

Comparing sources of stress for state and private school teachers in England

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journals.sagepub.com/home/imp**Jude Brady and Elaine Wilson**

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Abstract

Teaching is understood to be a highly stressful profession. In England, workload, high-stakes accountability policies and pupil behaviour are often cited as stressors that contribute to teachers' decisions to leave posts in the state-funded sector. Many of these teachers leave state teaching to take jobs in private schools, but very little is known about the nature of teachers' work in the private sector. This research addresses this gap in knowledge and compares the sources of stress experienced by 20 teachers in the state sector to those of 20 teachers in the private sector. The paper is based on qualitative data from a larger study. It analyses data collected in interviews and focus groups with classroom teachers and middle leaders working in mainstream primary and secondary phase education in England. The results emphasise state school teachers' acute distress in relation to workloads driven by accountability cultures. In comparison, private school teachers report less intense experiences of work-related stress, but some identify demanding parents as a concern. The research's novelty lies in this comparison between sectors and these sector specific insights may help to focus school leaders' efforts to improve teaching conditions in both sectors.

Keywords

England, parents, private schools, stress, workload

Introduction

Teaching in England is recognised as a highly stressful profession (Kidger et al., 2016). As in other high-stakes accountability contexts including Canada, the USA and Australia, teachers' work in England is characterised by heavy workloads and intense scrutiny (Viac & Fraser, 2020; von der Embse et al., 2016). Research acknowledges the link between teachers' working conditions, stress and ongoing teacher retention difficulties in England and elsewhere (CooperGibson, 2018; Viac & Fraser, 2020). Mirroring the USA and Australia, teacher retention is an acute problem in England with an estimated one third of teachers leaving state school teaching within 5 years of qualification (Department for Education, 2019a). While there is sparse evidence concerning private school teacher supply and retention, research from the state sector demonstrates that pupils are unequally affected by teacher supply problems. Those taught in the most disadvantaged schools are more

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likely to be taught by unsuitably qualified staff and such schools experience greater difficulties in recruiting and retaining teachers (Allen & McIntyre, 2019).

In a quest for a better work-life balance and improved job satisfaction, many teachers leaving England's state schools commence work in other sectors or continue in education but in non-teaching roles (Perryman & Calvert, 2020; Worth et al., 2018). However, around 16% of those who leave state school teaching (and who are not retiring) do in fact remain in the profession, but they assume jobs in private schools (Worth et al., 2015). Although approximately 17% of England's national teacher workforce is employed by private fee-charging schools (Department for Education, 2018a, 2018c), the work of those teachers is scarcely documented and so there is little knowledge of the way in which the type or intensity of stress compares for teachers across sectors.

Heavy workloads, high-stakes accountability environments, pupil behaviour and perceived poor collegial support are acknowledged stressors for state school practitioners (Chaplain, 1995; MacBeath, 2009; Skinner et al., 2021). Limited information is available concerning teacher stress in the private sector, although longer holidays, improved pupil behaviour and better pay are commonly believed to be benefits of working privately (Green et al., 2008). There is some anecdotal evidence that private school teachers might experience stress from parents. Specifically, teachers may encounter 'pushy parents' who place significant demands on teachers' time and expect them to obtain particular academic outcomes with their child (The Secret Teacher, 2015; Ward, 2014). As Peel (2015) suggests, fee-paying parents might anticipate good academic results as evidence of teachers delivering 'value-for-money'. Teachers could experience this pressure for results as stressful, especially as the financial success of private schools is contingent on customer satisfaction.

While stereotypes of well-behaved pupils and the 'pushy parent' abound, there is little research-based evidence which supports the notion that private school teachers experience more or less stress from parents or pupils – or any other factor – compared to those in the state sector. To address this gap in knowledge, our study undertakes a novel exploration of the sources of stress for private school classroom practitioners and middle leaders and compares these to the experiences of those working in the state sector. Findings are interpreted within their wider policy context and understood through the lens of the job demands-resources theory. The work is of potential significance to school leaders in contexts where teacher stress and retention present as problematic. By identifying sector specific sources of stress, our findings could support those leading government-funded and private schools to develop targeted strategies to improve the working conditions of their teaching staff.

