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## **‘In Our Daily Struggles’: Diaries as a Tool for Teacher Wellbeing**

### **Abstract:**

This article explores the connection between teachers, diary-writing and self-reflection in both historical and contemporary settings. It uses the insights of one pilot engagement project with present-day teachers, ‘Reimagining the Diary’ (2018-19), to explore the *longue durée* history of reflective writing within the teaching profession and to highlight the current problems facing teachers and educationalists looking to use self-reflection as a tool for improving ‘well-being’. This article is deliberately interdisciplinary and problem-focused, using insights from historical studies, law, medicine and education to explore the current teacher-retention crisis in the UK and the relevance of life-writing and reflection to it. It suggests that, whilst more research is necessary, engaging professionals with the form of the diary can itself be beneficial, as can using creative, context-specific forms of life-writing. In this way, this article uses the changing relationship between teacher and diary to explore wider shifts in self-reflective practice and selfhood.

**Keywords:** education, diary, time, self-reflection, creativity

### **Introduction**

The historical and literary connections between diary-writing, the teaching profession and what we now call ‘well-being’ run deep. Not only has the teaching profession used life-writing as a teaching practice since the middle of the twentieth century, if not earlier, but modern teacher-training and pedagogic practices have placed great emphasis on reflective writing (Steedman 1999; Marcos et al, 2011). Many teachers themselves

have been prodigious diary-writers and some have found commercial success publishing their diary-based memoirs (McCourt, 2005). Others have engaged with life-writing projects in society at large: one such teacher from Sheffield sent her diary to the famous social survey Mass Observation in 1940, detailing the bombing of her local area and the effect on her teaching. She noted that whilst the children had an ‘attitude of cheerful acceptance’ to the bombing raid, the mood in the staffroom was quite different, where other teachers feared a ‘winter of sleepless nights and long blackouts.’ She reported dissatisfaction at the unevenness of air raid provision among different local authorities and felt it was important to say so in her Mass Observation diary, but that she was nevertheless slightly ashamed of their attitudes ‘outside the staffroom’ as they seemed unpatriotic (Mass Observation, 1940). Like many teacher-diarists, she reflected not only on her personal experiences and anxieties, but her professional opinions and the collective identity of other professionals within her school setting, which itself occupied a particular historical context.

In fact, this particular extract from Mass Observation - a well-used source for social historians - became the starting point of our investigation into contemporary teachers’ life-writing practices and attitudes. Between 2018-19, our interdisciplinary team from the University of Bristol, UK, conducted a multi-layered study of teacher diary-writing entitled ‘Reimagining the Diary’ and we used this extract in a focus group with teachers based in the Bristol region. Committed to engaging teacher-participants with the research process itself, our team presented the Mass Observation diary of the Sheffield schoolteacher for the consideration of a small focus group. Commenting on the source, one teacher noted that:

Well, from the extracts you learn something about the world of that time. I don't think many people would learn much about the world outside my life from my diary - they would learn about me and how I feel, but I gave barely any reference to world events (Focus Group, May 2019).

Another teacher echoed this, stating that 'it was all about me and my diary ... it was just me, me, me' (ibid). In a contemporary world not short of note-worthy events and in a professional context full of external pressures, teachers told us that they used diary-writing as a space for *themselves*, a personal 'space' of writing. For some, the very term 'diary' was the archetypal act of personal reflection. A further teacher summed up the need for such a space (both physical and temporal):

As a teacher, most of my time is 'for' other people - if not classes of children, then for parents and emails to other teachers and so on. Even in the evenings, I am preparing for the next day even though I am sluggish by that point ('Focus Group, May 2019).

The time for oneself and for reflection, so instilled in teachers during their training, was depicted as fleeting. Time is under particular scrutiny in diary-writing, its presence or absence starkly exposed (Lejeune, 2009; Salter, 2010; Stanley and Dampier, 2007). In asking teachers to reflect on historical diaries and then on their own practice, different notions and understandings of time emerge, as well as a sense of *loss* of time and of the now almost extinct 'space' for private reflection.

It is the connection between teachers, diary-writing and time that this article seeks to explore, in both a historical and contemporary context. Using the findings of the 'Reimagining the Diary' pilot project, we suggest that by exploring the central elements of diary-writing and by involving specific users in co-designing its form, the

diary itself may help address the feelings of loss of time, anxiety and overburden that characterise the contemporary teaching profession in the UK, with implications for other groups of 'busy' professionals too. This integrative approach and the careful attention paid to teachers' views on diary-writing also reveal in more detail *how* teachers actually reflect through writing, helping teachers to 'attain grounded practices as well as evaluate the difficulties of implementing what is promoted about reflection' (Marcos et al, 2011, 34). In other words, understanding teacher diary-writing can help educational researchers and practitioners to consider what is gained from self-reflection, what it involves and what measures might help overcome impediments to iterative reflection.

