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Recruitment, Retention and the Workload Challenge: a critique of the government response

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ABSTRACT Various surveys have confirmed that there is a crisis of recruitment and retention of teachers in schools. This article examines the government response to this crisis, in particular to what is commonly cited as the main cause – unmanageable workloads. What it describes as the workload challenge has certainly not been ignored by the DfE, which in February 2017 produced an updated document detailing the steps it had taken in an attempt to reduce teacher workload. However, although it has taken the workload challenge seriously, it has downplayed some of the factors which even its own commissioned research has shown to be important. This article argues that, while it is certainly a step in the right direction, addressing the workload issue alone will not resolve the crisis.

A survey of teachers carried out by the *Guardian* in 2016 confirmed what many teachers have known for a long time – that government policies on education in recent times have had such a deleterious effect on teachers' working lives that many were planning to leave the profession. A staggering 82% stated that their workloads were unmanageable, 'with two thirds saying that expectations had increased significantly in the past five years' (Banning-Lover, 2016). These findings are in line with an analysis of the Teaching and Learning International Survey (TALIS) of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), undertaken by the Education Policy Institute (EPI; Sellen, 2016), which found that teachers in England's secondary schools were working, on average, longer hours than most of the other 35 developed countries and jurisdictions included in the survey. Moreover, the *Guardian* report backed up previous research by the Education Support Partnership (ESP) on the link between well-being and workload which found that eight out of ten teachers it surveyed had suffered a mental health problem in the past two years.

In fact, in terms of recruitment and retention, this is a crisis which is already upon us, not a prediction based on current teacher intentions. As the EPI study pointed out, 'England had one of the fastest reductions in the proportion of teachers aged over fifty in secondary education between 2005 and 2014' and 'one of the highest proportions of teachers under 30', while 'only 48 per cent of its teachers had more than ten years' experience compared with an average of 64 per cent across jurisdictions' (Sellen, 2016, p. 9). The study concludes that 'this may signal that teachers are experiencing "burn-out" before they even step into leadership roles' (Sellen, 2016, p. 9).

In this article I want to examine the government response to this crisis, in particular to what is commonly cited as the main cause – unmanageable workloads. What it describes as the 'workload challenge' has certainly not been ignored by the DfE, which in February 2017 produced an updated document detailing the steps it had taken in an attempt to reduce teacher workload. However, although it has taken the workload challenge seriously, it has downplayed some of the factors which even its own commissioned research has shown to be important. I argue that while it is certainly a step in the right direction, addressing the workload issue alone will not resolve the crisis.

Research Evidence

In line with its much-vaunted commitment to evidence-based policy and practice, the government has purportedly based its response on findings of teacher surveys, involving large samples and a mix of methods. Regarding workload, the EPI research mentioned above is quite clear that it is not the time spent teaching lessons which is responsible for the longer hours in English schools, but rather, it is the time spent 'planning lessons, writing assessments, marking and other functions that is driving long working hours' (Sellen, 2016, p. 8). Among 'other functions', it includes 'data management'. The government-commissioned study (Gibson et al, 2015) presents a similar picture, but interestingly this research takes a much closer look at what teachers feel are unnecessary and unproductive tasks. Tasks mentioned mostly fitted within the category of 'lesson planning and policies, assessment and reporting administration' (Gibson et al, 2015, p. 7). The most burdensome tasks for the majority of the sample were 'recording, inputting, monitoring and analysing data' (p. 8) and excessively detailed and frequent marking.

Under the heading 'Drivers of Workload', respondents most commonly said that the burden of their workload was created by accountability pressures and the tasks set by senior/middle leaders. Under 'Strategies and Solutions', the most common responses to what might be the way forward were changes in accountability and support offered. The most common solutions suggested were changes to marking arrangements, less data inputting and analysis, and increased time for lesson planning, but reference was also made to broader issues to do with trusting teachers as professionals, reducing frequency of changes to curriculum/qualifications/exams and changes to Ofsted processes.

The Government Response

On the face of it, the government response, as reflected in the DfE document on actions it has taken, seems to have been comprehensive and supportive. It included setting up three independent teacher-workload review groups, which have already produced reports offering advice for teachers on marking policy, planning and teaching resources, and data management. The government also committed itself to running a large-scale survey on workload every two years (similar to the one published in 2017) and to giving schools a minimum lead-in time for significant changes in accountability, curriculum and qualifications. It has worked with teaching unions and Ofsted to produce a pamphlet and poster for schools, and with the National College of Teaching and Leadership (NCTL) to fund groups of schools carrying out collaborative projects into reducing workload. Workload considerations have been introduced into guidance produced for schools (e.g. 'The Governance Handbook', DfE, 2017).