Literature review

Evidence from the Teaching And Learning International Survey (TALIS) shows that an average of 18% of teachers in surveyed countries experience a lot of stress in their work (OECD, 2020). This percentage rises to 30% of teachers when just England is considered, and teachers in Portugal, Australia and the USA also report higher than average stress (OECD, 2020). Other recent estimates support the finding that teacher stress is of concern in England. Worth and Van den Brande (2019) report that around one fifth of teachers in England feel stressed 'most' or 'all' of the time. Kidger et al.'s (2016) study makes the similar finding that around one in five of the surveyed teachers expressed at least some symptoms of depression or anxiety, and that these conditions were linked to teacher absence. New evidence contests claims that teachers' mental health has declined over time and suggests that due to shifting social trends, teachers (like others in the non-teaching population) may now be more likely to report mental health difficulties which in part explains the rise in reported cases of stress, anxiety, depression and other mental health illnesses (Jerrim et al., 2021). Although more research is needed into the longitudinal quantification of teachers' mental

health – existing retention, stress and wellbeing literature agrees that for many, teaching *feels* stressful and that these feelings of strain underpin teachers' decisions to leave the profession (Perryman & Calvert, 2020).

The potential impacts of teacher stress are well-documented across the globe, with studies concerning Norway and the USA linking teacher stress to attrition, teacher absenteeism and crucially – reduced pupil outcomes (Howard & Howard, 2020; McLean & Connor, 2015; Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2016). There is further evidence that those pupils taught by stressed teachers report lower levels of school satisfaction and have worse views of teacher caring (Ramberg et al., 2020). This link between teacher stress and pupils' experiences of school is particularly concerning because cross-country studies find that teachers working in disadvantaged contexts report higher levels of stress (OECD, 2020). As such, pupils in the most disadvantaged schools may be taught by highly stressed teachers, and this factor could contribute to impaired educational outcomes for these pupils. Therefore, identifying stressors and resourcing teachers to manage the demands of their work could have benefits across the school eco-system and contribute to better teacher mental health, improved retention, enhanced pupil outcomes and greater pupil and parent satisfaction.

What is teacher stress?

Teacher stress is understood to arise from contextual factors within the school setting (Kyriacou & Sutcliffe, 1977). Kyriacou (2001) defines it as:

The experience by a teacher of unpleasant, negative emotions, such as anger, anxiety, tension, frustration or depression, resulting from some aspect of their work as a teacher. (Kyriacou, 2001, p. 28).

This broad definition of 'unpleasant, negative emotions' as 'stress' allows a wide understanding of how stress might manifest and be experienced and discussed by individuals. The 'job demands-resources' conceptualisation of stress posits that factors such as pupil behaviour or long working hours only become stressful when staff are inadequately resourced to meet the demands of their job (Bakker et al., 2004, 2007). Under this view, job demands are defined as:

[T]hose physical, social, or organisational aspects of the job that require sustained physical and/or psychological (i.e., cognitive or emotional) effort on the part of the employee and are therefore associated with certain physiological and/or psychological costs. (Bakker et al., 2007, p. 275).

This definition enables an understanding of job demands as tasks, duties and requirements that necessitate a physical, emotional or psychological input from the employee. For teachers, job demands may include excessive marking workloads, a poorly resourced environment, large classes, a heavy teaching timetable or demanding parents. These demands become stressors when the teacher lacks the internal or external resources to support them to manage these strains (Bakker et al., 2007). Research has shown that teachers can be resourced to meet the demands of their work through a range of provision. Borman and Dowling's (2008) meta-study of teacher retention studies found that higher salaries and qualified teacher status are associated with improved retention, whereas Gordon (2020) reports that bespoke mentoring and a supportive collegial environment can foster teacher wellbeing for those in the early career stage. Additionally, government commissioned reports indicate that some workload reduction initiatives might help teachers to meet the demands of their work (Robinson & Pedder, 2018).

Stressors

Work structure. The way in which the school year is structured may contribute to stress. The academic year entails long and intensive days during term-times interspersed by breaks approximately every 6–8 weeks. This intense work pattern may become stressful if teachers do not have adequate opportunity to recovery in the evenings and at weekends (Demerouti et al., 2009; Worth et al., 2018). National survey data indicate that weekend and evening work are commonplace for state school teachers with middle leaders and classroom teachers working on average nearly 13 hours per week during non-school time (Walker et al., 2019). Less is known about the structure of private school teachers' work or if their workloads are associated with stress. However, marketing materials for many private schools emphasise that they offer weekend and evening sports fixtures and school community events which are arranged and supervised by teaching staff (Peel, 2015). It may, therefore, be the case that those working in private schools also experience intense terms with little recovery time available. That said, when holidays are considered – those working privately typically benefit from annual leave of around 16 to 20 weeks (compared to 13 weeks in the state sector) – and this extended leave may provide adequate opportunity to recover from stressful term-time work demands (Griff, 2013, 2014).