Furthermore, in using both historical and contemporary frameworks to explore these issues, we demonstrate how professional identity and notions of work and leisure time have shifted significantly during the twentieth century, as well as pointing out the present crisis in teacher well-being and retention (Worth, 2018; Foster, 2019). Tracing the changing use and meaning of reflective writing, we highlight that in some professions, such as medicine, reflective writing has now become a mandatory tool of professional improvement. These tools, grudgingly accepted by some or 'enforced' by others (Huxford 2015; Steedman 1999), have created something of an image problem for reflective writing. They represent a real cultural challenge for those seeking to use life-writing to improve well-being but point again to the value of context-specific co-designing of life-writing material. Such research aims are deliberately interdisciplinary and problem-focused, using insights from historical studies, law, medicine and education to answer a present-day challenge. This article first sets out the broader history of professionals and life writing, before exploring the perceived and actual diminution of private 'space' and time - culturally, professionally and practically - by

present-day professionals. It then explores the current educational landscapes and the parameters of the ‘Reimagining the Diary’ project, before reflecting on its key research findings and suggestions for future research. In this way, this article uses the changing relationship between teacher and diary to explore wider shifts in self-reflective practice and selfhood.

Beyond these areas, this article has direct implications for the study of ‘well-being’. For all its current pervasiveness, the term is applied in a dizzying range of settings and has several contemporary meanings (White and Blackmore, 2016). However, we draw on a definition that ‘ties together professional and personal wellbeing’ (Kelly, 2019, 84). The World Health Organisation defines well-being as ‘a state of well-being in which the individual realizes [*sic*] his or her own abilities, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and is able to make a contribution to his or her community’ (2018). Despite offering this definition, we understand that the meaning of well-being varies for each person, particularly in their personal writing; any definition must therefore keep the capacity of ‘the individual [to realise] his or her own abilities.’ Yet whilst ‘well-being’ is a potentially problematic term, it is also a highly *recognisable* one. It offers an accessible, practical phrase through which to explore issues of anxiety, happiness and fulfilment in professional settings, using a common term that employers, teachers, and researchers all recognise to some extent. Using such recognisable terminology is a crucial component of our study: in line with other ‘engaged’ research, we argue throughout that whilst we can provide important context to this study, definitions of well-being, self and life-writing, as well as research questions and their potential answers, must emanate from the teaching community themselves.

## **A Matter of Timing: The Changing Relationship between Professionals and Self-Reflection**

Professional settings produce specific kinds of writer and even fashion both identity and subjective outlook. As Carolyn Steedman has observed, the quotidian acts of logging and note-taking which form part of professional roles (from the police and military to the schoolroom) come to influence how writers view themselves and narrate their own lives. In some cases, they even purloin the very materials they use for self-narrative from their employers (Steedman, 1988, 63). Teachers have long been asked to produce specific reflective forms of writing as part of their professional role, many of which have prompted them to reflect on the day or week just passed. One of the earliest forms was the school logbook, established in 1862 and kept by the head teacher, which captured the ‘cycles and rhythms of school life’ (Wright, 2012, 160). Despite strict instructions from the Education Department, lengths of entry varied considerably and depended heavily on the head-teacher’s writing ability and reflective tendencies (ibid). Some focused on pupils’ activities, whereas others commented on visitors, extra-curricular activities, and even staff performance. Reflective writing in some form thus emerged as a corner-stone of the modern educational system from the late nineteenth century. In the twentieth century, applicants to teacher training colleges were asked to ‘write about themselves’ as part of the application process and by the post-war period, autobiographical writing had extended to the classroom, forming a central pedagogic method (Steedman, 1999, 49).

However, with all these forms of professional documentation and reflection, we can question whether such acts were voluntary. Our contemporary vision of the self as private, personal and praise-worthy should not obscure our understanding of the range

