

Teacher recruitment and retention in England: a Foucauldian analysis of disempowerment

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ABSTRACT

Use the following text (188 words): Persistent under-recruitment and poor retention threaten the sustainability of England's education system, with shortages acute among early career teachers. Using Michel Foucault's ideas of power, discipline, and governmentality, this paper argues that these issues stem not only from workload or pay but from systemic disempowerment. Successive reforms have enabled the Department for Education to centralise control over curriculum, pedagogy, and teacher education, embedding surveillance, accountability, and performativity that constrain autonomy. Teachers are cast as implementers of state-mandated practices—such as systematic synthetic phonics—validated through prescribed “evidence-based” methods. This disciplinary regime produces self-regulating, compliant teachers, eroding agency, identity, morale, and long-term commitment. From a Foucauldian view, such disempowerment is structural to neoliberal governmentality, where marketised systems operate through data and compliance. England's experience reflects global trends, as organisations like the OECD promote policy convergence and performative accountability that reshape teaching worldwide into regulated, data-driven labour. Addressing England's teacher crisis requires more than financial incentives: it demands restoring trust, autonomy, and intellectual freedom, reimagining teachers as critical professionals. Universities offering initial and continuing teacher education can lead this re-empowerment through reflective practice, research engagement, and democratic involvement in policymaking.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 12 October 2025

Accepted 11 November 2025

KEYWORDS

Teacher recruitment; teacher retention; Foucault; England, teacher education

Introduction

Persistent challenges in teacher recruitment and retention have become a defining concern in the English education system. Despite policy interventions to attract and retain staff, many teachers continue to leave the profession prematurely, while fewer new entrants are joining. The Department for Education (DfE), the government department responsible for education in England, has repeatedly highlighted high workload, accountability pressures, and declining morale as key factors. In this paper, we interpret these issues through Michel Foucault's notions of power and disempowerment, arguing that

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the structures and discourses governing English education have subjected teachers to disciplinary control, surveillance, and self-regulation, leading to widespread disempowerment and professional alienation, both strong disincentives to enter or stay in teaching.

Teacher recruitment and retention in England

England faces what is often termed a ‘teacher supply crisis’. DfE data show consistent shortfalls in recruitment targets for secondary teachers, especially in STEM subjects, modern languages, and early career retention (Department for Education 2024b) and it has been the subject of a review by the government-sponsored Education Endowment Foundation (EEF 2023) and an inquiry by the House of Commons Education Committee (Maisuria et al. 2023). Surveys from the National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER) reveal that teachers report excessive workload, constant policy changes, and limited autonomy as major reasons for leaving (Worth 2020). These issues are not merely logistical but structural, arising from the way power circulates within education policy. Foucault’s theoretical lens illuminates how teachers are positioned within networks of power that both enable and constrain them, leading to systematic forms of disempowerment.

The challenge of teacher recruitment and retention is not an English phenomenon. A recent report by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) highlights that there is a global shortage of teachers in many parts of the world across early childhood, primary, and secondary education (OECD 2025). In response to this situation, the General Secretary of Education International David Edwards stated:

We know what works. Governments must invest in the teaching profession—through competitive salaries, manageable workloads, fully funded professional development, and secure employment. But investment alone is not enough. Teachers must also have real autonomy, a voice in policymaking, and the resources to teach every student well. (Education International 2025)

As we will argue here, the notions that teachers should have real autonomy and a voice in policymaking are not ones that find expression in the current landscape of teaching and teacher education in England. As just one example, the voice of England’s teachers is absent in the 2024 Teaching and Learning International Survey (TALIS) (OECD 2025) as, in September 2020, the DfE, declined to participate (Dickens 2025). Ostensibly, the reason given by the then government for this decision was to save teachers work, but another possible reason highlighted by Dickens was that the government wanted to avoid having to contribute to the costs of the survey. Teacher unions considered the additional work would be minimal and that teachers were being denied an opportunity to express their voice (Dickens 2025). We will return to this and related points in due course to argue that this approach has implications for the recruitment and retention of teachers in England.

First, it is worth highlighting the nomenclature that is in current use concerning teacher education and training. The term initial teacher training, as opposed to initial teacher education, is the one preferred by successive UK governments, whereas the one preferred by the university sector is teacher education. This is not a mere semantic quibble, we will argue, but one that is indicative of a broader schism that governments

of various political persuasions have encouraged. Our preferred term is teacher education, but we refer to teacher training when we discuss government policies.

