AIMEE QUICKFALL • PHIL WOOD

Transforming Teacher Work

TEACHER RECRUITMENT AND RETENTION AFTER THE PANDEMIC

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Transforming Teacher Work: Teacher Recruitment and Retention After the Pandemic

BY

AIMEE QUICKFALL

Leeds Trinity University, UK

AND

PHIL WOOD

Nottingham Trent University, UK

United Kingdom – North America – Japan – India – Malaysia – China

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In loving memory of
Robin Edward Wood
(1937–2023)
A dedicated educationalist who saw the best in all children and who always fought for their opportunity to make the most of life.

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List of Acronyms

CCF	The Core Content Framework for ITT (2019)
DfE	The Department for Education
ECF	The Early Career Framework (2019)
ECT	Early Career Teacher
HEI	Higher Education Institution
ITE	Initial Teacher Education
ITT	Initial Teacher Training
ITTECF	The Initial Teacher Training and Early Career Framework (2024)
MAT	Multi-academy Trust
NAHT	National Association of Head Teachers
NASUWT	National Association of Schoolmasters and Union of Women Teachers
NEU	National Education Union
NFER	National Foundation for Education Research
NPQ	National Professional Qualification
PGCE	Postgraduate Certificate of Education
QTS	Qualified Teacher Status
SCITT	School Centred Initial Teacher Training
UCET	Universities' Council for the Education of Teachers

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Chapter 1

Introduction

When the Guardian reported on the 12th September 2023 that,

> **Only half of required number of trainee secondary teachers in England recruited**
>
> Figures show government is well short of 26,360 target amid crisis in teacher recruitment and retention

It highlighted the latest missed target from a long period characterised by poor levels of new teacher recruitment, a trend which has been shadowed by worsening levels of teacher retention of those already in the profession. As we will show in this book, England is experiencing a serious and ever worsening problem with teacher supply. Since 2015, the government has reached its own annual targets for recruitment only once, despite the variety of teacher training programmes which have been created to entice those who wish to enter the teaching profession. This has led to a deepening supply issue, meaning that schools are finding it increasingly difficult to recruit good teachers when they require them. The deficit is currently unequally spread geographically, but if the current trend continues then the problem will spread.

At the same time as recruitment to the profession has fallen, the retention of teachers who have already entered the sector is also in crisis. The UK Government, reporting on the teacher workforce in 2022 (DfE, 2023g) showed that only 58.7% of teachers remain in the profession for more than 10 years, and 68.7% for more than 5 years. Indeed, by 2022, only 87.2% of those who had qualified in 2021 had completed a single year in the classroom. Teacher workforce is being diminished by people leaving the profession early in their careers, a pattern Jack Worth of the NFER reflected on, commenting,

> Addressing teacher retention should be at the heart of dealing with the teacher supply challenge.
>
> (Jack Worth quoted in the Guardian, 8th June, 2023)

Transforming Teacher Work, 1–9

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The teacher recruitment and retention crisis in England is not a recent phenomenon and various attempts by government, including the use of financial incentives for some of those wishing to train, attempts to cut workload, and more recently the inclusion of more formal professional development for teachers appear not to have had any clear impact on a worsening situation.

The issue is serious, and we argue in this book that it is a problem which is part of a 'perfect storm' in the English education system. Firstly, the system is in a prolonged period of under-recruitment and teacher loss, especially amongst older teachers. This is evident when looking at the Teaching and Learning International Survey (TALIS) 2018 (OECD, 2020), where English teachers had an average age of 39, as against an average of 44 years across contributing countries, and only 18% of teachers were over the age of 50, as against 34% on average. Hence, not only is England now not recruiting enough teachers, but the nation also has a less experienced teacher workforce.

Secondly, the COVID-19 pandemic which began in 2020 has had a major impact on the profession. Schools were required to fundamentally change the way they ran at very short notice as the majority of children were required to remain at home during the period between March and June 2020. This led to huge pressure on schools to rapidly change the way they taught, to find large quantities of computer technology to ensure that children could learn from home (the government provided over 200,000 computers but many did not reach schools until the end of the first lockdown in June 2020), whilst also developing systems which allowed them to teach children face-to-face in those cases where key workers were still required to work beyond their homes. Schools also had to respond to constantly shifting, and often late, guidance from government concerning safe working practices during a national lockdown. Schools had to develop approaches allowing them to continue their pastoral and safeguarding roles; a continuing responsibility even though many children were remote from schools, and teachers were not meant to have direct contact with them.

The pandemic led to widespread exhaustion across the profession. This was particularly true once schools began to open fully from the summer and into September 2020. Whilst the general expectation was that once open schools would be 'back to normal', this was far from the reality and in fact the stress of working in schools intensified. There were a number of factors responsible for this, including ongoing absences amongst staff and children as infection rates increased, disruption in examination routines, often poorly communicated by government, and the continued need for social distancing through the introduction of 'bubbles' (groups of students who worked in isolation from other such groups in a single school).