of life-writing where that self has been articulated: reflective writing can be *enforced* in the classroom, in the workplace or even down the barrel of a gun (Steedman, 1999; Huxford, 2015). For instance, it is a present-day requirement of registration and re-registration in the United Kingdom that medical practitioners demonstrate reflective practices (most often written) to improve their skills and judgement (General Medical Council, 2019). In these mandated accounts, an emphasis on reflection and self-improvement has potentially given way to more regulatory, organisationally and economically productive imperatives. In response to enforced self-reflective writing as part of professional training, many teachers, doctors and medical professionals tasked with keeping *written* reflective accounts have revealed ‘considerable antipathy’ towards such reflection more generally; as Pamela Curtis et. al observed in a recent study of UK GPs, the majority of respondents held critical views of self-writing, some describing it as a ‘waste of time’ or ‘patronising’, whilst others felt they might be ‘judged’ (Curtis, Booth, Frankland and Harris, 2018, 316). This perception that their words might be used against them within medicine has potentially had even more damaging consequences, as seen with the recent Bawa Garba case, where a doctor’s reflections on the death of a young patient ‘fed-into’ proceedings that saw her lose her medical registration (Dyer and Cohen, 2018; Curtis, Booth, Frankland and Harris, 2018, 316-7). Instead of promoting well-being, such enforced reflective writing risks causing pressure, anxiety and resentment.

Yet there is a further set of *cultural* assumptions working against professionals using diaries to manage well-being, which contrasts with this mandatory professional reflective writing. A widespread idea among our teacher-participants, and present in society at large, is that diary-writing represents the height of spontaneity, creativity and voluntary reflection (Henderson, 2019, 157). This more positive image of self-reflective



writing can be equally unhelpful to busy professional writers: the historical and literary baggage of ‘the diary’ as the epitome of free expression can alarm writers when trying to unlock diary-writing’s potential power in improving self-perception and well-being, as well as closing doors to groups and individuals who feel that the diary is outside their specific socio-cultural milieu (Maynes, Pierce and Laslett, 2008, 54). The perceptions people hold of what diary-writing *should* be, must therefore be taken seriously when doing engaged research in this area. Finding ways to overcome these assumptions or disassociate the diary from its negative connotations or intimidating precedents thus became a central research aim in the ‘Reimagining the Diary’ project.

The historical baggage of the term ‘diary’ also reveals the much broader contexts of time and self-reflection in which professionals write (or don’t write), both of which have also changed over time. Many philosophers, medical practitioners, and modern ‘well-being thinkers’ agree that the reduction of work stress is important and advocate activities that either calm or uplift individuals. Whilst the idea that sharing one’s life could be one of these positive activities is a key assumption of twentieth-century therapeutic culture and the ‘psy’ disciplines, the idea does have more longstanding antecedents. Significantly, exhortations to this effect have long centred on the importance of a private space for reflection, or self-improvement (Carr, 2017, 139). The Aristotelian concept of *eudaimonia* (happiness) emphasised the need for ‘tranquillity, creative contemplation, and leisure’, or what Martineau describes as ‘Aristotle’s idea of leisure as an *active* time of self-realization’ (Martineau, 2017, 220 and 223). This notion that leisure activities should be used to improve the self, and thus contribute to general happiness carried forward through the ages with surprising regularity (at least for the leisured upper and middle classes), and can even be seen in the expressions of concern over unwholesome or passive leisure pursuits of the wider

population, such as gambling in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries or watching television in the twentieth (Cunningham, 2014, 136-7). As well as divided by class distinctions, Cunningham points out that such leisure time was still largely a male preserve, with many women after marriage unable to pursue or demarcate such leisure time.

The notion of leisure-time as an improving force and distinct from work-time endured into the twentieth century, though still imbued with class, regional and gender differences. However, significant recent changes in sociability and communications have perhaps challenged this distinction even more. Whilst commentators of virtually every age have highlighted how technological innovation has changed social relations - from the telegram to the 'invention' of writing itself (Ong, 1986) - this should not blind us to the significant changes that took place in the mid-twentieth century. First with the advent of the television to occupy leisure hours and, in very recent times, with the emergence of email and smart-phone technologies, Martineau argues that leisure time has become passive, and an overall contributor to individual unhappiness. These hours are spent in recreational consumerism, rather than in a 'journey of freedom and enlightenment.' (Martineau, 2017, 223; Carr, 2017; Todd, 2015). As Martineau points out, studies demonstrate that by and large individuals are not working longer hours, but that email, in particular, facilitates more intense and concurrent demands at work, leading to a general feeling that we are all working more (Martineau, 2017, 226; Newport, 2016). While for men life used to be divided between work and leisure, the mass participation of women in the workforce in the later twentieth century produced a discourse of 'work-life balance', really a balance between economically productive work and domestic work, which has now been furthered by smart-phones which facilitate the performance of domestic duties at work, and work duties in the home

(Cunningham, 2014). Gradually the importance of these older concepts of leisure have become eroded as work has come to dominate both the public and the private sphere. The importance of individual private space for leisure has been de-emphasised; the mental real estate for self-improvement and reflection has been colonised by technology-facilitated endless demands for our attention. This shift in leisure and work-time has collided with the growth of reflective writing for purely professional reasons, outlined above. Such mandated self-improvement further advances the encroachment of work into private spaces and has contributed to the sense of being ‘overwhelmed’.

