15

Well-being: theory and practice for beginning geography teachers

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Introduction

Initial Teacher Education (ITE) programmes (including the one-year PGCE (Post Graduate Certificate in Education), which all of the authors teach on) have often been described by trainees as a *rollercoaster*. Emotional peaks and troughs are experienced by almost all trainees to a range of degrees and many express their time in ITE and the early years of their careers as the *toughest of their life*. Well-being and stress-management issues for those in training and early in their careers are often significant, with non-linear and high-stakes struggles - emotionally, financially and academically – common for many (Birchinall et al., 2019).

This chapter will consider well-being for beginning geography teachers, exploring potential sources of challenge and providing practical guidance for mentors supporting well-being which is underpinned by our own empirical research, alongside the wider literature on supporting mentors and other staff in school who are engaged in mentoring practices. In particular, this chapter aims to:

- introduce recent research in well-being for trainee and early career teachers, with a particular focus on geography teaching;
- share the well-being *see-saw* and how it can be used to support mentees;
- consider how reflecting on challenges and resources for beginning geography teachers can be supportive and develop strategies for positive well-being; and
- discuss key steps that can be taken to develop and maintain positive well-being for mentees.

What is well-being?

The term well-being now has a common currency in many professions, as well as in the popular psyche. In education, developing well-being for children and teachers has been a major policy drive, specifically in schools in England (Bonell et al., 2014; DfE, 2014, 2016; Ofsted, 2019). For example, the Department for Education in England (DfE, 2018) have highlighted their focus on ensuring schools promote pupils' mental health and well-being, and from 2020

teaching pupils to look after their well-being will be mandatory.

Hand-in-hand with the explicit focus on well-being for pupils has been a consideration of teachers' well-being, both nationally and internationally (DfE, 2014, 2016; Froese-Germain, 2014; Gallant and Riley, 2017; Public Health England, 2015; Roffey, 2012; Spilt et al., 2011). Teaching has been suggested to be one of the most stressful professions in the world, with high emotional labour and low job satisfaction (Johnson et al., 2005). Research suggests teacher well-being affects teaching, student motivation and retention, with well-being and workload the most commonly cited factors for leaving the profession (Collie et al., 2015; Ofsted, 2019). These factors are regularly reflected in rising international teacher attrition rates (Danilewitz and Rodger, 2017; DfE, 2018, 2019). A recent report by the English school inspections body noted low well-being in most of those surveyed, with well-being actually reducing over a teachers' career (Ofsted, 2019). In a study commissioned by the Department for Education, over half of teachers surveyed said they had considered leaving in the past two years due to pressures on health, and 45% felt they did not achieve the right balance between home and work lives (DfE, 2017). Reports by the Independent Teacher Review Groups (DfE, 2016) stated that all parts of the education system have a role to play in reducing unnecessary tasks for teachers, including ITE providers. The current Teachers' Standards (DfE, 2012) do not mention the well-being of pupils or teachers, but tie trainee and qualified teachers' personal and professional conduct to their regard for the ethos, policies and practice of the school where they work. However, more recent English documents (such as the ITT Core Content Framework [DfE, 2019] and the Early Career Framework [DfE, 2020]) do have a discrete focus on well-being. This was replicated in the policy documents in Finland (FNBE, 2016) and Denmark (Danish Institute for Human Rights, 2012) where we collected data for our research. This has significant implications, as it shifts the emphasis for developing trainee well-being onto mentors due to the dichotomy between the documentation for assessment (DfE, 2012) and the documents for content (DfE, 2019, 2020; Healy and Walshe, 2022).

A discourse of teachers taking ownership of their well-being to thrive, rather than survive, persists (Margolis et al., 2014); however, there seems little appetite at present, or in recent decades, to tackle systemic and cultural issues affecting well-being in the sector (Perryman and Calvert, 2020). This has resulted in a limited field of knowledge on what sustains and develops well-being for trainee and early career teachers. Research on what may promote teacher well-being is scarce (Roffey, 2012), and what research exists has tended to focus on individuals and their survival characteristics (Margolis et al., 2014) as opposed to broader school-wide factors. Research into student well-being, including in higher education (Bates et al., 2017; Houghton and Anderson, 2017; Seldon and Martin, 2017; Universities UK, 2015), is also beginning to grow from a similarly small field, indicating that students at higher education institutions

(HEIs) are negatively affected by stress and as a result have lower well-being due to managing a range of responsibilities (Dwyer and Cummings, 2001). In the gap between student and teacher well-being there is a significant lack of research and guidance for those currently enrolled on ITE programmes (Thompson et al., 2020; Birchinall et al., 2019). If it is assumed that those on ITE programmes sit between these two bodies of research, it could be argued they are vulnerable to the stresses of both simultaneously. Even if trainees only experience the reported issues with well-being for one of these groups, they are still in a challenging position. As Roffey (2012, p.9) suggests:

> Training teachers who then leave because their lives are unfulfilled at best and miserable at worst is not only devastating to those individuals and damaging to students but also expensive on the public purse.

