

Part 3

Preschool and School Education: Policies & Practices

Where Have All the Teachers Gone and Why? How Can the World Encourage More People to Join the Profession, or Has the Cause Already Been Lost?

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Abstract

This paper explores the reasons why, across the world, fewer people have ambitions to become teachers and those in the profession are leaving early, particularly those after working for up to five years, and those in their fifties. It appears that becoming a teacher is no longer the ambition of many young people. The causes for this are many and varied, but include, poor pay rates in comparison with other graduate careers, long working hours and the need to take work home, difficulties with parents, who often do not support teachers in the disciplining of children, lack of sufficient financing of education to improve lives of teachers and school leaders and deal with the needs of Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) children and the deterioration in England and some other countries, in the behaviour of young children. One further reason in England, in particular, is the behaviour of Ofsted inspectors in judging the performance of schools after a short visit, which has, in some cases, resulted in teachers being sacked or, in desperation, committing suicide. However, this problem with recruiting and retaining staff in schools is a global one and is causing concern amongst developed and developing countries alike, and is raising serious concerns in the UN, UNESCO, and governments across the globe. Solutions have to be found to meet the UN Sustainable Development Goal 4 by 2030, which is focused on ensuring equitable educational opportunities for all in childhood and the encouragement of lifelong learning, to improve many aspects of human existence. A search of the literature on the subject is followed

by the results of a survey of some English secondary school students' attitudes towards considering teaching as a future career.

Keywords: teachers, UN SDG4, loss of teachers, teacher shortages, career choices of young people

Introduction

In 2016, UNESCO Institute for Statistics (UIS, 2016) published a report on the world's desperate need for more teachers, to meet the UN Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG4) by 2030: Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all. This was a worldwide need, as at that time, so many children had no opportunities to receive even basic education, let alone that at higher levels (UIS, 2016; SDSN, n.d.). Since then, the situation worldwide, with high population growth, has not seen the rise in teacher numbers required to meet SDG4. In fact, in many countries, people are turning away from teaching as a possible career, preferring other roles and possibly less stressful lives as a result. In addition, recruits leave their teaching jobs early, particularly before five years' service is achieved, and many older, more experienced, and good teachers are leaving that initial career choice to take up less stressful, more appreciated, and more financially rewarding jobs. This is very common after the age of fifty years is reached. This phenomenon is not confined to developed or developing countries, but can be observed across the world. The once respected job of being a teacher no longer holds the status or financial rewards it once did, and in many cases is now seen as a career not highly rated in the eyes of the public. Teachers are seen as overworked, underpaid, work long hours, are expected to take on the role of social workers/counsellors, as well as teaching, and are harshly judged by the public and by government inspectors. Many countries now have serious gaps in specific subject areas, particularly at the secondary level, as rewards are far higher in other areas of employment, and stress and lack of respect are not so obvious. Teaching was once a desired and respected profession, but not so now, it appears. Concerns have been growing over the lack of interest in teaching as a career for decades, culminating in 2024, when the UN (2024) issued a worldwide alert over this global problem of teacher shortages.

The continuing problem of recruiting teachers

Every education system is only as good as the teachers who provide the hands-on schooling. Study after study has confirmed their critical role in improving education quality and learning outcomes, which is why SDG 4 calls specifically for a major increase in the supply of qualified teachers and more support from the international community for teacher training in developing countries (Target 4.c). (UIS, 2016, p. 1)

Looking beyond the sheer quantity of teachers, there is also a pressing need for teachers who are well-trained, well-supported and commensurately paid. Entire education systems are gearing up for the pursuit of SDG 4, aiming to ensure that all children are in school and learning by 2030. Such efforts could falter if they fail to prioritize those on the frontline: the world's teachers, who are tasked with the actual delivery of a good quality education for all. (UIS, 2016, p. 14)

However, these concerns have not been sufficiently addressed and solved, and over the years, governments, researchers, and world organisations have raised the same problems. For example, Hilton (2017a) raised the question of poor recruitment and retention of teachers in England, and Hilton (2017b) raised the financing policy for ITT recruitment in that country, which was not meeting needs.