It is worth noting that there is considerable variation in the length of holidays and school days for private school teachers. Those in the private sector might experience long working days with the expectation that they participate in sporting, musical, artistic or social activities in addition to their classroom teaching hours. Those working in boarding schools are likely to have longer school holidays compared to both day school and state school teachers, but they may experience more protracted days with duties and school activities routinely extending into evenings and weekends. For boarding house mistresses/masters (those who live in the boarding houses with pupils), the role may entail responsibility for pupils around the clock. These suggestions are supported by literature from the former teaching union, Association of Teachers and Lecturers (ATL). Its guidance to members lists long working days, after-school commitments, stress from the market forces of the sector and 'pressure from higher parental expectation' as disadvantages of working in the sector in comparison to state-funded schools (ATL, 2014, p. 4).

Workload. Prior research has recognised the quality and quantity of workload as a key factor that contributes to teacher stress (Boyle et al., 1995; Brown & Ralph, 2002; Harmsen, Helms-Lorenz, Maulana, van Veen, et al., 2018). According to recent national scale surveys, full-time classroom teachers and middle leaders in England work just under 53 hours per week and most consider workload to be a 'very serious' or 'fairly serious' problem (Walker et al., 2019). Evidence gathered prior to the outbreaks of COVID-19 in England suggested that this perception was improving for state school teachers, perhaps owing to the workload reduction initiatives developed and implemented by government, teaching unions and school leaders (Walker et al., 2019). Data from TALIS 2018, which includes a small sample of private school teachers, indicate that teachers of lower secondary aged pupils (approximately aged 11–14) in the private sector work 5 hours per week more than their state counterparts, but that they report higher levels of job satisfaction (Jerrim & Sims, 2019). While workload has been the focus of government ambitions to improve teacher retention in state schools (Department for Education, 2019b), little is understood about private school teachers' comparative experiences of workload or if those who move sectors find that the workload is more or less stressful in one sector compared to the other.

Pupil behaviour. Most models of teacher stress identify pupil behaviour as a key stressor. Boyle et al. (1995), for example, find that pupil behaviour is the factor that explains the most stress

variance for teachers in Malta and Gozo. Pupil behaviour is important to consider because it has been linked to teacher retention. A recent working paper from the Department for Education reports that teachers who perceive pupil behaviour to be poor are more likely to leave their jobs compared to those who hold better perceptions of this factor (Sims & Jerrim, 2020). Other research suggests that strong in-school support can help teachers to manage stress from pupil misconduct and reduce the odds of them leaving their posts (Johnson et al., 2012). There is some evidence from TALIS 2013 that those working in private schools hold better views of the disciplinary environment (Micklewright et al., 2014). Although small numbers of private school teachers were included in TALIS 2013, the findings could be indicative that pupil behaviour is a less pertinent concern for private school teachers compared to their state counterparts.

Class sizes are a further point for consideration when understanding stress from pupil behaviour. Small class sizes are a salient selling point of many private schools, and the Independent Schools Council (ISC), which is the umbrella organisation for most of the mainstream private schools in England, reports an average pupil to teacher ratio of 8.5:1 compared to 18:1 in state schools (ISC, 2019; Department for Education, 2018a). As such, it might be expected that private school teachers experience less stress from pupil behaviour compared to colleagues in the state sector because they have fewer pupils to manage in the classroom.

Parents/guardians. Strained relationships between teachers and parents may be stressors in both state and private school contexts. Survey data collected by ATL (2016) indicate that increasing workloads propelled by pressures from parents and school leadership are causes of concern for private school teachers. Recent research from Ofsted (2019) (the body that inspects all state-funded schools in England) comments likewise that ‘relationships with parents can be a negative source of stress’ for state school teachers (p.7). The Ofsted report lists parents’ unrealistic expectations, frequent emails and parents raising complaints as specific activities that contribute to teacher stress. These findings, although in relation to the experiences of state school teachers, mirror the sources of stress outlined in the ATL report, thus indicating that relationships with parents may be similarly stressful for teachers in both sectors.