The three areas dealt with by the review groups address one of the findings of the 2015 study – that accountability was one of the most significant general concerns. At the classroom level it is easy to see how all these issues are linked. The current system of accountability requires more paperwork by teachers, who are expected to provide evidence of performance. A great deal of this is seen as unnecessary for 'good practice' in teaching and learning, and may not just be unproductive but counter-productive. There is often a tension between what senior leaders require in order to manage performance and what teachers think is appropriate for their own teaching, often accompanied by a feeling that all this paperwork is deemed necessary because they are not trusted. Ofsted requirements are often cited as the reason for the need to provide so much written evidence. Despite government claims of providing appropriate lead-in times for policy changes, many teachers still feel these are unrealistic.

The Need for a Change of Ethos

Overall it seems the studies confirm that the government's approach to accountability and the lack of trust that entails is one of the main sources of frustration for teachers. What teachers are really asking for is not a bit of advice about how to cope with heavy workloads but a shift of emphasis from their being perceived as 'managed employees' to being regarded as 'trusted professionals'. Increasingly the overemphasis on objective measures and numerical evidence is driving the development of practice in ways which many teachers instinctively object to because they know full well that these 'facts and figures' are often not valid, relevant or reliable, and act as a constraint on imaginative and inventive teaching, yet they cannot easily be gainsaid because 'good' school governance is said to rely on them.

More trust in teachers' professional abilities is clearly one of the solutions to the problem, but this crucial aspect is not really addressed by the government. Although it accepts the general need for teachers to have access to more Continuing Professional Development (CPD) opportunities, its

understanding of the broader issues is constricted by its assumption that it is the lack of CPD which has 'caused' unmanageable workloads in the first instance. In this it concurs with the conclusion of the EPI study which identifies a vicious circle operating, with teachers unable to access the CPD that would enable them to cope with heavier workloads because they had no time to do so. This was based on its finding that 'teachers in England who feel very well prepared for various aspects of teaching are 20 to 22 percent less likely to complain of finding their workloads unmanageable than those who do not feel well-prepared' (Sellen, 2016, p. 8).

But as the research shows, it's a question not just of being underprepared but of being asked to do tasks that are unnecessary and unproductive, which are linked to the overarching problems of the accountability system and the lack of trust. What is needed therefore is a change of ethos – a different attitude on the part of government, a different understanding of accountability, and a different relationship between governors, headteachers, senior leaders and teachers in schools.

Is there any evidence that the government has got this message? In its action plan it claims to be 'working to remove unnecessary workload for teachers, to help them concentrate on teaching and their own development' (DfE, 2017a p. 3), but there is no reference anywhere to 'trust'. A change of ethos would require a change of language, and the tone would be one of support and respect. So do we find this in its response?

Let us look at one of its main actions, the pamphlet and poster for teachers it produced, in conjunction with teaching unions and Ofsted, offering advice to teachers on marking policy, planning and teaching resources (DfE, 2017b). One of the purposes of this pamphlet was clearly to dispel any false assumptions about Ofsted's requirements. With regard to marking, for example, it points out that Ofsted does not 'expect to see any specific frequency, type or volume of marking and feedback; these are for the school decide through its assessment policy'. Thus, teachers are advised not to give marking a disproportionate value in relation to other types of feedback, and told that Ofsted 'does not expect to see any written record of oral feedback provided to pupils but will consider how written and oral feedback is used to promote learning'.

But how was it these 'false assumptions' came about? Why were teachers routinely making the mistake of 'giving marking a disproportionate value'? Would teachers of their own accord have chosen, as the poster states, to 'create detailed plans that become a "box-ticking" exercise creating unnecessary workload ... taking time away from the real business of planning'?

Teachers have for years been telling the government that many of its so-called reforms will lead to bad practice in schools. Their concerns have been largely ignored, and they have been forced to conform to new policies because of the severe penalties in terms of Ofsted ratings if they don't. Now the chickens have come home to roost, and teachers are advised to welcome the clarity provided about Ofsted's expectations for helping to reduce workload. But in view of recent history and Ofsted's track record, why should they trust

the government? How much evidence is necessary for assessing performance, and what kind of evidence, is a matter of judgement. Can teachers rely on Ofsted to back their judgement, for example, when schools, as they are now supposed to do, decide for themselves 'how planning should be set out, the length of time it should take or the amount of detail it should contain' (see poster [DfE, 2017b])?

