Seth Gershenson: Hi, everybody. And welcome back to episode three of Mind the Teacher. I am one of your co-hosts, Seth Gershenson, of American university, and I am joined as always by Stephen Holt.

Stephen Holt: Hi, everybody.

Seth Gershenson: Hey, Steve. How's it going?

Stephen Holt: Hi, it's going well. How are you?

Seth Gershenson: I'm pretty good. The focus of episode three is going to be to talk about the academic research on what we know about teachers mental health. And there's going to be three separate segments of today's show. The first segment, Steve and I are going to talk about some of our own research that we co-authored together along with a former student of mine who's now a professor at Shanghai University of Finance and Economics, Ray Wang. And the three of us wrote this research paper a couple years ago, pre COVID in fact. We'll put a link on the website. The paper is entitled Stress Test: Examining the Evolution of Teachers' Mental Health Over Time. This is circulated as an IZA Discussion Paper and it's freely downloadable on the website.

And this paper was generously supported by The Spencer Foundation. And in fact, this paper is what motivated Spencer to reach out to us about having a podcast on teachers' mental health to try to spread the word about what we know about teachers' mental health and how we can do better by teachers and ultimately do better by students to address these mental health concerns. So I was drawn to this research question after hearing a story on NPR about a novice teacher who was crying in their car after a particular difficult day during their first year in the classroom. And it was a very poignant story and a very awful thought to imagine a teacher going to cry in their car after school.

But of course, we don't want to make policy based on a handful of anecdotes. And so this NPR story got me to thinking, what do we actually know about teachers mental health broadly across the profession, across the country? Do we have representative survey data that can really tell us how big of a problem is this? And is this problem unique to teaching or is this a broader mental health crisis for everybody across all professions? And so this led me to start thinking about what data could help us answer that question. And that led me to a longitudinal survey, the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth. And there's two of those. One in 1979 that is looking at young people who are entering the workforce in the early 80s, and another, the NLSY97, which is similarly looking at young people who are entering the workforce in the late 90s and early 2000s.

And so Steve and I, along with Ray Wang, the three of us gathered and analyzed this data. And of course, COVID happened after this research was complete and opened up a whole new set of questions and we'll circle back to that. But for

now, Steve, why don't you run through what are the main findings there in our study.

Stephen Holt: Right. So there are really three questions that we tackle in our study about teachers mental health. The first is, are the people who become teachers just different in some way that relates ultimately to their mental health? As you mentioned earlier, national data on mental health is rare, but one thing that makes the NLSY unique is that we observe measures of mental health before people enter the workforce. This feature of the data allowed us to compare teachers and non teachers to see if any differences in mental health are really just a function of preexisting differences in the kinds of people that choose to teach.

And focusing on this '79 cohort for now, so young people join the workforce in the 80s, we see there's really not any evidence that teachers differ from non teachers in their mental health status as adolescents. So any mental health differences between teachers and non teachers are not because the people who become teachers are different in some way before teaching. Second question we try to tackle is how teachers mental health compares to their peers and other professions while they're working. Is there something unique about teaching that impacts mental health? Or do we need more attention to mental health broadly? And here, again, focusing on the '79 cohort, we find very little evidence between teachers and non teachers and their mental health status while they're working.

So in short, we don't find any evidence that teachers' mental health is all that different from non teachers either before they're working years or during them. Now, I think it's worth adding a few quick notes here. First, this really just underscores that mental health is important for everyone, including teachers. And we should be sure that schools provide sufficient mental health supports. As we heard in episode two, there's clearly still a lot of room for improvement on that front. Second, we might care a great deal about teachers mental health, because poor mental health in the classroom affects more than just the teacher, but their students and their students' families as well. And finally, teachers work on a seasonal schedule. So there may be fluctuations in their mental health throughout the year that we don't see in our data and that is unique relative to other professions.

Seth Gershenson: And how do the two cohorts compare?

Stephen Holt: Right. So the third question we tackle in our study is, has mental health in the teaching profession changed? And answering this question capitalizes on the other unique feature of the NLSY, which is that we have data from two cohorts decades apart. We follow a similar approach to look at the '97 cohort and compare the mental health of teachers and non teachers before and after they enter the workforce. And just like with the '79 cohort, we find teachers' mental

health is not much different from non teachers' mental health. There are two things that I think are worth noting.

