'Get back to school' headlines eroded teacher well-being during pandemic, research shows

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Intense public pressure on teachers to "get back to school" during the COVID lockdowns deepened an already widespread sense that they were undervalued, and left some actively rethinking their careers, research

from the universities of York and Cambridge shows.

The research monitored a small group of primary and secondary teachers for over two years from April 2020, charting an overall decline in their well-being and mental health in the first year. The findings, published in *Psychology of Education Review*, show how this was linked to the portrayal of teachers amid wider debates about whether schools should lock down, and for how long.

According to the study, while other frontline workers were lauded as "heroes," teachers felt they were being left out of this narrative and even perceived as "lazy," despite their key worker status. In particular, continual news stories during mid-2020 clamoring for schools to reopen led some teachers to believe that parents, and wider society, thought they were neglecting their duties.

Retention crisis

In reality, teachers were shouldering higher workloads as they adjusted to ever-changing government guidance, the researchers say. They describe the aggregate effects of the public portrayal of teachers as "psychologically costly" and suggest it may have worsened a well-documented retention crisis in the profession.

The researchers surveyed eight leading national newspapers, identifying 156 cases in which stories about COVID-19 and pre-16 education made front page news between March 2020 and January 2022.

These often either explicitly or implicitly suggested that teachers bore direct responsibility for school closures and other key developments in the education sector. Spikes in the coverage coincided almost exactly with when teachers reported sharp falls in their own mental health. While the decline was driven by the impact of events, the researchers

suggest it was exacerbated by the news coverage.

Some headlines explicitly criticized teachers for "demanding" that schools stay closed. More broadly, much-criticized national headlines called for teachers to be "heroes" by returning to schools while the [health risks](#) remained high, or reported the guidance of unions and doctors about whether they should do so.

Failing

The research suggests this constant discussion made teachers feel as though the public was waiting for them to make a decision about returning to the classroom, and that the longer they stayed away, the more they were seen to be "failing" children.

Co-author of the study and Principal Investigator for the research project, Dr. Lisa Kim, from the University of York's Department of Education, said, "There seems to be a relationship between the frequency of headlines criticizing teachers and teachers' own mental health. Though we cannot determine whether there is a [causal relationship](#), it seems that it added to the pressure, particularly because some commentary seemed to be encouraging a blame culture."

Mental health

In interviews conducted in April and May 2020, for example, one of the project participants told the researchers, "People think we're at home on full pay doing nothing, which is not great for your mental [health](#)." Later that summer, one teacher confessed, "There were times when I felt, and feel, that I've had enough. I don't want to do this anymore, because you can't see a light at the end of the tunnel."

Teachers emerged from the experience feeling underappreciated. In November 2020, after schools reopened, one told the team, "I was working really hard and it almost feels like what we've been doing hasn't really meant anything." They reported avoiding looking at social media because criticism of teachers was so widespread.

Public discussion

Dr. Laura Oxley, from the Faculty of Education, University of Cambridge, said, "Although lots of parents may not have actually thought teachers were lazy, the nature of public discussion meant that teachers started to feel that was the case."

"At the time, there was lots of praise for the NHS, delivery drivers, retail workers. Teachers were frontline workers too, but were often not part of the narrative. Constant headlines about getting them back to school made many teachers believe that people thought they were sitting at home doing nothing. This didn't cause the decline in teacher mental health, but it appears to have contributed to it."

The researchers say the findings of their study are a concern given the present teacher recruitment and retention crisis. Many teachers identify strongly with their job because they see it as rewarding and worthwhile, despite the modest pay. This was eroded during the pandemic, the researchers suggest, partly because of a deepening sense of feeling undervalued.

"It's striking that so little was said about the extraordinary efforts teachers were making," Oxley added. "Public narratives matter, and we need to think carefully about this if we want to encourage more high-quality professionals into education."

More information: Laura Oxley et al, Newspapers' portrayal of the

teaching profession during the Covid-19 pandemic in England: A content analysis, *Psychology of Education Review* (2023). DOI: 10.53841/bpsper.2023.47.2.41

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