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“No matter what is thrown at you, you still – inside your core – want to teach”: the role of calling in retention of secondary school teachers in England

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ABSTRACT

Retention of teachers in England is poor, yet many stay in the profession. Exploring why teachers remain, as well as why they leave, can improve understanding of retention. The aim of this study therefore is to investigate qualitative accounts of secondary-school teachers about factors contributing to decisions to stay or leave teaching. Eleven semi-structured interviews were conducted with early career teachers, established teachers, and teachers who had left or were leaving teaching. Data was analysed thematically. Findings showed that teachers wanted more autonomy in their work to focus on student needs, develop their subject passion, and nurture collegial relationships. However, accountability, bureaucracy, inadequate resourcing, and top-down directives stifled their ability to craft their work and nurture their calling to teach. To improve retention, teachers should be provided with more opportunities to develop their calling as a work orientation. This requires organisational and culture change at the school and political level.

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Teacher retention; career stage; work orientation; calling

Introduction

The retention of secondary school teachers poses a serious problem for the English education system. The number of vacant teaching posts is rising (Long and Danechi 2022; Worth and Salin 2018), and attrition data for new teachers shows that 12.5% have left the profession within their first year, rising to 40.3% after 10 years (Long and Danechi 2022). Between 2010 and 2015, the number of teachers aged 50 or over fell from 23% to 17% and the proportion of secondary school teachers leaving before retirement age is increasing (Worth and Salin 2018). These statistics show that many leave the profession early in their teaching career, and that a notable proportion of established teachers are not staying until retirement. Teacher attrition is therefore an issue at various stages, and international trends suggests these problems extend beyond England (Schleicher 2020).

The Covid pandemic and subsequent economic downturn resulted in increased numbers of trainees and temporarily improved teacher retention figures (Worth and Faulkner-Ellis 2021), but recent figures indicate supply challenges returning to pre-

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pandemic levels – especially in shortage subjects such as science, mathematics, and modern languages (Worth and Faulkner-Ellis 2022). Staff turnover and recruitment shortfalls have a negative effect on students and are expensive for schools (Klassen et al. 2021), and losing experienced teachers is detrimental to the workforce. Retention therefore needs addressing at all teaching career stages (Admiraal et al. 2019).

Poor financial incentives could explain attrition, but See et al.'s (See et al. 2020a) international research found financial incentives alone were not enough to retain teachers in challenging schools, and any improvements in retention were only maintained whilst extra money was provided. Likewise, research in the USA found performance related pay has no effect on retention (Hill and Jones 2020). The impact of financial incentives depends on context (Benhenda and Macmillan 2021), and pay is not typically reported as a major driver for leaving teaching (Long and Danechi 2022; Worth and Salin 2018).

Other possible explanations for teacher attrition include psychological characteristics, identity, and organisational factors (Bardach, Klassen, and Perry 2022; Day et al. 2006; Towers and Maguire 2017). Burnout, resulting from chronic stress at work, is one of the main causes of teachers' intention to quit (Madigan and Kim 2021). Yet, despite it being a strong predictor of motivation to leave, 70% of the variance in burnout is explained by school contextual variables (Skaalvik and Skaalvik 2017), suggesting that working conditions and organisational factors also contribute. For example, Admiraal and Røberg (Admiraal and Kittelsen Røberg 2023), utilising large data sets such as PISA and TALIS indicate that a lack of “togetherness and a participative culture” (p. 9), in other words collegiality, as the main reason for teachers leaving.

Workload is also frequently reported as reason for teachers leaving (DfE 2018). In a survey of Initial Teacher Education graduates in England between 2015–2020, 19% had left within the 5-year study period, and a further 16% were intending to leave (Perryman and Calvert 2020). Main reasons given were excessive workload and impact on work-life balance. Whilst many were prepared for the high workload beforehand, it was the *nature* of the workload, resulting from a culture of performativity, that caused excessive stress. Performativity involves measuring teaching output against targets set by government, and through quality assurance bodies such as the Office for Standards in Education (OFSTED). Teacher stress can be exacerbated by the climate of accountability and inspections (Brady and Wilson 2022), and performativity can disrupt teachers' identity by replacing traditional values of altruism and public service with business-orientated models like competition and “customer” demand (Ball 2008). Even teachers with many years of service can quit once their identity has been undermined (Towers and Maguire 2017).