The first is simply that mental health in the '97 cohort is generally worse than mental health in the '79 cohort for teachers and non teachers alike. The second thing worth noting is some supplemental analysis we've done on race. In episode four, you're going to sit down with Dr. Travis Bristol for a really interesting conversation about race and education and how that shapes mental health in schools. And I think our findings are a teaser for that richer conversation. Basically, when we look at the '79 cohort of teachers, both black and non black teachers had similar mental health status while teaching. However, when we look at the '97 cohort, that no longer holds true. And the more recent cohort of teachers, black teachers have worse mental health than non black teachers. But overall, the takeaway is that even though the more recent cohort has worse mental health, teachers' mental health remains similar to non teachers even in the '97 cohort.

Seth Gershenson: And is that surprising? I guess I know that there's been a lot of talk about the No Child Left Behind Act and various accountability pressures on teachers and on schools in general, but also more computers, more social media, the world has changed certainly in the 2000s from the 80s that might have just been a culture shift that changes the stress and pressure we all feel.

Stephen Holt: There are several ways to think about it. It could be that expectations around work have shifted in ways that are unique to that cohort. It could also be that the great recession effect. Many of the '97 cohort were graduating college right around the time, an early career right around the time of the great recession.

Seth Gershenson: And so we could speculate all day about why broad trends in mental health have changed across decades. But for the very micro focus of our discussion about teachers, the main results really do seem pretty similar across the two cohorts.

Stephen Holt: Right, that's exactly right.

Seth Gershenson: At the end of the day, at least in this survey data and at least pre COVID, teachers' mental health is not that different. And if anything, might be better sometimes than similarly professional non teachers.

Stephen Holt: Right, that's exactly right.

Seth Gershenson: That's a little bit surprising, maybe, especially given stories like the NPR story that motivated this research agenda in the first place. But again, on the other hand, there are workplace stressors and pressures everywhere. And so understanding that teachers might face, even though their job is very different in some ways, if they were facing similar pressures and stress as everyone else,

well, maybe we can learn from how other professions and other workplaces have addressed mental health a little bit.

And to get towards that, we're going to have to address another question, which is, is this unique to the US? The US has a fairly unique educational system. And for that, we're going to turn our second segment of the podcast over to two researchers from the UK, John Jerrim and Sam Sims. They've actually done some really similar research in the OECD setting and in the UK setting. And I think for the most part, they find similar results as us, but we're going to talk to them about what they've found in some of their research. They've been working on this for a long time in a lot of different settings and from a lot of different angles.

And then the other question is that all of our data and indeed all of our analysis took place prior to the COVID pandemic, and the COVID pandemic totally changed society in general, but maybe, education was one of the most profoundly affected areas by the pandemic. And so also, at the end of this episode, we're going to talk to Elizabeth Steiner from the RAND Corporation who has analyzed survey data of teachers post COVID and during the COVID pandemic. And we'll see what she finds. And there, I think, to foreshadow a little bit, it seems like teachers might have been disproportionately affected. And that certainly aligns with a lot of the public narrative about how hard the COVID pandemic has hit schools and teachers.

Stephen Holt: Right.

Seth Gershenson: All right. So let's turn it over to John Jerrim and Sam Sims and hear what they find in their research in the UK.

Hi, everybody, we've asked Dr. John Jerrim and Dr. Sam Sims to join us on the podcast today to discuss what we know about how teachers' mental health compares to workers in other occupations and what aspects of teaching might influence mental health that are unique to teaching, that are different from other professions. Their work is largely based in Europe and the UK in particular, but they've done a lot of cross country work. And we'll dive into that and we'll talk about how it compares to the work that Steve and I have done in the US.

Dr. John Jerrim is a professor of education and social statistics at the University College of London's Institute of Education. And Dr. Sims is a lecturer at the University of College London's Centre for Education Policy and Equalising Opportunities. Again, they've collaborated many times and published many studies together that look at teachers mental health, teachers workload, how teachers compare to non teachers in terms of mental health and workload, cross country comparisons of these things. And we're just really grateful that they're able to take the time to talk to us today about this important research. So thanks for joining us on the podcast.

Dr. John Jerrim: Thank you for having us.

Seth Gershenson: Yeah. Great. So let's start at the beginning. How did you get into this? What made you think about mental health and teachers mental health as a research topic?

Dr. John Jerrim: Yeah. So it was pre pandemic really when we began this project and it was one of the hot topics in education within the UK. And that really stemmed from there being oftentimes teacher retention and recruitment crisis, with many arguing that it was the mental health implications of becoming a teacher that was partly responsible for that crisis. So hence we decided to get into this topic, because our look around the literature was a lot of this seemed to be funded or a lot of claims made by interest groups in particular teaching unions. We've not so much independent academic evidence available on the issue. So we've went about trying to create the Bible of mental health research for teachers by throwing together as much as we could from as many different datasets in the UK as possible.

