



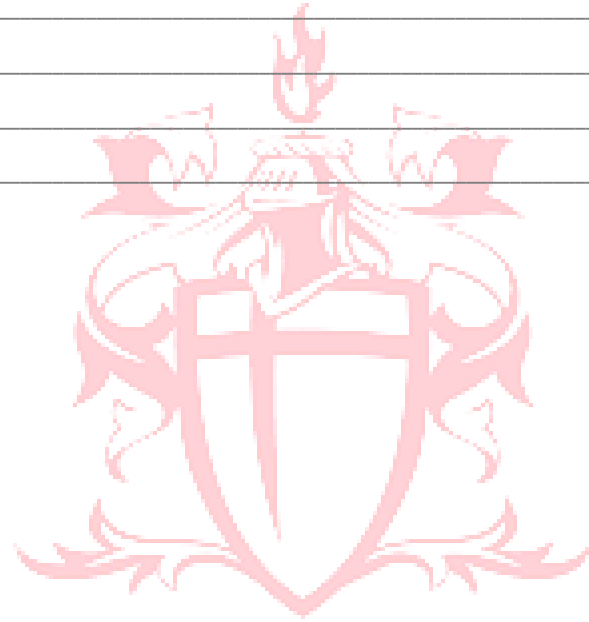
Teacher Well-Being Research Project

July 2017

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Introduction

RECOVERY FROM WORK

In both the United Kingdom and United States, workplace stress continues to be at the forefront of concerns for employees' mental and physical health. To investigate workplace stress further, there has been an increasing interest into how people recover from stress during breaks from work. Non-work periods, whether it is the evening, weekend, or a vacation, offer the opportunity for employees to recover from work-related stress. Additionally, holidays and vacations are seen as a perfect time for employees to rejuvenate and restore their working capacities.

TEACHER STRESS

When looking at working populations, teaching continues to be one of the most stressful occupations. Research has found that 76% of teachers believe that their levels of stress influence their health, with 56% stating they would be better at their job if they felt less stressed (National Union of Teachers). The Guardian newspaper found that teachers regularly work 60 hour weeks, which has led to a non-existent work-life balance, suffering relationships, and a drop in job satisfaction (Education Support Partnership). This has led to over half of teachers (52%) reporting that they have seriously considered leaving their current jobs, and 47% have considered leaving teaching all together (Teacher Toolkit).

Given these statistics, there has been growing interest in research that attempts to improve teachers' psychological well-being. One important strand of this research has been to understand whether teachers are able to use time away from work to recover from the considerable demands of the job.



Our Story

Previous research has focused on the summer and winter holiday periods, this research is specifically interested in the week long half-term breaks. These week long breaks happen a few times a year, and we are very interested in seeing how important these breaks are to teachers and their well-being. Our research design focused on this half-term break, in which we sent surveys for two weeks before the half-term break and for four working weeks after the break. This allowed for an investigation into both work and non-work weeks.

MEASURES

Our initial survey collected information on teachers' demographic information, personality, and work characteristics. Then, for seven consecutive weeks, a survey was sent each Friday to collect weekly well-being levels, burnout scores, and emotions experienced during the past week.

DATA COLLECTION

Throughout each collection period, the design remained the same. The research was conducted on many separate occasions:

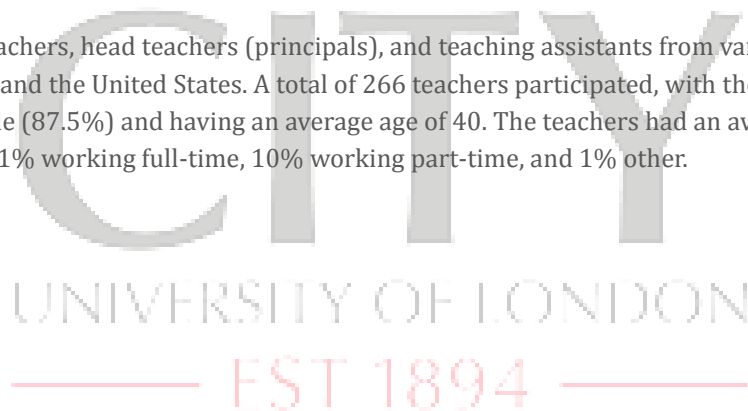
2015: October Half-Term (UK)

2016: February Half-Term (UK), Presidents' Week (US), Spring Break (US), May Half-Term (UK)

2017: February Half-Term (UK), Presidents' Week (US), Spring Break (US), May Half-Term (UK)

