

Understanding and mitigating the impact of COVID-19 disruption on trainee and early career teachers in secondary schools

Recommendations to ensure teacher quality and enable retention

Context

COVID-19 has led to huge disruptions to the education system, not just for students and teachers, but for those training to join the profession. Trainees learning to teach in UK secondary schools in both the 2019-20 and 2020-21 academic years have experienced very challenging training contexts, and there is a real risk that they will have insufficient expertise and could rapidly leave the profession as a result.

In turn, this potential lack of expertise and high attrition could seriously impact on the educational outcomes of young people who have already faced significant disadvantage through school closures and ongoing COVID-19-related disruption. For these reasons, understanding how teacher development has been impacted by COVID-19, and how early career teachers (ECTs) can be best supported in response, is a public policy priority.

The research

This research project, initiated in September 2020, responds directly to this challenge by tracking the experiences of new teachers during both their training and in their first year as an ECT. Through surveys of and interviews with trainees, ECTs, school leaders and initial teacher education (ITE) staff based in both schools and university over a two-year period, it is designed to build a rich understanding of the impacts of COVID-19 on teacher quality and retention. We will use this evidence to develop clear, practical recommendations for policymakers, school leaders and ITE providers across the UK. While the research is focused on those who complete the postgraduate certificate in education (PGCE), the findings have relevance for all teacher education routes, including undergraduate pathways.

The questions guiding the research

1. How has the COVID-19 pandemic created challenges and opportunities for secondary trainee teachers and ECTs to develop teacher quality?
2. How might the COVID-19 pandemic affect the retention of secondary trainee teachers and ECTs, especially those teaching subjects which have persistent shortages of teachers?
3. What changes to practice should be highlighted to trainees, teachers, schools and training providers to mitigate the negative effects of COVID-19 on teacher quality and retention?

Given the relevance of this research for policymakers and practitioners, we recognise the importance of sharing findings as they emerge. In particular, there is an important opportunity to reflect our findings in professional development for ECTs delivered via the Early Career Framework (ECF), which comes into force in September 2021. Additionally, the recent announcement of new funding to support those who began teaching in 2020-21 means that evidence-based guidance on how these funds can be most effectively allocated is timely and valuable.

This briefing note captures interim findings and recommendations emerging from the pilot study and first phase of the research, conducted between September 2020 and June 2021. This comprised 55 interviews, including with PGCE students, school-based mentors, school leaders and university-based PGCE staff. This phase of the research considered in detail the experience of those who completed their PGCE in the 2020-2021 academic year. Subsequent phases will provide the opportunity to make detailed recommendations for the 2019-2020 cohort and for teacher education and professional development more broadly.

Emerging findings and recommendations

The teacher training experience has been significantly disrupted, affecting different cohorts in different ways

The two cohorts of teachers who have trained during the COVID-19 pandemic have had markedly different experiences. The first cohort, who completed their PGCE between 2019 and 2020, experienced a relatively 'normal' period between September 2019 and the end of February 2020. From March 2020, with the onset of lockdowns in England, there was a rapid and abrupt shift to PGCE students working completely online. These students were unable to return to their school placements and were unable to attend in-person interviews for newly qualified teacher (NQT) posts. Instead, job interviews were held online, with implications for both the NQTs and the schools employing them.

The second cohort, who completed their PGCE between 2020 and 2021, embarked

on their programme of study in the middle of the pandemic and as such have moved between periods of in-school placement and online teaching. Although these PGCE students have been able to complete substantive school placements, they have had a disrupted rhythm and have been restricted in terms of movement around the classroom and school site. For this cohort, the university aspect of the PGCE has been, in the vast majority of cases, almost completely online.

This distinction between cohorts is important from a policy perspective. While those who trained in 2020-21 will be supported by the new Early Career Framework for their first two years in the classroom, those who trained in 2019-20 and completed their NQT year in 2020-21 are not part of the ECF induction programme. While the recent announcement of additional funding to support the professional development of this cohort is welcome, there is as yet no recommended provision to address the two years of sustained disruption they have experienced.