Seth Gershenson: Right. Yeah. And that's a similar story to how Steve and I got interested in this in the US setting. And not even that we were worried about biases and who's doing the reporting, but also just a lot of this seems to be anecdotal. You'll hear stories from teachers or read a blog post or a newspaper article where teachers or school leaders mention these things. But as a social scientist, we want to see is this an anecdote or does it hold up in a bigger dataset?

And the other thing that I want to point out is the story you told about what was happening in the UK. That's a very, very similar story that we hear in the US and elsewhere that there's a crisis with teacher burnout, we're losing teachers because of this. So it really does seem like it's a global phenomenon potentially.

Dr. John Jerrim: Yeah, I think that's right. And I think it's interesting to reflect on that issue more generally about the cross country comparisons that there's always a tendency to believe it's something specific to your country and specific to your education system. But when you do take this wider look internationally, you do realize that similar arguments are being made elsewhere. And you may not stand out. Your country may not stand out as much as you might think in this respect.

Seth Gershenson: So you've mentioned that the TALIS data, that is the Teaching and Learning International Study. Can you tell us a little bit about that dataset? Is it publicly available? Can anybody download it from the internet? Who collects it? And I should say for our listeners, we're going to put links to these datasets, links to these research articles on the website so you can check them out. But yeah, I'm really curious to learn more and I think our listeners to learn more about this TALIS dataset.

Dr. John Jerrim: Yeah. So TALIS is an international study run by the OECD. They first conducted it in 2008 and have repeated it in 2013 and 2018. England took part in 2013 and

has repeated it again in 2018, though, interestingly, has decided to back out in 2024. And I suppose for your listeners, the United States has participated at least at 2013 and 2018 and surveys as well. So it's a big-

Seth Gershenson: So it's only OECD countries?

Dr. John Jerrim: No, it includes not only OECD countries as well. That number has grown between 2013 and 2018. So it's one of those weird things where not all OECD countries take part, but some non OECD countries or regions within countries take part as well.

Seth Gershenson: Okay. So we're talking about-

Dr. Sam Sims: 50 countries, I think now [crosstalk 00:16:32].

Seth Gershenson: 50 countries. Wow. Okay.

Dr. John Jerrim: Yeah.

Seth Gershenson: Okay. So you wrote a pretty well known pretty important paper about job satisfaction that compared teachers across 17 different countries. And so you find that teachers in England had relatively low job satisfaction, is that right?

Dr. Sam Sims: Yeah. So we find that it's as low or lower as all the other countries in the comparison group essentially.

Seth Gershenson: Do you have any why do we think that is? Do you have any guess?

Dr. Sam Sims: So we know from the literature on correlates of job satisfaction of teachers and in particular, the literature on how teachers' working environment or working conditions in schools relates to their job satisfaction, that the extent of what we might call supportive leadership in schools has a very strong relation with teachers' job satisfaction. So that's the strongest and most consistent predictor across studies, really. In some other unpublished research, we've tried to make comparisons of this leadership construct across countries as well. We're not able to compare it to as many countries for statistical reasons. We only make the comparisons where there's evidence that these questions are being interpreted and mean the same thing across different countries. But we find that in England, the extent of supportive leadership in schools is also very low compared to other countries. I think we need more research on that, but that's a pretty good candid explanation for why teachers in England don't seem to be particularly happy or at least in 2018 in the state.

Seth Gershenson: Right.

Dr. John Jerrim: Yeah. Just to pick up on [crosstalk 00:18:19]. Sorry. Just pick up on Sam's point, that paper was done using, I believe the TALIS 2013 data. I think it's worth.

That's again, I think it's worth pointing out that at the time the TALIS study was done, in 2013, in particular, there was a particularly, I would say disliked education minister, who was bringing quite a lot of fairly controversial policies, which would add quite a lot onto teachers workload. And I think that also fed through into the 2018 edition as well, because people were suffering from that additional workload with those policies working through I think at that point. So I think that was a big policy issue running through the 2013 and 2018 data, which could explain that.

Seth Gershenson: And I think that's analogous to in the US context, there were concerns that the consequential accountability policy, the testing regime, consequential testing, No Child Left Behind, that policies like that affected teachers mental health. So I guess a similar story might have been happening in England.

Okay. So the other important thing though, is that if we think that we have a reason for why the job satisfaction among teachers in England was lower than in other countries, then that also gives us some ideas about how to improve teacher morale and improve teacher mental health by changing those factors which... And if we think leadership is a big factor, then that seems like something that schools and districts and policymaker should be thinking about, right?

