As an introduction to the annual LEARN! Conference 2020, Prof. Becky Allen and Dr. Amber Walraven engaged in a fireside chat about TeacherTapp, an application offered to schoolteachers assessing responses to three daily multiple-choice questions throughout the whole year. The data collected serves mainly research purposes, but it also valuable for policymakers. A tremendous amount of data on teacher well-being, teaching style, opinions on policies and many other topics have been assessed in recent years.

Prof. Becky Allen is the chief analyst and co-founder of TeacherTappUK and elaborated on the opportunities the application offers, particularly during the Covid-19 pandemic. Collecting data from about 8,500 teachers in the UK, the application registers school and teaching-related behaviour in the whole country during the pandemic. As TeacherTappUK has been one of the only sources of information about the situation in schools during the school closures, the app received a lot of media attention, even leading to minor governmental changes regarding school policy during the first lockdown.

TeacherTappNL was adapted and launched in early summer 2020 and currently collects regular responses from about 800 Dutch primary school, secondary school, and vocational schoolteachers. Dr. Amber Walraven argued that the database is a unique opportunity to research the behaviour of teachers as members of a dynamic environment which is exposed to forces and friction between different parties, such as school management and other teachers. However, Dr. Amber Walraven also emphasised that the tool offers opportunities which will outlast her current research aim, as there is plenty of opportunity to gather data with the given tool. TeacherTappNL is still in its early stages and had the opportunity to include large parts of the TeacherTappUK application after adapting existing questions to the Dutch school system.

Both researchers mentioned surprising findings when comparing teachers’ answers across countries. While in the Netherlands, teachers are flexible in their online education and usually encourage students to switch their cameras on doing online teaching, centralised UK school policies required students to switch their cameras off. Also, large differences in online live teaching became apparent between the two countries, particularly in the first lockdown.

The researchers agreed that the app gave insights into current problems in schools and reasons why teachers leave their profession. Prof. Becky Allen emphasised that, contrary to prior expectations, teachers rated issues in accountability and management styles to be the most unsatisfying facets of their job. Teachers perceive too much emphasis to be put on low-level marketing activities instead of activities that truly benefit the learners. Also, loneliness was indicated to be a major drawback in the job, as professional dialogue with colleagues is perceived to be lacking. Dr. Amber Walraven reported that shortages of teachers in Dutch schools became apparent as well. A recent introduction of a bonus payment by the government to incite teachers to switch to schools in socially deprived areas did not in fact appeal to most teachers. Similar to the UK, Dutch teachers also indicated school management and leadership to be one of the downsides of their profession.

As a future outlook, Dr. Amber Walraven and her team wish to increase the user base of the app and get better at asking the right kinds of questions in the correct wording. Also,
she wants to ultimately achieve a position where teachers see the app as a tool that aids their own professional development. Prof. Becky Allen is aiming to bring the app to even more countries. And following teachers from their initial teacher training throughout their career is something she aims to research in the future.