Routes into teaching in England

In comparison with nations beyond the UK, there is a multiplicity of routes into teaching in England (Department for Education 2024a). For a full discussion of the complexity and diversity of these routes see Whiting et al. (2018). In brief, these include postgraduate initial teacher training (ITT), as well as undergraduate courses which include recommendation for qualified teacher status (QTS), and 'assessment only' routes to QTS. There are also many different providers of such routes, which include higher education institutions, schools, organisations, such as the National Institute for Teaching, and School-Centred Initial Teacher Training providers (SCITTs), working in different combinations. There is evidence that the sheer number and complexity of these different routes and the variety of providers is itself a barrier to recruitment (See and Gorard 2020, 432) and the variety of different routes into teaching may therefore not be helpful in solving the recruitment crisis (See et al. 2021). This plethora of routes into the profession has been accompanied over the past few years by imposed changes to the content and format of initial teacher training. A key theme of the changes that have been enacted has been the increasing control taken by central government of teacher training in England by a series of measures that include the Early Career Framework (ECF), changes to national professional qualifications, the 'market review' of initial teacher education, the imposition of the Core Content Framework (CCF) and the need for ITT providers to apply for reaccreditation. These have been well documented within the pages of the *Journal of Education for Teaching* (see, for example, Mutton and Burn 2024; Newman 2022) and elsewhere. In short, these have acted to 'assert unprecedented levels of direct state control over the training and development of new teachers and to replace some established and experienced providers with often untried and un-tested government-favoured organisations' (Rowe 2023, 100). Such initiatives have largely excluded those from university teacher education departments, sought to ignore the expertise of university teacher educators (Rowe 2023, 110) and at the very least, placed huge extra demands on their time, resources, and health (Hayles and Mogra 2025).

The intent was to seek to create a 'gap' between university departments of teacher education, and practice in schools, and swing the balance towards schools for the responsibility for the training (rather than the education and training) of new teachers (Mutton and Burn 2024). University-led teacher education and training was seen as the 'problem', to be dealt with by moving the focus of teacher education and training away from universities to schools. In addition, implementation of such initiatives seems to have largely favoured certain organisations that were willing and, in fact, sometimes set up, to implement the increased centralised control being exerted over teacher education and training. That centralised control was enforced by the Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (Ofsted), a non-ministerial department of the UK government, which reports directly to Parliament. As well as inspecting schools, Ofsted has an ITT inspection framework, which it exercises approximately every 3 years to ensure providers' compliance. In 2020, the ITT market review was exercised and all teacher training providers who wished to continue in that role had to be reaccredited against centrally

determined criteria. As Rowe (2023, 109) highlighted, these criteria included the statements that any ‘claims or guidance derived from references from outside of those cited in the CCF, address, and support CCF statements’ and that ‘claims or guidance that build on or go beyond the CCF are supported by suitably robust sources of evidence’ (Department for Education 2022a, 8). In the light of authoritarian requirements, such as these, what has resulted is a ‘state-mandated, linear model of professional learning from initial teacher training and education through to continuing professional development’ (Nuttall et al. 2025, 1).

Government-imposed curriculum demands and teacher agency

As just one example of a measure imposed on the teaching profession in England, teaching phonics is ‘is a statutory requirement in primary schools in England, with most schools using a systematic synthetic phonics teaching programme’ (Education Endowment Foundation 2025a). Ofsted inspections include checking that ‘teachers ensure that pupils learn to read using systematic synthetic phonics’ (Ofsted 2025, 20), ‘that all pupils who are at the early stages of learning to read are taught to do so through systematic synthetic phonics’ (Ofsted 2025, 23), that ‘the Reception Year curriculum for teaching systematic synthetic phonics, spelling, and handwriting is logically sequenced and cumulative’ (Ofsted 2025, 56) so that by ‘the end of Reception [as children approach their 5th birthday], children use their knowledge of phonics to read accurately and with increasing fluency’ (Ofsted 2025, 60). ITT programmes for all primary trainees must, according to the DfE, include curriculum planning involving the use of systematic synthetic phonics (Department for Education 2022b, 22). This requirement built on the view expressed in the *Initial Teacher Training (ITT) Market Review Report* (Department for Education 2021) that ‘it is essential that every teacher who works in the primary phase is fully equipped to teach reading using SSP, regardless of the specific age group they initially hope to teach . . . [and that it] is also important that trainees are familiarised with the evidence for the effectiveness of SSP and that time is not used teaching them alternative approaches’ (Department for Education 2021, 13). Yet the evidence to support this required emphasis is questionable (Wyse and Bradbury 2022). Interestingly, Wyse and Bradbury report that the response to their research by the ‘lead behaviour advisor to the Department for Education . . . [and] founder of researchED, a grass-roots organisation that raises research literacy in education’ (The National College n.d.) was to dismiss their study as ‘rubbish’ (Wyse and Bradbury 2023), an assertion that was subsequently echoed by some politicians of the time. Yet even research carried out by the American Institute for Research for the Education Endowment Foundation (Molotsky, Dias, and Nakamura 2022) suggests the claims for the effectiveness of synthetic phonics have been exaggerated and that the approach needs to be more balanced and nuanced (Hall 2023; Wyse and Bradbury 2022) than is currently the case.