Dr. Sam Sims: Yeah, I agree. There is irony here that, as I understand it, England has one of the most comprehensive school leadership training frameworks, certainly amongst the countries that I know of. And there's a paper by Jonathan Supovitz from the US that was written about 10 years ago, I think, where he just did this case study on the English school leadership training system and outlined how comprehensive it was. And since then, that's been reformed and even expanded actually recently. So it's not for lack of training it seems that we've ended up with a system where teachers relative to other countries perceive the leaders in their schools as being not very supportive. Of course, that doesn't mean that we can reform and improve those leadership training programs and make it better. And I hope that is happening.

In terms of what this, looking across the papers in this literature, what do we mean by supportive leadership? If there's a school leader listening to this podcast, what concretely do we mean by that? And it seems like school leadership that's characterized by listening to teachers views, carefully explaining the rationale for why decisions are made, recognizing the work of teachers, the work they're doing-

Seth Gershenson: Empathy. Yeah.

Dr. Sam Sims: ...and good stuff that's being done. Yeah. That stuff seems to be what we have is in short supply in the English school system when we write these papers.

Seth Gershenson: Yeah. Well, that lines up exactly with what another guest on the podcast, Steven Guerrero, said, who is a public school teacher in the US in Massachusetts. That's very much along the lines of what he said was helpful to teachers, having leaders who are empathetic, who take the time to build inertia relationships, who explain why things are the way they are. I think that's a really good point. And an important thing for school leaders and policymakers to keep in mind when they're hiring school principals and so on.

So the cross country comparisons are fascinating, but the other thing I found really interesting in your research is the cross occupation comparisons. We talked about the stigma about talking about mental health seems to be declining, the importance of mental health seems to be increasing in the public space and dialogues. So everybody needs good mental health and everybody is stressed. Certainly during the pandemic, everybody's been exposed to a variety of new stressors. So what does the teaching occupation look like relative to other occupations when it comes to mental health?

Dr. John Jerrim: Yeah. So we've looked at this in various different dimensions as we were saying earlier with various different measures.

Seth Gershenson: Yeah. Right.

Dr. John Jerrim: And on the whole, after you take into account differences in demographic characteristics, so differences in say, gender, education, ethnicity, about who moves into the different occupations, teachers seem to be doing not too badly compared to most other professions in general, and particularly, in some dimensions compared to others of in particular wellbeing. So for instance, you can take head teachers and they often come out in our comparisons quite well in terms of things like life satisfaction and self worth compared to those in other occupations. Whereas for measures such as anxiety and happiness, teachers are around the average for most other professional occupations. So on the-

Seth Gershenson: Okay. And you're comparing them to everybody or specific occupations?

Dr. John Jerrim: Our main comparisons are to other professional occupations.

Seth Gershenson: Okay, with the university degree?

Dr. John Jerrim: Yes. The things like that with the university degree. We pull out some specific comparator occupations as well within our tables, which is a bit of an eclectic mix within itself, things like accountants, marketing professionals, authors and writers, solicitors, things like that, various different occupations. Yeah. But on the whole, teachers are around the average, don't particularly stand out as much as one might expect in some ways.

Dr. Sam Sims: The one nuance to that point is teachers that work in schools that are specifically for pupils with special educational needs, where on some of these

measures, we do see them standing out. And although we're not able to interrogate that with the data, it is plausible that working with peoples with these additional needs on top of all the needs that normal people has, creates extra demands for the teachers and staff. But yeah, by and large, non special ed teachers look very average in terms of their measures in mental health and wellbeing compared to these other occupations.

Seth Gershenson: And were you surprised by that, given the narrative that there's a crisis of sorts among teachers mental health?

Dr. Sam Sims: Yeah, I think we were a bit surprised by that. Conditional on all the things we said about there not being that much great evidence around at the start. I think I probably expected it to be slightly worse than some of these other occupations. If you think about comparing just the nature of the work that teachers do to the nature of the work that, for example, a marketing professional does, teaching is a highly relational job. So secondary school teachers have to maintain warm productive relationships with hundreds of pupils at any time that's demanding. There's much more accountability pressure on teachers than there are on marketing professionals, I would argue. And also teachers work this strange... Maybe we'll come on to talk a bit more about working hours.

But I've seen estimates that teachers tend to do roughly the same amount of work as comparable professional occupations. But of course, it's all compressed into about 80% of the time. And so they end up with these working patterns that are more similar to perhaps maritime workers where you've got week long periods of very intense work followed by periods of "short leave" in inverted commas where you're having some time off. And that's the equivalent for teachers would obviously be the summer break or whatever. So they're doing the same amount of work as other people, but it's highly relational, there's lots of accountability pressure and it's compressed into about four fifths of the time. So for all those reasons, I thought we might see teachers coming out looking a little bit worse. But I guess it's a pleasant surprise that we do.

