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Research paper

A profession in crisis? Teachers' responses to England's high-stakes accountability reforms in secondary education

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HIGHLIGHTS

- Dominant discourses of a 'profession in crisis' in England.
- Majority of participants provide evidence of crisis.
- A counter-narrative comprise teachers who have positive views of the profession.
- Danger that education research reproduces and reinforces the 'crisis' narrative.

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ABSTRACT

There has been a tendency to construct the teaching profession through a narrative of 'crisis' which places particular emphasis on high rates of attrition and poor wellbeing driven by a demanding work culture. Drawing on qualitative data from a mixed-methods study, this paper examines teachers' responses to reforms to English secondary education. It presents evidence that supports a 'profession in crisis' narrative with many of the research participants expressing negative attitudes towards the reforms and concerns about staying in teaching. However, the paper also illuminates a counter-narrative that highlights teachers' job satisfaction and their desire to remain in the profession.

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1. Introduction

Since the 1980s, English state schools have been a site of ongoing educational reform. A plethora of new managerial practices and accountability measures – or performativity 'technologies' (Ball, 2003) – have been introduced. These include target setting (where schools set measurable goals to try to improve academic standards), the publication of school league tables (ranking schools by the academic attainment of their students), Ofsted[1] inspections, performance management and performance related pay. These technologies are used to regulate the work of schools and teachers (Ball, 2021). One consequence of this increased regulation has been workload intensification and a gradual erosion of teachers' job satisfaction, which, according to some researchers (e.g., Worth et al., 2018), is a key reason why so many teachers are leaving the profession. The recent Key Stage 4[2] curriculum, assessment and accountability reforms in English secondary schools, which are the subject of this paper, have resulted in further workload intensification, often generating additional stress and anxiety, as teachers are required to grapple with a more demanding curriculum whilst implementing new assessment procedures and responding to new accountability requirements (Ball, 2021).

Reflecting on these successive waves of policy reform in

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[1] The Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (Ofsted) is a non-ministerial department of the UK government that is responsible for inspecting a range of educational institutions.

[2] Key Stage 4 normally covers the two years of school education in state schools in England (years 10 and 11), when pupils are aged between 14 and 16, although in some schools, Key Stage 4 work starts in Year 9.

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England's secondary schools, reports by teacher unions, speeches by high profile political figures and media articles, as well as individual teacher accounts, have for some time now been conjuring up an image of a profession in the grip of a crisis (Bousted, 2021; Moran, 2018; National Education Union (NEU), 2018). However, whilst there is evidence, including from our own study of the recent Key Stage 4 reforms that we present below, to suggest that the 'profession in crisis' narrative is a reality for many teachers (e.g. Ovenden-Hope, 2020; Perryman et al., 2011), our data also point to the existence of a counter-narrative of teachers continuing to enjoy their work with young people despite these pressures and constraints. In this paper, we want to critically examine the 'profession in crisis' narrative and show how it is manifested in contemporary teacher discourse. We also want to consider a counter-narrative that has tended to be obscured by dominant discourses surrounding the teaching profession but which offers an alternative perspective on the 'profession in crisis' discourse (Bamberg & Wipff, 2021). Whilst only a minority of teachers in our study expressed positive views about the reforms, their voices need to be heard, not least because by not paying enough attention to alternative stories of teachers' experiences, education research may be in danger of reproducing and reinforcing the 'profession in crisis' narrative, thereby potentially discouraging some new recruits from entering into the profession (Busby, 2019) and exacerbating problems of attrition.

The study on which this paper draws explored the effects of recent reforms in English secondary schools using a national survey and qualitative interviews with teachers in three case study schools about their perspectives on and experiences of the enactment of the reforms in their schools (Neumann et al., 2016). The study had a particular focus on the implications of the reforms for schools' curricular offerings and the allocation of resources to different subject areas, for pedagogy and classroom practice and for social justice. This paper draws on a re-analysis of the qualitative data from this study and is guided by the following research questions:

RQ1: To what extent is the 'profession in crisis' narrative evident in the way teachers talk about their work in the context of high stakes accountability reforms?

RQ2: Are alternative or more complex narratives presented?

The study was conducted prior to the Covid-19 pandemic and while many aspects of teaching and learning have dramatically altered, the themes explored in this paper remain relevant today (National Union of Teachers (NUT), 2016). First, we briefly summarise the reforms that were the focus of our study; and then foreground two related phenomena that speak to the narrative of a 'profession in crisis' - growing rates of teacher attrition and concerns about teacher wellbeing. We then outline our methodological approach before presenting the relevant findings from our study drawing specifically on data from the responses to our open-ended survey questions and interview data from the school case studies.

1.1. The Key Stage 4 reforms

The stated aim of the reforms was to raise the performance of English secondary schools. These reforms consisted of substantial revisions to the content and assessment of GCSEs (the national examinations taken by sixteen-year olds at the end of Key Stage 4) and a set of new secondary school accountability measures. Changes in the requirements of the GCSE examinations, first introduced in 2015, were designed to 'restore rigour and bring standards up to match the best around the world' (DfE, 2015, p. 8) by making the content of the GCSEs 'more academically demanding' (DfE (Department for Education), 2016a, p.92) and replacing continuous assessment of modular coursework as the default method of assessment with terminal examinations to be taken at the end of two years of study. A new grading system was also introduced, replacing the previous 8-point A*-G scale with a 9-point numeric scale, to enable more fine-grained distinctions 'and greater stretch' (DfE (Department for Education), 2016a, p.98) at the top end of the scale. Alongside these changes in assessment, the accountability measures by which secondary schools are evaluated were also fundamentally transformed. From 2016 the key (or 'headline') accountability measures for secondary schools to be published in school performance league tables were: the percentage of students entered for and attaining the English Baccalaureate, a measure first introduced in 2010, which requires students to attain GCSEs at grade C (or grade 5 in the new numeric scale) and above in English, mathematics, the sciences, history or geography and a foreign language at the end of Key Stage 4; Progress 8, which measures the average progress of students in a school across eight GCSE or equivalent qualifications compared to the average progress of students with the same prior achievement nationally; Attainment 8, which measures students' average attainment across these subjects; and the percentage of students achieving a 'good pass' (GCSE Grade C or Grade 5) in English and mathematics.