Another related example is the use of randomised control trials (RCTs). Borrowed from medical research methods, RCTs are increasingly used in educational research to test the effectiveness of policies, interventions and teaching strategies, aiming to establish causal relationships between interventions and outcomes. Often praised for their rigour and causal strength, many educational researchers argue that in spite of the large data sets that they generate, RCTs are not always suitable for the complex human and context-

driven nature of education. In providing the supposedly ‘robust’ evidence mentioned previously in relation, RCTs provide an approach much favoured by successive governments in England in order to find out ‘what works’; the Education Endowment Foundation (EEF) itself being one of the members of the ‘What Works Network’ (Cabinet Office 2025). One reason for the popularity of RCTs stems from the need for ‘evidence’ to compare different schools, and to drive towards efficiency; the NFER note that ‘RCTs are increasingly being used in the education sector to demonstrate the impact of an intervention on pupil outcomes . . . [and] are highly regarded by many organisations involved in education research, including the Department for Education (DfE), the Education Endowment Foundation (EEF) and the Nuffield Foundation’ (NFER (n.d.)). In these endeavours, RCTs supposedly promise ‘value-free scientific neutrality’ (Wrigley 2018, 362).

As an example, in 2025, the EEF advertised for a feasibility study to explore teacher-led micro RCTs. The purpose was ‘to test a short 6 week spelling intervention based on Look, Say, Cover, Write, Check (LSCWC)’ (Education Endowment Foundation 2025b). Teachers would ‘Enter simple pre-test assessment scores into the WhatWorked Teachers platform . . . , deliver the intervention and enter simple post-test assessment scores into the WhatWorked Teachers platform’ [sic]. They would then receive ‘an automated impact report to evaluate the approach in their own classroom’ (Education Endowment Foundation 2025b). The explanatory details included the following statement:

An RCT is used [sic] evaluate an educational programme by assigning settings to one of two groups: the intervention group, who receive the programme or the control group, who continue with business as usual. This ensures that any differences in outcomes can be confidently attributed to the programme, providing a robust estimate of the impact and contributing to the evidence for what works in improving educational outcomes. (Education Endowment Foundation 2025b)

The background information (Education Endowment Foundation 2025c, 2) draws a comparison with the use of micro-RCTs in medicine.

The beguiling simplicity of the approach masks a whole range of complexities which seem not to be considered (see Wrigley 2018). Further, notwithstanding the issues with specific RCTs, these complexities are compounded when the results of different studies are grouped and subject to a meta-analysis or a meta-meta-analysis (Wrigley 2018, 2020). This approach is demonstrated in a section in the EEF Teaching and Learning Toolkit concerning the use of phonics, and based on findings from 228 diverse studies dating back to 1990, which concludes the use of phonics has ‘Moderate impact for very low cost based on extensive evidence’, the ‘evidence strength’ is 4 out of 5, and the impact is + 5 (i.e. that children who received the intervention made, on average, 5 months more progress than those who did not) (Education Endowment Foundation 2025d).

We are not arguing for the irrelevance of RCTs in educational research; indeed, combining their rigour for scalability and causality with the richness of qualitative interpretive methods for context and understanding helps to balance the search for ‘what works’ with an understanding of ‘why, and for whom, and under what conditions’. However, we provide these examples because they connect current educational policy, teacher professionalism and workforce sustainability, each of which is directly related to teacher recruitment and retention. State-imposed curriculum demands, and state-sponsored research evidence, shape what and how teachers are expected to teach.