Accordingly, there is significant multi-disciplinary support for the notion that reflection through journaling could re-capture an important private space that has been lost in the hyper-accelerated modern work-life whirlwind of busy professionals, such as teachers or medical practitioners, and potentially improve their well-being. However, we must also be mindful of the medical experience and ensure that, when attempting to use journaling to improve well-being in busy professions, it is important that the impetus and drive for that practice is entirely generated by the individual, and firmly within a personal private space not accessible to ‘work’. In short, such reflective writing must pay attention to the specific experiences and needs of professional groups, and the different assumptions about work, leisure and time that have developed over time in that professional world. We therefore next turn to the specific changes that the teaching profession has undergone in the recent past.

### **Performance and Reflection in the Current Educational Landscape**

Many of the pressures facing teachers in the UK have intensified during the last decade. Indeed, since the ‘Academies Act 2010’, academisation has continued to influence

England's current educational landscape. Although there were a small number of academies prior to this date, the Act and subsequent legislation in 2016 have called for 'state funded schools [to move] from the public to the private sector' (Ball, 2017, 131; Heilbronn, 2016, 306). Of course, this change was in motion before 2010. Ball (2017) quotes David Blunkett, Education Secretary in 2000 when the 'city academies' programme was first introduced, who stated it was their shared aim to "improve pupil performance and break the cycle of low expectations" (Ball, 2017, 102). Some schools actively chose to convert to academies, yet traditionally, the 'governance of schools was a partnership between government, locally elected education authorities (LEAs), teachers in schools, and the churches, which owned many of the schools' (Heilbronn, 2016, 306). However, large-scale academisation led to schools being owned by businesses, 'faith bodies', charities or, indeed, other schools (Keddie, 2014, 504) which, according to Ball, 'signal[ed] the break-up of the "national system of education locally administered"' (2017, 113). As a result of this transition to academisation, schools are meant to experience greater autonomy or 'freedoms' (Heilbronn, 2016, 306), including more money, increased flexibility around curriculum delivery and design, better staff pay and moveable term dates (Keddie, 502). As well as those outstanding schools choosing to become academies – also known as 'converter academies' – 'underperforming schools' are forced to become 'sponsored academies [...] [and] are placed under the direction of an institution or group of institutions that are held accountable for improving their performance' (Keddie, 504, quoting DfES, 2013). In June 2015 there were 4,676 academies, compared with 203 in May 2010, and almost 60 percent of state funded secondary schools are academies (Heilbronn, 315-6).

Yet, despite the number of academies and the perceived advantages of becoming an academy – advantages some schools have, undoubtedly, experienced – critics

highlight a plethora of issues around bringing private sector elements into education, many of which have had a direct impact on teachers. Heilbronn argues that such a shift means ‘education [is regarded] as a market commodity’, and that such an approach leads to profound philosophical tension between ‘philosophically grounded models of education and one based on schools performing in a marketplace’ (306- 307). Making education into a product contrasts powerfully with the vision of education as a ‘development of one’s own capacities for autonomous use versus development of external conveniences for others to depend upon’ (McMurty, 1991, 213, in Heilbronn, 2016, 308). Indeed, the logical consequence of this shift, according to Keddie, is an ‘audit culture’ with increased ‘surveillance and rigidity’ (504) in order to make sure that the exam results – the ‘product’– are as high as possible, thus erasing the perceived autonomy of the academy. This 'audit culture' might even be interpreted as a corollary of a wider 'audit society' (Power, 1999, 4) which became prevalent during the late 1980s and 1990s. Revealingly, Keddie suggests that ‘moves to increase school autonomy have, however, not necessarily led to an improvement in students’ educational attainment’ which, she argues, ‘indicates that such moves in and of themselves are neither a “panacea” nor a “magic bullet” for improvement’ (505). Ball confirms this view when he suggests that ‘academisation is not always successful nor is it the only proven alternative for a struggling school’ (2017, 133).