Although there are some areas of success, the world is not on track to achieve SDG4 by 2030, and one of the main reasons is that teaching is no longer a desired profession, particularly for men. Wildfire (2022) raises the problems faced in Australia, which are echoed in many developed countries worldwide. This author claims that teaching has long been seen in the 20th and 21st centuries as women's work, and this, across the world, lowers salary levels, as women's financial rewards rarely match those given to men. She believes that this prejudice against females has a massive effect on entry to the teaching profession, as the role is trivialised, not seen as important, since so many women work in this area. As a result, teaching in Australia lacks respect as a career choice, and in some cases, she claims there is real ignorance of what teaching involves. Hilton (2022) explored the effects of bias against women in a variety of careers in England, the findings clearly demonstrating how women's career progression was affected by the ingrained, biased attitudes of employers.

Schneider (2019) reported on a national poll in the USA, which demonstrated that young people did not even consider becoming a teacher, and their parents and even their teachers also did their best to advise them against the profession. Reporting on Kansas City teacher shortages, Schneider described schools lacking teachers, no applications for advertised jobs, and that the general feeling was one of despair, caused by he believes, by the political hostility towards teachers.

Similar effects are being felt globally with the press in various countries, for example *The Guardian* in England (2024) reporting on possible strike action over pay and working conditions, demonstrated that newly qualified teachers there were going overseas to work, as the rewards and conditions are much better than at home and Oregon USA teachers, striking over pay and conditions were strongly dissatisfied by the rewards and status of the job. A South African researcher (PhD candidate) is also writing about the poor state of infrastructure in many schools there, making them unfit for purpose, resulting in potential teachers choosing other careers where working conditions are superior.

In England, the recruitment and retention problem has been growing steadily over the last few years, reflected in comments in the press, particularly the *Times Education Supplement* and *The Guardian*. These sources have been reporting on the struggle for schools to recruit new staff, keep staff, and each year, the DfE is missing its targets for recruitment (Norden & Turner, 2024). The case is different in various parts of the country, with some areas finding it much more difficult to attract staff than others, often country or seaside areas and the north of England. The same picture is unfolding each year, as in December 2023, the *TES* published an alarming piece entitled 'How England lost its teachers - and how it can get them back' (Martin, 2023). In addition, the press continues reporting on teacher loss, seen as serious nationally (Weale, 2022). The *TES* article was a report on a survey carried out by one of the Teacher Unions, NASUWT, which surveyed 11,000 teachers. The Poll showed the rising discontent, due mainly to low pay and the rising cost of living, with some teachers reporting cutting down on expenditure on food, some even resorting to the use of charity food banks to feed their

families. The government at the time had agreed to raise pay rates for newly qualified teachers, but this was at the expense of far less generous rises for teachers with five or more years of experience, the very teachers schools are so eager to retain. The article claimed that this would mean a real-time five per cent pay cut for experienced teachers. There was, it appeared, great anger from respondents over the poor pay rewards for teaching, which is a difficult and stressful job. Great concern had been expressed over teachers being forced to find second jobs to support their families, and that the status of the profession had fallen in the views of the general public, mainly it appeared due to the low remuneration. In addition, students' poor behaviour, which has been increasing in schools post the Pandemic, has resulted in physical and verbal attacks on teachers by students and parents, some resulting in death or serious injury. Parents are less supportive of teachers' concerns about student behavior than in the past, leaving teachers feeling unsupported by both parents and the government, even as they work to maintain standards, improve outcomes, and manage classrooms. For some, it has proved an impossible task, and they are leaving the profession in increasing numbers. Martin and Norden (2024) reported that full-time and part-time teacher vacancies have increased by twenty per cent in a year in the UK, providing clear evidence of the recruitment and retention crisis.

As 2024 continued, the crisis in recruitment in England became clear. Martin (2024) reported that the new Labour government had been advised to urgently consider measures to increase the supply of teachers to schools. Their pre-election promise was to recruit six thousand five hundred new teachers, including a strong push to recruit from abroad. However, no details of how this could be achieved have yet emerged. Recruitment was falling short yet again, with a crisis looming. Analysis of the figures for the year showed not only problems with secondary teacher supply, although bursary provision had helped a little, but a growing shortage of recruits applying for primary teaching posts too. It was clear that the growing problem of providing sufficient teachers had not been solved, despite the new government promising thousands of recruits, and a severe problem in primary recruitment was beginning to show in lower applications for training. Secondary recruitment had been missed by half of the documented need. Peirson-Hagger (2024) discusses the loss of teachers over twelve years, as new Department for Education (DfE) information shows that over twelve years 40,438 teachers left the profession, whilst eleven out of each one hundred who qualified left the state school sector within one year of qualifying, numbers rising to twenty-five after three years, thirty-three after five years, forty-two after ten years. The question must be asked: Is there a difference between the experience of training as a teacher and the reality of the classroom experience for newly qualified teachers? Is it that the two are not sufficiently interlinked?