Mandated content, standardised testing, specific pedagogical approaches and prescriptive lesson planning, in addition to official guidance or ‘evidence-based’ practices endorsed by government agencies, all combine to shape teachers’ autonomy, workload and sense of value. Each of these, we argue, has a direct effect on the choice of teaching as a career and the motivation to stay in it. When the state imposes rigid demands, teachers feel less trusted as professionals. As far as the general public is concerned, the profession may seem devalued, because of the apparent need of teachers for strict direction. Government control over curriculum and pedagogy can shape public narratives about teachers as implementers rather than as experts.

Detailed or frequently changing government requirements (or, as la Velle and Reynolds (2021) put it, constant policy churn) increases the bureaucratic pressure on teachers in terms of planning, documentation, assessment tracking, data analysis, and so on. Perception of a teacher’s work as having a heavy administrative load might lead potential entrants to see it as stressful and burdensome. Increased work of this type without corresponding support contributes to the poor work–life balance experienced by many teachers and often cited as a reason for leaving (Newton 2021).

A distinction should be drawn between evidence-informed practice and evidence-imposed practice. While government-sponsored research, such as that by the EEF can promote consistency and quality, when it is used prescriptively (‘children will be taught ...’) it can undermine teachers’ agency. Teachers report the most satisfaction when they are able to engage with research critically and adapt their own practice to the research findings (Cain 2015).

From a Foucauldian perspective, government-imposed curriculum demands, and state-sponsored research evidence, function as instruments of disciplinary power that construct and regulate teachers’ professional identities. The following section outlines this conceptual framework, which helps to explain why the strictures under which teachers have to work may contribute to the recruitment and retention crisis.

Foucault’s concepts of power and disempowerment

Foucault (1977/2019) reconceptualised power as dispersed and relational, embedded in everyday practices rather than held by specific actors. Power operates through discipline – mechanisms of observation, normalisation, and examination – which produce compliant subjects. Rather than overt coercion, modern institutions rely on subtle forms of governmentality: techniques that shape how individuals govern themselves according to prescribed norms. In educational contexts, this manifests as teachers internalising expectations of performance, efficiency, and accountability, as we have described and exemplified in the sections above. Disempowerment, from a Foucauldian perspective, arises not from a single oppressive authority but from being caught within these diffuse disciplinary networks that regulate conduct and identity.

Foucault (1977/2019, 1980) conceptualised power as diffuse and productive, rather than purely repressive. Power, he argued, operates through discourse to define what counts as legitimate knowledge, truth, and practice. Within education, national curricula, and government-endorsed research evidence constitute dominant discourses of ‘good’ teaching, positioning teachers as implementers of state-defined pedagogical norms. We

discuss this further after a consideration of the working of Foucault's concept of power in relation to the professional training of teachers.

In England, the intellectual independence of teacher education and training, both initial and continuing, as well as teachers' everyday practice, has been usurped by successive governments. It is hard to believe that the much-vaunted independence of universities can easily remain credible, at least as a description of teacher training in England is concerned. As Ellis and Childs succinctly express it:

Moreover, it does not appear that vice-chancellors and presidents have fully grasped that they have lost control of one part of their university – their ITE provision – that what goes on in those seminar rooms and on those courses is now controlled in very fine detail by the Department for Education in England. (Ellis and Childs 2023, 21)

If independent thought remains, it tends to do so in the 'shadow' of the official documentation (Pierlejewski 2025), as an adjunct to 'cynical compliance' (Ball 2003, 226).

The discourse promulgated by successive governments (Campbell and Crowe 2023, 197) was that these initiatives were required in order to address the problems in teacher education, in improving the quality of teacher education, in recruiting and retaining sufficient teachers, and, therefore, the outcomes for pupils. As regards the teacher education system in general, the evidence that the system was failing was simply not there (Ellis and Childs 2023; Mutton and Burn 2024). A recent report by the National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER) on teacher recruitment and retention (McLean and Worth 2025) argues that 'teacher recruitment and retention in England remain in a perilous state and represents a substantial on-going risk to the quality of education' (McLean and Worth 2025, 3). The data indicate that in 2024/25, recruitment in secondary initial teacher training (ITT) reached just 62% of the target set by the Department for Education (DfE) (McLean and Worth 2025, 5). This under-recruitment affected subject areas differently. For example, business studies, physics, computing, design, and technology, music, and modern foreign languages were all subjects that failed to achieve even 50% of their target recruitment (McLean and Worth 2025, 12). The only subjects that recruited above target were English, history, biology, physical education, and classics. Recruitment in postgraduate primary courses was 88% of the target figure (McLean and Worth 2025, 5). Moreover, these failures to reach recruitment targets were not a new phenomenon (see, for example, Maisuria et al. 2023) but rather a continuation of under-recruitment extending back over a decade or more, with the exception of 2020/21 when recruitment targets were met, perhaps as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic and the changes that forced onto the labour market (House of Commons Education Committee 2024, 3).

