

**Joan Woodhouse**

**Teaching in England post-1988: Reflections and career histories**

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## **Chapter 1: Teaching in an era of reform: policy shift since 1988 in English state education**

### ***Introduction***

This book offers important new insights into career-long teachers' experiences of teaching in England since the Education Reform Act (ERA) (1988). In particular, it offers new understandings of what sustains their longevity in the profession. I draw in the book on data from in-depth, career-history interviews with teachers who had been teaching in the English state sector since the 1970s or 1980s. I discuss (i) the teachers' perceptions of the impact of policy shift on their daily work over a thirty-year period (1988-2018), and (ii) the factors the teachers identified as pivotal in enabling them to stay in the profession career-long, when so many of their peers had left before retirement age<sup>1</sup>. (See Table 1 for attrition rates of successive cohorts of teachers).

[Insert Table 1 about here]

These career-long teachers were uniquely placed to offer authentic perspectives on how the succession of changes since 1988 had impacted their work, and on how and why they had been able to remain committed to teaching long term, despite the changing policy landscape. As the participants in the study were nearing the end of their working lives, the timing of the interviews, which took place thirty years after the ERA, was critical. It was a key point at which to harness the perceptions of a group whose seasoned and longitudinal perspective might otherwise have been lost forever. Capturing participants' reflections on thirty years of policy shift, this book also offers a nuanced understanding of the factors that have sustained these

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<sup>1</sup> The attrition rate over a number of years of service is shown in Table 1. Significantly, this table shows that there is a trend for this rate to be similar between cohorts. For example, of those teachers qualifying in the period 1996 – 2011, with potentially 10 years' service, the attrition rate is 35 – 40%.

teachers career-long in the teaching profession. The teachers' perceptions might usefully inform policy makers and educational leaders concerned with issues of teacher recruitment, retention and attrition. Their reflections also offer valuable insights to individuals considering a career in teaching.

The aim of the study was to consider the career-long teacher in relation to the changing situation in English state education post-1988. The participants in the study were interviewed during the academic year 2017-2018. They had spent their careers teaching in an era in which there has been an unprecedented pace and rate of policy shift (See Table 2 for a brief timeline of some key policy shifts referred to by interviewees during our discussions. For a more detailed, chronological list of reports, acts, and papers from 1988-2018, see Gillard, 2018). The career-long teachers' insights are critical to understanding this era of reform from the perspective of an under-researched group of educators: those who have experienced and implemented the changes. Their stories reflect how the imposed changes from 1988 onwards were received by already serving teachers, who saw their work as an important, professional role in educating young people. This perception of their role, as I discuss later in the book, was an important factor in their ability to remain committed to teaching.

During the era on which the book focuses, English education witnessed 'a paradigm shift' (Fisher, 2008, p.255), towards much greater political control and centralization of education. This paradigm shift was rooted in a significant change in the philosophy underpinning educational provision. This change became apparent in the move from a social to a market-led model, consistent with the free-market ideology that characterized the United States of America (USA) at the time. Successive UK governments<sup>2</sup> intensified central, political control of state education. Over time, state education was

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<sup>2</sup> During the thirty years covered by this book (1988-2018) there were four consecutive governments in power in the UK:

- 1988-1997: Conservative Government (Prime Ministers: Margaret Thatcher & John Major)
- 1997-2010: Labour Government (Prime Ministers: Tony Blair & Gordon Brown)

taken 'further and further away from liberal values, local control of administration and professional input into curricula, teaching methods and examinations' (Fisher, 2008, p.255).

As a succession of reforms impacted on English state schooling from 1988 onwards, the teachers in this study recalled that they initially experienced anxiety and a sense of loss of control over their own work. Disoriented by the new discourses of performativity, marketization and competition, they had, arguably, little option but to adapt, or quit. Whilst many of their peers chose to quit (see Hallahan, 2023; see also Table 1, above), as teachers who had remained in the profession, participants spoke of the ways in which they adapted, shedding light on how the 1988 ERA and subsequent legislation framed their daily work choices. Their stories are testament to the teachers' capacity to reassert control over their work and to use their knowledge, expertise and experience to ensure policy was translated into practice in ways that suited their schools, their contexts and their pupils.