What has this change meant for teachers themselves? Heilbronn likens their roles in academies ‘to that of managers in commercial firms’ (307), potentially de-professionalizing them or running counter to the role for which they are trained and motivated. The role of the teacher in such a setting is potentially outcome-driven, focused solely on performative measures that do not enable the teacher ‘to self-manage’ (Heilbronn, 309). Instead, teaching becomes ‘prescriptive’ (ibid), and teachers are

“fix[ed]” (Winter, 2017, 63) into the role of ‘spectators’ (Thwaite, 2017, 914), pulled into a ‘struggle over the teacher’s soul’ (Ball, 2003, 217). Such changes have potentially longer-term implications too. Further research is required to grasp fully the impact these discursive and practical changes to the educational landscape might have on those entering, and staying in, the profession. Teacher recruitment and retention in England are serious issues, as seen in DfE’s latest strategy on these areas (DfE, February 2019). One stark summary of the profession appeared in 2018:

Britain has a severe teacher shortage. New recruits have been below target for five years in a row and applications for training courses are down a third again this year. Combine this with a quarter of new teachers leaving the job within three years, plus high drop-out rates among women in their thirties who make up much of the profession, and you can see the problem. (McInerney, 2018, quoted in Kelly, 2019, 82)

The shocking results in the recently published *Teacher Wellbeing Index* (2019) support these figures. According to their survey, 57 per cent of educational practitioners have considered leaving the profession, with ‘workload cited’ as the main reason (74 per cent) (*Teacher Wellbeing Index*, 2019, 7). Furthermore, 74 per cent of educational practitioners found it difficult to ‘switch off and relax’, which was ‘a major contributing factor to a negative/work-life balance’ (ibid, 6).

What place then can diary-writing play in this pressured environment? Martin and Goodman argue that teachers can ‘make themselves through the act of writing’ (2004, 6). Goodley (2018) notes that diary writing can even help the teacher move beyond an age of measurement and reclaim the autonomous self of being a teacher. Educational researchers thus suggest that perhaps it is here, in the pages of a diary, where the authentic self breathes again, and those individual values can come back to

the forefront. Goodley suggests that diaries can also enable you to ‘re-enter’ a situation at a point of change and to direct this change in your writing before acting it out in the classroom: in a diary, the ‘human’ side of the teacher can be recalled and repurposed. But can this be done in the current climate and with the abiding assumptions about diary-writing, leisure and work time? Whilst these questions cannot be answered in full within this short research article, we argue that people-centred and creative approaches to diary-writing are one way in which self-reflection can offer private space for self-knowledge and improvement.

### **‘Reimagining the Diary’: Values, Method and Scope**

The project was funded by the Brigstow Institute at the University of Bristol. Brigstow’s vision is to bring researchers from different disciplines together and to work with external partners in the city to consider ‘new ways of living and being’ (Brigstow Institute, 2019). At its core is the premise that ‘participants’ (a problematic term in such a schema) and external partners are equally involved in research. Whilst definitions and methods of co-production vary across settings and disciplines, our approach was underpinned by the idea of a ‘shared issue’ that academics, teacher-participants and creatives could all consider, taking the ‘experiential knowledge’ of all seriously and drawing together all those keen to solve a particular problem (Banks et al. 2018, Hart et al 2013, 288). The pressing issues of teacher well-being and retention, outlined above, represented an urgent problem that teachers had an equal, if not greater, stake in solving than the researchers. Such shared issues also require going beyond the academic setting and the ‘Reimagining the Diary’ team included Bristol-based interactive design studio, Stand + Stare. Stand + Stare’s considerable experience in working with the life-

narratives of under-represented groups (including *Tangible Memories* (2016) with local old-age care residents) brought creative and non-academic solutions to this ‘real world’ problem; furthermore, Stand + Stare have developed their own diary format, ‘Mayfly’, a sound-based journal, which began conversations both in the team and the wider research project about the many different forms diary-writing could take.

Our pilot project worked largely with secondary school teachers, owing to contacts within the research team but also due to the particularly acute problems facing secondary schools in the next decade, with the ‘perfect storm’ of rising pupil numbers, below-target recruitment and the numbers of teachers leaving their jobs (Worth, 2018). Teachers were invited by email to attend an information evening in the summer of 2018 and a bigger launch event in March 2019. The launch event was also combined with a writing workshop with Carnegie-nominated children’s author Dr Mimi Thebo. Following this event, fifteen teachers took part in a week-long writing exercise, tasked with keeping a diary for one week (choosing from a six-week period), during their teaching terms and using a choice of different modern diary formats. Eleven of the fifteen teachers described themselves as ‘experienced’ teachers, with the remainder equally split between training and newly qualified teachers. All but one teacher taught at secondary level. The majority of teachers identified as female (eleven), a slightly higher proportion than figures the UK secondary school sector at large (World Bank, 2016).<sup>1</sup> The research team did not see diary entries, nor did they ask for teachers to reproduce any of their diary extracts. Instead, teacher-participants were asked to fill out a detailed series of questions on the process of diary-keeping and its place in their lives based on their experiences during the week. Teacher-participants were also invited to

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<sup>1</sup> According to the World Bank, 63% of the secondary school teacher workforce were female in 2016.