The reasons for this situation are complex, and include changes in pupil numbers, changes in funding, the introduction for some subject areas of bursaries, changes in the political and economic contexts, and what See and Gorard (2020, 431) termed 'uncoordinated and really rather incompetent policy decisions'. However, care is needed to ensure that different measures taken to attract recruits do not counteract each other (Klassen et al. 2021; McLean and Worth 2025).

As well as addressing issues in recruiting new teachers, attention has also to be paid to retaining teachers in the profession. The latest figures indicate that in 2022/23, 9.6% of teachers left teaching by the next year, although if retirements are

excluded, this figure falls to 8.8% (McLean and Worth 2025, 17). Another perspective on retention is provided by a statement to the House of Commons Education Committee from the Education Policy Institute in June 2023, stating that 'A decade after qualification, only 59% of teachers remain in the profession today' (Maisuria et al. 2023, 14).

Recruitment and retention strategies used in England have included financial, efforts to reduce teacher workload, an Early Career Framework (ostensibly aimed to provide structured support for early career teachers), requiring changes to and reaccreditation of ITT provision, changes to the eligibility for certain teachers from other countries to be awarded qualified teacher status (QTS) without the need for further training. Such strategies, however, do not always work coherently together (See and Gorard 2020) and when combined with policy and political 'churn' make it difficult to attribute to any measure particular effects, whether positive, negative or neutral. For example, whether the Early Career Framework (ECF) has aided retention is debateable. Figures from the School Workforce Census reported by the NFER indicate that in 2014/2015 to 2017/2018, on average, 15% of Early Career Teachers (ECTs) had left teaching within 1 year of entry, and this had reduced to 11% for the second ECF cohort in 2022/23. However, for 2014/2015 to 2017/2018, on average, 22% of ECTs had left teaching within 2 years of entry into teaching, and the figure for 2022/23 was 21% (McLean and Worth 2025, 18). Other measures might include increasing pay, reducing working hours, reducing workload, increasing the use of generative artificial intelligence to help teachers prepare their lessons and resources, and addressing issues associated with alleged worsening pupil behaviour and declines in pupils' mental health, increasing opportunities for flexible working. An indication of the complexity of the situation is provided by other forecasts which suggest recent increases in some areas of recruitment, possibly due, at least in part, to bursaries, falling pupil rolls, and changes in the wider economy (Chantler-Hicks 2025). Measures such as those mentioned above are recommended by the NFER report (McLean and Worth 2025). What that report does not mention are the two points to which we referred at the start of this paper, namely teacher autonomy, and teachers having a voice in policymaking, and it is to these issues we now turn.

A voice in policymaking

Teacher voice is important. The International Council on Education for Teaching (ICET) is an international NGO of teacher educators with consultative status at the United Nations Economic and Social Council (UNESCO). ICET launched an online series of participatory research seminars in 2021, with the aim of collecting teachers' views from across the world about issues affecting the profession. This 'Teacher Voice Series' also facilitates the participation of educational researchers from different countries to conduct collaborative studies that investigate and report on topics affecting teachers and teacher education and training. Most recently ICET has reported to stakeholders, such as UNESCO and to policymakers in various countries internationally on teachers' experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent lockdown of schools and universities. Post-pandemic pedagogy is the subject of the current collection of teachers' voices, and a report is in preparation. The ICET research reports are open access and published every other year on the ICET website and on the knowledge hub of the International Teachers Task Force

(ICET 2021). These reports provide valuable first-hand evidence from the chalk face. But are they heeded by national policy-makers?