The original insights offered by the study build on a body of research over the last thirty years in which consideration has been given, for example, to teacher resilience (Day & Gu, 2014; Day & Hong, 2016), teacher professionalism as enacted, and as defined in the government's professional standards (see Evans, 2011), and teacher professionalism in relation to accountability and trust (including, for example, Ozga, 1995; Evans, 2011; Ozga, Baxter, Clarke & Lawn, 2013; Six, 2021). The study on which this book reports adds a new dimension to our understanding of teachers' experiences in the context of English state education post-1988. It presents a picture of a group of teachers who adapted to change in ways that were neither actively resistant nor passively

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- 2010-2015: Conservative-Liberal Democrat Coalition Government Prime Minister: David Cameron (Conservative) & Deputy Prime Minister: Nick Clegg (Liberal Democrat)
  - 2015-2018: Conservative Government (Prime Ministers: David Cameron & Theresa May)

compliant. It provides accounts of the ways in which, over time, the teachers took control of their work to suit the context in which they worked and the children and communities they served.

I begin by discussing, in this introductory chapter, how the ERA (1988), and the policy shifts that ensued thereafter, affected the school sector in England in the thirty years that followed. (See Table 2 for a brief timeline of the policy shifts to which the teachers in this study refer). I consider how the change of inspection regime from Her Majesty's Inspectorate (HMI) to the Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (Ofsted) altered the culture and practices of inspection. Finally, I provide a brief overview of the chapters that follow.

[Insert Table 2 here]

### ***The Education Reform Act (1988) and after***

The ERA (1988) marks the start of a period of over thirty years during which there has been an 'epidemic of reform' (Ball, 2003, p.215) in English education. Prior to this period, the legacy of the Education Act of 1944 had been a more liberal system, in which Local Education Authorities (LEAs) were empowered to effect change, and government did not intervene (Fisher, 2008).

The ERA (1988) was to some extent the outcome of a growing, cross-party concern that, compared with other countries, state schools were underperforming, and young people were not being properly prepared for work and society. Teachers and educational administrators were suspected of 'running the system in their own interests and obscuring the results from public accountability' (Fisher, 2008, p.257). This suspicion is apparent, for example, in some of the comments made by Labour Prime Minister James Callaghan in his Ruskin College speech (1976):

‘[S]ome people would wish that the subject matter and purpose of education should not have public attention focused on it [...]. We all know those who claim to defend standards but who in reality are simply seeking to defend old privileges and inequalities [...] To the teachers I would say that you must satisfy the parents and industry that what you are doing meets their requirements and the needs of our children [...] [S]ome of the fields that [...] need study because they cause concern [...] are the methods and aims of informal instruction [and] the strong case for the so-called 'core curriculum' [...]; next, what is the proper way of monitoring the use of resources in order to maintain a proper national standard of performance; [...] [and] the role of the inspectorate in relation to national standards’ (Callaghan, 1976).

Callaghan’s concerns were to an extent echoed in Margaret Thatcher’s Conservative Party manifesto of 1987 (cited by Gillard, 2018), which promised four major reforms in education:

- a national core curriculum;
- governing bodies and head teachers of all secondary schools and many primary schools to be given control over their own budgets;
- increased parental choice;
- state schools to be allowed to opt out of LEA control.

Based squarely on the Conservative manifesto, the ERA (1988) introduced a number of significant changes. The salient features of the ERA (1988) included:

- (i) A National Curriculum, defining curriculum content to be taught. National Curriculum was introduced in 1989 and rolled out over a number of years across primary and secondary schools. National Curriculum focussed primarily on core subjects such as mathematics, science and English, deemed by policymakers to provide better value for money and to equip young people more suitably for employment (McGuire, 2022).

Curriculum and assessment were to be organized around key stages, that is, blocks of years at the end of which children would be formally assessed, using national assessments (McGuire, 2022). The key stages were:

- key stage 1: ages 5-7 years
- key stage 2: ages 8-11 years
- key stage 3: ages 12-14 years
- key stage 4: ages 15-16 years.

