

A status-based crisis of teacher shortages? A discussion

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ABSTRACT

The theory of status, applied by Ovenden-Hope (2022) to the current crisis of teacher shortages, helps to identify one of the underlying factors that impact teachers entering the teaching workforce in England. In this appreciative response to her paper, I argue that the structural factors that have come about with the neoliberal policy agenda of the last 40 years have impacted the status of teaching and the educative purpose, and that without a clear understanding of, and willingness to oppose, these structural factors, it is unlikely that we will solve the recruitment/retention challenge. These factors contribute to the low esteem in which teachers are held because of their perceived short period of training; public knowledge and curriculum access; the reconfiguring of teachers from knowledgeable guides to deliverers of content; and the co-option of the teaching profession as an arm of the state. The neoliberal or marketised teleology of education militates against the historic status of the teacher, and it is unlikely that teacher status will improve while they are teaching in an education system geared to the production of economically active adults.

INTRODUCTION

Tanya Ovenden-Hope (2021, 2022) has postulated a theory of status-based teacher shortages as an important contribution to the way that English educators (and those elsewhere) perceive the factors that underlie the current crisis in teacher recruitment and retention in the English school system.

She argues that the paucity of longitudinal research on the current crisis in both retention and recruitment means it is not understood well, and that those studies that have explored teacher pay and other incentivisation tried by western governments report a failure of these incentives either to improve recruitment or to stem the flow of teachers departing from the profession.

This exploration of status as a more 'structural' feature is much to be welcomed, as it moves the ground of the debate away from contingent issues of pay and conditions solely, though (as any union rep will tell you) these have an obvious impact where they are constrained, into the more nebulous world of how teachers and the teaching 'profession' are regarded (the inverted commas

KEYWORDS

TEACHER STATUS

TELEOLOGY OF EDUCATION

RETENTION

RECRUITMENT

denote the irony of the term in an era of deprofessionalisation). Equally important is how teachers perceive themselves under the 30-plus-year onslaught of neoliberal thought and policy regarding the public services and the parental and media perceptions that such thought has shaped. As Ovenden-Hope puts it, 'the low status of teaching as a profession, and of teachers, is embedded in common understanding (habitus), reinforced by media representations and individual expectations and experiences' (Ovenden-Hope, 2022: 40).

As a primary educator for just short of 30 years, this has been the world I have worked in and observed. The status of teachers, both privately viewed (or 'subjective'; Ovenden-Hope, 2022: 38) and publicly advanced (or 'objective'), has been a factor in staffroom discourse for as long as I can remember, and contrasts strongly with the esteem in which teachers were held in, for instance, nineteenth-century literature or that accorded my own grandfather as a primary teacher in Wales in the 1920s and 1930s.

TELEOLOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS

My central thesis here is that the status and professionalism of teachers is entwined with the publicly expressed, neoliberal teleology of education in England since (and possibly before) the 1988 Education Reform Act (Ball, 2021). In particular, the status of teachers may be related to a number of factors that derive directly and indirectly from that political teleology, and is unlikely to be altered, or the associated teacher shortages addressed, until the teleological problems are resolved, and the shape and purpose of English education reconfigured. The status of teachers has deteriorated, along with the status of teaching as a public service. The status of teaching has been diminished as it has been shunted from its high vocation in western cultural development to a delivery activity, in which learners function as economic actors (Rizvi & Lingard, 2009).

It is the nature of neoliberal thought that it presents as a way of thinking about economic and social relationships to which it admits no alternative. One of the features pertinent to education is the conversion of those educated from 'students' to 'consumers' of education, altering the balance of power in the educative relationship, and placing teachers in the competitive market to be employed to meet the needs of the market. The freedom of those wandering around seeking learning in the education market might thus be paramount for neoliberal thinkers, but, under one of the great paradoxes of what Mirowski calls the 'neoliberal thought collective', it seems that 'whilst in power, neoliberals may have subcontracted out parts of government, but that rarely makes a dent in bureaucracy. The coercive power of government inexorably grows' (Mirowski, 2018: 125). It is the placement of the professional teacher within the coercive power of a market-focused government that has both helped undermine teacher status (objectively, because the qualifications of a teacher are public, not extensive, and easily comparable to qualifications in other professions; and subjectively, because education policy has told teachers increasingly what to teach and how to teach it) and simultaneously, has co-opted teachers (and teacher educators, through the aptly named 2021 DfE Market Review) as a 'delivery arm' of the state.