Just as the voice of experienced teacher educators was silenced during the recent changes to ITT in England, so too has been the opportunity for teachers to become contributors to policy and having a voice. Instead, they are now perceived as ‘more biddable and unquestioning ... happy to support and advance the government’s non-negotiable agenda’ (Campbell and Crowe 2023, 202). In these respects, the changes have not just changed what teachers do; it they have changed who they are (Ball 2003, 215). Teaching has become performative. In some cases, teachers are presented with the lesson material to be ‘delivered’ to pupils, and are at best, allowed to make only minor tweaks, lest the approved version becomes diluted. Standardisation and conformity are ‘in’, to be monitored by the government. Creativity and criticality are ‘out’. So too are connections to educational theory, and moral and philosophical thought (Helgetun and Menter 2022, 98). Teachers and teacher educators with the ‘intellectual resources to make good sense of new initiatives or claims to knowledge’ (Hordern and Brooks 2024, 19), and who think critically, are not required. Instead, we have been informed, what is required are teachers and teacher educators (now envisaged as teacher trainers) who can, and will, implement the approved approach.

In such a scenario, it is not surprising that teacher recruitment continues to be a problem. As Klassen et al. (2021) reported, it is of course, not just a question of numbers but also of attracting ‘high-quality applicants who are suited to teaching and are likely to remain in the profession’ (163). In addition, those teachers who are employed should be qualitatively suited to their role, in terms of (for example) experience, specialist knowledge, understanding and skills, and qualifications. If teaching is viewed as merely implementing the curriculum and directives imposed by others (especially if they are poorly thought through and misguided), why would high-quality potential applicants consider teaching as a career, when its social status has been diminished consistently over the past several decades (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice 2018, 29), and where pay has failed to keep pace with that of similar graduate professions (McLean and Worth 2025)? Teachers are of course, not motivated only by such factors but also by wanting, for example, to make a positive contribution to society, and ensuring that pupils have a positive and rewarding education. With this wider perspective, debates about the effectiveness of systematic synthetic phonics could be part of initial teacher education – and here we use the term ‘education’ deliberately – which involves engaging with the research and the debates around its use, rather than training which brooks no dissent.

Disciplinary power and the loss of autonomy

We return to the thinking of Foucault, which informs our discussion of the causes and effects of the situation of teacher recruitment and retention in England. The erosion of teacher and teacher educator autonomy can be understood through Foucault’s concept of disciplinary power. Curriculum reforms, national testing, and detailed inspection frameworks have transformed teaching and teacher training into a tightly managed process. Teachers and teacher educators are expected to produce measurable ‘outcomes’ and document ‘impact’, often at the expense of creativity and professional judgement. Ball (2003) describes this as the rise of *performativity*, whereby

teachers' worth is measured through externally imposed metrics. Here, we draw on Foucault's notion of docile bodies as individuals who have been shaped and controlled by disciplinary institutions making them useful, obedient, and predictable. This is described more fully in Clapham (2023) in relation to the disempowerment of teacher educators as researchers themselves. Building on the interpretation of Allan (2019), we envisage that teacher training has been confined and enclosed within a place and a system that is 'closed in upon itself' to create a 'protected place of disciplinary monotony' (Allan 2019, 35), where partitioning controls individuals and individual institutions, and confines them to their allotted place in the system. By developing 'functional sites', and placing individuals and institutions within them, it becomes possible to keep those individuals, institutions and groups under surveillance and compare and rank them against others. Applied at a strategic policy and political level, we can use these ideas to suggest how governments have worked to create a docile body of teachers and teacher educators by use of

the practical techniques that impel, mobilize, operationalize, tease, blackmail, tempt, or incentivize the instrumental individual within a population, but which nevertheless continue to coerce in some way 'at a distance' and with an averted gaze. (Welsh 2016, 7 cited in; Allan 2019, 49)

Such techniques consist of

a multiplicity of often minor processes, of different origin and scattered location, which overlap, repeat, or imitate one another, support one another, distinguish themselves from one another according to their domain of application, converge, and gradually produce the blueprint of a general method. (Foucault 1977/2019, 60)

Such techniques, Foucault argued, were 'always meticulous, often minute' (Foucault 1977/2019, 60):

Small acts of cunning endowed with a great power of diffusion, subtle arrangements, apparently innocent, but profoundly suspicious, mechanisms that obeyed economies too shameful to be acknowledged, or pursued petty forms of coercion. (60)

By such techniques, teachers have become disciplined agents, performing in accordance with institutional and, especially, political, demands. The loss of professional agency leads many to experience disillusionment and frustration, contributing to attrition.

