'There has never been a better time to be a teacher' (Gove 2013)

Teachers are leaving

Teaching is still a vocation that attracts creative and caring professionals who want to make a difference. But in a time of continuing government drive to promote structural change and to build ever-stronger accountability frameworks, are we are in danger of missing the essence of what it means to be a teacher?

Since 2011 increasing alarm has been raised by statisticians regarding retention & recruitment. For example, the National Audit Office reported that between 2011 and 2014, the number of teachers leaving the profession had increased by 11% and the proportion of those who chose to leave the profession ahead of retirement increased from 64% to 75%. Other figures from the Institute for Fiscal Studies showed that 40% of teachers who enter initial teacher training (14,000) were not teaching five years later.

The future for recruitment and training is not encouraging. In February 2016, the Head of the National Audit Office, reported that the Department has missed its recruitment targets for the last four years and teacher shortages are growing. *'Until the Department meets its targets and can show how its approach is improving trainee recruitment, quality and retention, we cannot conclude that the arrangements for training new teachers are value for money'.*

In the TES, William Stuart observed, "*It feels as though ministers have struggled to keep up with the consequences of the changes that they have unleashed, let alone the teachers in the middle of it.*"

A cross-phase professional burnout

One evening recently one of the primary teachers in our cross-phase Masters in Education instigated a discussion about burnout by recounting the moment when he realised he was beyond exhausted:

The Minister for Education was invited to visit the City Council last week. I was to take my primary class to meet her and do a presentation. My normal reaction would have been one of excitement and exhilaration at the opportunity for myself and my class to engage with a national public figure. Instead, my heart sank and I just thought, 'Oh no - just another thing to do, on top of all the other things I've got to do'.

This primary teacher said it was at that very precise moment that he realised that all the joy in his job had been squeezed out of him.

'I work really hard preparing and teaching my class, I run the after-school football club, I go the extra mile, prepare for school productions, but I am approaching burnout'.

This moment of honesty from a young man in his late twenties inspired his peers to share their stories from early years, primary, secondary, further education (FE) and higher education (HE). They were all committed career teachers who wanted to enhance their practice. Yet their stories were strikingly similar.

A secondary teacher listed the areas that were worrying him, including the expectations of Ofsted, analysing assessment data, lack of training, clashing computer systems, poor school funding and poor communication. An FE tutor added the lack of resources, as well as marking and lesson preparation in her weekends and holidays and poor support from management.

At this point, the group realised that their experiences are endemic across the system not isolated, one-offs. Also it's not the professionals who are failing: many still provide a good learning experience despite political challenges. What is out of kilter is the system obsessed with metrics and performance that fails to acknowledge the human cost behind the statistics. These realities are causing the crisis in recruitment and retention.

A retention and recruitment crisis

Faced with figures about a retention and recruitment crisis in 2013, Michael Gove, the former education secretary, disagreed that many teachers were nearing burnout:

Far from the picture drawn in such unremittingly bleak colours by the teaching unions, the reality of teaching in England today is that there's never been a better time to be a teacher

Yet teaching has become amongst the most stressful of occupations. *The Guardian* found that nearly half of teachers planned to leave the profession in the next five years, because they are 'at breaking point', listing pressures such as: increasing bureaucracy around the recording of pupil progress; the need to keep data related to staff performance; and increased time devoted to marking. In March, the TES reported that 84% of teachers have experienced poor mental health in the last two years and it's rising - mostly due to excessive workload. But the counselling that was recommended will deal with the symptom, not the cause.

Our hope is that the new policy makers and ministers will acknowledge the harmful effect of continuous changes to the curriculum, alterations to examinations and the abandonment of assessment levels, not to mention the introduction of academies, free schools and grammar

schools, funding cuts and increases in accountability. These combined changes are damaging teachers' morale, causing exhaustion, lack of confidence, stress, and an overwhelming sense of resignation.

Turning to professional communities of practice

Meanwhile how can we help ourselves? In an overloaded curriculum, the greatest threat is one of losing a sense of who we are as professionals. The teachers on the Masters course kept going, they said, because this activity put them at the centre of a group of committed professionals with whom they can discuss their issues and feel supported out-of-school. It gives them a space to connect with a personal identity as a teacher.

Another way of rising above the chaos created by career politicians and enjoying the support of peers is to join a professional network that has a longer shelf-life. The value of these organisations is described in James Surowiecki's *The Wisdom of Crowds*. An anecdote from the nineteenth century relates Francis Galton's surprise when the crowd at a county fair accurately guessed the weight of an ox when their individual guesses were averaged. He contends that that a diverse collection of people is likely to reach better outcomes than individuals or even experts.

Called **communities of practice**, these groupings provide networks where like-minded teachers can support each other. Many communities of practice have spanned members' entire careers as well as retirement and over the years have provided the voice of professional reason in both face to face and online contexts.

All these networks allow you to reach beyond your educational establishment to build support, knowledge and resources with other professionals through dialogic learning, no matter what phase of education. There will be one for you. It may be the best move you make in preserving your professional sanity.

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Google the communities of practice

Association for Language Learning (ALL) www.all-languages.org.uk

Association for Physical Education (afPE) www.afpe.org.uk
Association for Science Education (ASE) www.ase.org.uk
Computers at School (CAS) https://www.computingatschool.org.uk/
Incorporated Society of Musicians www.ism.org
Information Technology in Teacher Education (ITTE) www.itte.org.uk
Joint Mathematical Council of the United Kingdom www.jmc.org.uk
MirandaNet Fellowship, innovating for education futures mirandanet.ac.uk
Naace – the education technology association www.naace.ac.uk
National Association for Language Development in the Curriculum (NALDIC)
www.naldic.org.uk
National Association for the Teaching of English (NATE) www.nate.org.uk
National Association of Teachers of Religious Education (NATRE) www.natre.org.uk
National Association of Writers in Education (NAWE)www.nawe.co.uk
National Society for Education in Art and Design (NSEAD) www.nsead.org
One Dance UK www.onedanceuk.org
PSHE Association www.pshe-association.org.uk
The Association for Achievement and Improvement through Assessment (AAIA)
www.aaia.org.uk
The Council for Subject Associations (CfSA) http://www.subjectassociations.org.uk/
The Design and Technology Association www.data.org.uk
The Geographical Association www.geography.org.uk
Association for Physical Education (afPE) www.afpe.org.uk
Association for Science Education (ASE) www.ase.org.uk
Incorporated Society of Musicians www.ism.org
Information Technology in Teacher Education (ITTE) www.itte.org.uk
Joint Mathematical Council of the United Kingdom www.jmc.org.uk