

---

# A New Deal for the Teaching Profession

HOWARD STEVENSON

**ABSTRACT** The crisis in teacher supply points to fundamental problems in the way teachers in England experience their work. In this contribution to debates about a National Education Service (NES) the author argues that a Labour government must be prepared to radically rethink how it engages with the teaching profession. The challenge is to shift from a compliance culture to one in which education workers become central to building the movement on which the NES will be based.

Teaching is in crisis. This is often presented as a recruitment and retention crisis, whereby the teaching profession is unable:

- To recruit new teachers in sufficient numbers;
- To retain qualified teachers in the profession;
- To encourage enough teachers to want to take on leadership roles.

The fact that England has the youngest teacher workforce among the countries of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) is one reflection of the inability to retain teachers in the profession. However, this crisis is more than a crisis of teacher supply, and labour market difficulties are a symptom of a much wider set of problems. An incoming Labour government would need to address the fundamental issues that conspire to have made teaching a deeply unattractive job to many potential and existing teachers. Teachers need a 'new deal' – marking a decisive break from the past in which politicians have seen teachers as a 'problem' to be 'fixed'. Labour can, and must, be different.

## **The Crisis in Teaching – Identifying the Causes**

The crisis in teacher supply derives from three key factors that all too often combine to drive teachers out of teaching. These are:

- Workload – teachers typically work over 50 hours per week (sometimes over 60 hours), and substantially above the OECD average. Workload levels are unsustainable – that is crystal clear.
- Pay – has been reduced in real terms since the economic crisis. Real-term pay cuts and general pay stagnation make teaching uncompetitive when compared with other graduate jobs. Pay issues also highlight significant gender-based inequalities.
- Reduced professional autonomy – this factor does not always feature in headlines as clearly as workload, but it may be the most important factor and therefore must be addressed. Successive years of reforms (of all parties) have often made teachers' work profoundly joyless. What is sometimes called the 'datafication of teaching' is out of control. What matters is what can be measured. Teaching as a complex social process based on the development of human relationships is replaced by the teacher as technician teaching in prescribed ways (phonics, for example) to 'deliver' 'progress'. Progress only becomes real – that is, valued – when it can be evidenced and measured. Teachers do not experience teaching as a creative, exciting and inspiring process that challenges them intellectually – but as alienated labour in which compliance and standardisation are valued.

Underpinning these problems are a number of 'second-order' factors which contribute to causing the problems indicated above. Many of these factors need to be seen as interdependent – each reinforces the other.

- *Weak teacher contracts.* Contracts for teachers in England have always been relatively 'loose' in the sense that there is considerable scope for 'flexibility' or local application. Teachers' employment contracts in many other countries are typically 'tighter' and specify in more detail what teachers can expect to do and not do as part of their work. These variabilities have been exacerbated by academisation. Relatively open-ended contracts and system fragmentation (fuelled by inter-school competition) are key reasons teachers' employment contracts have offered little protection against an apparently inexorable upward pressure on workload.
- *High-stakes accountability.* The English education system has an out-of-control accountability system in which testing, league tables and Ofsted combine to create a punitive culture in which teachers are made to feel like they can never be 'good enough'. The system is underpinned by datafication – the quantification of everything so that measurement and comparison are constant. This not only drives workload up (endlessly producing 'evidence' for an accountability machine that can never be satisfied) but also guts teaching of the pleasure that is derived from working with children and seeing them develop.
- *Performance-related pay (PRP).* A clear example of how all the factors identified above are connected. Teachers are constantly measured and judged. The pressure to perform inevitably drives up workload – while also reducing teaching to a process of chasing what are often considered meaningless

targets. Failure to play this game results in the withholding of pay progression – adding to pay problems, but also undermining teachers’ sense of self-worth and self-efficacy as they are considered inadequate. PRP places considerable pressure on teachers in terms of stress and workload, while also undermining teachers’ capacity to say ‘no’.

- *Increased managerialism.* High-stakes accountability systems in schools have driven an unhealthy rise in ‘managerialism’ – a form of school leadership that is hierarchical in form and relies on performance measurement and management to impose particular practices. It is increasingly clear that the unreasonable expectations being placed on ‘the system’ are experienced by school leaders in ways that result in such pressures being crudely ‘pushed down the line’ (ultimately to students). This approach to management does not welcome collegiality and pluralism in decision-making, but relies on promoting a ‘one best way’ methodology imposed from above. Sadly, in too many cases, it sees independent teacher voice as a problem, and staff who express dissenting views can experience victimisation and bullying. The bullying and victimisation of school-based union representatives is now a significant problem in the English education system and symptomatic of a very unhealthy and intolerant culture in too many schools.
- *Chaotic teacher training system and inadequate teacher development.* The deregulation of entry into teaching has been a spectacular failure. The adoption of multiple routes into teaching (School Direct and Teach First, among others) has compounded these problems – by adding complexity and causing confusion for potential new entrants when simplicity would have been more helpful. There is an urgent need to address the issues of teacher education and development in a way that is coherent, provides high-quality education and training at every point and has a direct impact on helping people to enter the profession, stay in it and develop within it. The ‘bring in, burn out, replace’ (repeat as necessary) model of teacher has to end.