Surveillance, accountability, and panopticism

Surveillance operates as a central mechanism of control in English schools. Systems of performance management, lesson observation, and Ofsted inspection enact a continuous process of scrutiny. Perryman (2006) likens Ofsted to Foucault's *Panopticon* (Foucault 1977/2019), the architectural metaphor in which constant visibility ensures self-regulation. Teachers are compelled to act 'as if watched', internalising the gaze of inspectors, leaders, and parents. This form of panoptic performativity creates a climate of anxiety and compliance, where innovation and risk-taking are constrained. Such self-surveillance demands emotional and cognitive labour, which in turn contributes to burnout and early exit from the profession.

Discursive construction of the ‘good teacher’

Foucault also emphasised the role of discourse in shaping subjectivity. In England, official documents, inspection frameworks, and teachers’ standards produce a normative discourse about what constitutes a ‘good teacher’. This figure is often characterised by efficiency, data-driven practice, and conformity to national standards (Moore 2004). Alternative pedagogical identities – those prioritising creativity, critical thinking, or pastoral care – are marginalised. Consequently, teachers are positioned within a narrow discursive field that defines their professional identity and limits self-definition. Those who cannot or will not conform to these expectations often experience alienation, perceiving themselves as ‘failing’ professionals, which accelerates attrition rates.

Governmentality and neoliberal marketisation

Since the 1988 Education Reform Act, English education has been increasingly shaped by market logics – competition, performativity, and managerial accountability. From a Foucauldian perspective, this represents a mode of neoliberal governmentality, in which individuals are ‘free’ to manage themselves according to market principles (Foucault 1991). Schools compete for pupils and funding, and teachers are positioned as entrepreneurs of their own performance. As Ball (2013) notes, this form of governance shifts responsibility for systemic problems onto individual teachers, who must constantly ‘improve’ themselves to remain employable. While presented as empowerment, this actually intensifies disempowerment: teachers internalise failure as personal rather than structural, eroding collective solidarity, and making resistance difficult.

Implications for recruitment

Foucault’s framework helps explain not only why teachers leave but also why potential recruits hesitate to join. The public discourse surrounding teaching emphasises exhaustion, workload, and accountability, constructing an unattractive subject position. Prospective teachers perceive the profession as highly scrutinised and low in agency. This perception is reinforced by policy discourses framing teachers as deliverers of standards rather than as intellectual or moral professionals. Recruitment campaigns that focus on financial incentives therefore fail to address the deeper issue: the discursive disempowerment of teachers within a performative culture.

Towards re-empowerment

Although Foucault was sceptical of universal solutions, his work invites possibilities for counter-conduct – forms of resistance within disciplinary systems. Teachers can reclaim agency through collaborative professional networks, critical reflection, and participation in alternative discourses that emphasise care, creativity, and social justice (Smyth 2011). Policy reform that genuinely decentralises control and values teacher expertise could help reconfigure the field of power in which teachers operate. Ultimately, addressing recruitment and retention requires not just material incentives but a transformation in how teachers are constituted as subjects within the

educational discourse. Here we point towards once such alternative discourse, that of the Universities' Council of the Education of Teachers (UCET), who consider that teachers need to be valued as 'intellectuals who take an enquiring stance to their work', as 'independent thinkers', who can 'search for theories and research that can underpin, challenge or illuminate their practice' and be 'continually intellectually curious' (UCET 2020, 2). Teacher education therefore needs to support such characteristics; teacher education departments in universities are well placed to do this as they can

provide a safe environment in which to ask challenging and open questions, provide reasoned solutions based on robust evidence, and to test the authenticity of their own claims and of those made by others. Furthermore, universities have a civic duty to extend and develop knowledge, without the constraints or limitations of imposed agendas or motives. (UCET 2020, 2)

International implications

The challenges of teacher recruitment, retention, and professional disempowerment evident within the English education system hold significant implications for international educational policy and practice. The Foucauldian reading of power, discipline, and governmentality underpinning this analysis resonates with global patterns of neoliberal governance in education, where control over curriculum, pedagogy, and teacher evaluation is increasingly centralised (Apple 2013; Ball 2012). Across OECD and non-OECD contexts alike, the emphasis on accountability, data-driven performance metrics, and standardisation has reshaped teaching into a form of regulated labour governed through inspection and comparison (Connell 2019; Rizvi and Lingard 2010). These mechanisms not only erode teachers' professional autonomy but also contribute to rising attrition and declining morale across many national systems (OECD 2021).