Even within cohorts, the experiences of different trainees are diverse, depending on their school placements, subject and personal circumstances

Different schools have responded to COVID-19 in different ways, including in their use of 'bubbles', the restriction of movement around the school site and their use of online teaching (for example pre-recorded content, 'live' online teaching, blended approaches etc.). The choice of approach by schools has naturally had implications for trainee teachers' school placements, and their ability to develop their professional practice. This includes in terms of observing others, developing classroom management strategies, engaging with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) provision and implementing assessment for learning strategies.

The pandemic and associated responses have also affected different subjects in different ways. Those subjects that make greater use of practical work (for example science, art, drama and PE) and fieldwork (for example geography) have had to adapt their teaching strategies more extensively.

Finally, it is important to account for the differential impacts of COVID-19 on PGCE students' own lives and well-being. For example, some may have had their learning experience disrupted by contracting COVID-19, periods of self-isolation or from additional caring responsibilities, for example home-schooling their own children.

Recommendation 1: Bespoke professional development for early career teachers should be put in place in response to the highly variable impact of COVID-19 on teacher training

A central finding of our research is that different trainees have had very different experiences of training during the COVID-19 pandemic, with associated variation in the challenges they are likely to face (or have faced) in their first years in the classroom. It is important that they receive suitably tailored professional development and support as ECTs. There is a distinct challenge associated with the provision of this support for the cohort who completed their PGCE in 2019-20 and have just completed their first year as an NQT, as they are not eligible for support under the ECF. It is therefore vital to consider how this group can access bespoke professional development that is

responsive to their individual needs, which might include them being given access to ECF training and resources.

Question for discussion: How can we respond to the variable impact of COVID-19 on teacher training to best support ECTs?

Recommendation 2: Opportunities for subject specific CPD are vital for teacher self-efficacy and potentially retention

Interviews with trainee teachers and ECTs highlighted powerfully the importance of nurturing engagement with and enjoyment of the subject they teach for self-efficacy. A passion for their chosen subject was identified frequently as a key motivating factor in deciding to become a teacher, and the opportunity to nurture this passion and develop subject specific knowledge through continued professional development (CPD) opportunities can plausibly be linked to the desire to remain in the profession.

We found that the COVID-19 pandemic may actually have increased opportunities for subject specific CPD, with a huge variety of lectures, courses etc. being made available online. PGCE students have taken advantage of this offer to enhance their practice.

Question for discussion: How do we ensure that there are opportunities within and beyond the ECF for ECTs to engage in subject specific CPD, both online and in person?

Recommendation 3: ECTs should be encouraged to critically engage with education research to develop self-efficacy

Our research so far has identified the importance of fostering critical engagement with research in the field of education in developing teachers' self-efficacy. Respondents highlighted that the university aspect of their training (lectures, seminars, tutorials, assignments) provided an important opportunity for PGCE students to engage with, debate and consider a range of ideas from education research, including pedagogy, curriculum, assessment, classroom management, inclusion and social justice.

This was highlighted as an important space for PGCE students to develop their own ideas about what to implement in their practice, and to critically reflect on the decisions they made regarding teaching and learning. Although the university aspect was almost completely online for these respondents (the 2020-21 cohort) this did not diminish the experience or its importance for PGCE students. Respondents articulated that they had made a conscious and considered choice to study to become teachers in the academic setting of a university and they felt their choice to be the right one. Many of those interviewed said they were likely to pursue further academic study in the next two to three years.

Question for discussion: How can we ensure that critical engagement with research is enhanced as a core part of ECTs' practice?

