

# TEACHER WELLBEING AND RETENTION: THE IMPACT OF RAPIDLY TRANSFORMING LEARNING AND TEACHING WITH DIGITAL TECHNOLOGIES

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## Abstract

All students, worldwide, have the right to access high quality education. However, there are often many factors that can negatively impact on access to high quality education. In particular, many countries have reported the need for an increase in teachers to ensure that access to high quality educational learning experiences are maintained. This concern is reported in several studies across Europe and Australia where there is a growing concern focused on a shortage of teachers and an increased argument around the need for the retention of teachers once they are employed in schools. COVID-19 shed some light on education and the role of teachers, and often how resilient teachers were in transforming their existing teaching practices through the use of new and emerging digital technologies to better support students. This change was often referred to as emergency remote teaching and was witness to teachers needing to rapidly transform their learning and teaching with digital technologies. It is within this context that this paper explores the relationship between teacher wellbeing, the need for educators to rapidly learn new digital technologies and emergency remote teaching across six (6) European countries during Covid-19. This paper reports on the preliminary findings of a case study that involves a survey of 27 teachers and semi-structured interviews with three teachers, to capture the rich description of each of the participants. A qualitative thematic analysis of the data was conducted with two main themes emerging. These two themes were (1) time and workload, and (2) leadership and support. While the nature of the study is quite small, it still has the potential to contribute to current literature pertaining to teacher wellbeing and teacher retention within schools. As educational institutions continue to look towards new digital pedagogies and digitally transform current practices, further emphasis needs to be placed on the notion of teacher wellbeing and retention.

**Keywords:** *Teacher wellbeing, digital transformation, digital technology, leadership, emergency remote teaching.*

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## 1. Introduction

There is no doubt that the role of a teacher is quite complex and challenging (Herbert et al., 2022; Nykvist, Mukherjee, & Blundell, 2022), however, this complexity can be seen to be amplified when teachers also need to use digital technologies to enhance and transform learning and teaching in a new context. Covid-19 added an additional layer to the challenges that teachers in schools and universities faced, especially as many went to a mode of emergency remote teaching, where they needed to rapidly respond to student needs (Carolan, Davies, Crookes, McGhee, & Roxburgh, 2020; García-Morales, Garrido-Moreno, & Martín-Rojas, 2021; L. Mishra, Gupta, & Shree, 2020). Prior to Covid-19 many teachers already found difficulties in using digital technologies to enhance and support learning and teaching and these difficulties have, in some cases, been associated with increased anxiety and workload amongst teachers (Henderson & Corry, 2021; Hu, Arnesen, Barbour, & Leary, 2019), hence having an impact on overall teacher wellbeing. There are multiple reports about shortages of teachers and the need to retain teachers (Symeonidis & Eloff, 2023). The wellbeing of teachers is a critical factor in the retention of teachers.

The term 'wellbeing' is used commonly within educational research, however, it is a term that is quite broad and difficult to define (Muir, 2019). Wellbeing can be defined as "interchangeably with other terms such as 'happiness', 'flourishing', 'enjoying a good life' and 'life satisfaction', all which have very

different interpretations and underlying meanings” (Carter & Andersen, 2019, p. 20). Though wellbeing can also be subjective in nature and is often described as subjective wellbeing (SWB) (Diener, 2000). In this sense each and every person would describe a positive sense of wellbeing in a different way. Promoting positive wellbeing no matter how it is defined or described is critical and there is a consensus that early intervention is the best way to achieve this (Fox et al., 2015). The research relating to wellbeing in education is often associated with mental health (OECD, 2017) and it is within this context that this study is situated. The significance of positive wellbeing is seen in the strong link between teacher wellbeing, student wellbeing and academic achievement (Schleicher, 2018). Research on the impact of Covid-19 and wellbeing in schools has largely focussed on student wellbeing (König, Jäger-Biela, & Glutsch, 2020; Tang, Xiang, Cheung, & Xiang, 2021) with some recent studies emerging on the impact on teacher wellbeing (Eblie Trudel, Sokal, & Babb, 2021; Vargas Rubilar & Oros, 2021).