- (ii) Levels of attainment, launched alongside National Curriculum, specifying standardized, national, age-related expectations of children's achievement. Levels of attainment were devised with the intention of allowing pupils' 'progress' to be measured and school performance evaluated. Levels of attainment were eventually removed, in 2014.
- (iii) Age-related tests (known as Standard Assessment Tests, or SATS), gradually introduced between 1991 and 1995. SATs were to be carried out at ages 7, 11 and 14, that is, at the end of key stages 1, 2 and 3. Introduced initially at the end of key stage 1, SATs progressed to key stages 2 and 3 as the first cohort of children moved on.
- (iv) The new General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) examination, introduced for 16 year-olds. The teaching to prepare students for GCSE began in 1986, and the first examinations took place in 1988. The GCSE offered one examination for all children, replacing the former 'O' levels (aimed at more able students) and the Certificate of Secondary Education (CSE) (intended for lower attaining pupils). Results of GCSE examinations and SATs were published, so that parents could look at league tables of school performance and compare results to expected national standards. The idea was that parents could assess the effectiveness of schools, and make their choice accordingly (West & Bailey, 2013).
- (v) New rules on religious education and collective worship, introduced with the 1988 ERA. Maintained schools were required to provide religious education and carry out a daily act

of collective worship, promoting pupils' moral, spiritual and cultural development (Gillard, 2018).

- (vi) Local management of schools (LMS), allowing schools to opt out of LEA control, and run themselves as autonomous, Grant Maintained (GM) schools. With funding direct from central government, LMS ostensibly offered schools the flexibility to make their own financial decisions in order to 'respond to the market' (Whitty, 2008, p.168). GM schools controlled their own budget and resources, took ownership of school buildings and land, and made decisions about pupil admissions and staffing (Fan & Liang, 2020). More than 1,100 primary and secondary schools opted to become GM between 1988 and 1997 (Fan & Liang, 2020), and the majority of the LEAs' schooling budget was devolved to schools. LEAs' spending power was considerably eroded, and the support they had previously been able to offer schools diminished.

The amount devolved to each school was largely determined by the number and ages of pupils on the school roll, placing schools in a position of having to compete with each other to attract pupils and stay afloat. Emphasis was placed on 'parent power' (Fisher, 2008, p.257), and the principle of increased choice for parents in the selection of their children's schools. Open enrolment meant that families were now entitled to express a preference for any school. School profiles no longer strictly reflected the local community and traditional intake area. This meant in practice that wealthier, more informed and educated parents had more choice in selecting a school for their children. They were typically better placed than less affluent and less educated parents to research and commute to higher performing schools, and/or to relocate to be near their chosen schools.

- (vii) The establishment of City Technology Colleges (CTCs), modelled on fee-paying, independent schools and established in urban areas (Fisher, 2008). CTCs were intended to cater for pupils of all abilities, specializing in science, technology and mathematics. The CTCs were controlled directly by central government, so taken out of LEA control. A proportion of costs were provided by business sponsors. This model paved the way for the introduction of academies further down the line.
- (viii) A set of National Strategies (1997-2011). Described as 'one of the most ambitious change management programmes in education' (DfE, 2011, p.2), the National Strategies provided training and support to schools and teachers in an attempt to raise standards through changes in the way core subjects were taught. The National Strategies took the form of a fixed term programme of interventions, of which the foci included:
- Early years and key stage 1
  - Primary literacy and numeracy
  - Primary school improvement
  - Secondary English, mathematics and science
  - Secondary school improvement
  - School improvement partners
  - Behaviour and attendance
  - Narrowing the gaps
  - Gifted and talented
  - Special Educational Needs and Disability (SEND).

The DfE (2011, p.3) asserts that the National Strategies programme 'was designed to achieve accelerated improvement in standards and to support a professional dialogue about teaching and learning by building teacher confidence in key areas.'