The introduction of these measures, particularly the English Baccalaureate (EBacc) and Progress 8, has impacted on schools in a number of ways: on school staffing, on class and subject timetabling and on the allocation of resources for the teaching of different groups of students (Neumann et al., 2016). The government's intention is that, by September 2022, 75% of Year 10 students in state-funded schools will take GCSEs in the EBacc subjects, rising to 90% of Year 10 students by 2025 (Long & Bolton, 2017). As a result, increasing pressure is being placed on schools to maintain an adequate supply of teachers in the EBacc subjects (Foster, 2019). These reforms have led to workload intensification and teacher burn-out. In a context of high-stakes reforms, what does this mean for the teacher in relation to the 'profession in crisis' narrative?

1.2. The teaching profession in crisis – background and context

The 'profession in crisis' narrative is comprised of two key discursive strands, with the first, more dominant strand coalescing around teachers leaving the profession and a second strand coalescing around concerns about reduced teacher wellbeing that may be fuelling attrition rates. For some time now, schools in England have faced challenges in teacher supply (Sibieta, 2020). Pre-pandemic figures show that approximately 1 in 10 secondary school teachers left the teaching profession each year between 2011 and 2018 (DfE, 2018a). A third (33%) of teachers leave the profession within five years of qualifying (Foster, 2019) and attrition rates are particularly high among early career teachers in the EBacc core subjects of science, maths and languages (Worth & Da Lazzari, 2017). Only 50% of teachers in shortage subjects like mathematics and physics remain in post five years after their training (Sibieta, 2020). Secondary school teacher recruitment is challenging, with subjects such as mathematics, physics, modern foreign languages and chemistry particularly affected (Worth et al., 2015).

In surveys on teacher attrition, teachers are reported as citing a burdensome workload, poor work-life balance, accountability pressures, including excessive monitoring procedures, and weak school leadership and management as their primary reasons for leaving the profession (NAO, 2016; Worth et al., 2018). In England, with school student numbers forecasted to rise over the next

decade, teacher supply pressures look set to worsen, particularly in the EBacc subjects (DfE, 2018a; Foster, 2019). Media reports have interpreted these statistics as pointing to a 'teacher supply crisis' (e.g. Fearn, 2017), variously describing the situation as 'severe' (Coughlan, 2018) and 'alarming' (Hazell, 2018); whilst a report from the National Foundation of Educational Research (NFER) referred to a 'bleak picture' of teacher supply in England (Worth et al., 2018).

The second related phenomenon feeding into this crisis narrative, and one that was beginning to gain increasing media attention even before the Covid-19 pandemic struck (Allen et al., 2020), is concern about teacher wellbeing. The detrimental effects of high stakes accountability reforms leading to increased workloads that impact on teachers' job satisfaction and wellbeing have been well rehearsed in the international research literature on teachers and teaching (Holloway et al., 2017; Perryman et al., 2011) These studies highlight the fear and anxiety that can be triggered by high stakes accountability reforms (Nathaniel et al., 2016) and the fatigue and demoralisation associated with workload intensification (Buchanan, 2010), and detail the ways in which teachers experience and 'manage' their feelings and emotions in response to major policy initiatives (Moore, 2018). These experiences can impact teachers' physical and mental wellbeing (Manning et al., 2020). Unmanageable workloads driven by frequent high-stakes policy changes, coupled with the demands of school inspections, have resulted in teachers in England working longer hours than teachers in most other countries (Dolton et al., 2018). Surveys of teacher wellbeing show that increasing numbers of teachers report feeling stressed and anxious about their work (e.g. National Education Union (NEU), 2019; Teacher Toolkit, 2018). In their 2018 report, Education Support (ES) (a charity supporting teacher wellbeing) pointed to a significant increase in 'teachers calling our emotional support helpline [where] our counsellors hear daily from those struggling with the demands of ever-greater accountability, a growing testing culture and high levels of workload' (ES, 2018, p.3). In 2020, ES reported that 62% of education staff described themselves as "stressed", 31% reported experiencing a mental health issue in the past academic year, and 55% reported considering leaving the profession for reasons of poor mental health and wellbeing (Education Support ES, 2020). Each year since 2017, around half of all respondents to the wellbeing survey have reported physical symptoms of poor wellbeing (Education Support Partnership, 2017; 2018, 2019, 2020). Thus, teacher wellbeing and teacher attrition have become interlinked and both characterised in 'crisis' terms (Falecki & Mann, 2021). For example, frequent media reports over recent years describing this relationship have appeared under headlines such as: '"Epidemic of stress" blamed for 3750 teachers on long-term sick leave' (Asthana & Boycott-Owen, 2018), 'Why teaching is making me ill' (BBC, 2017), and 'Burned out: why are so many teachers quitting or off sick with stress?' (Tapper, 2018). These two elements of the 'profession in crisis' narrative - teacher attrition and teacher wellbeing – work together to produce a powerful image of teachers experiencing unprecedented levels of stress, being 'burned out' (Tapper, 2018) and leaving the profession 'in droves' (Fearn, 2017).

