

Editorial

# Editorial Introduction to the Special Issue “Teachers Matter—Improving Recruitment, Retention and Development of Teachers”

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This Special Issue of Education Sciences on the theme of Education Matters was commissioned in recognition of the important role that teachers play in the development of students’ learning and wider outcomes. Ensuring an adequate supply of appropriate, suitably qualified teachers is a major policy concern facing many education systems around the world. Huge investments have been made by governments to overcome shortages of teachers, in regions or subjects, through offers of financial incentives, raising teacher salaries, improving teachers’ working conditions, providing support through professional development, and the induction and mentoring of novice teachers. Despite these efforts, challenges to improve the quantity and quality of the teaching workforce remain.

In this issue we have an impressive collection of papers from around the world, all of which attempt to help readers understand more about researching and addressing these challenges. Contributions came from Estonia, England, the US, Pakistan, Italy, China, Turkey, South Africa and South Korea. These provide readers with an international perspective of the challenges and opportunities in research in this field.

Ingersoll et al.’s longitudinal analysis of the School and Staffing Survey data in the US shows that the teaching population has transformed over the last three decades. Teachers are now likely to be older but less experienced, more likely to be female and from academically prestigious universities, and they are more ethnically diverse, than thirty years ago. These demographic transformations indicate that the teaching population is dynamic and constantly growing and being replaced. This suggests that the movement of people in and out of teaching is not unusual and challenges the view that teacher turnover is a problem to be solved. We think that such transformations should be expected as a sign of a healthy profession and managed accordingly.

See et al.’s comprehensive systematic review of international evidence on how to increase teacher supply suggests that monetary inducements may be effective in getting people into teaching initially. However, they do not appear to have a lasting impact. Those attracted by financial incentives are less likely to stay in the profession, and financial inducements to retain teachers are only effective as long as these incentives are available. Once removed, attrition rates return to their previous levels. Money, by itself, does not seem to be the solution, but the evidence for the impact of other approaches is minimal and is usually not robust enough to inform strong policy recommendations.

Siddiqui and Shaukat’s survey of over 1000 teachers in the Punjab area of Pakistan found that salary and teachers’ workload are also not important determining factors for teacher mobility. Teachers who moved between schools generally reported dissatisfaction with the working environment and the conditions of the school as the reasons, rather than better pay. Again, this suggests that policies to improve retention that are based on financial incentives may not be effective. In the long-term, continuing professional development (CPD) and support for novice teachers and better working conditions may be more useful.



**Citation:** See, B.H.; Morris, R. Editorial Introduction to the Special Issue “Teachers Matter—Improving Recruitment, Retention and Development of Teachers”. *Educ. Sci.* **2021**, *11*, 528. <https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci11090528>

Received: 3 September 2021

Accepted: 8 September 2021

Published: 9 September 2021

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The paper by Booth et al. cautions that the kinds of professional development offered to teachers should be tailored to their needs. They argue, for example, that mid-career teachers have different needs to those of early career teachers and as a result, professional development offered to teachers in schools should be more personalised and differentiated. They also found that teachers who are satisfied with their working environment are more likely to report positive experiences of professional development. While the correlational analysis is unable to show the direction of the causation, it is possible that positive experiences of professional development may help teachers cope with their working conditions better. The study also found that mid-career teachers are more likely to report increased barriers to professional development than early career teachers. This has important implications for initiatives to retain teachers in the profession. It suggests that we need to consider the needs of mid-career teachers and address the barriers to their professional development to support retention.

Two studies in this Special Issue describe how supporting teachers through a professional development programme can help develop teachers' competency and self-efficacy, which in turn, leads to improvement in student learning outcomes. Wu's randomised controlled trial, which tests the impact of training teachers in China on the delivery of a dialogic critical thinking curriculum, shows that children who were taught by teachers who had been trained did better on a critical thinking skills test than children of teachers who were not trained. Ibbotson and See's paper evaluates a collaborative partnership approach to training non-specialist teachers, using a Kodály-inspired pedagogy to teaching music. Pre-post comparisons show positive changes in teachers' pedagogical skills, self-efficacy and competence, and in children's self-confidence and their disposition for learning.