However, although well-being is significantly lower in teachers than other comparable occupational groups (Grenville-Cleave and Boniwell 2012; Skinner, Leavey, and Rothi 2021), most teachers *stay* in the profession despite the challenges outlined. Some may adopt a “survival” mode, whilst others may thrive. High job satisfaction and personal fulfilment of teachers is associated with lower attrition (Schleicher 2020), so there is benefit from drawing on frameworks exploring flourishing and resilience to understand teacher retention, alongside reasons for attrition. Here, positive psychology is useful as it studies optimal human functioning, and how to develop positive traits and potential (Linley et al. 2006; Seligman and Csikzentmihalyi 2000).

A concept that has started to gain traction is job crafting. This is the individuals' ability to proactively control the nature of their work and in so doing give meaning to the work (Wrzesniewski and Dutton 2001). It is self-directed, where the employee attempts to design their work from the bottom-up and believes they can improve the way they work. Performative approaches are top-down and provide less meaning, whereas job crafting should increase well-being and improve retention (Demerouti 2015). How an individual crafts their work gives rise to a particular work orientation, either a "job", "career" or "calling" (Wrzesniewski et al. 1997). "Job" orientation refers to working for material reward, usually money, "career" orientation for status and prestige, and those with a "calling" orientation see their work as intrinsically fulfilling, socially useful, and feel drawn towards the work itself (Rosso, Dekas, and Wrzesniewski 2010; Wrzesniewski et al. 1997).

Having a sense of purpose from work provides personal meaning and is therefore worthy of personal investment (Falcout and Murphy 2018). Employees with a calling orientation show the highest satisfaction with work, better health, productivity, and improved outcomes, indicating calling is linked to well-being and hence retention (Wrzesniewski et al. 1997; Rawat and Nadavulakere, 2015). Findings showing that trainees' main reasons for choosing teaching include making a difference to young people, and developing their subject passions (Perryman and Calvert 2020), indicates that calling is important for teachers. Indeed, Jurčec, Ljubić Golub, and Rijavec (2021) found that primary school teachers in Croatia with a calling orientation were more likely to craft their work leading to increased meaning, purpose, and flourishing. Having a calling also attracts potential trainees to teaching (Dinham and Scott 2000; Richardson and Watt 2006), makes them more likely to stay in teaching (Flores and Day 2006), and fosters commitment and hope in in-service teachers (Bullough and Hall-Kenyon 2011, 2012). However, there are few empirical studies on teacher calling, especially in secondary school teachers in an English context, so more research is needed to explore the role this work orientation may play in teacher retention.

Evidence suggests teacher attrition is an ongoing concern, but the factors contributing to experience at work and departure decisions may vary. Teachers who remain in the profession are worthy of attention (Whipp and Salin 2018), because the reasons they can withstand the challenging circumstances could provide insight into retaining more teachers. This study therefore aims to investigate teacher accounts, at different career stages, about factors contributing to decisions to stay or leave the teaching profession, and how work orientation and job crafting shapes these experiences.

Method

Research approach

Qualitative methods were adopted to interpret and understand teacher experiences, sensitive to their context and circumstances. In-depth, semi structured interviews were undertaken with a sample of teachers from three categories: those who were new to the profession, those who were established, and those who had left, or were in the process of leaving. This meant that information could be gained about career stage, and factors contributing to decisions to stay or leave the profession within each stage.¹

Participants

The sample was purposive, ensuring that teacher experiences at the different stages were captured. In a related study (Chitty, Maunder & Collings (submitted)), secondary schoolteachers across England were invited to complete a survey; they were also invited to participate in a follow-up interview. Eight teachers were recruited via this route, and the remaining were recruited through social media and personal contacts.

Eleven semi-structured interviews were carried out with newly qualified teachers (now called Early Career Teachers, ECTs) ($n = 2$), established (those in middle and veteran phase) ($n = 4$) and those who had left, or were in the process of leaving ($n = 5$). To protect identities, pseudonyms are used throughout.² Ethical approval was obtained from the institutional committee before the study commenced, and informed participant consent was provided.

The interviews

Interview questions focused on their motivation for becoming a teacher; enjoyable and difficult factors encountered in the job; support given; areas of concern; the retention problem in teaching and potential strategies for addressing it. Being semi-structured, the interview schedule was only used as a guide. The interviewer asked some questions but spent much of the time listening, using probes and follow-up questions. This allowed the interviewees to narrate their accounts in their own words (Hesse-Biber 2017).