Yet there is another story that can be told that challenges this account and provides an alternative, counter-narrative, albeit one that is less dominant. While recent statistics show that 33% of teachers who entered the profession in 2012 were not teaching five years later, 66% of the 2012 entrants remain in teaching (Foster, 2019). In other words, more teachers stay in the profession than leave. Although much of the existing research on teacher supply focuses on the reasons why teachers leave, a growing body of international research is turning its attention to those who stay (Towers, 2020, pp. 1–16; Tricarico et al., 2015) in order to better understand the conditions that facilitate teacher retention. This research suggests that the teachers who stay in the profession and enjoy the work they do are more likely to be working in schools with collaborative and cohesive organisational cultures (Yonezawa et al., 2011) and supportive school leaders (Burkhauser, 2017). While the socio-economic contexts of schools play an important role in facilitating or constraining the capacity of school leaders to cushion staff from the workload intensification and other pressures that can flow from the enactment of national policies, schools leaders who are able to respond sensitively to the emotional needs of their staff and actively foster their emotional wellbeing can make a critical difference to the ways in which teachers manage change (Maguire et al., 2018), with those leaders who 'possess a high degree of emotional intelligence' (West-Burnham, 2009, p. 13) far better placed to shield teachers from some of the negative effects of school reform. There are also more pragmatic reasons for staying on in teaching. For example, as teachers get older, their circumstances may become more circumscribed by caring responsibilities so that changing their job may not be a priority or even possible (Day & Gu, 2007). Hence contextual realities that support retention might co-exist with pressures that prompt teachers to consider leaving.

In what follows we outline the methodology of our study before going on to consider the ways participants' accounts speak to a 'profession in crisis' narrative alongside more positive counter-narratives.

2. Methodology

The research used a mixed methods approach comprising a survey of members of the National Union of Teachers (NUT)[3] and in-depth qualitative case studies of three contrasting secondary schools. The survey was distributed to all members of the NUT teaching in secondary schools in England (N = 68,833) via the NUT email database and was returned by 1802 teachers. The survey questions focused on: teachers' perceptions and experiences of the impact of the Key Stage 4 reforms on their schools' GCSE curricular offerings, pedagogic approaches, data management and student grouping practices, and the allocation of resources for the teaching of different groups of students. Most of the questions required structured responses such as indicating preferences on a Likert scale, but respondents were also invited to provide free-text responses to eleven open-ended questions. The survey questions were piloted with English secondary school teachers in different roles and levels of seniority. Following the pilot, amendments were made to increase clarity in the questions being asked and some questions were deleted to reduce the time taken to complete the survey. The survey was piloted again and further amendments were made. The survey was administered using Bristol Online Surveys.[4] Overall, there was a 0.4 percentage point difference between the gender composition of the sample and the NUT English secondary school membership as a whole. In terms of school types, the maximum difference between the sample and the total population of NUT English secondary school members was 0.7 of a percentage point. This suggests that the sample was broadly representative of the NUT English secondary school membership in terms of gender and school type. The majority of the respondents were in middle-managerial roles (43.1%) or classroom teachers (56.2%). Deputy heads and headteachers, who were

[3] In 2016 the NUT, with approximately 400,000 members (68,000 of whom worked in English secondary schools), was the largest teachers' union in the UK. The NUT has since merged with the Association of Teachers and Lecturers to form the National Education Union.

[4] The Bristol Online Survey (BOS) www.onlinesurveys.ac.uk is an online tool for creating, distributing and analysing surveys.

Table 1
Case study schools (data for 2015–16).

Case study schools	Ashfield 11–19 Academy School	Maple Way 11–16 Community School	Oak Park 11–19 Community School
Student enrolment	1880 students	687 students	974 students
Inspection (Ofsted) grade[a]	Outstanding	Good	Requires Improvement
% of A*- C GCSE grades including English and mathematics	72%	58%	53%
% of students eligible for Free School Meals	9%	25%	27%
% of students achieving EBacc	32%	5%	30%

[a] Ofsted inspectors use a 4-point grading scale to rate schools following inspections: 1 Outstanding; 2 Good; 3 Requires Improvement; 4 Inadequate. These ratings are made publicly available - inspections are high stakes for schools and teachers, particularly for those in the most disadvantaged contexts. Even under the new Ofsted inspection framework, which has shifted the inspection emphasis from test/exam scores to curriculum content, schools serving pupils from more deprived backgrounds are less likely to be judged 'good' (Roberts & Hill, 2019). A maintained school judged as inadequate will be placed into either 'Special Measures' or 'Serious weaknesses' categories, forcibly removed from local authority control and ordered to join an academy trust by the Secretary of State for Education, regardless of the wishes of the school governing body or local community. Such orders are often contested by the schools affected on grounds that include a lack of evidence to suggest that academisation improves the performance of schools, and academy schools being less accountable to parents and local communities than local authority schools (Dunn, 2019; Education Policy Institute, 2017). During the research period, Ofsted's graded judgements were based on: effectiveness of leadership and management; quality of teaching, learning and assessment; personal development, behaviour and welfare; and outcomes for pupils. The ratings in the table are those awarded in the most recent inspection prior to us conducting the research.

underrepresented in the NUT membership, represented only 0.7% of the sample. While, as union members motivated to complete our (10-15 min-long) survey, it is likely that our respondents may have been more critical of current reforms than the average secondary school teacher, the consistency of the messages coming through from the data, set alongside similar findings emerging from other research (for example, sources cited in the House of Commons, Committee of Public Accounts [2018] report on teacher retention), indicates that the views expressed are broadly representative of at least a substantial proportion of secondary school teachers in England.

To gain a richer understanding of teachers' views and experiences of the reforms, we undertook 31 semi-structured interviews with teachers and senior leaders across three contrasting non-selective, co-educational non-denominational case-study schools (see Table 1). The schools, all located in London, comprised an academy converter[5] (Ashfield School), a voluntary aided school[6] (Maple Way School) and a community school[7] (Oak Park School) - selected to represent a range of school types and sizes, diverse intakes with regard to social class and ethnicity and contrasting accountability pressures. Pseudonyms have been used for the names of schools and individual teachers to preserve their anonymity.