Methodology

Data for this study were collected through a series of in-depth one-to-one interviews and focus groups with teachers who taught in mainstream schools for pupils aged 5 to 18. In total, we analysed data from 40 teachers: 20 from the state sector and 20 from the private sector. The data were collected through 12 interviews and 8 focus groups conducted over a 7 month period, 2017 to 2018. All the private school teachers included in this study worked in schools affiliated with the ISC, whose schools account for around 80% of privately educated pupils in England. Both private boarding and day school teachers are incorporated into the study. School type (e.g. day/boarding) and phase (primary/secondary, or equivalents) are indicated in the findings and discussion.

Participants

Interviewees for this study were drawn from the previous stage of data collection, an online questionnaire – the results of which are not published here. Individuals were approached from a variety of school types, phases, regions and job roles. Those willing to participate were interviewed either on the phone or in-person. Focus groups (which were all conducted in-person) were recruited through a combination of methods including: the study’s questionnaire, advertising on social media, trade union promotion and through advertising with some of the major organisations

Table 1. Participants by sector and age phase taught.

Sector	Age phase		
	Ages 5–11	Ages 11–18	Total participants
State	6	14	20
Private	2	18	20

affiliated with the ISC. Focus groups contained a maximum of six teachers either from the state or from the private sector.

The convenience method of recruitment meant that some participants were clustered in the same schools. The 20 teachers from the state sector who were included in analysis worked in 18 different schools. The 20 teachers from the private sector were drawn from six different schools (three day schools and three schools with boarding facilities). There were fewer schools represented in the private school sample because approaching teachers through gatekeeper headteachers proved the most effective recruitment method, although this led to clustering. For private school focus groups, this clustering meant that participants were in a discussion group with colleagues and that all but one of the private school focus groups were conducted in a private room on school grounds. The other private school focus group and all state school teacher focus groups were held in neutral spaces such as private rooms in public libraries or community halls, and they contained a mix of teachers from different schools. Private school participants who were interviewed on school grounds may have been less willing to discuss the less positive aspects of their work while in their work environment. To manage this possibility, participants were invited to discuss teaching in general, rather than focusing on their experiences in their specific schools. Participants also were reassured that we would treat their contributions confidentially, and they agreed that to respect each other's confidentiality they would not discuss the content of the focus group with non-participants after the conversation had ended. Despite these efforts to encourage an open discussion, the clustering presents a limitation to the study and while it was an ongoing consideration during analysis, this limitation should be recalled when interpreting results.

Table 1 shows the breakdown of participants by sector and the age range that they taught. Age phases are defined differently between the state and private sectors in England and because the nomenclature varies between sectors, for ease of comparison, findings are reported by just two age phases: 5 to 11 years old – which is termed 'primary', and 11 to 18 years old – referred to as 'secondary'. Most of the participants taught pupils in the 11 to 18 age range.

Data collection methods

Qualitative data were apt to address our research question: 'How do the sources of stress compare for state and private school teachers in England?'. Interviews and focus groups were an appropriate data collection method because they afforded a rich insight into teachers' experiences of stress and allowed opportunity for teachers to develop their narratives. In addition, focus groups enabled teachers to compare their experiences and to identify amongst themselves which experiences and stressors were common to their sector. The semi-structured interviews and focus groups asked teachers questions concerning the best and worst aspects of their work, the areas of their work that they found stressful and questions concerning workloads and experiences of internal and external school monitoring. Example questions included: 'Can you tell me about the best/worst parts of your job?'; 'What, if anything, contributes to stress at work?' and 'Can you tell me about your

workload?'. To support interpretation, the analysis makes it clear which teachers worked in the same schools.

Data analysis

We organised our data using MAXQDA – a software for qualitative data analysis. In the first instance we explored our data for descriptions of 'stress' or 'stressors' in accordance to Kyriacou's (2001) definition of stress as the experience of 'unpleasant' or 'negative' emotions. Although the categories were adaptive, we had designed a preliminary coding framework based on previous research (Appendix 1). Prior research indicated that teachers might experience stress from workload, accountability/monitoring, pupil behaviour, parents, poor collegial relationships and time pressures – and these factors became our initial categories for coding.