PARTICIPANTS

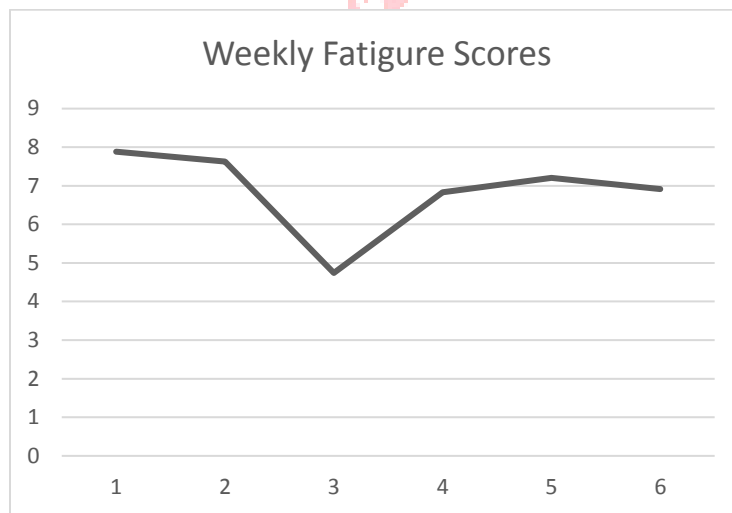
Participants were teachers, head teachers (principals), and teaching assistants from various schools around the United Kingdom and the United States. A total of 266 teachers participated, with the sample being predominately female (87.5%) and having an average age of 40. The teachers had an average tenure of 13.66 years with 89.1% working full-time, 10% working part-time, and 1% other.



What we found

FATIGUE

Each week we measured fatigue, which can be described as physical and/or mental exhaustion caused by work and life demands. Each Friday we asked each participant to answer how tired and fatigued they felt over the past week on a scale from 1 to 7. In the chart below, you will see the average scores for each week. Remember, the 3rd week was the half-term break.

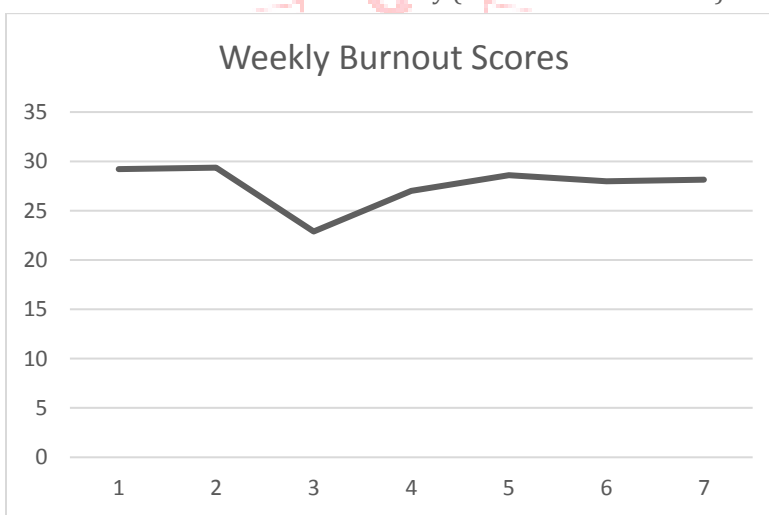


The chart above shows the pattern of change in fatigue during the week off. There was a statistically significant drop in fatigue scores during the break. What is very interesting in this figure is that the scores for week 4 (post-break) are not as high as week 2 (pre-break). We can see that teachers are recovering from feeling fatigued and tired during the break and this continues when they return to work. As the weeks continue, we still are not seeing high scores like those from the weeks before the break. Previous research has shown that scores usually fade-out and return to pre-break levels around a month after employees return to work; but in this case, we see that teachers are still maintaining some benefits from the break.

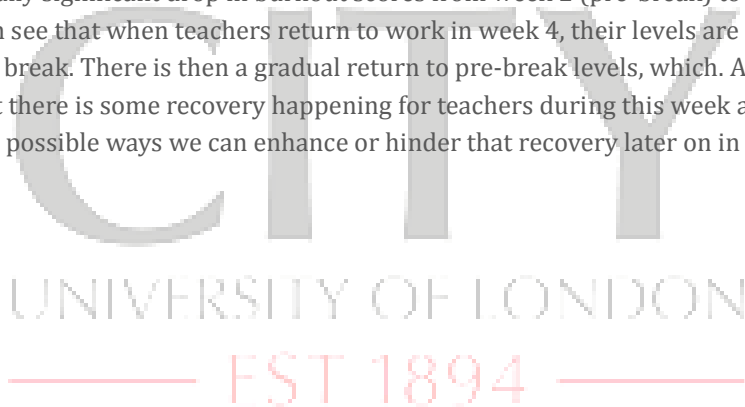
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BURNOUT