The whole tone of the pamphlet is patronising and seems to suggest that it was teachers themselves who were at fault. All the items under the 'Don't' column represent examples of bad practice, but (with the final column headed 'Remember Ofsted says') the blame for this seems to be placed squarely on the teachers, as if it were their idea in the first place. 'Don't spend time on marking that doesn't have a commensurate impact on pupil progress. Simple message: stop it!', implying that teachers are so dedicated to ineffective marking they need a verbal slap on the wrist. Clearly, not much change of ethos here! In fact, nowhere in the government response is there an acknowledgement of its own responsibility for creating the unmanageable workloads with which teachers now have to cope.

The Two-way Nature of Trust

If there is one thing that is in short supply in schools today it is trust. It could be the idea of trust being far too nebulous and open to interpretation for the 'business model' now operating, even when at the level of rhetoric trust is a much-used term. On a personal note, in my work as a school governor I have encountered numerous incidents where basic trust has just broken down, particularly in relation to the hidden agenda of school inspections, the mixed messages about assessment and evaluation from government via the DfE and Ofsted, and the world of uncertainty and constant change in which schools and teachers find themselves. Much of this is a function of the kind of dog-eat-dog world created by high-stakes testing, league tables, performance-related pay, privatisation/academisation and other so-called reforms of recent years, all driven by the choice agenda and the imperatives of market ideology, with which the readers of this journal are only too familiar.

Against this background, is it any wonder that teachers are wary of accountability measures which the government tells them are inextricably linked to and supposedly consonant with their professional values, and in line with concerns for their own professional development as teachers? A typical example is the school staff appraisal policy which comprises procedures relating to assessment of performance, staff development and pay progression. I shall examine this in some detail because it seems to me a perfect illustration of how definitions and measures which teachers know to be questionable and controversial are not acknowledged as such, and thus are so undermining of trust.

Such policies claim to be striving for consistency and transparency, in accordance with a model policy produced by the DfE (2012) which begins as

follows: 'Appraisal in this school will be a supportive and developmental process designed to ensure that all teachers have the skills and support they need to carry out their role effectively. It will help to ensure that teachers are able to continue to improve their professional practice and to develop as teachers' (DfE, 2012, p. 6). The policy involves an assessment of performance over an appraisal period, an assessment of the teacher's training and development needs and action taken to address them, and a recommendation on pay progression in the light of the assessment of performance.

Overall performance may be assessed using evidence from various sources, and judgments are made against a number of criteria. It is typical for the collection of evidence to include compliance with the requirements of the Professional Standards of Teachers, which are observable but not necessarily measurable. Such standards are wide ranging and identify all the most important aspects of good teaching, such as to 'establish a safe and stimulating environment for pupils, rooted in mutual respect' and to 'demonstrate knowledge and understanding of how pupils learn, and how this impacts on teaching' (DfE, 2011). These standards are referred to in the Standards for Teachers' Professional Development (DfE, 2016).

Senior leaders talk about the quantitative and qualitative evidence they take into account when assessing teachers' performance. Two quantifiable data measures are: (a) lesson observation, learning walk and work scrutiny outcomes involving judgements about whether the school expectations are being securely met, what requires further improvement and what is exemplary (mapping onto the Ofsted categories of Requires Improvement, Good, and Outstanding); and (b) measures of student progress, assessing whether they are in line with what the school hopes to achieve for all students and how they contribute to the overall headline performance measure Progress 8.

It seems odd that judgements based on lesson observation are described as quantifiable data measures, since judgements about performance in lessons are surely no more quantifiable than the criteria involved in assessing the Professional Standards of Teaching. But leaving this aside, when considering quantitative or qualitative evidence, it seems obvious that some types of evidence are considered to carry more weight than others. If we track back to the DfE's own document on teacher appraisal and capability referred to above (DfE, 2012), which as far as I can see is the most recent update, under a section on setting objectives we read: 'Objectives set for each teacher will be Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Realistic and Time-bound' (p. 6), a description which makes clear the weight given to these kinds of targets. There is much that could be said about the inappropriate use of behavioural objectives in educational contexts, but as most educators know, they are wide open to criticism on a number of grounds, not least because they encourage a simplistic view of educational outcomes as readily identifiable and measurable.