### **Putting the Education System Back Together Again – a New Deal for Teachers**

The imperative is for a ‘fresh start’ in which the relationship between politicians, the Department for Education (DfE) and teachers is transformed. Such a fresh start involves creating something new and exciting – linked to the National Education Service (NES) as a vision around which the teaching profession can be mobilised. What might some of the key features be?

1. A national summit of the teaching profession – a major conference involving all stakeholders to set out an agenda for working with the teaching profession. Education unions would be central to this. The aim would be to ‘frame the narrative’ about the Labour government working with teachers – and, in the future, ‘do reform differently’ (for an example, see New Zealand, where tests and charters have been abolished and the government has just set up a commission to review ‘Tomorrow’s Schools’ thirty years on). Local summits

might also be organised. The aim would be to organise high-profile/high-engagement events to signal the change in culture – and also win and mobilise support within the profession for wider changes that will be central to establishing the new NES. This is a vital issue – while teachers cry out for something different, they are also worn down by years of imposed change. There will also be powerful voices inside the profession who have built their careers within the academised model of schools as edu-businesses.

2. Re-establish national collective bargaining – the loss of collective bargaining has been a disaster for teachers. It has marginalised the voice of teachers and created the conditions in which the problems identified above have been allowed to take root. New bargaining machinery should be established as a matter of priority – for teachers and support staff. National bargaining would presage the development of a national contract for teachers. This will meet resistance from those headteachers who have sought to use their academy ‘freedoms’ to vary conditions – but the nettle must be grasped. A national education service requires a national teachers’ contract – and such a contract promises to address many of the problems that have been caused by fragmentation and school-based discretion.

3. Develop and formalise workplace representation for staff working in schools. Schools have become unbalanced institutions with too much authority invested in senior leadership. Schools need to develop institutional structures that formalise an independent voice at work for staff. This can in part be addressed through the re-establishment of school governing bodies with guaranteed elected staff representation (such as suggested by articles elsewhere in this issue of *FORUM*), but thought should be given to developing structures within the school, but which sit outside of the governing body. Examples from other countries may provide a model. For example, Italian labour legislation requires the majority of workplaces (including schools) to have workplace representatives who are elected and who are consulted on key decisions pertaining to that workplace. Any employee can stand for election, but in reality the candidates are drawn from union lists. This model is very different to anything in the UK currently, and it would need much more thought, but there is a need to rebalance relationships in schools, and radical thinking is required. The creation of workplace committees with elected representatives discussing anything from health and safety to professional development has the potential to make a major contribution to the reculturing of schools.

4. Address teacher education and development – working with the national summit and teacher unions, there is an urgent need to reconfigure what high-quality teacher education and career-long professional development might look like. Teacher education and development needs to take a long-term perspective – seeking to develop teachers over a career. Teachers need to be able to access high-quality professional development, and to have the resources to undertake this. Professional development needs to be placed in the hands of teachers – not driven by the need to chase meaningless targets. Careful thought needs to be given to how career development and professional development

might be linked. Performance-related pay needs to be rejected, and more meaningful ways need to be identified to connect career and professional development (while being wary of making participation in professional development a bureaucratic requirement to secure pay rises or promotion). One example that offers a model for consideration is the process of 'Professional Update' established in Scotland, where teachers are engaged in developmental career reviews but in ways that avoid crude observations, rankings and use of student test scores to evaluate performance.

### **A New Democratic Professionalism**

An incoming Labour government needs to establish a new relationship with the teaching profession. If it can do this it can create a huge movement for progressive change (which will be vital to building the NES). Teachers are crying out for something to inspire them after years of insults and imposed policy. This requires a fresh start, or a 'new deal'.

The key is to work out how teachers can be involved in developing a new democratic professionalism in which teachers and other education professionals feel they have meaningful control over all the key elements of their work. For teachers, this requires the profession to have influence at all levels of the system (from school level to national government and supra-national institutions) and across key aspects of their work, and principally in three areas:

- The determination of learning and working conditions.
- Engagement with disciplinary knowledge and teacher education and development.
- Education policy development and enactment.

This is in essence about teacher agency – teachers feeling empowered as professionals in relation to all the key issues that shape their working life. However, individual agency only becomes meaningful when it is exercised collectively also – which is why teacher unions must be at the heart of a new democratic professionalism.

---

**HOWARD STEVENSON** works in the School of Education, University of Nottingham. *Correspondence:* [howard.stevenson@nottingham.ac.uk](mailto:howard.stevenson@nottingham.ac.uk)