Given the significance of teacher wellbeing and how rapidly many teachers needed to adapt and transform their learning and teaching during Covid-19, especially in terms of the use of digital technologies, there is a need for more research on teacher wellbeing. While Covid-19 saw a rapid digital transformation of learning and teaching, many schools were already transforming their learning and teaching prior to Covid-19 and this meant that some teachers were better prepared than others. Over the past decade or more educational institutions and governments have developed policies and undertaken large projects aimed at digitally transforming education (König et al., 2020; Steinar, Sara, & Siri Sollied, 2018; Tamim, Borokhovski, Pickup, & Bernard, 2015). However, according to Bisri, Putri, and Rosmansyah (2023) there is no established definition of what digital transformation means though there is some consensus that it refers to the use of digital technologies to improve teaching and learning. Langseth, Jacobsen, and Haugsbakken (2023a, 2023b) define digital transformation as a comprehensive organisational and strategic change that affects the entire organisation. They further posit that despite the importance of supporting teachers' entrepreneurial activities such as digital transformation, in large-scale projects, support is often lacking or inconsistent. Moreover, the lack of sustained leadership involvement further undermines the educational system's ability to adapt to rapid changes, leaving it ill-prepared for the challenges often associated with digital transformation.

While there has been a push for digital transformation in learning and teaching and that digital technologies have the potential to transform learning and teaching (Ertmer & Newby, 2016; Tamim et al., 2015), there is an argument that the full potential of digital technologies in learning and teaching has not yet been realised (Newman & Beetham, 2017). The use of digital technologies to transform education is “fraught with many challenges” (Nykqvist et al., 2022, p. 207) and it should be used purposely and not as a bureaucratic tool or for convenience where it has little positive impact (Haßler, Major, & Hennessy, 2016; Kirkwood & Price, 2014). It is within this context, where there was a rapid transformation of learning and teaching with digital technologies that this paper focuses on the impact that this had on overall teacher wellbeing.

## 2. Research approach

The study employed a mixed methods approach to answer the question, ‘how did teachers adapt their digital pedagogical approaches during the pandemic and what impact did this have on their overall wellbeing?’. Qualitative data was collected through a survey and semi-structured interviews, while quantitative data was collected through the survey instrument. The qualitative approach used in the research design was informed by grounded theory (Thornberg, 2012).

The data was collected from a survey of teachers (N=27) from schools in Norway, Germany, Poland, Portugal, Spain and the UK. Three (n=3) randomly selected participants were invited to participate in a 20-minute semi-structured interview. The semi-structured interviews were broadly focussed on three main questions.

1. What changes did you need to make to your current teaching practices during the COVID-19 pandemic (both pedagogically and technologically)?
2. What type of support and or resources did you receive when you needed to move to an online or hybrid mode of teaching?
3. Was there an increased workload associated with moving to an online or hybrid learning environment?

The interviews were transcribed and analysed to identify concepts, categories, sub-categories and how they relate to each other through a process of open coding (Corbin & Strauss, 2008).

A thematic analysis of the qualitative data was based on a descriptive phenomenological approach. This approach aims to draw out the rich data associated with the lived experiences of the participants and their environments (Sundler, Lindberg, Nilsson, & Palmér, 2019). Descriptive statistics were drawn from the quantitative data.

### 3. Findings and discussion

Two inter-related themes emerged from the data analysis. These were (1) time and workload, and (2) leadership and support. The themes are inter-related in nature as each can influence the other. In this section we will highlight the major findings relating to the themes and supported with relevant literature. The following quote from one of the teachers '*I am glad it's all over!*' is a testament to how many teachers were feeling during the emergency remote teaching that they had to undertake. The findings highlight the many challenges and lessons learned during the rapid digital transformation of learning and teaching during Covid-19.

