation of resources and more efficient communications and collaboration.

It was emphasised by senior leaders that learning about different examples of good practice or new strategies being implemented in other schools did not mean that these approaches would be effective in their own institutions. The context of a school, the varying abilities of staff, the existing levels of trust between staff members and attitudes towards change could all contribute to whether or not a new strategy could be introduced successfully in a particular setting.

Some small and simple strategies were however thought to be effective in most settings. These included:

- Ensuring that SLT members and senior leaders regularly and clearly acknowledged the time and effort made by teaching staff and any additional hours that they undertook.

- Managing email expectations, including adding delays to email delivery, or setting time limits on when work emails should be sent (e.g. not after 6pm).

- Helping teaching staff to understand that they need to know when to stop and not believe that every lesson plan needs to be perfect, but could be adaptable to reflect learners' needs as they change.

In terms of encouraging staff buy-in, senior leaders said that it was important to consult with staff directly – to gather their views on the strategies and approaches that they value, and where they think that changes could be made effectively. Furthermore, clear communication to staff of the reasons for new or additional work – and the active support of senior leaders in that work with them leading by example – are significant factors in identifying and implementing strategies that aim to address workload management.

The views expressed in this report are the authors' and do not necessarily reflect those of the Department for Education.

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