All interviews were conducted by the first author, who was a practising secondary school teacher at the time the study was conducted.³ This shared experience facilitated rapport, and enabled participants to express their views to someone as a relative insider who understood the context and was familiar with the issues raised. Therefore, interviews operated more as a collegial discussion – contributing to the authenticity of the data.

Analytical approach

Data was analysed using Thematic analysis (TA), according to the phases laid down by Braun and Clarke (2013). Interviews were transcribed and read several times to build familiarity with the content. The data was then coded using a combination of inductive and deductive coding. “Data derived codes” were taken directly from the text whilst “researcher derived” were codes derived by the researcher (Braun and Clarke 2013). Codes with a similar meaning were grouped together into categories, enabling the development of “conceptual themes” (Harding 2013) that recurred across the data. Themes and sub-themes were re-examined and refined and given a title to reflect their content and meaning. The first author conducted the fine grade coding, but theme generation and interpretation was a collaborative effort between both authors to improve analytical dependability.

Analysis

The themes generated from the analyses are shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Thematic structure constructed through the analysis.

Superordinate theme	Overarching theme	Sub-theme
Crafting the work	(1) Getting there: Developing the calling	Having the call Relationships matter It's all about the kids Love of Subject Is this really necessary? The Bean Counters
	(2) Resistance to the calling	Resilience is not enough Where have all the good times gone?
	(3) Staying there: Sustaining the calling	

Superordinate theme: “crafting the work”

“Crafting the Work” was identified as a superordinate theme because the way interviewees talked about their work as a teacher aligned with “calling” work orientation. Their priority was to proactively craft their work to develop their sense of calling. They wanted their work to be fulfilling, socially useful and something they felt drawn to. This superordinate theme was comprised of three main themes: “Getting there: Developing the Calling”; “Resistance to the Calling” and “Staying there: Sustaining the Calling”.

Theme 1: “getting there: developing the calling”

All teachers described “Having the call” (sub-theme) to teach. They were motivated by a sense of vocation. Jackie (left/leaving teaching) knew from an early age that “*teaching was the way to go forward*”. Even when her family suggested she change occupation she said she “*couldn’t think of something else that I actually, really wanted to do*”. Her identity was enmeshed with her work:

... you are an AM ... when people say to you, ‘What do you do? [I say] “I am a teacher”. And I have been saying that now for 16 years ... And I’m still proud to say it ... No matter what is thrown at you, you still – inside your core – want to teach.

She added:

And it’s got nothing to do with the status or the money or anything else that comes with it. I’m still proud of the fact that teaching is a vocation, that we are important in society ...

“Status” and “money” were explicitly stated as less important than vocation, and she felt drawn to the work which she saw as fulfilling and socially meaningful.

When asked what she liked about teaching, Harriet (ECT) showed her service ethos by saying “... *the personal, looking after them, that sort of thing*”, whilst Linda (ECT) was drawn to the work “*I always saw it as something that I wanted to do ...*”. Roland (established teacher) explained that once he had started teaching “*I just knew it felt right*”. He was drawn to it and found it fulfilling. Calling underpinned all participants regardless of career stage and was a key motivating factor for the participants.

However, calling depended considerably on interactions between teachers, students, and other staff – expressed in the sub-theme “Relationships matter”. Harriet (ECT) enjoyed her role because of the evolving professional relationships with students,

... one of the things that I love about the job is that you get that trust and that you get that relationship and they feel able to come and speak to you.

The teachers who had left (or were leaving) also prioritised the value of relationships. When asked what they thought maintained teacher motivation, Aron (left/leaving teaching) replied:

Well, I think [the] relationships people invest in the job ... particularly young people. Some teachers I know are on their third generation of families that they've taught.

Relationships across the generations represented a personal investment for teachers – increasing their perseverance.

The value of collegial relationships between teachers, students and other staff in school was also discussed extensively. Participants felt that collegiality had changed within schools. Some reported that the school climate had moved from a collective to an individualistic culture, resulting in reduced collegiality. Leavers saw this as a main reason for departing. Jackie (left/leaving teaching) said:

Whereas you used to be able to work very much part of a team, now it seems to be that a lot of teachers – not in a horrible way – but they've got to prove their own worth to the school because otherwise they won't go up the pay ladder.