10-12 semi-structured interviews were carried out in each school, with the sample chosen to reflect diversity across roles (i.e. class teachers, senior leaders, Special Educational Needs and Disability Coordinators [SENDCOs] and union representatives) and subjects (both EBacc and non-EBacc). The interviews were designed to investigate how the reforms were being enacted in the schools and their impact on school and teacher practices and student experiences. The research was conducted in accordance with the ethical guidelines of the British Education Research Association and was granted ethical approval by King's College London. The data from the survey and interviews were analysed by the team for the original report (Neumann et al., 2016). Results of the structured survey questions were processed and analysed using SPSS (see original report for findings from the quantitative data).

In this paper, we draw on the qualitative data from the free-text responses in the survey and the interviews in the three schools, which were re-coded for the purposes of this paper. Our secondary analysis centred on participants' responses relating to their experiences of, and emotional responses to, changes in their work. The data were analysed using a line-by-line (Chenail, 2012) and the constant comparative method (Boeije, 2002), with themes initially constructed from an inductive reading of the data and subsequently refined using an analytic grid focused on three key themes coalescing around narratives of crisis, alternative perspectives and the role of school leadership and school contexts in shaping these narratives. We also conducted a quantitative analysis of the free-text responses to three of the open ended questions in the survey. This involved identifying all the data segments that described participants' emotions, feelings and experiences related to the impact of the reforms on their work and categorising them as expressing a positive, negative or neutral view of this impact.

In what follows we present our findings around the three key themes around which our data coalesced. The first, *narratives of 'crisis'*, captures experiences such as: the risk of leaving; feeling overloaded and under pressure; and feelings of fear, stress and anxiety. Next, we turn to highlight some *alternative perspectives*. Under the headings, 'counter-narratives – job satisfaction' and 'Getting on with it', we present teachers' experiences of deriving satisfaction in their work despite the challenges they face. Here we want to stress that respondents recognised aspects of the 'crisis' but were nevertheless committed to, and positive about, their work. Finally we consider matters related to *school leadership and contexts*, which we found to be critical in how the participants' managed the reforms. In our reporting of the data, below, interview responses are indicated with an 'I' and written survey responses with a 'W'.

2.1. Narratives of 'crisis'

2.1.1. At risk of leaving

The following extract provides a useful starting point to explore the kind of pressures emanating from the wider performative culture of schools in England that can result in teachers leaving the profession. The extract conveys a litany of pressures and policy imperatives.

> I think the (EBacc) reform is part of the growing workload concerns, new schemes of work, but added to loads of additional things … I know we have performance related pay but appraisals and observations with grades and support plans and disciplinary procedures and capability procedures and all of these different things, plus the accountability for every exam, all

[5] Academy schools are state-funded schools in England that are directly funded by the Department for Education and independent of local authority control. 'Converter academies' are schools deemed to be successful that have chosen to convert to academies.

[6] Voluntary aided schools are religious or faith-schools that receive their running costs from central government via the local authority. School buildings and land are usually owned by a charity, often a church.

[7] Community schools are state-maintained schools run by the local authority.

> the pressures that we have … every teacher is responsible also for the attendance of their tutor group, or attendance to class, so many things together …

(I: Marina Leventis, Inclusion Leader and MFL[8] teacher, Oak Park).

There was a palpable sense of regret evident in some of the survey responses emanating from what teachers described as a diminution of their joy in their job and, echoing the findings of the Education Support ES (2020) research cited above, threats to their health and wellbeing associated with these sorts of performativity pressures; and in some cases the possibility of leaving was raised.

I gave up some of my [departmental] responsibilities due to ill health but I have seen my subject and department pulled apart. (W: Religious Education teacher, standalone academy, 'Outstanding' Ofsted rating).

I feel frustrated and helpless. I do not want to be another teacher statistic who leaves; I love my subject and my pupils and I genuinely cannot imagine another job. But I am exhausted. (W: History teacher, standalone academy, 'Outstanding' Ofsted rating).

The following extract was particularly striking; a long-serving teacher, who had undoubtedly experienced a great deal of educational reform throughout her career, reported that she was now leaving teaching, as the job had simply become overwhelming.

After 32 years I feel at a loss as to what is expected of me. I am too scared to stay in role as the accountability is too much. The expectations are daunting, we all try our best for all students and the data is just overwhelming, feeling like a stick to beat us with. I am leaving at 54. (W: Head of Department and drama/expressive arts teacher, multi-academy trust, Ofsted rating not specified).

These sorts of responses illustrate the effects of a punitive accountability system, exacerbated by a sense of perpetual, unproductive – or indeed positively harmful - reform. As Santoro argues (2013), when teachers feel alienated from the values and practices of their job and are under pressure from high workloads, they are more likely to want to leave the profession. The emotional nature of some of the responses resonate with Day's (2002, p.685) argument that multiple reforms can 'flood … our emotional brain'. Teacher 'burnout', which was frequently mentioned in the survey responses, indicates poor wellbeing (Lauermann & König, 2016) and is linked to mental health issues and teacher attrition (Education Support ES, 2020).

I know many teachers who are quitting, or who have quit, who were great teachers but constant changes to exam specifications, and a huge decrease in teacher morale due to constant monitoring and accountability measures, which have stifled creativity in the classroom, have led to the very best finding alternative careers, or often quitting with no job to go to, just burnt out and exhausted. (W: Head of Religious Education, local authority school, 'Good' Ofsted rating).

Just destroying even more the whole crumbling system … More crisis ahead and more teachers leaving as the situation is unbearable. Teaching nowadays has become modern slavery … (W: Newly qualified teacher, modern languages, multi-academy trust, 'Outstanding' Ofsted rating).

