

BOOK REVIEW

The teacher gap, by Rebecca Allen and Sam Sims, London, Routledge, 2018, 156 pp., £14.99 (pbk), ISBN 9781138730892

In educational research we identify questions for investigation and report on the findings to provide a better understanding of the question and potentially effect positive change. *The Teacher Gap* (2018) initially suggests three questions, or 'teacher gaps', that require exploration:

- (1) What is the difference between the importance of teachers and how they are treated?
- (2) What is the difference in the number of teachers needed and those we have?
- (3) What is the difference in the quality of the teachers we need and the quality we have?

As context for these questions the reader is offered Professor Rob Coe's (2013) stark statement on education in England at the start and close of the book that 'standards have not risen; teaching has not improved' (Coe 2013 cited in Allen and Sims 2018, 1). The stagnation of the English education (and inference of accountability for this and thereby potential solutions) is adopted as the framework for exploring the authors' exploration of teaching as a profession, teacher supply and teaching quality in the classroom.

Initial teacher education in England is a pluralistic system, with all of the varied models, as the authors point out, being 'almost entirely front-loaded' (18). What they mean by this is that we expect our teachers to learn how to do the job effectively in a short period of time (although the undergraduate routes into teaching are not mentioned and do take three years), rather than hone and develop their skills as teachers over an extended period of time, for example as the medical profession do. The authors call for a two year pre-qualification 'training' phase and an additional four year period 'development' phase leading to full qualification (122).

This solution for teaching as a sustainable and effective profession appears akin to the professional formation required in further education (FE). Professional formation is expected, but not funded, within FE once an individual has qualified to teach at the level of the Diploma in Education and Training (DET) or Certificate in Education and Training (CET). These qualifications may be within or without a university accredited Post or Professional Graduate Certificate in Education (PGCE) or Certificate in Education (Cert Ed) respectively. Professional formation leads to the professional recognition of QTLS (qualified teacher learning and skills), which gives parity in the school sector to FE teachers. While the intention of professional formation is to support continuing professional development (CPD) for FE teachers, its execution through voluntary paid membership of the professional body, the Society of Education and Training, and lack of funding in FE to support teachers engaging with CPD, has resulted in low participation. This needs to act as a warning to policy makers on how to implement professional formation for the school sector.

The importance of the teaching profession in all sectors requires long-term, structured investment beyond a political party term. Teachers must be perceived and treated as the professionals they are; they must be allowed to grow in confidence in their expertise through sustained high quality CPD. With poor self-efficacy, many teachers, and particularly early career teachers, choose to leave teaching feeling they are not equipped to do this very important job (Ovenden-Hope et al. 2018).

Teacher supply, recruitment and retention, is clearly a challenge in England, as well as internationally, with 30 per cent of teachers leaving teaching within five years (House of Commons 2017) and schools are finding it difficult to fill posts with the quality of teachers they need (National Audit Office 2017). The authors 'out' the 'sausage machine' practice of recruitment in schools in which teachers are 'hired, burned out and replaced, year after year' (119–120). This practice may provide a short term fix for schools, but in the long term teaching becomes unattractive as a career, with its reputation preceding it for a high workload and poor CPD opportunities.

The quality of teaching and how this is achieved is therefore at the heart of *The Teacher Gap*. We know that quality teaching is a key element for educational improvement and pupil progress (Slater, Davies, and Burgess 2012; Hanushek and Rivkin 2012; Barber and Mourshed 2007). The authors are pleading with the reader to understand and effect change to the 'hopelessly ineffective' (120) development that we have for teachers in England. This plea emphasises the main question the book hopes to address, and the key to moving education in England forward. This question is not one of the three questions identified earlier as suggested by the 'teacher gaps', but is 'how do we give teachers a career worth having?' (120). The three questions explored flow from and inform this one vital question.

The authors' findings from interviews with those who have left the profession and current teachers, their wider research and applied examples external to teaching, all demonstrate that we should value teachers, invest in them and concentrate on creating a working environment in which they can feel supported, motivated and thereby flourish. This is how we attract and retain our teachers; this is how we establish effective classrooms; this is how we support an upward trajectory for school improvement – we recreate teaching as a profession.

This book does not offer a new understanding of how to address teacher recruitment and retention or improve quality in teaching and learning, but it does provide a robust narrative that establishes the failure of education policy to support teaching as a profession and of politicians to recognise the urgency for change:

'For our children to thrive as adults, our teachers need to thrive in the classroom. For all those in education, from the Secretary of State down to parent-teacher association, there should be no greater priority than nurturing and retaining brilliant teachers. We should be offering them the best possible training, supporting them in any way we can and systematically removing any burdens which stand in the way of their success.' (4)

We must give teachers a career worth having. The urgency to do this should be ringing in the ears of education policy makers and it is hoped that recent announcements from the Department for Education of a Recruitment and Retention Strategy (DfE, 2019a) and Early Career Framework (DfE, 2019b) are early signs of positive change for teaching as a profession.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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