Sarah (left/leaving teaching) stated that the introduction of Performance Related Pay (PRP) had undermined collegiality,

... as a staff we've been very upset because it goes totally against the grain of what I was just talking about with that sort of collegial attitude and support for each other and trying to be positive. And that [PRP] comes down as this huge hammer ... this is like a slap in the face.

The accounts of ECTs also suggested that collegial support was lacking. For example, Harriet, referring to her mentor, found there was no time *"for that in-depth sit down, [to] analyse this lesson, ... [and] figure out how you're going to improve"*.

All three groups of teachers felt collegiality to be vital, and the lack of it hindered their ability to develop their calling and so reduced their ability to teach.

Participants also emphasised the importance of relationships with pupils. Within the sub-theme "It's all about the kids" they felt that the educational welfare of the student, pastoral as well as academic, should be central to the profession, and expressed frustration when this was not the case. For example, Teresa (established teacher) felt the drive to achieve high grades came at the expense of student well-being:

The well-being of pupils needs to be top priority, not pushing them and causing them so much grief and sleep deprivation that they're worried about what the teacher's going to say to them.

Teachers felt they were causing unnecessary stress for students. Julie (established teacher) likened the educational process to a machine,

... culture of exam factory ... the kids probably feel like they're on a production line sometimes. And you do lose track of what it's about ... I'm almost apologising sometimes for what I'm teaching them.

Julie felt she had lost control of the educational process and her judgement on what is best was no longer required. This went directly against her values and why she wanted to be a teacher.

All the teachers expressed a “love of subject” (sub-theme) as part of their desire to teach and wanted to share their subject enthusiasm with students. Linda (ECT) believed teachers remained in the job, despite encountering difficulties:

I guess because they really do truly love their subject so much that they want to continue producing the work and talking about it.

Despite long service, the teachers who had left or were leaving had not grown tired of their subjects. As Aron (left/leaving teaching) said,

... if you are a good maths teacher, where children “get it”, you know those kind of Eureka, penny-drop moments where suddenly it all drops into place, and it’s quite rewarding when that happens.

He was still proud to be associated with mathematics teaching. Crafting to maintain and develop a love of subject seemed vital for maintaining professional commitment, yet teachers all felt that their love was tempered by the schools they worked in. Roland (established teacher) expressed a sense of anomie. He compared past and present feelings as a teacher.

...there was a job that I knew what I was doing before. I was teaching subjects which I know a lot about ... I feel permanently distressed now, all the time, I don’t know what’s going on. Most of the stuff I just think’s a complete waste of time.

He was disorientated and disillusioned. The school culture was adversely affecting his relationship with his subjects and enjoyment of teaching, and he felt out of control.

Although the ECTs had only experienced the more recent teaching climate they still felt the environment stifled their love of subject. Linda (ECT) felt some teachers stayed in teaching despite the difficulties they expressed,

... because ultimately I feel like every teacher does really like their subject don’t they? ... But you never get to see it.

She wanted teachers to be able to discuss subject matter more,

... and then it brings the joy back to it, of actually why you did it in the first place. You never get that.

All the teachers saw love of subject, as well as good relationships, collegiality, and student welfare as vital for the development of calling and wanted to craft their work to maximise them. Because they were often unable to do this, they expressed lack of control and ownership over their work leading to frustration and disenchantment.

Theme 2: “resistance to the calling”

This theme described factors that created resistance to the development of calling and could even counteract it. Despite participants expressing the need to invest limited resources with skill in the support and development of teachers, they felt that their time was often wasted. For example, in the sub-theme “Is this really necessary?”, teachers

expressed frustration over having to perform tasks they considered to be of limited value. As Teresa (established teacher) stated,

... teaching is becoming a paper-pushing exercise. Instead of teaching the children how to be young, reflective, considerate citizens we're teaching them how to be pen-pushing paper wielding adults.

Teresa felt that unnecessary bureaucracy was taking over from "genuine" teaching.

Anne, a senior established teacher, felt she had to protect her staff from excessive accountability,

... shielding people from too much of that and reminding people of why we're here ... and it's not about the data, it's about everything else we're doing as well.

By reducing their exposure to unnecessary tasks, Anne tried to ensure that staff could then concentrate on all aspects of student welfare. Stephen (left/leaving teaching) was irritated by certain tasks saying,

... you can't be ever bored with the ludicrousness of the inspection protocol or the pronouncements from the DfE [Department for Education] ... which seem to be very much out of touch for us up here.

He was exasperated by the government directives, which he perceived to be so distant from the realities of school teaching.