These responses give voice to the teacher attrition statistics that have been framed as a 'crisis' in English schools. Some of these teachers, with many years of experience of working in schools, have dealt with successive waves of education reforms, whilst others, in their first year of teaching, are already finding the pressure too much to bear. The responses in our study reflect the intensification of teachers' work in recent years that others have also observed (Green, 2021; Lawrence et al., 2019), alongside an erosion of teachers' sense of professional autonomy (Green, 2021). All of these pressures can take an emotional toll on teachers, leading to higher levels of stress and lower levels of wellbeing, as reflected in the lexicon of 'exhaustion', 'burn out', feeling 'daunted' and 'overwhelmed', which pepper the narratives of many of our survey and interview responses, and in the description in the final extract above of teaching as a form of 'modern slavery'.

2.2. Feeling overloaded and under pressure

Many survey respondents and some of the teachers who we interviewed reported that they were feeling overloaded and under pressure in their jobs. Tension and stress were frequently highlighted, very much resonating with what Perryman et al. (2011) describe as the 'pressure cooker' of the audit and target culture, emanating from what Ozga et al. (2011, p.1) refer to as the 'incessant production of data to monitor performance in education'.

I think there's more pressure and I think it becomes a more pressurised job, and it becomes a job that is not just about … the classroom anymore, with the data collection and things like that. (I: Maria Alton, Head of Drama, Maple Way).

As a teacher of English, the pressure that has been added is incredible. Further expectations for data collection and reporting on target setting have come into place with no additional time provided. (W: Newly qualified teacher of English, multi-academy trust, 'Requires Improvement' Ofsted rating).

Responding to the open-ended questions in the survey that asked about the impact of the reforms on schools and teachers, respondents lamented the 'unbearable pressure' they experienced at the hands of leaders who were presented as generating a culture of 'blaming' teachers and 'pressurising' them to improve test results:

> *Meetings are held weekly if not more often with subject leaders, where spreadsheets are scrutinised and teachers interrogated about why certain students are not making sufficient progress … Recently, I was informed that SLT [Senior Leadership Team] want every one of my year 10 students to make 5 levels of progress … How I am meant to achieve this I am not sure but asking for help usually results in a telling off, rather than any support.* (W: Newly qualified teacher of science, standalone academy, 'Requires Improvement' Ofsted rating)

It seems the SLT at my school have a single concern, which is to satisfy the vanity of the league tables - whatever the accountability measure in place. The cultivating of a positive learning ethos and environment is not a part of any of it - even though that would be the answer to the concerns about poor results, rather than the fostering of fear and anxiety in students brought about by unrealistic target grades. (W: Head of Art and Design, local authority school, 'Good' Ofsted rating).

It is worth noting that senior leadership teams, who are themselves under pressure to perform, respond to this pressure in different ways, with some transferring the pressure onto teachers, and others acting in ways that protect their staff from the sorts of demands experienced by teachers elsewhere. As a science teacher in an 'Outstanding' multi-academy trust school in the survey commented: 'It all depends on how the school approaches it. Currently we have the stick approach, rather than the carrot and teachers seem to be expected to work harder'.

2.3. Fear, anxiety and stress

Many teachers reported feelings of uncertainty and a lack of

[8] Abbreviation for Modern Foreign Languages.

confidence about their abilities to respond to the demands of the reforms; feelings that were exacerbated by what Moore (2018, p. 41) has called the 'new zero-tolerance culture in relation to weakness', which can result in exhaustion, stress, anxiety and fear.

Teachers are exhausted … I mean there's a fear in schools at the moment. It's like a teacher can be gone within six weeks and that just tends to be somebody who has it in for someone's classroom practice … and then you're out. (I: Helen King, Head of Geography, Oak Park).

The sheer level of fear about accountability and the difficulty of the new GCSEs and of terminal assessments have meant the entire curriculum (from Y7) has been reduced to replicate GCSE-style assessment. (W: English teacher in a multi-academy trust school, 'Requires Improvement' Ofsted rating).

Others feared that cuts in their subject areas would lead to redundancies. In the survey there was a strong correlation between the respondents' subjects and their views about their job security: 77% of non-EBacc teachers 'disagreed a lot' with the statement that the reforms have increased their job security compared to 21% of mathematics and English teachers and 32% of teachers of other EBacc subjects. Many survey respondents reported that their schools had made or were threatening redundancies as a result of the financial pressures they were facing, particularly for non-EBacc teachers and support staff.

Threats of redundancy if we cannot teach a second subject. The arts are being stripped away from options choices and many teachers are left with their full-time timetables slashed in half. Many fear for their jobs at present. (W: Head of Department and Design and Technology teacher, standalone academy, 'Good' Ofsted rating).

Teachers of English and mathematics also reported feeling under pressure, although for them the pressure was to accelerate achievement in high-stakes tests. Although these subjects have always been treated as 'core' in schools and therefore prioritised, now English and mathematics are double-weighted thus raising the stakes even higher for teachers of these subjects, and in particular heads of these core departments.

> *[There's] huge pressure, you know, accountability around English and maths, as a head of faculty, is just immense. And just non-stop … and I mean you are powerless against those kind of forces.* (I: Kaye Greene, Head of English, Oak Park)

I think teachers are extremely anxious about next year and I think that's felt through and through because the teachers aren't as confident with the content, with assessing the students. (I: Mark Kennedy, Head of Mathematics, Ashfield).

In contrast, the stress and anxiety reported by teachers of non-Ebacc subjects tended to be associated with their subjects being marginalised rather than pressures to perform. This marginalisation was reflected in loss of curriculum time, reductions in uptake and/or reduced resourcing and staffing.

There is a real risk that all performing arts subjects including Music will be subjugated and eventually removed from the KS3 [Key Stage 3] and 4 curriculum - as they cost the school money and do not count toward league tables and the school performance - and slowly the number of students choosing to take these subjects will drop. (W: Music teacher, multi-academy trust, 'Good' Ofsted rating).

We really do have to sometimes convince the parents that [PE] is not a throwaway subject, that it's not regarded any less by universities or by college, and we show them the amount of science involved. (I: PE teacher, Maple Way).