This leads to questions about what the mentor's role is in supporting the development of well-being for beginning and early career geography teachers and reducing early career teacher attrition.

<Insert Task 15.1 here>

Defining well-being

Despite being regularly used, the term 'well-being' is not always clearly defined, yet its prevalence can sometimes lead to the assumption that it is easily defined and systematically understood by all who use it. As Weare (2000), in line with others, has noted, summing up well-being or mental health in a single sentence is often simplistic and inappropriate, and reducing this multifaceted and complex concept to a simple definition is impossible. It has also been argued that in trying to do so, our own 'values, preconceptions and assumptions' are side-lined (Weare, 2000), despite the fact that concepts such as mental health and well-being are influenced by our own personal views of what is usual or desirable, what behaviours are 'normal' and so on. Carr (2000, in Gott, 2003) asserts that concepts such as well-being are not 'value neutral' but are always influenced by a range of factors and contexts; as a result, any definitions provided are usually influenced by the contexts and communities that devise them. This means that definitions of well-being used in other contexts might not automatically transfer to schools, and what constitutes a definition of well-being or mental health for one group, might not be the same for another.

Research shows that the concept of well-being is difficult to define as it is often considered complex (Ortega-Alcázar and Dyck, 2012; Pollard and Lee, 2003; Dodge et al., 2012; Masters, 2004). As a term, well-being has been suggested to lack a shared understanding despite its frequent use in a systemic review of the literature (Pollard and Lee, 2003). Mental health more broadly too has also shifted and changed from medical and deficit models where it was once considered as the absence of a mental illness, to a state or condition in its own right - a *strength perspective* (Spratt et al., 2006). It would be naïve to suggest that mental health or well-being can be simply or easily defined or indeed, that they are a fixed state. One of the key hurdles in explicitly defining the *elusive* (Ortega-Alcázar and Dyck, 2012) concept of well-being is that it is not a discrete entity, but rather multi-factorial and multi-dimensional (Dodge et al., 2012; Masters, 2004). In line with this, in our own research on well-being for ITE students as a team, we felt that well-being 'implies a sense of balance and ease with the myriad dimensions of life'. Psychological well-being can be considered as tackling challenges and engaging in personal development (Eldeleklioğlu et al., 2010). In attempting to reflect some of the complexity of the concept, whilst providing our own research participants with a meaningful task, the working definition of well-being we are using in this chapter is the same as in our research and builds on that of Dodge et al. (2012): Wellbeing is maintaining the balance between resources and challenges; these factors may be internal or external and operate in a dynamic flux over time.

The definition of well-being chosen reflects our own experiences; becoming a teacher involves finding a balance between resources and challenges, as well as the personal and professional (Pillen et al., 2013). Resources are anything we have to support us; relationships, experiences, traits, materials, technology and so on. Challenges are anything that we need to overcome - for example assessments, health issues, financial problems - but they do not necessarily entail a negative or bad thing; challenges can be very positive, for example a weekly placement target can be a challenge and a motivator to develop. This definition is represented as a *balance* by Dodge et al. (2012), with resources at one end and challenges at the other, and became known to us as 'the see-saw' (p.230).

In our empirical research (Thompson et al., 2020) we have found the see-saw very helpful to provide a framework for participants – beginning teachers, including trainees – to think about the breadth of challenges and resources they have and to consider the balance between them. Pillen et al. (2013, p.241) highlighted how:

> …the period of transition from student to teacher is often a struggle for a great number of beginning teachers which usually remains invisible to their teacher educators and mentors or colleagues in schools.

The see-saw provides an opportunity for trainees to make some of their challenges visible, both to themselves and others, and we have used the same format working with a number of trainee teachers in England, as well as throughout other parts of Europe (Germany, Denmark, The Netherlands and Finland). What has struck us most vividly is that, despite the very different range of teacher education in these countries (for example, Finland comprises a five-year-long, Master's-level training course which is frequently oversubscribed, whilst in England teacher education can take a little as ten months), many of the resources and challenges trainees experience are similar or even the same (Thompson et al., 2020).

