

Beating the burnout

As the teaching profession struggles to retain experienced school staff, **David Weston** argues that a focus on professional development and teacher learning is vital...

A recent OECD study noted that England has one of the youngest teaching workforces in the world, especially at primary school, which has far reaching implications for school leaders who are trying to recruit and retain the best staff.

A young workforce suggests that we are relatively successful at recruitment, yet it is strange that so many of our more experienced teachers are leaving in such large numbers. Schools need to eradicate some of the causes of high turnover and ensure that wisdom and experience is not being lost but being effectively spread around the school.

When you look in detail, the figures for the 31 OECD countries are stark. With 20% of our secondary teachers aged under 30, we have the second youngest workforce after Indonesia. In the primary sector we have a massive 31% of teachers in this age bracket, way ahead of 2nd ranked Belgium with 22%.

The positions are similar if you look at the proportions of teachers under 40. At the other end of the table we see Italy with a staggering 85% of primary teachers aged over 40 and 92% of secondary teachers. Amazingly, two out of three Italian secondary teachers are over 50, a proportion that must terrify the authorities.

Clearly it's better for us to have a workforce with a good supply of new entrants but it is striking just how unusual our own workforce is.

Where are our mature teachers going?

The top reasons given for leaving are stress, excessive workload / bureaucracy and behaviour issues. Broadly speaking, the majority of teachers in England who leave the profession tend to be either in their early careers (within the first five years) or toward the end (over 50s).

Notably, a significant proportion

"With 20% of our secondary teachers aged under 30, we have the second youngest workforce after Indonesia..."

(around three in 10) of the younger teachers are leaving with an intention to return, for example going on sabbatical, travelling or starting a family. The fact that such a large number of more mature teachers are citing stress, workload and bureaucracy as a reason to leave is something that worries me.

It suggests that not only are some teachers burning themselves out and leaving, but that some may be burning out earlier in their career and yet remaining in the classroom in order to retain their salary.

Indeed, the TUC recently reported that teachers put in more overtime than any other public sector workers and Kevin Courtney, deputy general secretary of the NUT, has said that teachers are "manifestly overworked" and that their jobs are becoming "increasingly stressful".

This can't be good for the young people in our schools nor for the colleagues of these teachers who have to support them and potentially pick up the slack. Worst of all, it is the schools in the most challenging circumstances that experience the highest rates of staff turnover and this has been shown to be damaging to the quality of education.

The importance of leadership

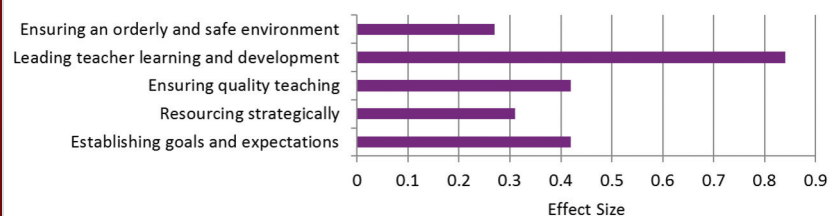
Michael Barber's much-vaunted message that "The quality of an education system cannot exceed the quality of its teachers" is a powerful one that has led many school leaders and policy makers to throw more initiatives and training at teachers in order to make them better.

The irony is that this approach leads to a loss of professionalism and autonomy, which simply fuels stress levels, reduces motivation and makes it less likely that teachers will have the capacity to improve themselves.

It's also ironic given that we know from Viviane Robinson's research (fig. 1, below) that focusing on 'making teachers teach better' is only half as effective as a leadership activity than modelling and leading teacher learning and building capacity for professional collaborative development.

Effectiveness of different leadership aspects in improving learning outcomes

fig. 1



High quality collaborative professional development and teacher learning (as distinct from low quality cultures of one-off training that are 'done to' teachers) has been shown to raise young people's engagement and attainment, as well as raising the motivation and confidence of teachers.

Embracing teacher enquiry and lesson study

I've witnessed this myself, with teachers who have participated in our National Teacher Enquiry Network (NTEN) Lesson Study pilot reporting greater teamwork and engagement in their work.

One teacher worked with two colleagues to study the engagement of quiet pupils in her Physical Education (PE) class and managed to transform one of the quietest girls from a PE-refuser to an enthusiast who joined the after-school athletics club.

Another teacher recounted the transformative effect in the staffroom when the teachers were empowered to engage in a sustained collaborative professional learning programme, saying:

"The pedagogical discussions we're having around the staffroom simply wouldn't have happened before" and

"[There is huge] impact in working alongside in a lesson rather than at the back with a clipboard".

"I've been head of my school for ten years. Taking part in Lesson Study has been the most transformative thing we've ever done," commented Alison Peacock, head teacher at Wroxham School, at the official launch of the NTEN in the Houses of Parliament. "That involves looking closely at children's learning," she continued, "not going in judging a teacher but really closely looking at the quality of learning."

Lesson Study is a triad-based approach to collaborative professional development where teachers plan a lesson and predict the effect of specific teaching activities on specific pupils. They then teach and observe the lesson and follow this by brief pupil interviews. Finally they reflect on their predictions in order to plan the next lesson in the sequence. The basic process is illustrated by the cycle shown in fig.2, below:



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

DAVID WESTON IS CHIEF EXECUTIVE OF THE TEACHER DEVELOPMENT TRUST AND A VISITING FELLOW AT THE INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION. HE IS A FORMER MATHS, PHYSICS AND ICT TEACHER WITH NINE YEARS EXPERIENCE, A FORMER CONSULTANT SPECIALISING IN DATA AND ASSESSMENT, AND AUTHOR OF PHYSICS TEXTBOOK MATERIALS.

Improving staff morale and retention

When collaborative teacher enquiry approaches, such as Lesson Study, are embedded in a culture where teachers are empowered to take charge of their own improvement, then we see improved morale and retention for staff and greater depth of learning and engagement for the young people in our classes.

This process, just as importantly, gives teachers autonomy over their work, which is motivating and ensures that wisdom and expertise is shared and explored throughout teams rather than being lost.

Whilst Robinson's work identified staff morale and retention as the most important aspect of school leadership, it is also important that school leaders:

- Strive to reduce bureaucratic burdens, examining every minute spent on admin and evaluating its value to learners when compared to collaborative professional development, planning and marking.
- Create an orderly and safe environment, actively supporting effective and consistent behaviour management and offering in-depth support to help teachers deal with disruption.
- Resource the school strategically, keeping pupil learning at the heart of decision-making and ensuring that time and space are available for teachers to collaborate.
- Ensure quality teaching, helping staff focus on some of the fundamentals of good practice through collaborative enquiry, coaching and mentoring.
- Set high expectations for pupils and staff and demonstrate and model those expectations in every action.

This approach ensures we are not only able to keep our most experienced professionals in the classroom but also ensure they keep improving, year-on-year. It also allows us to engage the enthusiasm of the newly and recently qualified teachers and ensure that they continue to develop,

The research evidence is clear that this is the direction we need to go in our schools and this is why we've been able to work so closely with the NUT and the National College to pilot these programmes.

The National Teacher Enquiry Network (NTEN) is a collaborative partnership of schools and colleges focused on innovation and improvement through highly effective and evidence-based staff professional development and learning, supported by rigorous research and development.

fig. 2