#### 3.1. Time and workload

All participants indicated that they were faced with many challenges moving to an online only mode of learning and teaching. They all reported that they spent considerable time preparing their classes and familiarising themselves with the affordances of the available technology. They had to constantly adjust their pedagogy according to their students and their home situation, which put a strain on their workload and well-being and overall family life in many situations. Consequently, teachers experienced high levels of uncertainty over a long period, which caused additional stress as they had to rapidly learn new ways of working and in many cases, learn new technologies. This impacted their ability to cope (Talbot & Mercer, 2018) as well as their work and family life balance (MacIntyre, Gregersen, & Mercer, 2020). We argue that all of the participants struggled with mastering the technological, pedagogical and content knowledge (as indicated by the TPACK framework (P. Mishra & Koehler, 2006), needed to design learning experiences when a disruptive digital context was introduced (emergency remote teaching). The working conditions also included large amounts of screentime and sitting, which put a strain on them both mentally and physically. Sensemaking and response to their situation was mainly an individual, and to some extent a collegial preoccupation, at lower levels in the school. The participants indicated that they had no authority to regulate their work conditions to reduce the added workload that they experienced. Hence, the notion of support and ultimately leadership in their schools comes to the forefront.

#### 3.2. Leadership and support

Most respondents referred to support and leadership as lacking in quality and consistency. Leadership was rarely mentioned and often related to more administrative issues. Teachers mainly developed their professional digital competence independently in the context of their online teaching from home or informal collegial networks. Our findings suggest that a majority of teachers developed professional digital agency in a bottom-up approach to online teaching and learning. They all experimented with lesson designs, broadened their practice with available digital tools and developed a deeper understanding of the many pedagogical options and restraints in online schooling. These findings are in line with previous (non-pandemic) research about online schooling at the K-12 stages (Langseth et al., 2023b) in Nordic countries, where teacher digital agency led to transformation in the way schools were able to offer more flexibility in the choice of subjects and the form of delivery (online, blended or face-to-face) for students. The findings indicated that this rarely happened, and we speculate that this is due to a lack of leadership involvement in digital transformation prior to and during the pandemic. According to Snowden and Boone (2007), an event, such as Covid-19, can be described as a state of chaos, where leaders have to take immediate action (i.e. emergency remote teaching), and then proceed to build support by sensing and responding to the situation that teachers are experiencing.

The pandemic offered a limited space of time for leadership and management to learn from teachers' experiences to improve their leadership and adjust the educational system in the long term. The limited support by leadership and the reported lack of access to support resources (personnel and digital technologies) can be seen as contributing to stress and anxiety, hence impacting teacher wellbeing (Lambert, Boyle, Fitchett, & McCarthy, 2019). It is in this context that a distributed leadership model, in combination with coaching in schools, has the potential to better support teachers' overall wellbeing. Teams with complementary competences (teachers, resource teachers and middle-situated leaders) can potentially support teachers and inform leadership about actions in the short and long term in this complex domain (Sjovold, 2014; Snowden & Boone, 2007). The following quote from one of the interviews is indicative of how a number of teachers felt during this time '*Still to this day, there has been no recognition for the work or increased workload that we had to perform during COVID19 - no recognition of how I had to put my students before my family, no pay increase, not time off – nothing. I feel like teachers were just at the bottom of the food chain having to hold on to everything*'.

#### 4. Conclusion

There is no doubt that digital technologies will play a substantial role in learning and teaching now and into the future, however, it is of utmost importance that the notion of teacher wellbeing is considered as schools embrace digital transformation and recognise that people are part of the process. There is a correlation between teacher wellbeing and teacher retention, and it is necessary to consider the two themes that emerged from this study: time and workload, and leadership and support. While the study has its limitations in the size of the participant sample, there is a need for further research in this area. Schools need to provide a safe and supportive environment that is not only conducive to learning for students, but also one that is focussed on teacher wellbeing, especially if they want to avoid teacher burnout and retain their teachers. The digital transformation of schools will continue, and the process is complex and requires all stakeholders to be aligned with the vision of the school, supportive of the process and the many challenges associated with such an endeavour.

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