In addition, teachers in England have suffered inspections on achievement and quality from Ofsted, which have resulted in teachers leaving the profession in despair and, in some tragic cases, headteachers committing suicide, as a result of the Ofsted reports after a short visit by the inspectors. A poor report often leaves schools unable to attract new students as parents look for outstanding reports from inspections before choosing schools. However, in addition to these concerns, recent research has found that the main concern of teachers in UK schools and their reasons for quitting the profession are the bad behaviour of young people and the time it takes in schools to cope with this concern. Teachers' lives are dominated by dealing with this problem (Severs, 2025).

At present, it looks very unlikely that the global 2030 goal will be met, as the need for teachers has risen as the world's population grows. UNESCO, on 29 February 2024, at a meeting in South Africa, set a new target of forty-four million teachers by 2030, where the UN Secretary-General's *High-Level Panel on the Teaching Profession* put forward a fresh set of recommendations to safeguard future learning for every child. To move forward, the world needs able people with high-quality skills and knowledge. The meeting was informed that the world will need to replace seven out of ten secondary teachers by 2030, as half of the present teachers will have left the profession by that time. The greatest need for new teachers will be in sub-Saharan Africa, where 15 million new teachers will be needed by this decade's end. The results of this crisis in teacher numbers has resulted in higher class sizes, stressed and overworked teachers, wide disparities in education standards and availability, resulting in financial strain and varying quality and standards in the education offered. There is a need to allow teachers to drive change in education, encourage critical thinking, and promote modern learning skills. So, digital learning has to be embraced and used, and technological skills encouraged in learning.

How the world can finance these new requirements was discussed, and concerns were expressed over the number of teachers who leave the profession early. This is a growing and worrying trend demonstrating the pressures on teachers. The loss of primary teachers doubled between 2015 and 2022. The financing of new primary teachers will cost 120 billion dollars, with 68 billion required to provide the required secondary teachers, the UN Secretary General told the UNESCO meeting (UNESCO, 2024). Without these changes, 84 million children will be denied education, 300 million will not learn basic literacy and numeracy, and only one in six countries will have all students finishing secondary education. The question must therefore be asked, what can be done globally, to make teaching a more attractive profession to young people and one in which workers feel valued, well rewarded, and listened to by governments, particularly the parts of governments, which judge teachers' success or failure? What can be done to raise the status of teachers in the eyes of the general population and, in particular, the potential teachers of the future? In some countries, efforts have been made to have an inclusive profession, with the USA in particular making strides to attract black male teachers which has been shown to raise the performance and eagerness to learn, in young black boys, particularly in the more 'female' subjects namely languages, writing, reading and creativity (Garcia, 2023). Certainly, across the world, pay for teachers has to be more commensurate with the qualifications they have to achieve, workloads lowered, respect for the profession improved, and more understanding from the general public that the long holidays and short hours are not the reality of life as a teacher.

Despite these concerns addressed above, it does appear that some countries have raised education standards and the working conditions for teachers, where respect for education lies at the forefront of society, Singapore has a high place in the PISA Tables (Niemtus, 2024). The DfE and the British Council have encouraged cooperation between the two countries so that new approaches used in Singapore could be explored. The system used there to train teachers only allows top graduates to enter the profession, and three pathways are provided: a teaching track, subject specialism, and a leadership track. This ensures that good teachers stay in the classroom to enhance children's learning. Pay is equal, and staff change schools fairly frequently. Before undergoing training, prospective teachers have to spend time in the classroom, encouraging a good understanding of what the job entails, before theoretical and practical training needs are

addressed. The government appears to have a clear vision of what is required to produce good teachers and is ready to listen to the profession about the needs and actions required. The Ministry of Education is in close contact with schools and ready to listen to advice from the teaching staff. There is, it appears, a policy of long-term planning and a willingness to learn. The teachers there praised England's good approach to diversity and SEND children, whilst good, well-structured digital education was strong in Singapore, as are the inspection and support systems for improvement. Inspection teams return to the same school after a year or so to see what improvements have been made after their recommendations. Not quite yet, the approach of Ofsted in England.