The English case is particularly instructive as part of a transnational policy network in which reforms are both borrowed and exported. England's model of performative accountability – embodied in Ofsted inspection regimes, prescribed pedagogical frameworks, and evidence-based directives – has influenced education systems globally, from Australia to Singapore and the United States (Grek and Ozga 2010; Lingard 2010). Simultaneously, such policies are reinforced by international agencies such as the OECD and the World Bank through benchmarking exercises such as PISA, which legitimise technocratic governance and policy convergence (Sellar and Lingard 2013). This mutual reinforcement produces a global feedback loop of performative reform, wherein the structural disempowerment of teachers becomes a transnational feature of neoliberal education policy rather than a local anomaly.

The implications for teacher education are equally global. Universities worldwide face pressure to align initial teacher education provision with competency-based standards and 'scientific' evidence models, often at the expense of critical and reflective pedagogical traditions (Cochran-Smith et al. 2016). Yet higher education institutions remain key sites for resistance and renewal, capable of reasserting teaching as a moral, intellectual, and democratic profession (Sachs 2016; UCET 2020). Addressing the sustainability of teaching thus requires international collaboration to revalue teacher autonomy, critical enquiry, and professional trust as foundational principles of educational justice.

Moreover, England's teacher shortages have cross-border ramifications, as recruitment from lower-income countries intensifies global inequities in educational capacity (UNESCO 2023). The re-empowerment of teachers must therefore be conceived not only as a national policy priority but as a shared international responsibility – essential for sustaining equitable, high-quality education systems worldwide.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the persistent challenges of teacher recruitment and retention in England must be understood not merely as administrative or economic failures but as symptomatic of deeper structural and epistemic dynamics within the global education policy field. Drawing on Foucault's (1977, 1980) conception of disciplinary power and governmentality, this article has shown how contemporary teacher policy in England – manifested through the Early Career Framework (ECF), Core Content Framework (CCF), and the reaccreditation of Initial Teacher Training (ITT) providers – has intensified regimes of surveillance and performativity that constrain teacher autonomy and reconstitute professional identity around compliance and accountability. Such mechanisms, as Ball (2012) and Apple (2013) argue, reflect the broader neoliberal narrative in education policy, wherein teachers are positioned as agents of policy delivery rather than as autonomous professionals or independent intellectuals.

These processes of centralisation and control are not unique to England but resonate globally through what Rizvi and Lingard (2010) identify as the *globalizing education policy* movement, mediated by organisations such as the OECD and UNESCO. Internationally, policy borrowing and policy learning (Lingard 2010) have facilitated the diffusion of performance-based accountability systems, metrics-driven governance, and evidence-based mandates – elements that, while claiming to raise standards, frequently undermine teacher professionalism and morale. As Sellar and Lingard (2013) observe, the OECD's influence on national policy discourses has reinforced technocratic modes of governance that prioritise comparability and efficiency over relational and ethical dimensions of teaching. This global policy convergence reflects Foucault's notion of *governmentality*: the production of self-regulating subjects who internalise norms of productivity, datafication, and market rationality (Foucault 1991).

Thus, to address the teacher recruitment and retention crisis, policy must move beyond instrumental responses and engage with the cultural and political conditions that produce teacher disempowerment. Connell (2019), Sachs (2016) and UCET (2020) call for a reassertion of the teacher as a moral and intellectual actor – capable of critique, ethical judgement, and collective agency. Restoring trust and autonomy requires reimagining teacher education as a site of empowerment rather than compliance, where universities play a vital role in fostering critical enquiry and professional voice (Cochran-Smith et al. 2016). Internationally, a renewed emphasis on teacher professionalism and democratic participation in policy formation aligns with UNESCO (2023) call for inclusive, context-sensitive education systems that value teachers as key agents of social transformation. Ultimately, the English case serves as a cautionary exemplar of how neoliberal governance, underpinned by measurement and marketisation, can erode the professional and ethical foundations of teaching. Reversing this trajectory requires not only national reform but also an international reconfiguration of how teachers' work, expertise, and agency are

conceptualised. As Ball (2012) reminds us, education policy is a deeply political act: to reclaim the profession is to reclaim education's emancipatory potential itself.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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