Finally, whilst the pandemic was declared as being over by the government in February 2022, it has cast a long shadow over many communities. One example of this is the rise in adults seeking mental health services from the National Health Service (NHS) in England, with 4.6 million referrals in 2022, 22% higher than in 2019 (BMA, 2023). In children aged 7–16, the rate of probable mental disorder rose from 1 in 8 in 2017 to more than 1 in 6 in 2022, and in those aged 17–19, the rise has been even steeper, from 1 in 10 in 2017 to 1 in 4 in 2022. This is just one example of the issues facing schools as they have emerged from the pandemic. And for many communities, the stress of the pandemic has simply been replaced

by that of the cost-of-living crisis. Whilst the government appears to be keen to suggest a return to 'business as usual', many communities in England are still suffering major disruptions which have a knock-on impact on the schools which serve them. Many schools are operating in stressed communities, whilst many of the systems put in place to monitor school performance, particularly Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted), the school inspectorate, are acting as if the system is now back to operating in a pre-pandemic context, refusing to take any account of the seismic shifts many schools have seen, as the inspection framework explicitly forbids inspectors to take the pandemic into account as a contributory factor in school performance.

Given the context outlined above, we believe that the pandemic acted as an extreme 'stress-test' of the English education system, highlighting and emphasising aspects of the system which are not working well, and which might be contributory to the recruitment and retention crisis. Similarly, Lawlor (2021, p. 185) argues that the pandemic acted as a huge stress test in the USA,

> COVID-19 exposed and tested many dimensions of the support system for vulnerable groups and communities. The convergence of racial, political, and economic upheaval amplified and complicated the effects of the pandemic.

In a similar vein, Meng (2020) reflects,

> The pandemic pushes essentially every system to its extreme, exposing the good, the bad, and the ugly of its inner workings. It tests each system's resilience (or lack thereof) as a well-functioning integrant of the human ecosystem. We have seen this stress test being conducted in public health and medical systems; in social and economic systems; in political and administrative systems; in law enforcement and regulatory systems; in educational systems; in production and supply chains; and in tourism and service industries, just to name a few of the most obvious ones.

Thus, we attempt to understand the longer term nature of the recruitment and retention issue in England, before comparing it to other countries who each have somewhat similar issues. Through this analysis, we can begin to characterise the longer term contributing factors of the problem, before then exploring the ways in which, as Lawlor and Meng suggest, the system has been put under stress during the pandemic. From this we can ask,

- What can we learn from this period?
- What has happened since the pandemic?
- Are there continued problems or has the system bounced back?
- Does it further expose issues present prior to the pandemic to help identify what we might need to focus on if we are to begin to solve the issues we face?
- What might we try to do to kerb the loss of teachers from the profession and attract more individuals into a system where they wish to remain and build a successful career?

We believe an analysis of the pandemic and its aftermath will allow us to gain insights into the recruitment and retention issues that perhaps remain hidden to those who have tended to see the crisis as a simple supply and demand issue. However, before we begin to explore patterns in recruitment and retention, we first offer a primer for those not familiar with the English system to help with orientation in subsequent chapters.

The English Education System – A Primer

Education in England is overseen by the Department for Education (DfE), and whilst at first glance the system can appear to offer a simple model, it is in fact a complicated system, reflective of the historic values and political turns the country has taken over many years. At a basic level, Fig. 1 demonstrates the educational pathway followed by children into adulthood:

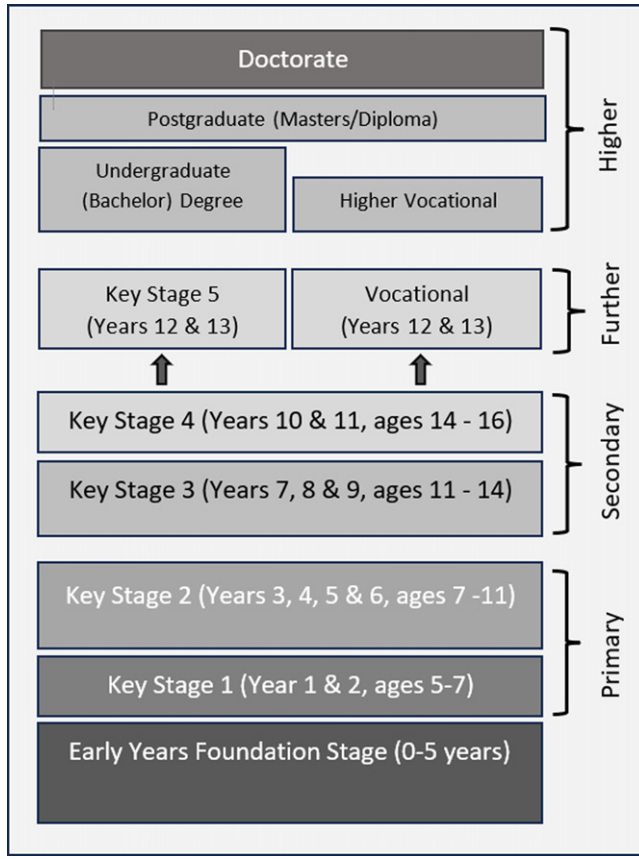

Fig. 1. Basic Education Pathway From Early Years to Post-compulsory Education (2023).

The National Curriculum covers Key Stages 1–4 and sets out the expectations for each subject at each stage. However, this simplified model does not reflect the different types of school, arrangement of Key Stages into schools or other pathways, or indeed that the National Curriculum is not compulsory for many schools in the sector. In addition, in England, children may attend state-funded or private schools, or may be homeschooled.

State-Funded Schools

State-funded means that there is no fee to pay for attendance as costs for education are covered by government funding, although voluntary contributions may be requested for school trips, individual music lessons and other enhancements. Ninety three percent of children in England attend state-funded schools. Within the state-funded bracket, there are:

- Academy schools, which are free from local government control, do not have to follow the National Curriculum and can employ unqualified teachers in classroom teaching posts. In many cases, academies have clustered into groups called Multi-Academy Trusts (MATs) which normally have a central bureaucracy and to which all member schools contribute funding.
- Community schools, which are primarily the responsibility of local government and do follow the National Curriculum and must employ teachers with Qualified Teacher Status (QTS).
- Free schools, which are free from local authority control and are set up by parents, teachers, businesses or charities when there is a perceived need for more schools in an area. Free schools, like academies, do not have to follow the National Curriculum.
- Voluntary Aided and Voluntary Controlled schools, linked to organisations, which can be faith schools or non-denominational and receive contributions from a charitable body.
- Foundation schools, where the governing body or charitable foundation are responsible for staff, admissions and the school site.

Primary (5–11) and secondary (11–16) phases are usually (but not always) taught in separate schools, and secondary schools may be comprehensive (open to all applicants), semi-selective or selective grammar schools (usually requiring an entrance exam, such as the 11+ exam) together with secondary modern schools for those who fail to pass the 11+ exam.

State-sector schools fall under the inspection remit of Ofsted, who (correct at time of writing) inspect state-funded schools, settings and colleges and grade the quality of provision using the Education Inspection Framework (Ofsted, 2019b). As outlined below they are also responsible for assessing the quality of initial teacher education (ITE) providers.

Private Schools

In England, around 6% of pupils attend a fee-paying school, known variously as independent, private and public schools. Private schools do not have to follow the National Curriculum (DfE, 2013) or employ qualified teachers for classroom teaching roles. Fees for private schools vary widely, and many offer bursaries and scholarships for disadvantaged students, but generally significant financial means are required to access private schools in England.

Homeschooling

Whilst education is a requirement for all children in England, attending a school is not. There are an estimated 86,200 children being homeschooled (January 2023, Danechi & Long, 2023). This remains an estimate because there is currently no register of children who are homeschooled; a voluntary register is currently under consultation (January 2024). Homeschooled children do not have to follow the National Curriculum and parents/carers must fund homeschooling themselves.

Assessment

Statutory testing is used in state-funded primary schools in England. Key Stage 1 statutory assessment tests (SATs) take place in the summer term of Year 2, when children are aged 6–7 and cover reading, writing, maths and science through teacher assessment judgements (which are supported by testing). For Key Stage 2 SATs, Year 6 (aged 10–11) children sit three test papers in reading; grammar, punctuation and spelling; and mathematics. Writing is assessed by teacher judgement. Science tests are administered to a sample of pupils every two years to monitor national performance in the subject. Teachers also provide assessments on reading, writing, mathematics and science in addition to the tests. At the end of Key Stage 4 (aged 15–16), most pupils take General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSEs) examinations in state-funded and independent schools. Beyond this level there is a choice of routes with some students taking vocational qualifications and others taking Advanced Level academic qualifications.

Teachers

As a population, teachers in England are comparatively young, and have fewer years experience of teaching than other Organisation of Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries (OECD, 2020). School leaders in England have also on average spent fewer years in their role than those in other OECD countries (OECD, 2020).

To teach in England you do not need to have Qualified Teacher Status (QTS), but the majority of teachers in England do hold QTS, and even in schools where this is not a requirement (academies, free schools and private schools) QTS is still considered a benchmark.

