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Research article

The experiences of newly qualified teachers in 2020 and what we can learn for future cohorts

Aimee Quickfall,[1,*], Philip Wood,[1] Emma Clarke[1,*]

[1] Bishop Grosseteste University, Lincoln, UK

* Correspondence: aimee.quickfall@bishopg.ac.uk

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Abstract

Those training to become teachers in England during the 2019/20 academic year were severely impacted by the first national lockdown due to the Covid-19 pandemic, with many missing school placements, giving them less time to build experience and confidence before becoming newly qualified teachers (NQTs). Their first year of teaching was also severely impacted by the pandemic. As part of a British Academy-funded project, we collected data from 2020/1 NQTs in England through their first year of teaching. This article focuses on the qualitative data from seven participants, utilising online interviews to understand the challenges and opportunities they faced within the sector during the pandemic. Our findings, while drawing on small-scale data, provide insights into how schools and training providers can support trainees in healthier times, and include the importance of relationships within school, support given by school leaders and the need

to acknowledge the challenges of beginning a professional career. These findings may also be useful in future disruptive events for early teacher education.

Keywords newly qualified teacher; early career; Covid-19; well-being

Introduction

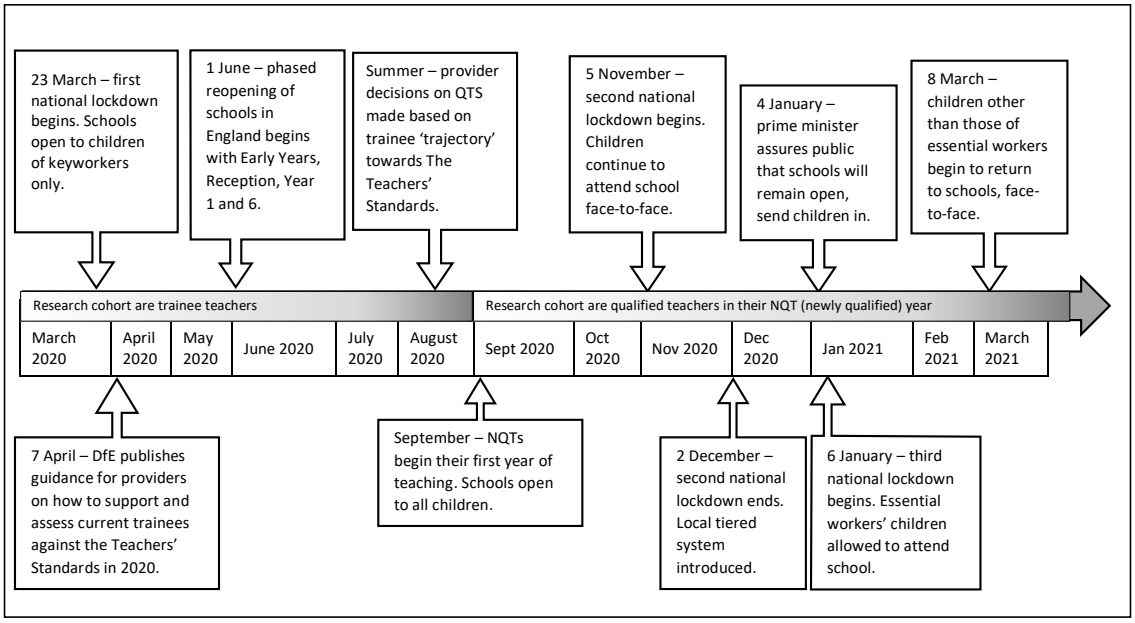
The Covid-19 pandemic brought rapid, unexpected changes to the way societies functioned during 2020 and 2021. From lockdowns, which saw sections of populations isolated in their homes, to emergency legislation that fundamentally changed the way individuals interacted with each other, the way people's lives functioned shifted radically, none more so than for those working in public, front-line services. Teachers were required to work in ways very different to normal (Sharp et al., 2020). In the first lockdown in England, from March to June 2020, this meant the closure of schools for all but the children of essential workers, with teachers required to shift their work to distanced methods, including teaching, pastoral care and safeguarding responsibilities. Teachers were attempting to support the majority of students through digital media and phone.

Teacher education plays a vital role in responding to global challenges, and so this article addresses, with small-scale yet rich data, the education of teachers in their early career, deepening understandings of how early career support can respond to change.

Initial teacher education into early career for the 2020/1 cohort

The timeline in Figure 1 summarises major events during the pandemic, from the perspective of a trainee moving into a qualified teaching role. Naturally, each initial teacher education (ITE) provider and their partnership schools, newly qualified teachers (NQTs, in the first year following qualification) and trainees would have been tackling local issues, with a much more complex situation than this reflects.