Seth Gershenson: Yeah. That's exactly what Steve and I thought when we did our US study and we found very, very similar results to you all, that actually on average, teachers looked like everyone else. And we were surprised, but also after thinking about it, the world's a stressful place and everyone is dealing with different pressures and different challenges. So I think that the teaching is such an important profession that stories about teacher burnout and teacher mental health show up in the news more often than for other professions. But one of my takeaways at least, was that mental health is very important and it's something that everyone is dealing with, not just certain professions.

Dr. Sam Sims: Also, an interesting point around the result that John mentioned about head teachers actually looking quite positive compared to other occupational groups. There are other things involved here in that head teachers tend to be higher

paid than other teachers and so on. But it prompts a thought really, which is that as well as having these demanding characteristics, teaching is actually in many ways, a very rewarding and meaningful job. And when you actually look at some of the questionnaire items in these validated scales for measuring wellbeing and mental health, some of the items directly tap this idea that I find my life meaningful or similar words like that. And so it's no surprise to me that perhaps some of these demands or it's plausible to me that some of these demands of the job are just compensated for by the very rewarding meaningful aspects of the job around helping pupils learn and develop and flourish.

Seth Gershenson: Yeah. I think that's a very good point. And I think that's another point that I think aligns with what Steven Guerrero talked about on his episode talking about why he became a teacher. And there really is this bouncing act of teachers got into teaching largely because they want to help kids and they want to make the world a better place and they want to help kids reach their potential. And there's an inherent stress there, because what if you have a bad day and what if you don't do your best? So that inherent tension, I think is also part of what makes teaching such a unique profession when it comes to mental health. There's these huge payoffs to having a good day and seeing a student succeed. And there's these huge costs of seeing a student have a rough day or you yourself having an off day in the classroom, say. And those nuances are hard to get at in the data. But I think you're right, these different measures are capturing different dimensions of those feelings that the teachers have over the course of the year.

The one last topic I wanted to make sure that we have a chance to hit on is that I know you've also done some interesting work on working conditions and how working conditions and workload affects teacher retention, teacher burnout, teacher mental health. What do we know about working conditions? And again, this is I guess pre COVID, but also we could maybe extrapolate to how is working conditions under COVID and being virtual, maybe, how is that affecting job satisfaction, teacher retention and so on?

Dr. John Jerrim: Sam, I think there's this one for you.

Dr. Sam Sims: Sure. So John mentioned linking TALIS data with the administrative data for England. So the administrative data in England is the school workforce census and lots of analogous datasets in US state, I think, that just contain information on teachers, their career patterns, qualifications and so on. And so that allowed us to take about 40 different questions from the TALIS questionnaire, which assess various aspects of teachers' working lives, their working conditions, and boil them down into some underlying mentions. So for example, I think there were seven different questionnaire items that tapped to this idea of supportive leadership I mentioned earlier. There are bunch of items that tap the behavioral disciplinary standards in a school and so on.

And then we can model the relationship between these aspects of teachers' working conditions and their job satisfaction and using that school workforce census data, whether they subsequently left the profession in the following 18 month period. And I think the clearest findings from that research, and this is very consistent with other research, lots of it from the US, is that it's those two factors that I mentioned, the supportive leadership and the disciplinary behavioral standards in the school, are strongly predictive of job satisfaction and whether or not teachers actually subsequently remain in the profession or leave the profession.

And this has some quite nice implications for school leaders and policy makers, I think. I mentioned before about we discussed the virtues of leadership training or productive leadership styles. The other big one, as I mentioned, is around behavioral standards in a school. And so what these surveys suggest reading between the lines of these different studies are that if you have a school with clear behavioral standards where students know how they're expected to behave and these are consistently enforced, those standards are insisted on by teachers and by school leaders, and that the behavior policy helps teachers get on with the job of teaching. So a concrete example of that is lots of schools in England have moved to centralized detention systems so that if a teacher gives a detention to a pupil, then the teacher doesn't have to give up their lunchtime to run the detention. Instead, it's being run in some centralized room in the school. That kind of thing, because it allows the teachers to get on with the job of teaching, which as we discussed, is usually the reason they went into the profession in the first place.

Seth Gershenson: Right.

Dr. Sam Sims: Yeah. So I think those are the strongest bets, those two things, for school leaders looking to improve job satisfaction and retention of teachers in their schools, certainly among the group of things which are within the power of head teachers to influence.