attend a focus group with researchers and the creative team, where the full group discussed the historical diary mentioned above (held by the Mass Observation archive) and reflected further on the process of diary-keeping and its relationship to their professional and personal lives.<sup>2</sup>

Given our desire to understand the perceived meanings attached to the diary and its form in a specific professional context, many initial questions revolved around the format of the diary. Teachers were given a choice of stationery at the launch day and not restricted to just one diary. The majority (80 per cent) opted for a plain lined journal; only two used the 'Mayfly' sound journal and three used a 'Kindness jotter' (a popular choice in high-street stationers containing spaces to log 'acts of kindness'), either in addition or instead of the plain journal. Many teachers explained their choice of the plain journal as the most 'comfortable format' (Survey, 2019): the empty page felt familiar but refreshing and, as one teacher noted, could be used as a 'stress buster' (ibid). The plain journal, perhaps, acted as the canvas, which could then be embellished with writing, drawing, and/or other forms of self-expression, and seemed, for some, to carry fewer expectations of regularity and length. Whilst the blank page could be intimidating (Lejeune, 2008, 175), the simple page seemed to hold appeal for many. As one teacher noted: 'The sense of the blank page gives room to be as creative as you can' (Survey, 2019). Another teacher shared this feeling, stating: 'Having a free space meant I could encourage my poet. With a more formalized structure I couldn't start for thinking about limiting my writing' (ibid).<sup>3</sup> Only one diary was digital in format, with one teacher keeping 'free-writing' (ibid) notes on their mobile phone. The perception of

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<sup>2</sup> All fifteen participants completed the anonymous, online, questionnaire, but only four participants attended the focus group (held on a weekday as a twilight session). This difference in number perhaps even further reflects the time pressures on contemporary teachers.

<sup>3</sup> It should be noted that this language of 'poet' and 'editor' emanated from a model designed by Dr Mimi Thebo and used in the 2019 teacher workshop.

the digital as public, not private perhaps played a role here: Hall similarly emphasizes the power of reflection and how it can be used to develop the professional self, but he suggests that, with blogging, reflection has changed from a private activity into a public discussion (Hall, 2018, 37). When asked to expand on their choice, teachers felt they needed ‘space to be free’ for their recollections and expressed a preference for ‘long-form’ (Survey, 2019) writing or prose, hence the majority opting for the plain lined journal. Those who opted for the commercially popular ‘kindness’ and ‘one-line’ diaries (popularised by authors including Sharma, 2016) pointed to how they encouraged positive feelings ‘over a[n] extended period of time’ and, for one person, acted as a reminder ‘that I can think positively’ (Survey, 2019). One teacher even noted how they had tasked their tutor group to carry out ‘random acts of kindness’, which ‘inspired’ them to keep this sort of diary themselves (ibid).

From the first moment of diary selection though, the expectations and assumptions of the diary form were discussed. In the focus group, teachers were aware of the ‘weight of [their] words’ and put forward the idea that their words had to have meaning, or fulfill a bigger purpose in order for it to be of ‘value’ (Focus Group, 2019); the fear of knowing ‘where to start’ and feeling ‘self-conscious’ came through in the survey, and the adjective ‘difficult’ was used by numerous teachers when reflecting on the first day of keeping a diary (Survey, 2019). Jennifer Jarvis (1991) notes similar views in her piece on the use of ‘learning records’ with non-native trainee English teachers. She suggests that ‘the word “diary” seems to have associations in many people’s mind with “confessions” or “bearing the soul”’ (1991, 135) and that, as a result of this, it is more associated with the ‘private sphere’. Establishing audience and purpose are therefore important; individuals need to be clear in their minds about why

they are keeping a diary and who they are keeping the diary for in order to make the diary an authentic, rather than performative, space, though the two remain connected.

As well as the pitfalls of the term ‘diary’, teachers’ most common reference was to *time*: time to write, how long to write, making time, forgetting time, feelings of guilt over time spent for oneself and many other issues. Teachers recalled how time ‘never stops’ and time is always ‘racing away’; days are spent ‘firefighting’ and being caregivers, rather than care-takers. As one teacher noted, it was ‘difficult to find time to sit back and reflect’ (Survey, 2019). One teacher described how they were ‘going to write to *give myself time*’ (Focus Group, 2019), but another stated that ‘it’s that constant push pull against what I wanted to do and what I thought I should be doing’ (ibid). Time impacted on the form too: the freedom afforded by the plain journal related to the ability to write both long and short entries, and to write whenever and wherever because teachers wrote at different times of the day. ‘I loved the feeling of expression it [the diary] gave me,’ shared one teacher. ‘I enjoyed getting my thoughts down and reflecting on my day’ (Survey, 2019). Teachers shared that they felt ‘guilty’, ‘bereft’ or ‘annoyed’ (ibid) if they missed a day of keeping their diary; others discussed organizing their life and actions around the diary so that they had something positive to record. One teacher stated that ‘it was a shame I’d not managed to prioritize the time’, and another admitted that, when they were not able to make an entry, ‘there were a lot more thoughts charging around in my head that I hadn’t processed’ (ibid). Linking back to Jarvis’ article, there is an assumption here that the term ‘diary’ suggests that writing should be regular. One teacher noted that ‘It is difficult to put yourself into a routine’, particularly when, as stated by another, ‘time is quite pressured’ (ibid). We therefore considered whether our intervention had actually increased the sense of accountability, rather than reducing it.