The ECTs also felt some tasks were a waste of time:

I think planning a decent lesson is more important than the data-analysis ... I think [if] you are analysing data, who are you analysing it for? You are analysing it for people above you, for the league tables. (Harriet)

Data was not seen to help the student or teacher, only the authorities. Unnecessary tasks absorbed resources that teachers could be using in the classroom and so were counter-productive to its development.

Similarly, the sub-theme "The Bean Counters" represented administrators who audited schools using a system that seemed inappropriate to many of its employees. Although the interviewees were not ideologically opposed to being accountable through quality assurance bodies, Aron (left/leaving teaching) felt that the current approach prevented teachers crafting their work in the way they felt best.

[the] accountability agenda drives you in a direction which is not really why you signed up to be a teacher in the first place. You know, you signed up because you want to do the right thing; you want to give young people a good experience and to open their eyes to the world of the subject and someone to love mathematics. And you find yourself going, 'This is what you need to do if you want to get a grade "C".'

In addition, the increasing number of schools becoming Academies (schools run by an Academic Trust which are independent from the local authority) seemed to create an organisational climate which acted to the detriment of calling. Participants viewed Academies as pursuing a business model designed to maximise grades and good league tables positions to secure funding. Teresa (established teacher) stated that academisation had led to " ... *just a totally different environment and not a pleasant one to work in*".

Some teachers felt academisation had contributed to their departure from secondary schools. Julie (left/leaving teaching) found the changed atmosphere caused the school “... to unravel, to put it politely”. This “unravelling” showed itself in an authoritarian style of management that affected her well-being. The ECTs also saw problems in managing a school as a business, particularly when decisions were being made by people who were perceived to have limited experience in school settings,

And this is a problem because have those people at the top set foot in a school? Do they know the runnings of a school and how young people work? Have they worked with young people and do they understand them?. (Harriet)

In a similar vein, Linda (ECT) said:

The investors [academies need a financial backer] had far too much influence. They were like private equity bankers and had no experience in education yet they were dictating what the curriculum was. And any teacher’s opinion was absolutely squashed

Teachers expressed circumstances where they felt that the quality assurance processes, accountability and organisational climate of schools were working against rather than with them. They felt excluded from decision making and questioned the authenticity of those in charge who were seen to lack insider knowledge and experience in schools. The people and organisational structures working outside of schools to monitor, control and oversee schools were restricting their ability to do “real” work and therefore stifling their calling as a teacher.

Theme 3: “staying there: sustaining the calling”

This theme showed how teachers felt they could overcome the resistances to develop their calling. In the sub-theme “Resilience is not enough”, teachers who had left, or were leaving the profession, stated that building resilience just to encourage a “keep calm and carry on” attitude was not enough to sustain them. To cope, they needed to move to a different area of education where they could successfully craft their work and regain control. For example, Aron (left/leaving teaching) stated:

One of the big drivers for me leaving though was not necessarily around workload and stress and all those things, it was more to do with the inflexibility of the teaching timetable and workload.

High workload was not the problem, rather the lack of autonomy to organise his own work. Stephen (left/leaving teaching) expressed similar sentiments:

I work my pants off because I’m passionate about my job. If I have to work ‘til late, I do it. What irritates me is the lack of support and guidance from the government. That is what is destroying, or has destroyed my interest in continuing to teach.

He did not receive recognition for his hard work and did not feel valued or supported. As a result, he was intending to move to part-time teaching and outdoor pursuits’ work. This movement to jobs related to teaching or to a fractional contract within school was a common theme. For example, although Julie (established teacher) intended to stay in mainstream secondary teaching, to sustain herself she wanted to change to part-time work. Working harder, or maintaining her present level, was not sustainable:

... I can't stay in it full time. I have been really tempted to say no, that's it and just leave and get anything. But if I can go part-time I'll stay but I just don't see how anyone would want to do a full timetable anymore.

Even the ECTs did not think they could simply do "more of the same":

I don't actually know if I can do it and it makes me really sad ... Is there some other educational, like youth work thing that I can do that doesn't involve so much pressure?.
(Linda)

They were willing to graft because they were invested in their occupation and committed to teaching, but the current working climate was unsustainable. A way to manage this conflict was reducing contracted hours or seeking alternative employment within education where they could still exercise their calling. They felt unable to craft their work within their current role, hence sought alternative ways to nurture their desire to teach.