There are many ways in which this crude system of judging teacher effectiveness is wrapped up to make it look more sophisticated. In my own authority, such targets are puzzlingly described as 'absolute' rather than

'conditional', with the implication that relative to classroom observation they are more 'objective'. A judgement is made of the extent to which students make progress – broadly in line with, better than expected or significantly better than expected, relative to starting points and the progress of similar students nationally. Teachers whose pupils make better or significantly better than expected progress are likely to receive a more positive appraisal overall, because these measurable outcomes are somehow more 'objective' than the other evidence. Most of the supporting statements from appraisees I have read often begin with reference to the progress of the students in their charge, usually accompanied by a spreadsheet of numerical information.

All this begs many questions about the validity and reliability of all these measures. How valid are measures of the starting points? Certainly not very valid if the widespread 'gaming' of SATs in primary schools is anything to go by. Other measures, such as Cognitive Abilities Tests (CATs), are open to the objection that they already have contextual factors built into them and can just as easily lower and raise expectations. If teachers have expectations at all, these should be highly localised and readily revisable in the light of student responses in lessons.

But this kind of evidence is used to point the finger at individual teachers, whose pay progression depends on it. Although many head teachers and senior leaders deny it, this is a system of performance-related pay of the crudest kind. Underpinning it is the same 'no excuses' approach with which contextual factors are dismissed when comparing schools. A recent article in the *British Educational Research Journal* (Perry, 2016) confirms the high levels of instability in value-added measures. School scores are unstable across schools, but there is also 'inconsistency of value added performance for different cohorts within schools at a given point in time' (Perry, 2016, p. 1056). The author concludes that the policy of value-added progress measures has no justification and that, as measures of school performance, they are likely to be profoundly misleading. What is true for schools, given the differences between cohorts, is also true for teachers.

When teachers receive mixed and contradictory messages, when, as so often happens, the goal-posts change, then trust breaks down. Teachers might be told one thing about appraisal, but the reality is something different. Most informed leaders know that there are numerous non-school factors at work, to say nothing of school factors for which the teacher herself cannot be held solely responsible. Teachers have not invented the high-stakes testing regime which is so dysfunctional for teaching and learning. Many of them are having to teach in ways which are problematical in terms of their professional values, but they have very little choice in the matter.

Democratic Accountability

'Trust' implies a more self-regulated profession and what has been described (see Sachs, 2016) as a 'responsive' accountability, where there is more concern

with processes than with outcomes, in contrast to 'contractual' accountability, where the focus is mainly on outcomes measures. These two forms of accountability will always be in tension, but it is a tension which it is not impossible to resolve. The more democratically oriented the contracting government, the more likely it is to understand the complexities which require the freedom to make on-the-spot judgements in the light of changing needs in different and diverse cohorts of students. However, the profession has to strive to explain its actions in ways which the public understands, otherwise democracy in the wider societal context goes by the board. Teachers cannot be so self-regulated that the wishes of the majority of citizens are disregarded. In a universal system of provision, some form of measurability and inter-school comparison, as well as a degree of control, is inevitable, but this has to be made compatible with treating teachers as 'trusted professionals', with all that entails in terms of a critical approach to measurability and to how causes, processes and outcomes are identified and explained.

In the present circumstances, this ideal relationship between government and the profession does not exist, and I'm not sure there are any signs that things are about to change, despite a lot of rhetoric to the contrary and many exceptions to the rule in individual schools. Teachers continue to vote with their feet. It looks as though the 'blame the teacher' culture is still alive and well. Although some form of bureaucratic structure in schools is always likely to be necessary (see Tschannen-Moran, 2009), the layers of hierarchy in academy chains, with huge disparities in power and remuneration between 'top' and 'bottom', make a mockery of the whole notion of the autonomous professional. One assistant head teacher I know talks of young teachers being used as 'cannon fodder'; if results improve, they stay; if not, they leave, decisions being made almost on a year-by-year basis.

Although talking about schools rather than teachers, the newly appointed head of Ofsted**,** Amanda Spielman, seems to toe the same line as her predecessors in this regard. She is apparently appalled at the way schools have gamed the system and pushed results over real learning (see *Guardian*, 24 June 2017), but as the general secretary of the Association of School and College Leaders (ASCL) points out in the same article, while welcoming the 'the chief inspector's call to put children's education before the constraints of performance tables and school inspections ... the subtext seems to be that the blame for any narrow compliance with accountability measures lies with the school. It doesn't.'

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