However, for another teacher, reclaiming the audience and purpose of a diary for themselves meant that it was something they found ‘enjoyable’ and ‘less stressful’. This sense of reclaiming the diary as an individual was expanded upon by other teachers, for example: focusing on writing ‘short entries,’ giving a time constraint of ‘10 to 15 minutes’ and ‘set[ting] aside a period every evening’ (ibid). One teacher went further with ‘writing when I wanted to rather than every day’ (ibid). The power of the pronoun ‘I’ in this sentence, as well as the other data discussed here, begins to showcase the importance of personalizing the diary as a format and the scope such personalization might hold for a sense of empowerment in a time-stretched environment.

In the focus group, the negative influence of ‘screen time’ on self-reflection was discussed in detail, reflecting both Martineau’s argument about the blurring of work and leisure time, but also a wider postmodern view that the digital revolution has further fragmented the processes of self-creation (Elliott, 2008, 141). Some teachers felt that keeping a written, paper diary was a more ‘traditional’ format (described by one teacher in the survey as ‘refreshing and familiar’ Survey, 2019)) and represented an opportunity to step away from screens, whilst others discussed the sound jotter’s ability to embrace the technological age. A physical diary recalled to some an apparent return to a slower mode of thinking/pace of life, whether real or imagined, ‘because there’s something about the ink that is permanent’ (Focus Group, 2019). Some raised the idea that the diary could be a care-taking practice that becomes ‘the fabric of your everyday life’ (ibid) and offers you a ‘snapshot in time’ (ibid) to return to if and when you wanted. For one teacher in the survey, not only was ‘diary writing hugely beneficial to reflect[ing] on the day [and] gain[ing clarity]’, but it also helped them to ‘record precious moments that I never want to forget’ Survey, 2019).

Teachers involved in the project, many of whom took an active interest in the current retention and recruitment crisis, used the diary-writing experience, the survey and the focus group to offer their own perspectives on well-being too. As one teacher noted in a survey response:

I believe that diary writing is a good thing because it helps us to process our thoughts and see ourselves from a different perspective. I also think that diary writing helps us to understand what is important to us. It allows us to spot patterns in our daily struggles and focus on creating solutions. Survey, 2019)

Indeed, some teachers emphasized that writing a diary was a cathartic experience that lowered anxiety ('it was like talking almost to a friend' (Focus Group, 2019)). When asked directly, 93.3 per cent of teachers in the survey perceived an improvement in their 'well-being' from diary writing; it offered the opportunity for both therapy and celebration, and teachers recognized that, in order to maintain this, keeping a diary long-term is really important - 'until it became part of my ritual' ('Survey, 2019). The proportion who felt it improved well-being is significant, not necessarily as *proof* that diary-writing can improve well-being, but in indicating the prevalence of the *view* that such self-reflection is inherently positive (Elliot, 2007). Teachers saw self-reflection as critical in forming self-identity: 'I don't think you can help getting too deep [...] it just invites you to think [...] you're going to go on little journeys' ('Focus Group, 2019), one teacher recalled. In acknowledging how firmly held this viewpoint is, we can, as Goodley argues, facilitate 'the repositioning of a teacher as a person' (2018, 171). Some of this repositioning involves working with the grain of cultural thinking on the diary: the idea of 'offloading' came through strongly, as did the element of celebrating the small details in your day/life, which can sometimes get lost in the 'busyness'. For

Goodley, 'reflective practice offers a different route, one of noticing and reacting' (2018, 168). One of our teacher-participants described this attention to detail as a 'mindful' approach to diary-writing, logging small events, discontents and triumphs. Indeed, one person noted that they kept the diary with them 'at school, in order to jot down things of importance, both good and bad', whilst another teacher shared that the diary offered them the opportunity to 'process' and 'record' the 'School issues and worries that never seem to go away' Survey, 2019). Again, the professional context of self-reflection was not far away. However, one respondent demonstrated that such incursion was not necessarily negative:

It did highlight why I am in education; generally, experiences within education are positive, however when faced with a negative/challenging experience, the diary did make me think about how I could have approached things differently or in fact reinforce my actions at the time. ('Survey, 2019).