Across the teacher accounts, there was a sense of bleakness and hopelessness – even within those who were staying in teaching. Expressed in the sub-theme "Where have all the good times gone?", all the established teachers felt strongly that levels of hope in the profession were low. For example, Teresa (established teacher) said:

I didn't think they [the teachers] really have anything to hope for other than to get good grades.

Roland (established teacher) stated:

I think it is Hope-less at the moment until things radically change. And I can't see that happening any time soon.

The leavers also emphasised issues around hope and reflected this as a shared experience within their identity as a teacher. Jackie (left/leaving teaching) said:

I think teachers like to believe there's still hope for the students. But I think a lot of us have lost a lot of hope in our vocation.

Hope of better circumstances had been lost, and this made it difficult to stay in secondary teaching.

Discussion

Findings showed that participants were sustained by their sense of calling to teach and wanted to fully develop it. They saw teaching as a vocation, and something they were passionate about, but were struggling to exercise their core professional values within the current system. The best way to develop and maintain their calling was through job crafting, but this required autonomy for teachers to concentrate efforts on the educational welfare of the students and promote their love of their subject. Resistance to the development of their calling came from having to perform functions deemed unnecessary. Further resistance came from an educational climate seen to prioritise data gathering and quality inspections over the "real essence" of teaching, and uninformed top-down directives preoccupied by performance targets. Incongruence between elements of the job that teachers find meaningful and the activities that they are performing in their

current roles (Turner and Thielking 2019) made it challenging for teachers to nurture their calling through job crafting.

All participants were committed to teaching and expressed the sense of purpose and social motives that drew them to the role (Schleicher 2020). They were willing to apply themselves but felt that they could not sustain just by working harder and longer. Even teachers who were not planning to leave were “surviving” rather than thriving because the system seemed to be working against them. Sector-wide changes impacting on teachers’ sense of professional autonomy, opportunities to develop and capacity to thrive (Räsänen et al. 2020) were expressed by teachers through their frustration in current working conditions, and a desire to find alternative ways of regaining control. Staying in the profession required some teachers to craft their work by working part-time, whereas those who left secondary teaching still had a desire to work with students so sought to work in related areas within education to sustain their calling. Given the strength of personal commitment participants showed towards teaching as a profession, approaches to retention should focus on nurturing this through working conditions that allow teachers’ calling to be exercised – enabling them to focus on the parts of the job they value most, and that contribute to the meaningful purpose that initially drove them to become teachers (Schleicher 2020).

Participants valued their relationships with students and wanted pupil welfare to be a more central focus of their role. They also valued collegial relationships, collaborative working, and in-school support, but felt this was currently lacking. These components of teaching are experienced as meaningful by teachers (Falcout and Murphy 2018; Turner and Thielking 2019), and are linked to enhanced satisfaction and increased intention to stay in teaching (Admiraal and Kittelsen Røberg 2023; Benhenda and Macmillan 2021; Day and Gu 2010; Gu and Day 2007; McIntyre 2010; Whipp and Salin 2018). Schools therefore need to facilitate collegiality, build communities of learning with colleagues, and provide opportunities for teachers to engage in professional development (Ehrhardt and Ensher 2020). For example, initiatives such as Professional Learning Communities (PLCs), composed of teachers who collaborate to discuss issues about teaching and learning, could be used at a local level to strengthen collegiality in secondary schools (Owen 2016). Additionally, the ECTs wanted high quality mentoring. Mentoring is extremely important for new teachers, is beneficial for both mentors and mentees (Whipp and Pengelley 2016) and can help them to translate their calling into practice, and tackle challenges (Ehrhardt and Ensher 2020; Flores and Day 2006). Good quality mentoring for ECTs should therefore be put in place to help teacher retention (See et al. 2020b).

Participants wanted autonomy to exercise their professional judgement in the classroom and focus on the needs of their pupils, rather than being motivated through careerism and promotion. Initiatives to improve recruitment and retention of teachers should therefore focus more on job crafting and calling. Promoting the value of teaching in recruitment campaigns will appeal to those attracted by the social purpose of the role. Some modern advertising has highlighted salary packages, rapid promotion, and leadership roles (Towers and Maguire 2017), which contradicts the evidence about un-sustained effects of pay incentives for teachers (See et al. 2020a, 2020b; Hill and Jones 2020) and aligns more to a “job” or “career” orientation. The findings suggest that trainees should be recruited who show calling (Rawat and Nadavulakere 2015; Richardson and Watt 2006), and existing teachers should be

helped to view their work as a calling (Jurčec, Ljubin Golub, and Rijavec 2021) because this work orientation shows intrinsic commitment to being an educator, and therefore higher endurance. However, even those without a calling orientation can find purpose in their work through crafting (Falcout and Murphy 2018), so improved working conditions should be prioritised.

