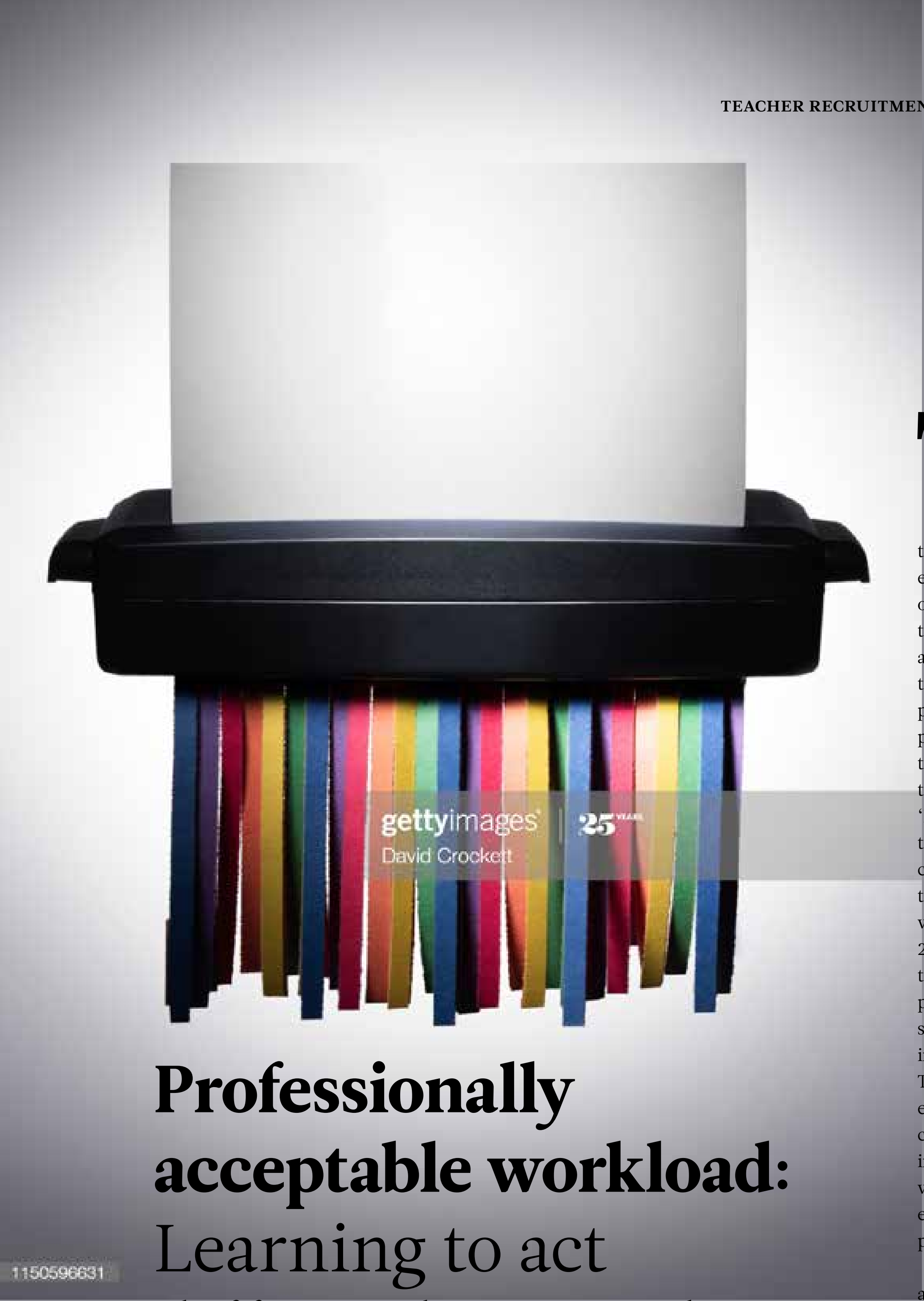

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Professionally acceptable workload: Learning to act differently towards effective change

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The Department for Education (DfE) has taken steps over recent years to emphasise the importance of addressing excessive teacher workload, in order to reduce the number of teachers leaving the profession and to encourage more entrants to teaching. Advice has been published for providers and practitioners, such as 'Addressing teacher workload in initial teacher education' (DfE, 2018a), 'Reducing workload: Supporting teachers in the early stages of their career' (DfE, 2019a) and the 'top tips' offered in 'Ways to reduce workload in your school(s)' (DfE, 2019b). Toolkits for reducing teacher workload have been published, with examples from small-scale research studies in 12 settings (DfE, 2019c). The guidance is aimed at encouraging institutional and cultural change, which is vital in developing a mentally healthy workforce whose members can engage all children and young people in learning.