The data we have reported so far in this paper indicates that, from the perspective of some teachers, if there is a crisis in teaching, it is one that is characterised by pressure, budget cuts, anxiety and performance demands. These factors can, and do, lead to lower levels of teacher wellbeing and arguably reduce teacher retention rates (Madigan & Kim, 2021). However, national policies that focus more on teacher recruitment rather than the lived experiences of teaching may indirectly be contributing to this problem by neglecting to consider issues of retention.

Although the majority of participants in our study expressed negative views about the reforms, we interrogated our data-set to search for alternative accounts of teachers' experiences. We quantitatively analysed the responses to three of the open-ended survey questions:

- If you wish, please add any further comments you may have about the impact of Ebacc in your school. (463 responses)
- If you wish, please add any further comments you may have about the impact of the new GCSEs on your subject or your school. (421 responses)
- If you wish, please add any further comments you may have about the impact of Progress 8 and Attainment 8 in your school. (222 responses)

We found that 3% (N = 14) of responses on the impact of the Ebacc were positive, 89% (N = 417) were negative and 8% (N = 32) were neutral - neither positive or negative. Out of the responses to the question on the impact of the new GCSEs, 4% (N = 15) were positive, 92% (N = 396) were negative and 4% (N = 15) neutral. Responding to the question on the impact of Attainment 8 and Progress 8, 7% (N = 15) of the responses were positive, 86% (N = 192) were negative and 7% (N = 15) were neutral. Overall, out of 1111 responses to the three open-ended questions on the impact of the reforms, 90% were negative (N = 1005), 4% (N = 44) were positive and 6% (N = 62) were neutral. Some of these responses included both negative and positive comments.

'Good news' stories about teaching are less often told or may become drowned out by the less positive accounts which tend to dominate (as with our study). However, our one-to-one interviews with teachers provided an opportunity for us to explore their work in more depth as the interview structure enabled them to talk at greater length about their teaching experiences.[9] Drawing on both our interview and survey data, it is to some of the more positive accounts of teaching that we now want to turn.

2.4. Other perspectives - examples of teacher positivity

2.4.1. Counter narratives - job satisfaction

While many of our participants responded to our questions in ways that aligned with the crisis discourse, not all teachers reported an over-riding sense of adversity in their work. Some teachers described how they derived a great deal of satisfaction from their work. Indeed, a small number of teachers commented that, although they did not welcome all aspects of the reforms, they did welcome the higher expectations demanded by the new curriculum content. These changes were seen as supportive of the students and were welcomed by some teachers.

I think in many respects, although it's going to be tough on kids, they are going to be in a better position in terms of knowing what they can do next because a [Chemistry] A level is hard, and if you make the GCSE easy then the difficult problem is not at the end of GCSE, it comes

[9] It may be the case that face-to-face interviews with the researcher could have prompted more positive responses regarding the reforms, as participants may have wanted to 'present themselves in what they believe will be seen as a favourable light' (Sikes, 2000, p.264) and they may have, consciously or subconsciously, sought to conceal any less favourable aspects of their working experiences. However, the fact that even those who voiced positive views about their work acknowledged some of the negative aspects expressed by others suggests that these participants were not seeking to conceal the less positive aspects of their experiences.

at the end of A level when they fail and they can't do what they want to do. (I: Gareth Enders, science teacher, Oak Park).

The new GCSE is more rigorous but rightly so. The current assessment criteria are unsuitable to assess ability to communicate in a foreign language. The new specification will address that. (W: MFL teacher, multi-academy trust, 'Good' Ofsted rating).

At the time of the research the Progress 8 measure had just been introduced, and there was a mixed response to its introduction. However, those expressing support for this new accountability measure welcomed it as giving equal value to the progress of all children. Progress 8 was introduced, in large part, to correct the perverse incentive produced by the previous accountability regime that compared schools according to the percentage of students attaining 5 or more A*-C grades at GCSE. This measure had resulted in schools disproportionately focusing on the attainment of a narrow band of students at the C/D 'borderline' who could potentially contribute to a school's league table success. The benefit of the Progress 8 measure, as some respondents saw it, was that it removed this artificial preoccupation with the C/D borderline students. For example, as Olivia Cartwright, Head of English at Maple Way, put it: 'Ten years ago we said that every child matters, but now we actually genuinely mean it. That, I think, is very powerful.' There were some similar responses in the survey.

The move to include all students in the measure is positive, in removing the obsession with percentage A-C, which forced us to focus on a relatively small proportion of the cohort who were around the C/D border.* (W: Deputy head teacher and science teacher, standalone academy, 'Outstanding' Ofsted rating).

It has meant that the low ability pupils now matter, a grade D is worth the same to the school as an A if the progress from KS2 is the same. That's something I have seen to benefit those who are low attainers who usually get forgotten about over your high attainer. (W: Science teacher, standalone academy, 'Good' Ofsted rating).

2.5. Getting on with it

Some participants found ways of continuing to teach in ways that were aligned with their existing teaching philosophies. As Ball (2013, p. xvi) has argued:

The technologies of reform are individualising and insidious and deleterious but they are not totalising. They do not play upon all teachers in the same way. Paradoxically, they also trade upon the creativity and inventiveness of teachers to make things work.

For example, some who dismissed the reforms as 'nonsense' or 'rubbish' complied with them without investing emotionally in their actions, or only minimally doing so. For instance, Carolyn Brandelli, a Classics teacher at Ashfield, talked about the love she and her colleagues had for their work: 'we're good teachers and we love what we do' despite 'the [assessment] nonsense that we need to do …. And I can't really explain to you why we have to do it, we just do'. Similarly, Sofia Fernandez, an art teacher at Oak Park explained that she just liked, 'being in the room with the kids and teaching them'. Such teachers found ways to 'get on' with their work without giving in to pressures to change their practice or pedagogy.

I don't think that the reforms will do much to stop me … I love teaching, I love the … reward of seeing people progress and, you know, making the people who are going to eventually run our country! (laughs). (I: Anala Shah, Media studies teacher, Ashfield).