After conducting this initial coding, we were able to refine the codes and sub-codes. Next, as is recommended by a 'framework analysis' approach, we mapped overlap and interactions between the categories (Srivastava & Thomson, 2009). Following this review, we explored the data according to different variables (e.g. state/private; day/boarding and primary/secondary) in order to identify if there were any themes that were more dominant in one kind of school compared to another. After this, we began to interpret the findings in relation to the job demands-resources theory to better understand how and why in some contexts activities (such as marking) become stressors.

Findings and discussion

We found that state and private school participants identified different areas as key contributors towards stress. Private school participants emphasised parents as a source of stressful accountability, whereas the state school teachers typically emphasised burdensome workloads compounded by accountability-motivated school policies as their primary stressor. In addition, we found differences in the nature of the teachers' narratives. Some teachers in the state sector described their work as intensely stressful, whereas the private school teachers typically described milder experiences of stress. The private school participants also indicated that they felt well-resourced to meet the demands of their work by long holidays and appropriate levels of autonomy. When considering these overall findings, as previously outlined, it should be remembered that the private school sample was drawn from six schools – the operations of which do not necessarily typify other kinds of private schools, for example schools that are not affiliated with ISC.

Unmanageable workloads

For state school teachers working in both primary and secondary phase education, workload was identified as a main stressor, a finding that has been mirrored in previous research (Ofsted, 2019; Perryman & Calvert, 2020). Teachers spoke of their workloads as 'absolutely overwhelming', 'daunting', 'relentless' and others used the image of 'drowning' in work. Feelings of stress arose from both the volume of work and the nature of work. Some spoke of the number of books that they needed to mark, and this was particularly stressful for teachers when they felt that the marking did not help pupils. One primary school teacher, for example, stated that she forged her pupils' handwriting in exercise books to evidence that they had read and acted on feedback. She performed what Ball (2003) refers to as an act of 'fabrication' whereby she feigned evidence of pupil achievement in order to appease her school managers who routinely scrutinised her marking.

There were exceptions in the state school sample. Lesley, a state school secondary teacher, said that she did not 'have an issue with workload' which she credited to effective school policies that

had enabled the 'removal of unnecessary marking'. She believed that her experience was not 'normal'. In a separate interview, Emma, a secondary school middle leader in a different school, relayed a similar experience to that of Lesley. Emma explained that she could 'manage [her] workload very well' because there were effective policies in place to eradicate burdensome workloads especially from marking. Lesley and Emma's experiences of manageable workloads were not typical of the state school sample; they may have worked in school contexts where managers were early adopters of the workload reduction strategies encouraged by the Department for Education.

Private school teachers also spoke of long working hours. Those in the surveyed day schools discussed 'intense' days and those in the boarding schools, or who had prior experience in boarding schools, characterised such working days as protracted. Boarding school teachers might supervise pupils into the evening or throughout the night, and teachers in both day and boarding schools explained that they were expected to participate in weekend work. Despite long and/or intense hours many spoke of finding working in a 'co-curricular' capacity as 'rewarding', 'satisfying' and 'enjoyable'. Significantly, many private sector participants spoke of holidays acting as 'compensation' for their long working weeks, whereas only one state school teacher explicitly identified holidays as a resource that equipped her to deal with the demands of her intense term-time work.

Despite long holidays that might mitigate the onset of high levels of stress, there were teachers from two different private schools who suggested that workload was stressful. Robert, a private secondary school classroom teacher, believed that there was a 'sink or swim' policy in his school and 'if you do sink, [management] are quite happy to replace you'. Katie and Madeline, both teachers in the same private day primary school, were participants in the same focus group as Robert. They also indicated that 'wellbeing' was not a 'priority' in their workplace and that staff were overtimetabled as the school was in financial difficulties. It is crucial to note that these more critical voices from the private sector emerged in a private school focus group which was held in a community centre with teachers from different schools. It may, therefore, have been the case that teachers in the other private school focus groups presented mainly positive accounts of school management while on school grounds, and with a larger group of colleagues.