Seth Gershenson: For sure. That's a great segue and I guess you've already spoken to the question about what do we do to make teachers lives easier, to make teachers mental health better. Supportive leadership is definitely one thing. Part of that is hiring good leaders, part of that is providing resources and training to those leaders. I know one of my co-authors on another line of research, Constance Lindsay, wrote a really important review of what we know about principals in the US and how important principals are. So school leaders for sure are important. We'll put up a link to that, principal review on the website as well. Is there any other policy dimensions besides school leadership that you think policy makers, school leaders, principals, district leaders, should be thinking about when we start to reopen schools next fall?

Dr. John Jerrim: I guess one of the things that really teaches always flag and as an academic, who also has teaching responsibilities can have a lot of sympathy to it, is marking. If

we're looking at workload, marking seems to be the one aspect that really correlates strongly and not in a good way with teacher mental health and wellbeing, workplace stress. So anything that could be done.

Seth Gershenson: So in the US, we would say, I guess, grading papers.

Dr. John Jerrim: Yeah, grading papers.

Seth Gershenson: So is the answer, which I think teachers benefit a lot in other ways too, not just with marking and grading, but providing them with some assistance.

Dr. John Jerrim: Yeah. So providing with assistance-

Seth Gershenson: Right. It's like having someone who can help with that.

Dr. John Jerrim: Yeah, assistance with that. And also digital technology. It does seem potentially the place there where a difference could be made. Sam, I think you've had some ideas around this previously as well with marking policy.

Dr. Sam Sims: Yeah. So marking is obviously an important part of the teaching process, looking at pupil's work, providing feed back, giving them pointers and how their work can be improved. And yeah, nobody here is proposing that we abolish that, but it's making sure that the marking is being done for the right reasons for those fundamental pedagogical reasons as opposed to, I think sometimes marking can be done for the purposes of satisfying accountability measures. So in England, and I'm aware that this is different to the US, one of the main ways in which schools are held accountable is through inspection visits by national inspector where trained inspectors will come to the school, assess what's going on, observe lessons, look at books and so on.

And John mentioned earlier those controversial reforms at the start of this decade around 2012, 2013 where marking was almost being done just to generate evidence for in school inspectors to look at. So the comments in the bottom were a lot of what was being written in pupil's books was for the benefit of the inspector rather than the benefit of the pupil. And we know from various research and also from some nice theory from psychology that teachers really didn't appreciate having to spend their time doing that marking for accountability purposes as opposed to marking for pedagogical purposes, which is aligned with why they went into the profession in the first place.

Seth Gershenson: So is the issue marking or is the issue having the time to mark and marking takes away to time from other more important activities?

Dr. John Jerrim: I think it's probably a combination of both. And I think part of the trouble with marking is it's one of those jobs that's frankly fairly tedious, but also very important and happens on sociable hours, not ideal times. And it's time consuming. So you put all those things together, and no wonder it's one of the

things that stands out always. So I think it is the mix between those different aspects.

Seth Gershenson: Right. So one solution is providing more assistance to teachers. Another solution would be to give them more time somehow, giving them professional days or personal days off.

Dr. Sam Sims: Yeah. So another thing you can do on top of that is just change the way that feedback is given to students. And there's actually a big movement in this direction [crosstalk 00:37:35] towards teachers reading all the books and looking at the work, of course, to understand common mistakes that pupils are making and areas where pupil could improve. But then instead of writing lots of stuff on the bottom of the page in pupils books, giving all feedback to the class as a whole. So you're doing it as one big batch. Pupils are all benefiting from getting all of that feedback. So that in a sense, the teacher is modeling what a good answer is by showing, okay, some people did this, but maybe think about doing it this way in future. And that's just a more efficient way of doing marking, which maintains the pedagogical benefits of marking, but gets rid of some of those tedious, laborious marking for the sake of accountability type elements.

Seth Gershenson: So I want to thank you both again for taking the time to talk to us today. It was really a pleasure and fascinating conversation. Our guests today were Dr. John Jerrim and Dr. Sam Sims both at the University College London. And I'll give you the last word guys. Thanks again for coming on. Are there any last big takeaways that you want to share with our listeners?

Dr. Sam Sims: I think I would just add that it is easy for some of the reasons we've discussed for negative perception to build up about teaching as an occupation and the work and lives of teachers. But ultimately the findings from papers like ours and papers like yourself is that these are quite optimistic findings, and we shouldn't talk down the teaching profession, because we need great teachers. And if the data says that actually this job is very comparable to other jobs in terms of some of these important considerations around mental health and wellbeing, then that's a useful finding in and of itself. And perhaps we should be a bit more optimistic about teaching.