## *Ofsted*

Five years on from the ERA (1988), Ofsted (Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills), was established, and has endured. Ofsted is the non-ministerial, government department responsible for inspecting educational services. Ofsted replaced the former body responsible for school inspection, Her Majesty's Inspectorate (HMI), marking a lasting change in the culture and practices of inspection. There were some continuities in the approach of HMI and Ofsted, in that both bodies provided ministers with what Lee and Fitz (1997, p. 39) term 'commentary on the health of the system'. There were also key differences, notably that Ofsted publishes and makes available to the general public information about the performance of individual schools, evaluated against inspection criteria (Lee & Fitz, 1997). The demise of HMI, whose role had largely been seen as supportive and developmental (Baxter, 2013), and the inception of Ofsted, marked a significant shift in the culture of inspection in England.

HMI had been viewed by schools and teachers as 'a trusted critical friend' (Brighouse & Waters, 2022, p.513), adopting a 'professionally trusting' (Brighouse & Waters, 2022, p.21) approach. HMI's reports and advice had a significant impact on policy (Lee & Fitz, 1997) and on practice (Brighouse & Waters, 2022) during the 1980s. For example, two major surveys of schools (Primary and Secondary) undertaken by HMI became baseline documents, highly valued by practitioners, and drawn on by ministers in devising policy on curriculum, quality and standards (Lee & Fitz, 1997). Based on inspectors' classroom observations conducted towards the end of the 1970s, the documents contained statements about what constituted good practice. The HMI 'Curriculum Matters' pamphlets then set out a series of curriculum proposals that became the core of National Curriculum (Lee & Fitz, 1997).

Although the relationship between HMI and teachers may have been based on trust, governments of the late 1980s and early 1990s considered HMI to be 'elitist', and 'more focused on influencing

government than on schools' (Baxter, Grek & Segerholm, 2015, p.80). In England as well as internationally, school inspection was becoming more politicized, and education policy and inspection more closely linked (Baxter, et al., 2015; Baxter, 2013). Influenced by international comparisons such as the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), politicians realized that 'if education was to be a political vote winner, then the government needed to be seen as tough on education' (Baxter, et al., 2015, p. 78). The Conservative government introduced competition in the provision of inspection, in a bid to change the culture of the inspection workforce and take control away from what they perceived to be a too powerful educational establishment (Baxter, et al., 2015). As the responsibility for inspection moved from one organization to the other, there was radical change in 'the personnel, mode of inspection and the direction of the results of inspection' (Lee & Fitz, 1997, p. 39).

With regard to personnel, it had previously been quite commonplace in England for HMI inspections to be carried out by the same LEA advisors with whom teachers worked periodically throughout the year. HMI inspectors, especially those with responsibility for and expertise in particular subjects at secondary level, built positive working relationships with teachers in schools. This meant that the HMI inspectors were able to position themselves centrally to work with schools in the region, and so to create and maintain what Lee and Fitz (1997, p. 47) term 'an interpretative community'. These largely local communities shared many of the characteristics identified in Ehren and Baxter's (2021, p.43) 'network' model of governance, being 'based on interdependency, trust and empathy [...] [and] most effective when provision cannot be standardized and local actors need a degree of autonomy and flexibility to coordinate their work'. Consistent with the network model, HMI placed support for teachers and schools at the centre. Strong working relationships between teachers and LEA advisors/inspectors were underpinned by mutual trust and a shared set of values founded on a commitment to improving classroom practice. Inspectors and advisors worked to foster collaboration across the borough, whilst teachers maintained the freedom to define for themselves,

often in collaboration with neighbouring schools, curricula and pedagogies to best serve the communities in which they worked, and the students they knew. This was no longer the case once HMI were subsumed into and replaced by Ofsted, and responsibility for inspection shifted from local to national level (Baxter, et al., 2015).

Under Ofsted, each school is inspected by a contracted team of inspectors assembled for each inspection, and led by Ofsted Registered Inspectors (RIs). The contracted teams comprise a range of people generally not known to the schools. Under the guidance of the RI, the team is required to make a judgment about the quality of educational provision offered by the school. The school will normally be given one day's notice before the Ofsted inspection takes place, and is accorded one of the following grades on completion of the inspection:

- Grade 1: Outstanding
- Grade 2: Good
- Grade 3: Requires Improvement
- Grade 4: Inadequate. A school graded as 'inadequate' will normally be subject to a repeat inspection, usually within three years. The school will be expected to make improvements by the time of the follow-up inspection.