STATUS-INFORMING NARRATIVES

This status-impacting, marketised understanding plays out in a variety of narratives:

1. Teacher status is related to the qualificatory 'ease' with which teachers can enter their profession, comparing unfavourably with other professions. In the public mind, the fact that a graduate can 'train' to be a teacher with a ten-month postgraduate course compares poorly to the 'effort' needed to train to be

a doctor or architect, or, indeed, a teacher in Germany or Scandinavia. Ovenden-Hope (2021) writes of the perspective on teaching as something that can be done by any 'seemingly competent adult' (p. 72), which plays into this 'unqualified' narrative, and which challenges teacher status as graduate professionals.

2. Teacher status has declined along with the mandating of a national curriculum that can be accessed and mediated by parents and carers, with the enthusiastic help of educational publishers, without the 'overt need' for teachers. In deciding that there should be a national curriculum, the 1988 Education Reform Act privileged content over other considerations and reshaped the role and agency of teachers as a result (Hughes & Lewis, 2020). Subsequent 'policy-led' alterations of the curriculum by the Department for Education have done little to give teachers the sense that they are in control of curricular content.
3. Teacher status is, therefore, impacted directly by their performative conception as deliverers of predetermined content to children and young people, rather than a role as knowledgeable culture-bearers and guides to the modern world. The position argued by Oakeshott (1967/1989), that the 'chief business of the teachers was to make available to children something which approximates more closely to the whole of their inheritance' (p. 40) is long since gone. Friedman's understanding that intellectuals threatened the free market (Burgin, 2012) is mirrored in the UK by the way that the government disregards the role of teachers as public intellectuals, or to be trusted with anything beyond delivering predetermined content.
4. Teacher status (along with that of the professions generally) has been affected further by the

democratisation of knowledge that has come with the internet and infinitely broader access to knowledge (and prejudice) by the wider public. Although more work needs doing on this, it would be a surprise if the impact of patient access to medical knowledge on health professionals (McMullan, 2006) was not mirrored in the education world (cf. Schofield & Davidson, 2003; Kereliuk *et al.*, 2013).

5. Teacher status has been affected by constantly shifting cultural and political pressures added to the curriculum over time (PREVENT, fitness and obesity, changes in sex and relationships education, etc), further reinforcing the perception that schools and the teachers in them are simply a compliance-enforcing or public-information wing of the state.
6. Teacher status has been affected by the shift in the teleology of educational purpose from a rich,

historic and theoretically informed grasp of the educative task as defined by a long cultural immersion in western thinking, to a 'skills for jobs' or 'train workers for the economy' – this reinforced by those, like business leaders, who insist that education is about skills and 'competencies' for the workplace (CBI/Pearson, 2019; Lucas, 2019).

Finally, the modern understanding of the professionalisation (and subsequent de-professionalisation) of the teacher's place in society has been, since the nineteenth century, separated out from the earlier liberal educative understanding that education is for the pursuit of wisdom (as argued cogently by Ozoliņš, 2020), from its position as rooted in home, family and community, and from the larger meaningful narratives of service, knowledge and care that the postmodern turn has sought to deconstruct. These changes are a late product of the

Enlightenment, and cannot be laid at the door of the neoliberal state, but these 'moves' have introduced a short-termism and careerism into the role of the teacher that is easily co-opted by the neoliberal conception of the individual teacher and learner as deliverer and consumer respectively.

My view is that until a rewriting of educative purpose is attempted, with an associated teleological shift as to why we are educating, we are unlikely to see any changes in the status of teachers. Indeed, without any change of direction of UK (and most western and western-influenced) education, the pressures preventing people entering the profession, and driving them away once they are in, will increase. The status of teachers is still wholly dependent on the status of teaching. ■

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