Recommendation 4: ECTs should be offered regular, supported reflection that is not linked to assessment to build teacher identity

The PGCE students who completed a series of three interviews for this project over the course of the academic year 2020-2021 reported how these had provided vital, almost therapeutic spaces to reflect upon their values, their experiences and to begin to develop their identities as teachers. These interviews were not part of the assessment of the PGCE students, and this was crucial in providing an open, honest and reflective professional space. Participants did not view these interviews as 'additional work'; rather they had a therapeutic value in that they contributed to identity development, enhanced well-being and, we argue, would lead to greater job satisfaction and increased retention.

These findings point to the potential benefits of making such interviews available to all ECTs. At the same time, we recognise the substantial resources required to deliver this, particularly in terms of the time of school-based mentors with the expertise to facilitate reflective professional conversations focused on values, experiences and identity rather than assessment or progress. We suggest that this is something university tutors may be able to assist with.

Question for discussion: How can we continue to provide reflective professional conversations for ECTs, and what are the barriers to doing so?

Recommendation 5: Greater recognition should be given to the role of transferable skills and experience acquired before teacher training in developing new teachers' professional practice

We found that there was real value in university tutors supporting PGCE students to identify the previous experiences, learning and capabilities that they could incorporate into their teaching practice, and in encouraging PGCE students to share these with their school-based mentors. Those students who were able to draw on pre-existing experiences and skills (for example confidence with online platforms and technology or communication and teamworking skills developed in sectors including education, marketing and customer service) were able to be responsive and flexible in the context of pandemic-related uncertainty.

Some mentors were very adept in providing PGCE students with opportunities to apply their experiences and capabilities to support their teaching and wider school roles. This in turn supported PGCE students' self-efficacy and the development of professional identities.

Question for discussion: How can we support ECTs to continue to identify and leverage the learning and capabilities they bring from their previous careers and experiences to develop their professional practice?

Recommendation 6: ECTs should be supported to develop their pastoral practice, in recognition of the importance of the pastoral role in teacher motivation

The pastoral role of teachers, and their wider social contribution, have been underlined by the experience of COVID-19. Trainee teachers emphasised that the opportunity to make a difference to the lives of young people and their communities was a key motivating factor in their decision to become teachers. This motivation was enhanced by the COVID-19 pandemic for some participants, and was part of the reason why they chose to become teachers at this stage in their lives and careers.

For others, the wider role of a teacher was made apparent by the contribution of teachers and schools in supporting young people during the pandemic. This observation became increasingly important in their decision to continue to pursue a career in teaching and shaped their career choices, for example choosing to specialise in working with young people with SEND. The weight interviewees placed on the pastoral role highlights that as we come out of the pandemic, the teacher's role in supporting children holistically is seen as equally important as a focus on academic 'catch-up'.

Question for discussion: How can we ensure that ECTs are able to develop their pastoral practice?

About the project and research team

This research is funded by the Economic and Social Research Council as part of the UKRI 'Ideas that address COVID-19' grant call. Research findings will be generated through analysis of responses gathered from questionnaires and remote interviews conducted across an 18-month period (April 2021-September 2022), to enable participants' experiences to be captured during both the training year and the first year of practice as an ECT. The findings also draw on a pilot study conducted by the research team between September 2020 and April 2021.

Interviewees include PGCE students, ECTs, school-based mentors, school leaders, and ITE staff, based on a sample of 400 teachers trained at King's College London. The research will produce a set of clear recommendations for practitioners and policymakers involved in the training and development of new teachers to enhance teacher quality and retention.

Principal Investigator: Dr Simon Gibbons. Simon's work focuses on teachers' professional development and the impact of policy on practice, utilising qualitative research methods. As Director of Teacher Education at King's College London, Simon leads the ITE programme.

Lead Co-Investigator: Dr Elizabeth Rushton. Lizzie's work considers secondary teacher identity with a focus on science and geography teachers. She has expertise in mixed methods research and has led evaluations of UK-wide science teacher professional development programmes. Lizzie designed and led the pilot study that informs this research.

Wider research team

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