Seth Gershenson: I think that's right. And another way to spin that is the policy implications we talked about with supportive leadership and so on. That's not unique to teaching. If everyone in all professions is struggling with various pressure and mental health concerns, we need to be helping everybody and doing a better job for everybody in all professions, not just teachers. Teachers are so important, they drive so many long run student outcomes, so the most important part of schools. They get a lot of attention, but really mental health is important for everybody.

And A lot of the lessons that we've learned about how to make teachers' lives and teachers' mental health better apply to other professions and vice versa.

Things we've seen that work in other professions might do wonders in schools for teachers. And we'll talk about that in our final episode. So I think that's exactly right. And I just want to thank you guys both again. It was a pleasure chatting and I look forward to talking again sometime.

Dr. Sam Sims: Thanks guys.

Dr. John Jerrim: Thanks, Seth.

Stephen Holt: We're going to turn now to Elizabeth Steiner of the RAND Corporation, who talks to us about COVID-19 and teachers mental health.

Seth Gershenson: Today's guest is Elizabeth Steiner, a policy researcher at the nonprofit nonpartisan RAND Corporation. Thanks for joining us today.

Elizabeth Stein...: Hi, thanks so much for having me.

Seth Gershenson: Yeah. I'm really excited to have you on the show and glad you're able to make it and talk with us. The reason we were so excited to invite you on is that you're one of the lead authors of a report that the RAND Corporation published just a couple of months ago in June titled, Job-Related Stress Threatens the Teacher Supply. And like the title suggests, you're looking at teacher labor supply, teachers' morale and how they're feeling and what that might mean for their status in the profession now and moving forward. And so let me start with a big question, which is one of the main questions that you address in the study. What is the state of teacher wellbeing right now in the midst of this unprecedented global pandemic?

Elizabeth Stein...: Yeah. Thanks so much. Our report presents findings from a nationally representative study of K-12 public school teachers in the United States that was fielded in January and February 2021. So just short of a year into the pandemic. The major topics we explore, as you pointed out, are the state of teacher wellbeing and teachers intentions to leave their jobs at the time of the survey and the stressors that teachers were facing at that time of the survey during the pandemic.

So in short, we found distressingly that teachers are experiencing frequent job related stress. And symptoms of depression are higher levels than the general adult population. And that teachers are most stressed about working conditions related to their mode of instruction and their health. We also found that teachers who were considering leaving their jobs after the onset of the pandemic but not before, were more likely to experience these stressful working conditions than their peers who were not considering leaving their jobs or their peers who were considering leaving their jobs prior to the pandemic.

So we interpret this as suggesting that there is a group of teachers who are more stressed than the others, although everyone is stressed, which in turn

suggests that job-related stress among teachers and the conditions that are driving that stress is something that we need to address to support teachers staying in their jobs.

Seth Gershenson: Absolutely.

Elizabeth Stein...: The other thing I'll add is that we were able to compare broadly, our findings in teachers who are still in the profession with the findings from a survey that was administered just a few months before ours in December 2020. And that December 2020 survey was of teachers who had already left the profession. My colleague, Heather Schwartz, was one of the lead authors on that survey, along with Melissa Diliberti. And Heather and Melissa found in their work that teachers who had already left the profession cited stress as one of their top reasons for doing so along with pay and lack of childcare.

And so we saw that the teachers in our study who were still in the profession, but were considering leaving their jobs, the stressors that they cited were congruent in many ways were similar to those of teachers who had already left the profession. And so that raised some concern for us that among this group of teachers who weren't considering leaving their jobs prior to the pandemic, but we're considering doing so in January and who were additionally reporting more stress and more symptoms of depression than their peers, that is something didn't give quickly an intention to leave my turn into a decision to leave. And we found that to be concerning. And so specifically we saw that almost a quarter of teachers were considering leaving their jobs by the end of the school year. So this was back in January. Most of them were considering leaving after the onset of the pandemic.

One caveat here though, is that intentions to leave is a mutable thing. And more recent work has shown that the percentage of teachers who intend to leave has dropped a little bit since January. It might be found now around 18%, which is close to where it was before the pandemic. And timing probably plays a role too. In January, it's getting a second semester, in March or April, here's insights which may make a difference in how people respond. And we saw too that there were some differences by the race of the teacher. Almost half of Black or African American teachers were considering leaving their jobs compared to about a quarter of teachers overall.

And of course, that was particularly alarming to us, because we know from your research among others, that all students benefit from having teachers of color or from having teachers of diverse backgrounds. And African American students in particular can benefit from having teachers of their own race. And then in addition, there are very few teachers of color in the profession. And if they leave at higher rates, it poses a risk for the diversity of the teaching profession.