It is worth noting that these excerpts are from teachers who teach non-EBacc subjects. Whilst many teachers of non-EBacc subjects expressed feelings of stress and anxiety associated with their subjects potentially being marginalised alongside fears of redundancy due to budget cuts, the accountability stakes are not as high for these teachers as they are for those who teach EBacc subjects, especially mathematics and English. As a result, it is more likely that non-EBacc teachers will be able to 'get on with it'. Another category of teachers who can feel under less pressure to conform are those who have more years of experience and feel either more secure in their position at the school or that they have less to lose by not conforming. They may also be long-term 'stayers' in the profession with a lot to lose if they leave teaching, such as salary security, housing, pensions (Towers, 2020, pp. 1–16). Experienced teachers may also have developed a resilience to change, great competence in their classrooms and a powerful commitment towards their students that helps them manage in difficult times. For example, a design and technology teacher at Maple Way who had been teaching for 13 years, while critical of the reforms and some of the ways in which the school leadership managed the changes, maintained that he did not feel particularly pressured or stressed by the reforms, commenting that: 'I suppose I'm probably now at the point [in my career] where I don't care about [data gathering] actually'. Likewise, Harry Drake at Oak Park, a geography teacher who had been teaching for over 25 years said: 'I'm very sorry about the way things [the reforms] have gone … but I still like coming in [to teach] and everything'. To some extent the survey responses support the argument that those who are more experienced may be better placed to navigate the reforms. For example, 37 out of the 44 positive responses to the three survey questions on the impact of the reforms were from teachers who had 5–35 years' teaching experience. Here, it is worth repeating that the majority of teachers who leave the profession do so within the first five years of teaching (DfE, 2018b).

2.6. School leadership and wider contextual matters

Many of our respondents reported feeling under enormous pressure at the hands of sometimes unhelpful and punitive school leadership teams, but our data also includes examples of teachers working in schools with supportive leadership teams, who constructed more positive accounts of their experiences of the reforms. As we have argued elsewhere, some schools are well placed to respond to high-stakes policy imperatives in ways that enable them to 'thrive in a new policy climate' (Maguire et al., 2019, p. 23). For example, senior leadership teams in schools like Ashfield with more secure league table positions and better Ofsted ratings, and/or that are better resourced - and these things often go together (Hutchinson, 2016; Staufenberg, 2018) - are under less pressure to conform to official policy expectations and better placed than others to protect teachers from the more harmful effects of the reforms.

I think our school's got the right strategy in that they're doing it gradually, they're not doing anything too quickly and not making any radical changes … being quite cautious but understanding that things will change. (I: Andrew Zane, history teacher, Ashfield).

Our school thankfully is in a more fortunate position than other schools and we have been able to negate some of the impact on pupils' choices simply because we are Ofsted's Outstanding therefore can disagree with more certainty than another school in a more precarious position would be able. (W: Head of History, standalone academy, 'Outstanding' Ofsted rating).

Senior leaders in schools that are relatively well situated and resourced are better placed to buffer teachers from additional pressures and stress brought on by high-stakes policy reforms, thereby allowing them to 'get on' with their work. We found that 33 out of the 44 positive responses to the survey questions on the impact of the reforms were from respondents in schools rated 'Outstanding' or 'Good'. However, there were also positive comments about the senior leadership in schools that were less obviously well situated.

In the three in-depth case study schools, teachers made positive comments about the leadership, although this was particularly so in Ashfield:

> Our head of department is very experienced and I think she is very good at managing change, and I think that's where … we work together, we all communicate, we work very well as a team … We are lucky in this school that as a teaching member of staff I feel very supported in that I could go to any member of the SLT and ask for their advice, or ask what they think about something that we've done.

I feel as though the [leadership team] took quite a measured approach and we didn't have a knee jerk reaction to it […] The school has done as much as possible to try and keep a varied and rich curriculum. (I: Nathan Derrell, Curriculum leader for Humanities, Maple Way).

However, a note of caution was expressed in some of the survey comments about the capacity for some schools to continue to protect their staff and students from potential negative effects of the new reforms.

The Head is fighting changes to creative and vocational [subjects] on the timetable because our students embrace them. But even he admits it's just a matter of time. (W: Science teacher, multi-academy trust, 'Good' Ofsted rating).

Supportive and trusting relationships between headteachers and staff can contribute to teachers having a stronger sense of professional autonomy and agency – factors which help to bolster teachers' commitment, motivation and ultimately retention (Day, 2009).

The data presented in this section indicate the ways in which some teachers in some schools are managing to steer a more positive course through the accountability and workload demands generated by policy directives. Whilst in all kinds of schools there are examples of teachers constructing narratives about the work they do in ways that allow them to simply 'get on with it', the school culture nevertheless appears to be critical in shaping individual teachers' responses to their work. More specifically, it would appear that the 'profession in crisis' narrative can be more deftly navigated by teachers in schools that are well-situated in terms of league table positions, Ofsted ratings and resourcing and where there is more scope for emotionally intelligent leadership.

3. Discussion

In this paper we have explored teachers' responses to the curriculum, assessment and accountability reforms in English secondary schools in the context of concerns about teacher attrition, teacher shortages, particularly in EBacc subjects and teacher wellbeing that are reflected in political and media narratives of a 'profession in crisis'. In response to our first research question, we found that the 'profession in crisis' narrative is evident in much of our data. Both in our survey and case study interviews respondents reported instances where teachers in their school have left the profession, with some respondents expressing a desire to leave a profession that they love but in which they feel they can no longer continue. Our data also show that teachers who are overworked and under pressure are more likely to express feeling burnt out and having lower levels of wellbeing. The 'crisis' narrative apparent in much of our data points to a link between high levels of stress, anxiety and reduced wellbeing with some expressing intentions to leave the profession. One significant theme in our data is the role that school organisational cultures play in contributing to (or reducing) teacher stress and anxiety. Many of the negative comments about school leadership relayed experiences of working in what others have called 'sausage machine' (Allen & Sims, 2018) or 'toxic' (Woodley, 2018) schools under 'toxic leadership' Kell (2018a, 2018b), p. 26). These are schools and leaders that pay more attention to systems rather than the people who work in their schools, that generate cultures of blame, fear, anxiety and distrust, and that tend to have higher levels of teacher turnover because of the hostile, unsupportive, 'pressure cooker' (Perryman et al., 2011) working environments that they produce.