Burnout is classified as a prolonged state of stress which can cause both physical and emotional exhaustion. Just as we measured fatigue each week, we did the same for burnout. We asked participants to answer questions such as 'I felt that I'm working too hard on my job,' 'I felt frustrated by my job,' and 'I felt emotionally drained from my work.' We asked each participant to answer how much they agreed with each of the statements ranging from strongly disagree, disagree, slightly disagree, slightly agree, agree, and strongly agree. We then took these scores and gave them a value from 1 to 6. The scores from these questions were then compiled to get weekly total burnout scores. In the chart below you will see the average weekly burnout scores across the seven weeks of the study (week 3 is the week off).



There was a statistically significant drop in burnout scores from week 2 (pre-break) to week 3 (during break). Again, we can see that when teachers return to work in week 4, their levels are not quite as high as they were before the break. There is then a gradual return to pre-break levels, which. Although, it is still important to see that there is some recovery happening for teachers during this week away from work; we will look further into possible ways we can enhance or hinder that recovery later on in this report.



EMOTIONS EXPERIENCED

Next, we looked at the different emotions teachers were experiencing each week. We were particularly interested in positive emotions like feeling excited, enthusiastic, energetic, alert, active, inspired, calm, relaxed, and attentive. We asked each participant to answer how they felt each week and for each emotion answer if they felt it not at all, a little, moderately, quite a bit, and extremely. We then took these scores and gave them a value from 1 to 5. In the chart below, you will see the average total scores for each week.



There was a statistically significant jump in positive emotions during the week away from work. What is also interesting is that the scores before the break are pretty high, possibly some excitement for the upcoming break. When returning to work in week 4, scores are still higher than pre-break scores, but then drop below the week after. This shows that the frequency of positive emotions return to their pre-break level during the second week back to work. We will explore this further, and also provide some recommendations for maintaining some “vacation-effect” when returning to work.

THE ROLE OF LEISURE TIME EXPERIENCES

In this research, we were keen to explore what was happening during the break. We were interested in understanding the experiences that might be enhancing or hindering teachers' ability to recover from workplace demands during time off. To do this we utilized a famous psychological model known as self-determination theory. This theory suggests that if people can satisfy three basic psychological needs, they will experience increased well-being. The three needs within this theory are **competence** (the feeling of having the ability to do something effectively), **autonomy** (the feeling of having control and choice in one's activities and pursuits), and **relatedness** (the feeling of being close and connected to others). Each week we asked questions like 'How competent did you feel over this past week?', 'How much freedom and choice did you have over the things you did over the past week?', and 'To what extent did you feel close and connected to the people you were with over the past week?' The answers were on a scale that ranged from 1 to 7. The weekly scores from each psychological need were added together to get a total psychological needs satisfaction (PNS) score each week.

In our analysis, we first wanted to see if the PNS total during the break (week 3) was related to the scores of fatigue, burnout, and positive emotion for the week that teachers returned to work (week 4). When we calculated this, we found that PNS scores during the break were negatively related to both fatigue and burnout, which means that the more PNS experienced during the break, the lower the scores for fatigue and burnout when returning to work. We also found that PNS scores during the break were positively related to positive emotions experienced during week 4, which means that the higher the PNS total, the higher the positive emotion scores when returning to work.

Our next step was to investigate whether burnout scores for week 4 (post-break) were influenced by scores of PNS during the break. As we saw in the graph above, burnout scores significantly dropped during the break. We were interested in examining whether satisfying psychological needs during the break had a strong influence on burnout when returning to work. In our analysis, we found that burnout when returning back to work was indeed influenced by PNS, even when burnout scores for the break were reduced. This means that the change in burnout from week 3 to 4 is not just destined to happen, but can be influenced by the levels of psychological needs being satisfied. Knowing this gives us insights into how people may be able to enhance their recovery from work during vacation periods.

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Recommendations

With all this information, you may be asking yourself; ‘Well now what?’ This research, as well as previous research, allows us to offer a few simple recommendations on how to enhance the quality of time away from work.

WORRYING AND RUMINATING ABOUT WORK

Previous research has also found that worrying/ ruminating about work during non-work periods can have a negative impact on your ability to recover during a break. It has been shown that people who worry and ruminate about work during non-work times have less recovery than those that do not.