Seth Gershenson: For sure. They're already underrepresented, and it would make that under-representation even worse if turnover was higher. But the other thing that you

do in the study that's I think really important is compare teachers to the general public. So what do we find? What do these comparisons tell us about teachers versus non teachers and how they dealt with the pandemic and stress and attitudes towards their jobs, the future and so on?

Elizabeth Stein...: Yeah. Well, we found that many more teachers reported experiencing frequent job related stress than US adults who were working. Almost twice as many, actually. Nearly 80% of teachers reported frequent job-related stress compared to about 40% of employed US adults.

Seth Gershenson: Oh, wow. Okay.

Elizabeth Stein...: Yeah. Teachers were also more likely to say that they were considering leaving their jobs than US adults generally. And that's notable in a pandemic and we're starting to experience a recession.

Seth Gershenson: Yes. And again, that's troubling, because if teachers are feeling that way, that means it's distracting them from their core mission of teaching. It might lower their effectiveness in the classroom, even if they stay. And again, I worry about the equity side of this, where those feelings presumably are disproportionately accumulating in under-resourced schools and in schools serving disadvantaged communities. And so that's just another obstacle, another burden that those teachers are dealing with and ultimately those students are dealing with, because their teachers are distracted, maybe disengaged and so on. Is that a fair concern?

Elizabeth Stein...: I definitely think it's a fair concern. We didn't find any evidence of that though in our analysis. We found similarly high reported rates of job-related stress, similar stressors and similar intentions to leave the profession among teachers at all different school types, in all different kinds of communities, at all different grade levels of all different subject matters, all different levels of experience.

Seth Gershenson: Got it. So it's pretty universal?

Elizabeth Stein...: Yeah.

Seth Gershenson: Okay.

Elizabeth Stein...: But I think it's a fair concern, because prior to the pandemic, there's a large body of evidence that turnover at under-resourced schools is generally higher than at more privileged schools. And so you could imagine that perhaps in less extraordinary times that stress has a key role to play in what we see. But I'll jump, maybe if I may, to describing the second comparison group of US adults.

Seth Gershenson: Oh sure. Yeah.

Elizabeth Stein...: So we also asked a very brief question to understand whether teachers and US adults were experiencing symptoms of depression. There's a measure that is used occasionally in clinical settings called the Patient Health Questionnaire. You may be familiar with it. It's a recent diagnostic tool to get a very broad clinical sense of whether someone might be at risk for depression. It asks about depressive symptoms and how often that person has been experiencing them. It's a two question. It's a two question screener. It's widely used, it's widely validated.

And so we asked that question of teachers and we were lucky enough to find a comparison group in the Understanding America Study, which is run by the University of Southern California. It's a nationally representative survey of US adults working or not. And we were able to work with them to access their data from their February survey on which they asked the same question, they asked the same two questions, Patient Health Questionnaire screener. So we have this great comparison group of just general US adults asking whether they were experiencing symptoms of depression. And we found that teachers almost three times as many teachers reported experiencing symptoms of depression as US adults. It was about 27% of teachers compared with about 10% of US adults.

Seth Gershenson: Wow. So almost three times? Yeah.

Elizabeth Stein...: Yeah, almost three times. Yeah.

Seth Gershenson: That is striking. And empathy is so important. Schools being a good teacher means empathizing with students, but vice versa. Families and parents, principals, everybody needs to empathize with teachers too, that they've tackled an incredibly difficult job during a very unusual and challenging situation. And so empathizing with teachers and also giving them agency and voice in how schools move forward during the pandemic and so on, I think is going to be so important to retaining an effective teacher workforce. And as I think you mentioned at the very beginning, teachers are flat out important. They're one of the most important parts of what makes a good school good. And supporting and maintaining and retaining an effective teaching force is critically important.

Elizabeth Stein...: It absolutely is. And teachers mental health is important. I think we've touched on this a little bit at the beginning, but it's important not only for their students' learning experiences, but for the person themselves.

Seth Gershenson: Yeah, absolutely. Right.

Elizabeth Stein...: Mental health distress can lead to physical ill health. And teachers who are experiencing mental and physical health maybe absent more. Maybe they're not as engaged in their work as you already mentioned.

Seth Gershenson: Absolutely. Yeah.

Elizabeth Stein...: So I think that acknowledging those things and trying to support teachers as best we can from all levels from school leaders to parents to district leaders to teachers with their colleagues, I think is incredibly important, especially since it looks like the next school year will be unusually challenging too.

Seth Gershenson: Yes. Well said. Well, thank you so much for taking the time to talk with us today. Our guests has been Elizabeth Steiner, a policy researcher at the nonpartisan nonprofit RAND Corporation. Thank you so much for your time today.

Elizabeth Stein...: Thank you so much. It was great to be with you.