Policies not pupils

Contrary to other studies, pupil behaviour did not emerge as a prevalent stressor in state school or private school data (Harmsen, Helms-Lorenz, Maulana, & van Veen, 2018). There were some instances of teachers from the state sector reporting extreme incidents of pupil misconduct (one had been physically assaulted by a pupil), but such reports were exceptional. At the end of interviews and focus groups in which pupil behaviour had been absent from discussion, the interviewer commented on the matter and remarked that pupil behaviour had not been mentioned as a stressor. Navinder, a state secondary school teacher, explained that 'it's not the children' but 'these never-ending tasks' that originate from 'leadership and management within schools' that make teachers' work stressful. As has been reported in other research, some participants in this study explained that support from school leaders and colleagues, or the benefit of teaching experience, helped them to effectively manage stress and enjoy their work with pupils (Gordon, 2020; Richards et al., 2018).

Private school teachers spoke occasionally of concerns about 'entitled' pupils being 'rude'. However, for the most part, behaviour was characterised as good, and several compared it favourably to the state sector. Katie (primary day school teacher) stated that her 'biggest problem' was whether or not 'pupils cross their legs' whereas she imagined that in the state sector 'most teachers get chairs thrown at them'. Although this projection was not reflected in the narratives of the participating state school teachers, it provides an illustration of some private school practitioners' perceptions of the relative stressors of each sector.

Pushy parents

Private school teachers identified parents, as opposed to pupils, as ‘more of an issue at [private] schools’. Interviewees from different schools considered that parents applied ‘pressure’ and were ‘very hands on’. Teachers explained that parents expected high academic outcomes (sometimes regardless of the pupil’s interest in academic work), and that they demanded instant replies to emails, meetings at short notice and were inclined to ask for ‘investigations’ into teachers’ conduct if their child was aggrieved by any kind of school sanction. Teachers interpreted these ‘unpleasant’ interactions as a consequence of the ‘business client’ nature of the relationship which positioned teachers as ‘more answerable to the parents’ compared to state school teachers who were more accountable to government. Several interviewees made comments of the type that parents were paying ‘large sums of money’ and thus held high expectations for what one teacher termed the end ‘product’.

In contrast to this experience, participants from the state sector rarely noted parents as a direct source of stress. There was one cursory mention of a time-consuming parent who wanted daily reports on their child’s progress, but beyond this the theme of difficult parents was largely absent from the data. It may have been missing from the data because participants were adequately resourced by school managers to cope with any potentially difficult relationships with parents. By way of example, one secondary classroom teacher in the state sector, Erin, noted that it was a strong point of her school that she was ‘well supported’ by management. Several others commented that they had good relationships with parents who were supportive of school. For other teachers, the stresses of parental demands and pupil misbehaviour may have been of relative unimportance compared to the ‘overwhelming’ workloads and intense scrutiny that they reported.

Work scrutiny

State school participants reflected on the sources of their stressful workloads. In some cases, they perceived that school leaders enacted burdensome policies that led to excessive workloads. Erin (secondary school classroom teacher) commented that she engaged with ‘tedious’ marking because she felt she needed to ‘mark the books as if next week someone’s going to look at them and scrutinise them and say, “oh, you didn’t mark this”’. When discussing why school leaders might implement policies that led to burdensome workloads, participants attributed these accountability cultures to the wider demands of the schools’ inspectorate (Ofsted). Rosalyn, a primary teacher, suggested that school leaders scrutinised classroom staff through fear of not being adequately prepared for an external inspection:

[School leaders] are just frightened. I almost feel sorry for them [. . .] There is that fear, but it’s that genuine fear of Ofsted because they can. . . and at times they *are* removed from their jobs.

The idea of high-stakes accountability being ‘filtered down’ to classroom teachers from school leaders (fearful of the consequences of a poor Ofsted report) was a prevalent theme in the data and has been reported elsewhere (Perryman, 2009). The finding mirrors the Department for Education’s teacher recruitment and retention strategy that attributes burdensome workloads in part to school accountability cultures prompted by a desire to prepare teachers for high-stakes Ofsted inspections (Department for Education, 2019b).