If you are prone to this type of thinking during non-work time, we would recommend mindfulness training. Research has shown that this type of training can help us to “disentangle” ourselves from unhelpful thinking patterns, and leads us to focus more on our present moment experiences. We have provided some suggested reading and other resources below.

SATISFYING PSYCHOLOGICAL NEEDS

As mentioned above, having a sense of autonomy, competence, and relatedness during a break is key to recovering from work-related demands and pressures. One way to enhance this is to reflect on small actions that would give you more autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Take some time to ask yourself: what is it that allows you to feel you have more control and choice at work and home? What allows you to feel you have the ability to do something effectively? Which activities help you feel close and connected to others? Taking time to reflect on those actions will give you an idea of what you need to do in order to satisfy these basic psychological needs during the break and when returning to work.

It is important to add that research has shown that the size of the action isn't important, particularly in your recovery. Both large and small actions improve your well-being and ability to recover over the break. There is no need to focus on only on big actions that make you feel as though your needs are satisfied. Simply focus on a few small things that would benefit you during the break.

SMALL ACTIVITIES

In a report by De Bloom (2015), research has shown that the following small activities boost recovery during a vacation:

- Exercise on the last working day. This allows for you to release the built up work pressures so that you enter the break free of those negative influences.
- Starting work at a slower pace when you return. A lot of times we jump right back into work when we return, which will bring our well-being levels back to where they were before the break. It is important to pace yourself back into work, and not push yourself too much when you first return.
- Creating new memories during the vacation will allow you to reflect positively on your time away. Cherishing these holiday memories throughout work brings you back to those times and will enhance and prolong the vacation effects.

MINDFULNESS RESOURCES

If you are interested in learning more about mindfulness training, we would recommend the following resources.

The UK's Mental Health Foundation provides a lot of useful information about mindfulness skills and courses, including an on-line course if you want to practice in your own time:

<https://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/our-work/mindfulness>

One of the most respected books written on mindfulness is "Finding Peace in a Frantic World", by Prof Mark Williams and Dr. Danny Penman. The book includes free access to some excellent recordings of mindfulness exercises: <http://franticworld.com/>

Finally the HeadSpace phone app is highly regarded, and can help you build mindfulness practices into your everyday life: <https://www.headspace.com/>



From the Team

THANK YOU

The Teacher Well-Being Research Team is so extremely grateful for your participation in this research. With your participation, this project has become one of the largest international research projects on teacher well-being. The knowledge that we gain from this project is valuable, and we would not have been able to do it without your time and effort.

NEXT STEPS

We are planning to use the data collected within this project to further understand the vacation experiences of teachers. Our research director, Dr. Paul Flaxman, is looking to communicate the findings to teachers, schools, and to the psychological research community. Furthermore, for her first PhD study, Shannon Horan, is looking more closely at personality differences that might influence how teachers recover from work pressures during mid-term breaks.

We are also very interested in teachers' well-being in other aspects of their careers. Our team has been providing personal resilience training to teachers across the UK. We are currently evaluating the impact of this training on teachers' psychological health.

Finally, we have future plans to investigate both the psychological and physical well-being of teachers in upcoming research. If you are interested in staying in touch or hearing more about our future outcomes, please send an email to [**teachers.wellbeing@city.ac.uk**](mailto:teachers.wellbeing@city.ac.uk).



Meet Our Members

Teacher Well-Being Research Team

DR. PAUL FLAXMAN SENIOR LECTURER	SHANNON HORAN DOCTORAL RESEARCHER	ROSS MCINTOSH RESEARCH ASSOCIATE
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Dr. Paul Flaxman is a Reader in organisational psychology at City, University of London. Paul's research focuses on examining predictors of psychological health in workplace settings, and evaluating interventions that have the potential to enhance employees' well-being. Paul and his team were recently funded by the British Academy to assess the effects of brief mid-term breaks (such as half-term) on school teachers' levels of exhaustion and psychological functioning.



Shannon is a PhD researcher and a member of the Organisational Psychology Research Group. Her research projects include exploring teachers' psychological well-being and the impact of personal resilience training on employees. Shannon is interested in employee psychological well-being and individual differences among employees, specifically perfectionism in the workplace.



Ross is an organisational and coaching psychologist. In his research role at City, University of London, he leads on the delivery of ACT Personal Resilience Training for teachers as part of a funded research project. He also delivers ACT based training to people in the NHS, Civil Service and private sector. He co-founded the start-up ACT3 Psychology, dedicated to cultivating psychological flexibility in individuals and organisations. Prior to his portfolio career Ross spent over 20 years in Senior HR roles in Government.

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