Special Measures: This is not an official grade *per se*, but an unofficial classification (Anilkumar, 2023), accorded to schools that receive grade 4 in most of the categories inspected. Schools placed in Special Measures face direct intervention from Ofsted, and are given an action plan for improvement. The schools are then regularly monitored to check whether they are on course to improve. If deemed necessary, Ofsted-approved consultants from outside the school ('Superheads') are brought in (Anilkumar, 2023).

The move from HMI to Ofsted reflects a change in the culture and foundation of schooling in the 1980s and 1990s, and a shift from what Ehren and Baxter (2021, p.31) term a 'network' to a '(quasi) market-based system' (p.38), entailing radical re-structuring of the schools sector in England.

The government's rationale for wide-scale restructuring of schooling was that marketization, competition and centralization would improve schools' performance and ensure quality of education for all. As Ehren and Baxter (2021, pp.38-9) explain:

'advocates of quasi-markets argue that competition and choice will lead to increased diversity of provision, better and more efficient management of schools and enhanced professionalism and school effectiveness. Marketization is expected to bring particular benefits for families from disadvantaged communities, who have been ill-served by more conventional arrangements. The justifying belief is one of superiority of the private sector in driving up standards, compared with public institutions'.

The government's aim was to raise standards by forcing 'underperforming' schools to improve their test and examination results (Fisher, 2008, p.257). Their strategy was to increase differentiation in the types of schools available (Whitty, 2008), offering different types of educational provision 'to reflect different educational values and purposes and meet the differing needs of pupils' (Woods & Simkins, 2014, p.326).

As a part of this increased differentiation, the Academies Act (2010) ostensibly offered schools greater freedom and autonomy, building on the earlier precedents set by LMS, GM schools and CTCs, through academization. Modelled on the USA Charter Schools system, academization is the process by which state-funded schools move out of LEA control and into the control of private organizations (charitable trusts). When a school converts to academy status, funding is provided directly by the national government, rather than the LEA. Charitable trusts can run a single academy, or multiple schools (known as Multi Academy Trusts, or MATs), the latter having become the dominant model over the last decade. MATs have the autonomy to make their own curricular, financial, staffing and

governance decisions (Dunn, 2019), including the freedom to employ teachers who have not been through England's process for teacher certification (Greaney, 2015). Academy chains can be run by a range of possible organizations, the most common now being other successful schools (Greaney, 2015).

The Academies Act offers schools rated 'Good' or 'Outstanding' by Ofsted the option to become an academy. Schools accorded a 'Requires Improvement' grade by Ofsted, on the other hand, are *obliged* to become academies, and are usually taken over by a 'high performing' MAT. Schools are therefore placed under pressure to ensure they are not deemed by Ofsted to be underperforming, as they risk facing punitive measures from centralized government, including closure, direct intervention and forced academization (McGuire, 2022). For some schools, Ofsted inspection is potentially, therefore, 'a high risk activity' (Baxter, 2013, p.481), entailing loss of autonomy for schools and leaders (Baxter, 2013).

The shift in inspection regimes signifies a move in English education from a developmental and supportive inspectorate to a punitive model, embodied in Ofsted, whose role is to judge rather than advise or support schools. As the teachers' reflections discussed later in this book reveal, the impact of Ofsted on their work has been considerable, and arguably the single most detrimental of a succession of reforms.

In the chapters that follow, I discuss the impact of the succession of reforms since 1988 on schooling and teachers' work, and consider why teachers remain in the profession despite the cultural turn and its impact on their daily work in schools. The teachers' career histories and reflections reveal that despite changes in the culture and policy landscape of English education, the teachers have remained committed to the values that underpin their choice of profession, and developed strategies to take back control in an era characterized by prescription and punitive accountability. I conclude by

presenting a model of an ideal type of the career-long teacher, adding new understandings of the factors supporting the longevity of a generation of educators in a challenging profession.