Initial Teacher Education/Training

In order to be awarded QTS by the Department for Education, you must be recommended for the award by an accredited ITT provider. Throughout this book we refer to 'Initial Teacher Education (ITE)' and 'Initial Teacher Training (ITT)', as these are used widely in the sector – at the time of writing, the DfE use 'ITT', Ofsted use 'ITE' and the providers themselves use one or both interchangeably. Many in the sector prefer the use of ITE as they argue that an emphasis on education over training denotes the complexity and extended duration of the project of becoming a teacher (Chitty, 2009).

There are various ways to train to teach. Firstly, as an undergraduate on a 3 or 4 year university-based programme, leading to a degree and QTS (QTS cannot be awarded to someone without an undergraduate degree at time of writing), or secondly on a postgraduate training route, of which there are a wide spectrum of choices. The majority of student teachers are on postgraduate routes, which are funded either through student finance in the same way as a university degree, or through a salaried position in a school whilst training. Postgraduate student-financed routes are accessed through higher education institution (HEI) or school-centred initial teacher training (SCITT) provider. Some salaried postgraduate routes are available, although at the time of writing, places on these are difficult to secure and not evenly spread throughout the country. These salaried routes are currently the High Potential Initial Teacher Training (HPITT) route (for example, Teach First, who select candidates believed to have a high potential for teaching, usually based on quality of undergraduate degree level) and the Postgraduate Teaching Apprenticeship (PGTA) (DfE, Train to Teach website, 2023). In addition, the vast majority of postgraduate ITE programmes include an academic qualification, normally a postgraduate certificate in education (PGCE), postgraduate diploma in education (PGDE) or a professional graduate certificate in education (pGCE); many SCITT providers partner with universities to offer these qualifications.

All ITE providers are subject to Ofsted inspection, and, like school inspections, ITE provider Ofsted reports are currently graded and based on an inspection framework.

There have been reforms to the ITE sector throughout the pandemic, which we will explore in chapter 2, but it is important to note that all Initial Teacher Education courses in England must meet the minimum requirements of the DfE ITT Criteria and the Core Content Framework (CCF). The CCF sets out the core learning that all programmes must cover, the content being organised into 5 core areas – behaviour management, pedagogy, curriculum, assessment and professional behaviours (DfE, 2019a). The DfE ITT Criteria set out general requirements of ITT programmes, such as a requirement that programme design includes 120 days of school-based training, and that all trainees should have significant teaching experience in two schools during their programme (DfE, 2023a).

Outline of the Book

This book is set out in three sections.

Section 1 – The Nature of the Problem

In this section, we lay out the patterns and features of the recruitment and retention crisis and consider how it also affects countries other than England.

Chapter 2 considers the evidence for a recruitment and retention crisis in England, outlining data trends in both areas, and also discusses the available evidence which might help to explain why the current problems exist. We consider a wide range of issues which are present in the research literature, including some which are not well recognised drivers of the current situation.

Chapter 3 looks at other countries who all have similar crises, but which are different in both the nature of the problem and the evidence explaining the challenges faced. We do not do this in an attempt to foster a simplistic comparison and 'policy borrowing', the limitations and pitfalls of these are all too well known (Burdett & O'Donnell, 2016). We instead include these examples to show that the solutions to recruitment and retention issues are never easy or simple but bound up in contextual issues. However, they remain instructive of the wider issues faced in England.

Section 2 – The Pandemic Experience in England's Schools

In this section, we consider the evidence which gives us an impression of how schools were impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. We focus on primary and secondary schools (including SEND provision). We do this not because we believe there were not equally acute issues in Early Years settings and Further/Higher Education during the pandemic, but because we needed to ensure the analysis was manageable in the space we have. We are sure there are others who are far better placed than us to reflect on, and tell the stories about these elements of the sector.

Chapter 4 is a timeline of the pandemic and the emerging processes, patterns and events in schools. We feel this is important because in carrying out the research for this book, we became aware of just how easy it is to misplace and forget the order of events which occurred during the course of the pandemic. We hope this will provide a useful remainder and aide memoire.

Chapter 5 is a synthesis of the academic literature we were able to locate concerning the experience of those in schools during the pandemic. As research is still being published, we do not claim this synthesis to be exhaustive, but we do believe it provides plenty of evidence of the issues and pressures which schools were exposed to over the course of the pandemic. We focus on the professionals rather than the children, which again is in part due to limitations of space, but also because our concern is with the teacher perspective. Again, we hope others will attempt to tell the stories of children. It is an important story to tell.

Chapter 6 reports on a research project we began early in the pandemic, and which spanned the 2020–2021 academic year. To the best of our knowledge it offers a rare insight in attempting to capture the experiences of Newly Qualified Teachers (NQTs) during this crucial year. The participants in this research had lost the majority of their school experience whilst training as teachers and were