While in our data there are many examples that support a 'profession in crisis' narrative, we also need to remind ourselves that, despite high numbers of teachers leaving the profession in the first five years of teaching, the majority of teachers do stay in their jobs (DfE, 2018b); and in this paper we have also presented data, in response to our second research question, that reflects a counter-narrative to the 'crisis' discourse. This counter-narrative tells of teachers who maintain positive levels of job satisfaction and who have chosen to continue in the profession in a period of substantial reforms to curriculum, pedagogy and assessment. The strong association between teachers who are positive about their work and supportive school cultures that was evident in our data resonates with the findings of other studies, some of which also suggest that supportive school cultures and good staff-leadership relationships are predictive of higher rates of teacher retention (for example, Flores & Day, 2006; Burkhauser, 2017; Allen & Sims, 2018). Teachers working in such schools, who report job satisfaction and a positive sense of wellbeing, undoubtedly have a better chance of navigating the daily stresses and strains of teaching life. Yet this is of course not to say that all teachers whose experiences support a 'profession in crisis' narrative are necessarily working in badly-run schools. Our data suggest that teachers' subjects and their years of experience are significant factors in how they have been affected by and/or are able to cope with the Key Stage 4 reforms. Those who teach EBacc subjects may feel pressurised because the accountability measures and associated surveillance practices place particular weight on their subjects, but feel relatively secure in relation to redundancy. In contrast, being a teacher of a non-EBacc subject offers less job security, but relatively more autonomy within their practice. At the same time, whatever subject they teach, those who are more experienced tend to be better placed to cope with and navigate the reforms, as is reflected in the official teacher attrition statistics that show the majority of teachers who quit the profession leave within the first five years of teaching (DfE, 2018b). Experienced teachers are less likely to leave the profession as quickly as early career teachers, who may feel less equipped to deal with professional challenges in the same way as their more experienced colleagues (DfE, 2018a, 2018b, 2018c, 2018d). Although motivations for staying in the teaching profession are complex, teachers' reasons for staying can strengthen over time as their career progresses (Chiong et al., 2017) and can increase teachers' own professional confidence and resilience.

Finally, our data illustrate a connection between school contexts, leadership climates and responses to policy change. High performing, better-resourced schools with more socio-economically advantaged intakes, like Ashfield School, where respondents expressed positive views about their school leadership, are far better placed to manage the challenges of policy change than those in more vulnerable positions. They may also be better placed to ensure the health and wellbeing of their staff.

4. Conclusion

In this paper we have foregrounded evidence that supports a 'profession in crisis' narrative. Many of the participants expressed concerns about the reforms and raised questions about themselves staying in teaching as well detailing pressures that they thought

could lead others to leave the profession. The paper also explored a counter-narrative that highlighted teachers' satisfaction with teaching and their desire to remain in the profession. In this section we want to consider some of the implications of these findings, for, as we have argued earlier, there may be a danger if educational researchers, policy-makers and other stakeholders reproduce and reinforce a 'profession in crisis' narrative without considering some alternative discourses.

First, there are some implications for schools and their leadership teams. When teachers are required to work within the confines of external and internal policy directives that they may be intellectually and emotionally concerned about, teaching can become stressful, exhausting and energy sapping and this can drive some teachers from the profession. But we also know that teachers' motivations for remaining in teaching are complex, multi-faceted and dependent on their individual situation and circumstances and do become stronger over time (Day et al., 2007; Tricarico et al., 2015). Senior leaders need to be able to buffer staff, to help them manage change in transparent and democratic ways, and they need to ensure that resources are directed towards supporting their staff's health and well-being particularly where policy demands are mandated.

Second, there are wider concerns that need to be explored by policy makers. For example, since this study was carried out, teaching has been seriously disrupted by the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic. The health and wellbeing of citizens is now widely discussed as a result of changes to ways of living and working. Consequently the wellbeing of teachers has been at the forefront of discussions around the future of teaching and schooling in the UK (Education Support ES, 2020). Just before the Covid-19 pandemic struck, policy was introduced in the UK to support early career teachers (DfE, 2019a), as have a range of strategies to improve teachers' wellbeing (DfE, 2019b) and support retention (DfE, 2021). However, in a post-pandemic world, these policies may only paper over the cracks. If policy makers' attention is dominated by a 'profession in crisis' narrative that largely concentrates on recruitment issues, then alternative strategies simply may not be considered. Targeting teachers in their fourth year of teaching could be worth considering as this seems to be a key moment in a teacher's career given that most leakage happens in the fifth year. Other provisions such as some sabbatical leave to use to visit other schools and more support for teachers to undertake further extended study could help build resilience and self-efficacy in teachers (Gu & Day, 2007). The policy 'trick' would be to concentrate on retention and support throughout a teaching career.

The data from our research shows that, whilst most of the teachers who responded to our survey were critical about the reforms and thought they could lead to further teacher attrition, many teachers continue to derive great satisfaction from their work and construct positive narratives about their experiences of teaching. This finding is reflected in the fact that most teachers do stay in the profession. Paying attention to these diverse teachers voices that contain critique of educational reforms as well as detailing their commitment and engagement in teaching can help senior leaders and policy makers better support schools to provide the emotionally intelligent leadership and conditions that enable teachers to stay and thrive in their work with young people.

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