The paper by Baccaglini-Frank and colleagues demonstrated, through design-based action research, how the use of a battery-operated minirobot (the Geombot) for training teachers can enhance teachers' understanding of their own perspectives to the teaching of geometry. The authors use their findings to point towards emerging new learning opportunities for both teachers and students as a result of the implementation of the Geombot. They suggest that further research exploring development opportunities such as this would be valuable for teachers and for promoting dialogue across the academic and practitioner communities.

While developing teacher competency is beneficial, students' perception of teachers' competency is also important. The paper by Shin and Shim reports that students' perceptions of their teachers' professional competence in South Korea are associated with students' academic performance. These findings suggest that developing teachers' professional competence may have a positive influence on students' attainment and engagement, although further work is needed to understand if there is a direct causal relationship there.

Nakidien, Singh and Sayed's empirical work reminds us that professional development of teachers is not just about enhancing skills and competency. Professional development is also crucial in preparing teachers for curriculum reforms and new challenges. In their paper, they highlight the need to prepare teachers for the post-apartheid curriculum in South Africa, which emphasises equality, inclusivity, and recognition of all cultures and religions. This is timely and relevant not only in South Africa but also elsewhere in the world. There is an increasing need for recognition of diversity and inclusion in education. The recent call for decolonising the curriculum in the UK means teachers need support in order to effectively deliver an amended curriculum. Teacher training and professional development, however, is an area too often overlooked in the literature on decolonisation and would be a fruitful area for new research.

The paper by Leibur and colleagues explores the experiences and perceptions of teachers engaging in a professional development course in Estonia. The findings of this study foreground the importance of collaboration and support in the implementation of effective professional development. Without this, teachers may experience a range of barriers that inhibit their ability to successfully apply, participate in and complete professional development opportunities.

When the coronavirus pandemic happened, schools had to rely on new ways of delivering lessons. The paper here by Perry, Findon and Cordingley is timely. It is a review of the evidence on the efficacy of blended and remote approaches to teacher education and the limitation and affordances of these approaches. It reminds us of the importance of teacher training in preparing teachers for the digital age and also highlights some of the challenges associated with this area of training and development.

Aslantas' paper examines the challenges of measuring teacher quality or effectiveness by looking closely at the widespread use of value-added models. The study confirmed that most students' performance at secondary schools in Turkey can be predicted by their primary school grades. Therefore, systems that assess teachers on the basis of their students' performance are misguided. The contribution that teachers make to differential student outcomes is small after other key factors have been considered.

All of these studies show that developing teachers to help them meet the needs and new demands in teaching is useful in its own right. Moreover, there is some evidence which points towards potential benefits for their students too. We need to be careful not to use promotion or pay rises as an incentive for professional development, as is sometimes used in some countries. And we certainly should not use teachers' professional development status to differentiate "effective" from "ineffective" teachers. Teachers should be routinely kept abreast with changing curriculum and policy reforms and should be supported to pursue areas of interest and expertise which will enhance their role within the profession. Professional development, as long as it is based on sound evidence, can also potentially contribute to the retention of teachers in teaching, but teachers need to be properly supported to participate in and utilise these kinds of development opportunities.

The papers within this Special Issue all signal the high value that teachers hold within our education systems while simultaneously pointing towards the barriers and challenges that policymakers and practitioners face in maintaining an effective workforce. Yet, there is still so much more that we need to know about the issues of teacher recruitment, retention and development. We believe high quality research, such as the work reported here, is a step forward to a better understanding of researching and addressing the challenges and barriers faced in supporting our valuable teacher workforce.

**Author Contributions:** B.H.S. and R.M. contributed to writing the editorial. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

**Funding:** This research received no external funding.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The authors declare no conflict of interest.