There were different views on the ways in which accountability manifests for private school teachers. Some emphasised that parents were the primary agents of accountability and intimated that they were free from unnecessary scrutiny from school managers. Others reported that school

monitoring policies (e.g. book marking inspections and unannounced classroom inspections) were sources of stress. Rupert, a private secondary day school classroom teacher, stated that he had ‘an acceptable, manageable level of work’ and he linked this to his autonomy. He enjoyed being ‘a master of [his] own domain’ and the ‘autonomy of the role’ that was ‘free from outside inference’. He clarified that he felt free from unnecessary intra-school scrutiny: ‘no one’s saying, “You must teach this in this lesson, in this way, have you done this yet? Where’s the evidence of this?”’. He continued to suggest that managers were not ‘coming into the lesson and asking, “What are [the teachers] doing? Why are they doing it?”’. This feeling of autonomy appeared to resource Rupert to meet the demands of his work and to experience it not only as manageable but also as enjoyable.

While Rupert’s view was shared across some participants from other schools, Katie and Madeline who worked in the same private primary school felt that their school managers implemented unnecessary levels of scrutiny. Katie described her school’s lesson monitoring policy as ‘overkill’ and ‘annoying’ and Madeline detailed a stressful experience of observation whereby the observer ‘burst into [her] room’ and provided feedback that she did not find ‘particularly helpful’. She perceived the inspection and feedback was offered only for the purpose of ‘ticking boxes’ for an imagined future inspection from the Independent Schools Inspectorate (a body overseen by Ofsted that is licensed to inspect some private schools in England). When asked why they thought their school might have implemented such monitoring practices (specifically unannounced inspections), Katie posited that her school’s managers were ‘very conscious of what the state sector [is] doing, and they pick up on these buzzwords’ believing that adopting the latest trends would be ‘mega for the business’. Robert, a secondary school teacher from a different private school, and a participant in the same focus group conversation, suggested that ineffective monitoring policies were ‘like some kind of virus’ spreading across the sector divide. These comments, when compared to Rupert’s experiences, indicate that the conditions in the private sector may vary considerably from teacher to teacher and school to school, and some schools may be closer in their policy approach to the state sector than others. In Katie and Robert’s views, this perceived mirroring of state school procedures was not desirable and led to stressful work experiences.

Stress intensity

Although there was clear variation in the narratives of the private school teachers, it was noticeable that their descriptions of the pressures that they felt were less intense compared to those of the state school participants. State sector narratives included descriptions of teaching as a highly stressful profession that left teachers struggling with long lasting negative psychological and emotional effects. Many of these descriptions of profoundly stressful work related to the volume and nature of work experienced by teaching staff. When asked about workload, Jenny, a state primary school classroom teacher, stated that ‘most days it feels overwhelming, to be honest, but that’s the way it is I think’. Jenny’s comment reflected a resignation that ‘overwhelming’ workload was a condition of her profession. Faced with managing the extreme demands of her work, it seemed that she could not conceive of any possible resources that could mitigate the effects. Similarly, Navinder (state secondary school classroom teacher) commented that ‘the workload is ever increasing and there just seems to be no end in sight’. His comment similarly revealed that he was ill-resourced to manage the flow of endless and ‘increasing’ work.

Another secondary state school respondent, Alison, detailed how she had looked to leave the profession to assume a position in a supermarket because she found her long working hours to be ‘soul destroying’. She explained that her heavy timetable had led her to lose all her ‘creativity and

enthusiasm', a comment that resounded with another primary teacher (Rosalyn) who spoke of teachers 'broken' by their workloads. In Rosalyn's case, she had opted to assume part-time hours to balance the demands of her job with other aspects of her life.

Although private school teacher Robert spoke of his school's managers having a 'sink or swim' attitude to staff's ability to manage stress, many others from the sector spoke of workloads that were 'acceptable', 'manageable' or intense but mitigated by long holidays. Others, particularly those in boarding schools, pointed to the physical environment as a resource that helped them manage stressful workdays. They perceived themselves as lucky to enjoy 'beautiful' views and surroundings.

The finding that state school teachers experienced their work as more intensely stressful compared to the sampled private school teachers becomes significant when the link between teacher stress and pupil outcomes is considered. The benefits of private education for pupils are well-documented. Compared to state school pupils, the privately educated can expect a pay premium throughout their working lives and are much more likely to attend elite universities and enter high-status professions (Green et al., 2018; Macmillan et al., 2015). If state school pupils are taught by teachers with high levels of stress and poor wellbeing, and these negative teacher states are linked to pupil outcomes (McLean & Connor, 2015; Ramberg et al., 2020) – this could further compound the disadvantage associated with being state-educated.