Research

One local secondary school was approached and asked if it was possible to question a group of students, aged over 16, in year eleven, to voluntarily complete a questionnaire on their ambitions post GCSE, in particular if they had indeed been considering their future, A Level choices and possible later careers, including teaching as an option. At this age, they are considered adults, so parental permission was not required. The school was happy to help and approved the questionnaire. Those who responded yes to the request were sent the questions via email. The response was not high, as at that time of the year, the group was preparing for GCSE exams. However, 20 students offered to complete the questionnaire. 14 girls and 6 boys submitted answers. The ratio of males to females, to a certain extent, follows the teaching profession's domination by females. Response to the question 'Have you considered teaching as a possible career?' had only 2 positive responses from girls and none from boys. The 2 females had a preference for younger age groups. One wanted to train as an infant teacher, the other as a primary teacher. Those who had said no to the question about considering teaching as a career had their united responses summed up by one respondent, a female:

I feel teachers aren't paid enough, and the pay is not worth my time to be disrespected by students who purely attend school due to the compulsory attendance put on us by our parents. Students enjoy picking on teachers, which makes a teacher feel uncomfortable and ashamed. I also wouldn't be able to handle the challenges of student behaviour and dealing with pathetic arguments.

Lack of respect was mentioned by many and all the male respondents, together with the poor status, resulting in a lack of respect for the profession in a competitive world.

Asked about their parents' opinion on teaching as a career for them, in most cases, the responses were negative, poor pay, too much work, and badly behaved children featured strongly. One respondent, a female, said: 'They think I can do better, but if all else fails, teaching could be an option'. One of the male respondents said it did not appeal as 'it's a woman's job'.

On being provided with a list of possible negatives that influence students' appetite to teach, the most popular was the low status of teachers in the job market, particularly the poor pay and high workloads. High up the list, too, came pupil behaviour 'backchat' and 'attitude' to teachers, plus difficulties caused by parents and their complaints. However, the stress caused by the need to prepare students for exams and being held accountable for their results, and the Ofsted inspections, came low on the list, as did the female-dominated workforce. Asked to explain why young people now do not consider teaching an attractive profession brought again the poor pay rewards for a stressful job,

and the ‘most kids are interested in money and teachers don’t get much’ plus, ‘being a teacher will not get you far’ and ‘the kids’ behaviour is pretty dreadful, who would want to put up with that?’. No one in the group had discussed teaching as a profession in school with teachers or a careers advisor, which is interesting and the answer to how we get more people to train to be teachers, as the country needs an educated workforce. The overwhelming answer was ‘better pay’, with one piece of understanding from a female respondent, ‘they give students an education which sets them up for life, their education results in their future work profession, teachers can be proud of that’.

Conclusion

It is clear from both the literature search of attitudes to teaching as a profession in several developed countries and the negative perceptions of young people in the UK, towards the profession, is raising serious concerns as to how education is going to cope with and overcome the rejection in many countries of teaching as a possible career choice. Negative attitudes to teaching as a profession are held by many parents, who wish to see their children in a high-status, well-rewarded profession. Teaching is not perceived by many as fitting into that category, and parents advise their children not to consider teaching when considering job choices. Young people are not attracted to the profession for a wide spectrum of reasons, and little is being done to improve the standing of the profession across the world by increasing pay, reducing workloads, and raising the status of the teaching role. Governments appear to be making few direct interventions to attempt to overcome this problem, apart from recruiting teachers from other countries, which does nothing to tackle the lack of teachers worldwide.

One area for the UK to examine is the comments made by teachers in recent research and the young people interviewed in this research. Both these areas of response reported that the bad behaviour and lack of respect for teachers by students are adversely affecting people looking towards teaching as a profession, or remaining in the job once it is acquired. As a profession, teaching has fallen away in competition against better-paid graduate roles, which have higher status and less stress. The high incidence of women who work in education can be a deterrent to men, as it is well known that female-dominated professions are generally low in the salary race, compared to professions where men are in the majority. It appears the world, despite several attempts by the UN to raise concerns about the desperate state of the teaching profession worldwide, is not responding to the impending crisis and a downturn of universal equality in education, which is a human right and a world need.

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