Resources and challenges

Using the data collected from our research which explored the well-being of trainee teachers in England (Thompson et al., 2020; Quickfall et al., 2021), a range of common themes emerged when asking participants to list the resources and challenges which impact them; these are summarised in Figure 15.1.

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<Insert Figure 5.2 here>

One of the research methods within our study involved participants taking photographs to represent their well-being each week (examples shown in Figure 15.2). We supported participants to analyse these using thematic analysis and a similar range of themes emerged, including seeking comfort, being with others, workload, and maintaining relationships.

In addition to the see-saws and the photographic data, we also interviewed our participants. Again, a theme reiterated was that of relationships, with one of the participants telling us 'The times my well-being was the lowest were the times I felt most alone'. The theme of relationships occurred throughout all of the sources of data as both a resource and a challenge.

The findings of our research are inline with wider studies which also suggest that social support has been found to promote psychological well-being, as well as to buffer the effects of stress (Dwyer and Cummings, 2001). This would suggest that when supporting beginning teachers (and indeed any teacher new to a school), developing and maintaining supportive professional relationships is a key factor in developing well-being – and one in which mentors can play a direct role:

> …while national policies and constraints at school level may make powerful and empowering forms of Professional Learning Communities difficult to realise, it can…make a major contribution to teachers' well-being. (Webb et al., 2009, p.406)

It is also now recognised that professional learning communities may be increasingly virtual, with online social spaces impacting geography teachers' subject identity and professional practice (e.g. Brooks, 2021). Whilst Bergviken et al. (2018) recognise the value of social support provided by teacher social media groups, such as the one they examine (a Swedish teacher Facebook group of over 13,000 members), they argue that these benefits can sit in tension with engagement that is 'disadvantaging, exploitative and/or disempowering' (p.230)

<Insert Task 15.2 here>

The importance of supporting relationships for beginning teacher well-being

The social resources of trainee teachers have been linked to their ability to proactively deploy coping strategies (Väisänen et al., 2018); as teacher educators ourselves, we were keen to use ideas of community to support trainee teachers. Isolation and community were themes that emerged from our anecdotal experiences of supporting trainee teachers with academic work, school experience placements, finding employment and preparing for their role in school. The idea of developing collaborative working as a group follows the *community of practice* model, with a community of practice being defined as:

> …a group of individuals, who through joint enterprise have developed shared practices, historical as social resources and common practices. (Coburn and Stein, 2006, p.28)

Communities of practice are often applied to school contexts, which provide a shared domain of interest, shared activities and a shared repertoire of practice (Shields and Murray, 2017). Recent research also suggests that communities of practice have beneficial effects, particularly in terms of belonging, self-efficacy and a sense of professional identity (Kirkby et al., 2019; Vann, 2019) – issues which are also supportive factors in developing well-being.

The idea of communities of practice comes from wider social learning theory (Wenger, 1991) which considers three key aspects for the function of an effective community:

- shared goals;
- relationship formation; and
- collaborative learning.

Wenger-Trayner and Wenger-Trayner (2011), whose work dominates the field of communities of practice, elaborate on these further suggesting the role the 'domain', the 'community' and the 'practice' play. Here they define these as:

> The domain: members are brought together by a learning need they share. The community: their collective learning becomes a bond among them over time. The practice: their interactions produce resources that affect their practice. (Wenger-Trayner and Wenger-Trayner, 2011, p.1)

In terms of communities of practice, beginning teachers can be theorised as being inducted into a large community (for example, university led partnership, SCITT (School Centred Initial Teacher Training), subject association community, and so on) as 'legitimate peripheral participants' (Wenger, 1991, p.64), alongside academic staff and lecturers. Their goals are shared: to successfully complete academic work and placements, and achieve Qualified Teacher Status. Whilst, in theory, the community of practice model would appear to reflect the basic realities of school experience (as communities of practice can present challenges, as well as support and resources), as a newcomer the beginning teacher may lack the competence required to engage in practice in school, and if attempts to integrate are not welcomed by the community, 'learning becomes difficult' (Johnston, 2016, p.534). This again highlights the key role of the mentor in facilitating entry into this new community of practice when they are in school, either on teaching practice within the context of ITE, or at the start of their career as a newly or recently qualified teacher.