Conclusion

From the research we concluded that the teachers in our sample experienced similar sources of stress, although most private school participants articulated the experience of this stress as less intense compared to those working in state schools. This finding supports other research which has tentatively indicated that private sector teachers are more satisfied with their work compared to those in the state sector (Micklewright et al., 2014). We found that although state school teachers enjoyed their work with the pupils they served, they were fatigued, exhausted and 'broken' by burdensome workloads. Other work has found that such conditions contribute to employees' decisions to leave state school teaching, and for those that remain in service, poor wellbeing and high stress are negatively correlated with pupil outcomes (CooperGibson, 2018; McLean & Connor, 2015). With these considerations in mind, it is important to address the sources of excessive stress for state school practitioners, and consider how best to resource these much needed staff.

Some of the resources available to private school teachers – and particularly boarding school teachers – such as attractive physical environments and longer school holidays were specific to the sector and could not be easily introduced in the state sector. However, there was some evidence to suggest that teachers in both sectors might be resourced to manage stress through appropriate levels of autonomy. Indeed, those who depicted themselves as adequately autonomous and free from unhelpful intra-school scrutiny spoke of high work-enthusiasm and engagement. Other research indicates that school leaders can support autonomy through the cultivation of supportive communities that encourage and enable sharing of practice, reflective dialogue, collective responsibility and the cultivation of common values (Stoll et al., 2006; Valckx et al., 2020). Strong supervisory support and bespoke mentoring can further support teachers manage the demands of their work (Bakker et al., 2007; Gordon, 2020).

Participating state school teachers indicated that stress from heavy workloads resulting from accountability-motivated school policies overwhelmed other factors of potential stress such as relationships with parents, colleagues or pupil behaviour. This finding accords with recent research

into teacher retention in England that emphasises workload as a core problem (CooperGibson, 2018; Perryman & Calvert, 2020). We consider that school leaders in the state sector might usefully continue to address teacher workload and review teacher monitoring policies and practices in relation to staff stress. There was some limited evidence in our study of state school teachers who worked in contexts where workload management strategies had been effectively implemented, and these teachers described improved workload stress compared to peers. Existing case studies and guidance on effective workload-reduction strategies (such as workload reduction toolkits) could provide a practical and sector-appropriate source of help for school leaders interested in improving workload quantity and quality in their schools (Department for Education, 2018b; Teacher Workload Review Group, 2016). Allen and Sims's (2018) work makes a further series of practical recommendations for addressing burdensome workloads. One such recommendation is that schools restrict working hours each day in order to identify which tasks teachers prioritise as essential to the functioning of the school, and which tasks (and associated policies) are non-essential and thus can be discarded.

In the private sector, our small sample indicated that some contexts might benefit from a similar workload and accountability policy review, although a focus on supporting staff's capacity to navigate difficult communications with parents might prove more pertinent. While this study is limited in its capacity to identify practical strategies for teachers and school leaders to manage stressful encounters or complaints from fee-paying parents, this is an area that could benefit from further sector-specific investigation.

As a concluding comment, we found evidence of greater variation within the private sector than we were able to report within the parameters of this paper. There remain several future avenues for exploration including comparative studies of the different sources of stress for private day school teachers compared to those in boarding schools, for example. In addition to this, there is potential for a more granular understanding of the way in which teacher stress affects pupils' educational experiences across and within sectors. Further qualitative study of the association between teacher stress and pupils' school experience might yield valuable findings for school and sector leaders looking to better understand interactions within the school ecosystem.

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Appendix I

Table A1. Codebook.

Major code	Sub-code I
Identify stressor	Identify sub-code
Workload	Volume Quality Task (e.g. marking, planning/preparing, direct teaching time)
Monitoring	Surprise methods Unclear criteria Fear of judgement/consequence
Pupil behaviour	Low level disruption Violence Distressed pupils e.g. by exam targets/bullying
Resources	Lack of resources e.g. teaching assistants Large classes Teachers purchasing own items Unreliable equipment
Parents	Unsupportive of school Demanding of time Unrealistic explanations Parental complaints
Colleagues	Unsupportive Absence Social exclusion
Time	Structure of day e.g. short rest breaks Working hours Holiday periods
Other	Personal factors National factors (e.g. pressure from inspection)

Note. Codebook categories derived from: Boyle et al. (1995), Borg and Riding (1991), Borg et al. (1991), Higton et al. (2017), von der Embse et al. (2015).