However, if this is to become a reality, the workforce has to be central to its own reform; without significant shifts in perceptions of 'work' by all members of school communities, nothing can change. Although a great deal needs to be done to reduce the external pressures on schools that have impacted on teachers' workload for many years, a further aspect needs to be addressed by teachers, teacher

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educators and school leaders together within schools. This is because the culture of extreme workload in pursuit of perpetual improvement is embedded in a whole generation of teachers. It is almost impossible to think differently about teaching as a profession and about what it means to be an expert teacher. This article focuses on this particular challenge within the profession itself – to reform views of acceptable workload – while acknowledging that the external conditions that have produced the current situation need to be tackled.

Extreme workload as a proxy for excellence

Drawing on Bourdieu and Wacquant's (1992) concept of habitus, we need to understand the ways in which teachers internalise the influences that inform how they operate as social beings. We argue that the unwritten rules of the school community have been seriously underestimated in the workload debate. Working excessive hours has become normalised within the culture of schools – it has become a tacit indicator of teachers who are acknowledged to be dedicated and expert professionals. Trainee and new teachers frequently observe more experienced colleagues managing extreme workloads with great professionalism and resignation. They learn about what is acceptable from them. This is a dilemma facing the profession. Long, unreasonable working hours are frequently modelled by school leaders and by experienced teachers who have gained respect and seniority. Extreme workload has come to be viewed as intrinsic to achieving and maintaining standards – for example, by the collection, management and communication of large quantities of data; by extensive teaching outside the school day; by disproportionate performance management; and by minimal time for meaningful professional learning away from classroom teaching, which has become viewed as 'guilty time', in a perverse reversal of ideas about being a 'professional' whose expertise needs to be nurtured (Ball, 2013).

Teachers' self-worth and beliefs about long working hours

Try to envisage the response in many staffrooms to a teacher who says, 'I don't find my workload unreasonable and I can usually manage everything without my work taking away from family time in the evenings and at weekends.' How many teachers would dare to speak this if it were true? How would the majority of other staff respond to such a statement? How many would honestly wonder whether the teacher was doing their job properly? Working very long hours has become a proxy for being good at the job. It is so much a part of professional identity that it is difficult to think of behaving differently, even while feeling deeply unhappy about the impact on personal life and mental wellbeing. It has become part of teachers' emotional investment in their role – part of their sense of worth and efficacy. It affects informal talk among staff and the ways in which subliminal messages are conveyed within schools, and to which trainees and new entrants are extremely sensitive – 'it's just the way it is in my school'. There seems to be no point in having deep discussions that start with 'but this is not making a fundamental difference to the experience of pupils in my classroom/school' or 'this is data production and management that does not impact on the quality of my teaching/the teaching in my school'. This is just as difficult for school leaders as it is for classroom teachers and mentors – and new entrants learn the talk. It is necessary for school communities to stop and consciously deliberate on this, to make the 'unspeakable' become discussable.

Frank talk needs to happen so that more teachers – including new entrants – come to believe that a teaching career is sustainable. This means understanding the complexity of teachers' feelings about their workload and their identities as excellent, committed professionals – but changing the ways in which we talk, think and act about workload is emotional work.

Emotional change

For effective and active learning to take place, at any age, there needs to be a level of intrinsic motivation and a questioning of assumptions that have become 'normal' as a basis for altering identities (Mezirow, 1990, 1997). To change practice and habits successfully, teachers at all stages in their career will need to learn anew – challenging the culturally acceptable practice that currently equates effective practice with

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'hard work' or long hours. The school workload reduction toolkit (DfE, 2018b) promotes good practice, but it is still possible for a school to work through the contents at senior level in the spirit of consultation, without class teachers feeling empowered to take part in any reform. It is important, therefore, to consider ways in which teachers can engage in their own decisions about a professionally acceptable workload. In order to reframe personal responsibility within the hierarchical systems of school management, it is important to situate discussions in the context of emotional capital:

> *'Emotional capital is a tripartite concept composed of emotion-based knowledge, management skills, and capacities to feel that links self-processes and resources to group membership and social location.' (Cottingham, 2016, p. 452)*

In other words, in the context of schools and colleges, a teacher's emotional capital is dependent on the ability to understand their feelings, to use those feelings effectively within the workplace as a resource, and to communicate to others how those feelings have been useful. In order to employ emotional capital, it is likely that other forms of capital, such as social capital, will also be in place. The absence of emotional capital might be a teacher who just does as they are told, feels no sense of ownership of tasks, doesn't feel able to critique practice and doesn't feel a probability of success that they will be able to effect change within the organisation.

Any discussion of 'teacher workload' is dependent on the relationship between the person working and their emotional response to that work, alongside that teacher's understanding of colleagues and parents'/carers' feelings and attitudes to that work and the policies and practices that relate to it, as decided by senior managers and governors. All this is balanced by how much the teacher feels that they have agency over this work. The potential for a deficit of emotional capital when people feel that they have no control over work demands also applies if people feel disempowered to make the changes needed to improve working conditions.

It feels important, therefore, to articulate any discussion of workload in vocabulary that emphasises the role of the individual, the framework of a team and the professional responsibility to the learner.

Working towards a professionally acceptable workload

The notion of a professionally acceptable workload perhaps offers a greater chance of gaining the cooperation of various stakeholders in making the changes that are needed in our educational organisations. Archer (2007) holds out hope that individual reflexivity can help to enable things to be done differently. This involves being able to talk deliberately about how to change behaviours. We suggest that a focus on emotional capital can make a valuable contribution to reflexive practices, within altered school discourses about how work is valued. What is professionally acceptable can be a focus of explicit and honest discussion by all stakeholders

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(Kossek and Lambert, 2004), while being a way of capturing the differentiation needed within workload decisions (e.g. by career stage and pay grade), although this does not take away from the clear need to bring wellbeing and workload into better alignment. The UCET companion paper upon which this article is based, available online, offers a number of discussion prompts for open talk among providers and schools.

The role of teacher educators

Given all this, what can teacher educators in particular do to encourage and promote professional, acceptable workload practices in trainees? The prompts below may provide a starting point.

- Make professionally acceptable trainee teacher workload an explicit item in ITE partnership agreements, with boundaries that have been discussed with all parties. This goes beyond stipulating teaching hours. It includes the total hours that it is calculated that the trainee should be spending on the training programme. Agree what is reasonable on a weekly basis.
- Agree partnership processes for trainee teachers to articulate where their workload becomes unreasonable, without fear of repercussions.
- Develop knowledge and understanding of individual trainees' circumstances – e.g. where childcare needs should be a prime consideration in allocating placements.
- Provide clear guidelines to support students with financial pressures.
- Make wellbeing and workload management a standing item in regular mentor meetings.
- Train mentors in understanding appropriate workload and how they model professionally acceptable workload management.
- Share a position more widely with education partners about the importance of equipping teachers, particularly in their early career, with adaptive expertise.
- Encourage reflexive practice – giving trainees the skills to take ownership of their pedagogical thinking and techniques for returning to their reflections and developing them further. This can be a powerful way to hold emotional capital in relation to your practice and workload.
- ITE programmes can develop new teachers to be able to articulate the 'non-negotiables' within workload issues and why these are so important.
- ITE programmes can prepare trainee teachers and school partners to approach workload and wellbeing as major features of induction for newly qualified teachers.
- Provide non-taxing ways to keep a dialogue during placements, e.g. reflective weekly journals through a few lines in an email, a vlog or a visual diary.
- Act as an advocate for the trainee where necessary, e.g. if a second placement is very different from the first placement and the trainee is finding different expectations difficult.
- Encourage discussions between trainees, and between teacher educators, to promote critique on workload practice, not criticism.
- Review the protocols for mentors and university tutors to liaise where there are concerns relating to management of workload.
- Make wellbeing and workload a standard focus of mentor discussion with the university tutors when they visit.

This article is based on a UCET companion paper to DfE advice on addressing teacher workload. The full companion paper is available at: www.ucet.ac.uk/11213/professionally-acceptable-workload-a-second-ucet-companion-october-2019

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