<Insert Task 15.3 here>

When ITE trainees go on their school experience placements, their temporary community of practice can be considered to have shrunk down from their often-large cohort of peers to the size of a secondary school, or a single department within that school (Yandell and Turvey, 2007). These communities are temporary (Backhouse, 2018) and do not offer the same opportunity to become a legitimate peripheral participant, as trainees have 'guest-like status' (Johnston, 2016, p.544). Most postgraduate ITE students in England, with often just 10 months to qualify, spend most of their course on school placements, and must have significant teaching experience in at least two schools (DfE, 2019). Undergraduate and part-time ITE trainees usually have longer periods between school placements, so it could be argued that the postgraduate student (which most beginning geography teachers are in England) is at a disadvantage in terms of access and participation in communities of practice that provide meaningful opportunities to build relationships, and are supportive and understanding of their

challenges. Emotional support provided by mentors which moves beyond a master-apprentice relationship can improve chances of a successful school placement (Shields and Murray, 2017) and it is clear that professional integration and intra-personal relationships are key to successful completion of the programme. This allies with a coaching style of mentoring which may be more time intensive, as opposed to the mimesis or replication of practice which sometimes occurs due to a lack of time.

What might this mean in practice for beginning geography teachers?

The findings from our study on the well-being of trainee teachers begins to address the lack of research in this area and reveals some key areas that schools can address. The national and international findings from our investigation (Thompson et al., 2020) highlighted for all participating trainees, regardless of the route they took or even the country they trained in, the importance of relationships and the challenges that existed in developing these. Some of the challenges that were identified from our study around building professional relationships included:

- **Transience**: this was particularly pertinent for trainees. Here relationship difficulties were compounded by an understanding that the interactions were time-limited and temporary. This made it difficult for our participants to feel part of the school community and develop a sense of belonging.
- **Time**: trainees were often acutely aware of the time pressures on their mentors (as well as on themselves) and this made some trainees concerned about approaching busy mentors. Mentors also noted that they found interactions with trainees were, at times, more rushed than they would have liked. This is also likely to be a significant issue for those mentoring early-career teachers.
- **Workload**: this final challenge is underpinned by the previous two. Trainee (and early-career) teachers found that their workload was often very high and their overwhelming concern was ensuring they were prepared to teach. This meant that they sometimes found it difficult to create the space to develop relationships with mentors who were also usually under a great deal of pressure.

Despite the many challenges in developing professional relationships with mentors, they were seen by our participants as essential. These relationships encouraged a sense of community, developed learning and made receiving feedback and acting on it a much more active and positive experience. Pillen et al. (2013, p.246), in their research, cited not only the ‘complexity’ of learning to teach, but also the fact it is a ‘very personal process’. This *personal* nature of teaching, where it is at times difficult to separate the feedback on the teaching from the

feedback on the person, highlights the importance of strong professional relationships between mentors and those they are mentoring; further, it brings into focus the tension between the need for mentors to play both a developmental and evaluative role, and the impact this tension may have on their relationship with mentees (Healy and Walshe, 2022). Roffey (2012, p.10), too, noted the role 'relational' aspects and 'social capital' play in resilience and well-being;

> Social capital in the context of school life is more about the quality of connections – the ways in which people relate to each other, as both individuals and groups.

Following on from this, it might be helpful to consider how social capital and relationships can be maximised and developed for beginning geography teachers, as well as mentors, to develop well-being. Whilst the social capital within a school context is important, Kinder (2022) has highlighted that there is also value in mentors supporting beginning teachers to navigate and productively engage with the networks and communities that make up the wider geography subject community. As a mentor, you can model how engagement with the geography subject community contributes to your own resources or can mitigate some of the challenges you face. This support for beginning geography teachers has the potential not just to develop well-being in the present, but also to have a long-term impact on how beginning geography teachers can maintain their well-being throughout their teaching career. Furthermore, having a subject community approach to supporting and developing beginning teachers is likely to mitigate isolation they may be more likely to feel if they are in smaller geography departments as it extends their professional learning community (e.g. Webb et al., 2009; Kinder, 2022) beyond their immediate context.