Figure 1. Timeline of 2020/1 Covid-19 events linked to initial teacher education in England (Source: Authors, 2022)



The partial closure of schools in March 2020 led to a lack of capacity to support the practicum work of student teachers. In England, the 2019/20 cohort of student teachers were unable to undertake a major element of their classroom experience, crucial in helping them develop practice and gain confidence before beginning their first teaching post. Some providers arranged for trainees to teach children remotely; all offered activities in lieu of placement time; and many provided online resources, tutorials and remote sources of support during lockdown (Kidd and Murray, 2020).

The Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (Ofsted, 2021: n.p.) reviewed ITE provider Covid-19 responses: 'many partnerships have found innovative methods for enabling trainees to make up for lost time in the classroom due to COVID-19'. However, efforts were not enough to provide a full ITE experience, and this cohort would need additional support in their first year and perhaps beyond, to 'make up for COVID-19 related losses' (Ofsted, 2021: n.p.). We wished to understand the context of this cohort, faced with unprecedented and unforeseen challenges in their training and first year of teaching (la Velle et al., 2020), as they needed to deal with the pandemic and its associated disruption, but they did so with the loss of invaluable classroom experience during their training year in 2020.

Research on NQTs' experiences during the pandemic is scarce, but some recommendations for early career teachers have been suggested. These include a focus on tailored support, acknowledging that 'different trainees have had very different experiences of training during the COVID-19 pandemic, with associated variation in the challenges they are likely to face' (Rushton et al., 2021: 3).

A rapidly shifting teaching landscape

One of the processes any system requires, to enable future-proofing, is a consistent supply of highly qualified and motivated workers to ensure the safe, continued sustainability of the sector. Unfortunately, in England, teacher recruitment, retention and well-being are ongoing challenges, and they provide the context on which the experiences of the 2020 student teacher cohort rests (DfE, 2018a; Worth and Van Den Brande, 2020). In a study commissioned by the Department for Education (DfE, 2017) prior to the pandemic, over half of teachers had considered leaving in the previous two years due to pressures on health. In the specific case of NQTs, increased levels of work-related stress were reported only 20 weeks into their first year of teaching in a pre-pandemic context (Gorard, 2017).

Of particular concern are the withdrawal rates for new teachers. In England early career teachers, in the first two years after qualification, are most likely to leave between their first and second year after qualifying (Worth and Van Den Brande, 2020). For example, 4,000 NQTs left their teaching posts in 2018 during their induction year, one-seventh of the cohort (DfE, 2018a; Speck, 2019). The reasons for this pattern are not clear, and there is a lack of UK-based research into the early development of teachers (Glazzard and Coverdale, 2018).

However, the DfE, seeing recruitment, retention and well-being as significant problems, have sought to address the crisis in recent years, in part through guidance and policy to tackle workload. In 2019, the DfE (2019a) set out their plans, including four priorities: school culture; support for early careers; building an attractive career offer; and making teaching accessible to 'great people'. Part of this strategy package was the Early Career Framework (ECF; DfE, 2019b), which was rolled out nationally in September 2021, and which includes non-teaching time and mentor support for NQTs into their second year of teaching. However, for the cohort with which we worked, the ECF was still a year away, and they received one year of timetable and mentor support, in line with previous regulations.

When the pandemic struck, it is suggested that this led to a transformation of the traditional ways of working in schools, with the 'tightrope of accountability and autonomy' temporarily disrupted, and that school leaders moved away from an emphasis on teachers' 'performance, surveillance and compliance' (Netolicky, 2020: 392) towards greater teacher autonomy. The increased autonomy, collegiality and community that research suggests has come about through the pandemic disruption (Sahlberg, 2020; Trombly, 2020) may constitute the majority of the 2019/20 cohort's experience of schools, with a culture shock to follow if accountability and performativity return to their pre-pandemic standard – this disruption of accountability is described by some of the participants in this study. How NQTs understood their roles as they transitioned from student to teacher may have differed from those who had gone before. Even in normal times, without a global crisis, the transition between student teacher and qualified teacher can be traumatic, due to the 'reality-shock' (Haggarty et al., 2011: 937) they experience.

As we move into a post-pandemic recovery phase, and hear again about the coming storm of teacher shortages (Worth and Faulkner-Ellis, 2022), it becomes clear that the pandemic has not solved deep-seated issues, and has instead merely temporarily masked them. The well-being impact of the Covid-19 pandemic may have negative consequences, including the costs of induction and recruitment, as well as the knock-on impact on the quality of pupil learning (Allen et al., 2020a). Thus, teacher well-being is a crucial element in any future-proofing of the system itself.