For this teacher, the blurring of work and leisure was not entirely negative and, in fact, the diary writing process had revealed to them their earlier motivations when they embarked on this vocational career.

Aware of our footprints as researchers, our initial and small-scale response was to undertake a creative overhaul of the diary, in collaboration with our creative partners. We used the above issues that teachers felt were important in diary-writing (self-reflection as improving, the aesthetic qualities of the diary and the value of time) and considered how to limit the factors that prevented them writing or reflecting (cultural and professional expectations of self-writing, accessibility and disability, time away from key tasks). Inspired by the idea expressed by one teacher that the diary is 'the vault of all your secrets' Survey, 2019), and conscious of the often tedious way that

reflective-writing has been used to log professional progress, teacher-participants, university researchers and creative collaborators all experimented with the idea of a ‘self-destructing’ diary; one that did not stand in judgment as a ‘memory keeper’ but that still facilitated the same exploration of self. What we as a team came to term a ‘toolkit’ emerged: a set of activities that mimicked the acts of self-reflection that constituted the diary but that left no physical trace. The prototype toolkit included non-judgmental, fun, and inclusive games to encourage self-reflection, including a spinning top, a dice game and paper games, in addition to Stand + Stare’s existing ‘Mayfly’ sound jotter. Some provided blank spaces, others distinct prompts around specific themes (e.g. ‘hopes and dreams’) or other stimuli that might encourage reflection or ‘space’. Crucially, none of these objects placed the act of writing at the centre, but all of them could be accompanied by written extracts if desired. This might seem like a strange decision: surely the central act of the diary is to write? However, working in collaboration with creative partners who pressed us on why the form needed to be written, led to a realization that such a non-written design circumvented some of the pressures mentioned above that prohibited writing, as well as the historic and literary baggage that was associated with the diary. As Philippe Lejeune noted, the ‘private diary is a practice. The text itself is a mere by-product, a residue’ (2008, 31). At the same time the team wished to retain a physical object, something about which teachers were almost unanimously enthusiastic (Survey, 2019).



Image 1: Diary 'Toolkit' by Stand + Stare, UK. Copyright Stand + Stare

The creation of the 'toolkit' will not, of course, address the specific challenges faced by teachers and busy professionals in contemporary settings, nor was it intended to do so. The collaboration and interrogation of the diary format in this setting does, however, raise important questions for life-writing researchers: first, how far does the canon of life-writing, and specifically diary-writing, act against the use of diaries as present-day tools for well-being? Are there ways to overcome this and to involve specific groups in the design of life-writing – or life-telling material? The proliferation of well-being manuals and an array of diary formats in high-street stationers demonstrates the perceived limits of the 'standard' daily prose account (however inaccurate such a perception is) and the search for other formats. The 'Reimagining the Diary' project and resultant 'toolkit' are very small examples of an approach which recognizes the specific



historical, cultural and professional frameworks which shape responses to self-reflection, in addition to the more general assumptions about selfhood, privacy and life-writing. It acknowledges what self-reflection means to particular groups, encompassing its positive and negative connotations.

## **Conclusion**

This article has explored the connection between teachers, diary-writing and self-reflection in both historical and contemporary settings. It has used one small pilot study to explore the *longue durée* history of reflective writing within the teaching profession, drawing parallels with other examples of professional self-reflection, and has highlighted the current problems facing teachers and educationalists looking to use self-reflection as a tool for improving ‘well-being’.

Despite long-established links between self-reflection, writing and ‘well-being’, our study and the work of other researchers highlights the multi-faceted barriers faced by advocates of the practice. The concept of diary writing today brings with it literary expectations and internally-generated pressures that can create a disincentive for the already time-poor, self-critical and anxious professional. Further, the simultaneous colonization of traditionally private space by modern professional work practices and technologies, and the mandated use of reflective writing to support professional regulation and quality oversight has created a climate in which many have developed an aversion to reflective-writing.

In this context, we call for people-centred and creative approaches to diary-writing and self-reflection. Whilst our conclusions are far from definitive, this research demonstrates how life-writing can be used to answer interdisciplinary, problem-centred

research questions in creative, collaborative ways. For teachers, our findings suggest that reflective-writing offers an opportunity for catharsis, celebration and the ability to look at a situation from different perspectives. In an educational climate experiencing a loss of time, anxiety and overburden, 'diary writing could arguably act as a window into the lives of others, potentially shedding light on new avenues of wellbeing to be explored and issues to be addressed' (Survey, 2019).

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