Whole-school considerations may include: relationships need time to develop; much research highlights the link between positive relationships and well-being. *Scheduled* time needs to be provided for mentors to meet with those they are mentoring and support the development of positive, professional relationships. *Personal* time is also required to reflect on the mentoring role and its purpose**.** Opportunities for formal and informal networking of beginning geography teachers to exchange ideas and provide mutual support may also be a cheap and effective way of building relationships with peers. Trainees in our research reported feeling *lonely* in schools and struggling to understand basics such as school routines, key staff members and so on, as they were so focused on the actual aspect of teaching. Schools may be able to produce a (very brief) booklet that trainees and early-career teachers can access with this sort of routine information in; this can be used to complement any in-depth induction programme.

Individual mentor actions may be generated from reflecting on the following questions:

- How could you utilise the see-saw model discussed earlier to understand the challenges and resources specific to your mentee and use this (as well as the career entry profile) to develop an individualised training support plan?
- Reflecting on the challenges and resources drawn out from our research, can you use these as discussion points with your mentee?
- Puttick (2018, p.34) suggests 'coffee and kettle-space time' as an important time for interaction between teachers in the department. Can you share with your mentee the best times to talk formally? Can you encourage informal discussions too, to begin to develop professional relationships?
- Reflect on your support for previous trainees and/or early career geography teachers. Using the findings from our research, what has worked well previously? Is there anything you need to adapt to support the development of professional relationships?

Conclusion

This chapter has highlighted the difficulties in defining well-being due to its complex, context-dependent and multifaceted make up. It has also drawn attention to the need to support beginning geography teachers in developing and maintaining their well-being. Using a resources and challenges model is one way of being able to do this, with a particular need for considering what challenges beginning geography teachers are specifically likely to face

This chapter has identified some of the key challenges and resources that face beginning geography teachers. These include issues relating to developing their knowledge and experience base, dealing with finding an appropriate life/work balance, and importantly developing professional relationships. It was this final factor which was identified as both a resource and challenge in our research. This suggests that relationships between mentors and mentees can be both a source of support and challenge, and as a result this chapter has focused on developing the positive aspects of this important relationship and ensuring that as much as possible the resources are developed for both the mentor and mentee.

Links between personal and professional relationships, workload and well-being, when connected through the timelines and photo-elicitation interviews, suggested that the way the period of ITE and early-career teacher development is experienced is made of rhythmic patterns of demand and activity; this is in the same way that experienced teachers' workload has also been theorised (Wood, 2019). The challenges and resources of beginning geography teachers

are dynamic, the see-saw of well-being pivots up and down rapidly, and without relationships inside and outside the programme it is difficult to move out of the "troughs" of the experience.

For discussion

- What are your main challenges and resources as a *geography* mentor? How might these shape the mentorship you give to beginning teacher mentees?
- After examining the challenges and resources you and your mentee share, can you develop an action plan (this may include departmental/whole-school actions) to enhance the mentoring culture within your department?
- How will you address the actions that fall within your mentor/mentee relationship in the action plan developed (in the previous point) and which actions need support from the wider department/School Leadership Team?

Further reading and resources

1. **Thompson, S., Clarke, E., Quickfall, A. and Glazzard, J., 2020. Averting the Crisis in Trainee Teacher Well-being-Learning Lessons across European Contexts: A Comparative Study.** ***Journal of Comparative & International Higher Education,*** **12, pp.38–56.**

This paper provides an overview of our small-scale international comparative study examining the well-being of those undertaking ITE. We draw out from the findings the common thread across the participating countries of the importance of developing positive mentor/student relationships. The research was conducted across universities in Finland, Denmark and implications for best practice to support trainee teacher well-being are suggested.

2. **Department for Education [DfE], 2019.** ***Reducing workload: supporting teachers in the early stages of their career Advice for school leaders, induction tutors, mentors and appropriate bodies*****. London: DfE.**

This document contains advice and guidance for mentors in supporting beginning teachers with a focus on reducing unnecessary workload. It expands on a range of common themes for early career teachers which affect their workload and has a range of key questions for mentors and school leaders to engage with.

3. **Quickfall, A., Clarke, E. and Thompson, S., 2020, The PGCE journey: Wellbeing and workload, *BERA blog*. Available at: https://www.bera.ac.uk/blog/the-pgce-journey-wellbeing-and-workload. [Accessed 25 January 21].**

This blog summarises some of the issues affecting trainee teachers and their experiences of well-being whilst in training. It reflects on the implications of these challenges for trainees, mentors and those working more widely in ITE provision. The BERA mental health, wellbeing and education special interest group (SIG), which this blog is part of, contains a range of up-to-date papers and resources. Available at: https://www.bera.ac.uk/community/mental-health-wellbeing-and-education.

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