Calling can be nurtured for established teachers by developing a context where they can craft their work, and where collegiality, love of subject and student centredness is prioritised. When teachers feel they are successfully living their calling, they are more engaged, have improved job satisfaction and reduced absenteeism (Ehrhardt and Ensher 2020). To improve retention, teachers therefore need to be engaged in activities that they see as meaningful (Rawat and Nadavulakere 2015; Turner and Thielking 2019). They also need active involvement in decisions and opportunities to build and exercise their skills (Whipp and Salin 2018). Input into decision making is associated with occupational commitment in teachers (Collie 2021), but teachers in this study felt excluded from decision making and did not have control over their work. They lacked belief in some of the tasks they were expected to perform and were stifled by administration and accountability. This contradicts a climate for job crafting, where employees can structure and reorganise their own work in ways that are meaningful to them (Van Wingerden, Poell, and Useche 2019).

It is striking all participants showed disillusionment with the education system in its current form. Despite sharing a passion for teaching as a vocation, and commitment to the profession, they expressed frustration at the climate they were working in. It is possible that the nature of the study being focused on teacher retention attracted individuals with personal agendas and negative accounts to voice, but the findings resonate with existing literature and reflect the narrative of a teacher workforce “in crisis” (Towers et al. 2022). Those with a calling to teach may show commitment to their work and capacity to persevere in face of challenging circumstances, but there are limits to what they can tolerate (Bullough and Hall-Kenyon 2012). Even teachers with a calling need to be able to nurture this so they can continue to find value in their work and weather difficult times (Falcout and Murphy 2018).

School organisations therefore need to create working conditions that enable teachers to exercise their calling (Rawat and Nadavulakere 2015). Changing systemic factors impacting on teachers in schools need to be initiated at the political level to see sustained improvement in teacher retention. Key areas of concern for teachers were the culture of performativity, inadequate resourcing for schools and the shifting “business model” of education – all of which require longer term reform. However, the role of school culture mentioned by some participants indicates that changes at the organisation level could improve teacher experiences. Approaches to school leadership which facilitate professional autonomy, student-centred practices and collegiality would create a climate whereby teachers’ calling could be more effectively nurtured in a climate of trust and respect (Schleicher 2020). Strengthening the organisational context and improving leadership means teachers are more likely to stay (Kraft, Marinell, and Shen-Wei Yee 2016).

These interviews have idiographic generalisability (Braun and Clarke 2013) because the sample was diverse, drawn from a range of school – types, geographical areas, and different career stages. The rapport and trust built between the interviewer and participants facilitated the authenticity and credibility of data produced.

However, member checking and triangulation would have improved the confirmability of findings and are thus recommended in future studies. Another limitation is that participants were only interviewed once, so their ongoing trajectory in teaching (whether they stayed or left) is unknown. To develop our understanding of retention decisions over time, it would be beneficial to track teachers longitudinally to find out if their views changed and the reasons for leaving or staying. Differences between primary and secondary schools and whether the different educational systems in Wales and Scotland affect retention could also be examined. Studying a larger sample of teachers, including those in the same school and those who change schools, would enable nuanced insight into school-level factors that contributed to teacher retention.

Findings show that calling is important to emphasise in recruitment to teacher training, and to nurture during teachers' career through working environments that enable them to craft their work. Changes need to be integrated into school culture to strengthen support and increase teachers' autonomy in their work, rather than short term "bolt-on" initiatives which fail to address the underlying issues (Brady and Wilson 2021). To feel a sense of purpose and value in their work, teachers need opportunities to engage in activities that they find meaningful (Falcout and Murphy 2018), but the results from this study suggest that these opportunities are currently few and far between.

Notes

1. For the purpose of open access, the author has applied a Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) licence to any Author Accepted Manuscript version arising from this submission.
2. Due to ethical/commercial issues, data underpinning this publication cannot be made openly available.
3. This paper is based on research published in this thesis <http://nectar.northampton.ac.uk/id/eprint/14819>

Disclosure statement

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

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