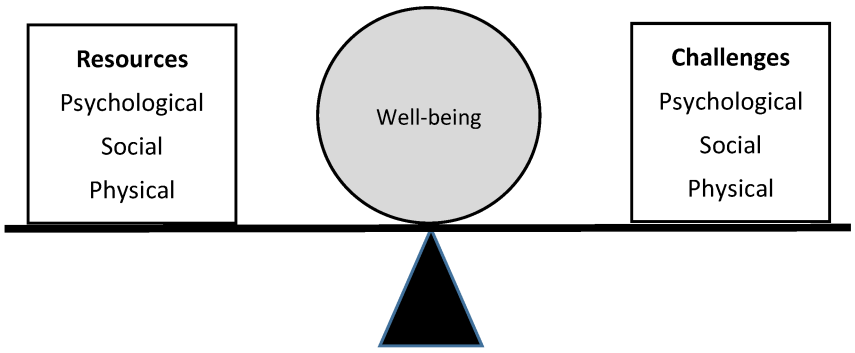
Importance of well-being for early career teachers

There is limited research literature on the well-being of teachers, school leaders and teacher educators during the pandemic in the UK. However, what literature exists suggests that the teaching community in the UK faced some significant challenges, especially those with younger pupils and those with special educational needs (Marchant et al., 2022). Kim and Asbury (2020a) found that teacher narratives from the first six weeks of lockdown had themes of uncertainty and worry, and teachers remained extremely worried about vulnerable pupils, even as their own resilience grew after the initial lockdown period. Teacher mental health and well-being declined throughout the pandemic, and this was particularly so for primary school head teachers (Kim et al., 2022). Allen et al. (2020b) found that aspects of well-being such as feeling useful and feeling optimistic declined during lockdown. Other challenges that negatively impacted teachers included uncertainty, workload, negative perception of the profession, worry for others, health struggles and juggling multiple roles (Kim et al., 2022). Three positive resources were social support, autonomy and coping strategies (Kim et al., 2022). Negative portrayals of teachers in society and the media impacted on teacher well-being, and teachers reported feeling that they had not been considered by the government (Kim and Asbury, 2020b).

As we are not mental health professionals, we are keen to avoid making claims about mental health, and so an appropriate, non-clinical definition of well-being is used within the study. Well-being itself is challenging to define (Ortega-Alcázar and Dyck, 2012), and it is often framed as complex (Dodge et al., 2012). In attempting to reflect the complexity of the concept, while scaffolding the data collection with a meaningful framework, the working definition of well-being is maintaining the balance between resources and challenges – these factors may be internal or external and operate in a dynamic flux over time (Dodge et al., 2012).

Dodge et al. (2012) deploy a model of well-being that incorporates the idea of balance and changes over time in the resources and challenges one can draw on in particular situations (see Figure 2). This model is used to structure this project as a medium for understanding the potentially positive and challenging aspects of NQT experiences.

Figure 2. Model of well-being (Source: Dodge et al., 2012: 230)



Well-being in student teachers and NQTs is not well researched, possibly because the high-stress nature of the early stages of a teaching career has been normalised (Birchinall et al., 2019). However, there is a growing body of literature on the well-being of the teaching workforce generally, which is important, given that these issues have also been linked to mental health problems (DfE, 2017; Education Support Partnership, 2017).

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Identified stressors relating to teaching in a non-Covid context include workload (DfE, 2017), mismatched expectations (Schmidt et al., 2017), financial issues (Griffiths, 2019) and personal relationship issues (Fraboni, 2019).

The Covid-19 pandemic has been identified as adding to these stressors, through anxiety, ill-health, bereavement and added workload. With less capacity to support new teachers in schools, it is not surprising that early career teachers' well-being and mental health is now a growing concern (Tate, 2020). The Education Support Teacher Wellbeing Index reported that early career teachers experienced the highest level of poor mental health symptoms to date in 2021 (Education Support, 2021: 6).

The relationship of the 2020 NQT cohort to the pandemic is crucial in understanding their experiences in the transition between training and qualified teaching. It is apparent that while large-scale studies which focus on retention, well-being and workload are regular and broadly 'in-step' with each other (for example, DfE, 2018b; NASUWT, 2019), there is a scarcity of qualitative research that explores the experiences of teachers, and particularly early career teachers.

By exploring aspects of well-being experienced by the NQTs, insights can play an important role in signposting ways of future-proofing the profession to ensure that it moves forward positively, rather than regressing back to the problematic practices of the pre-pandemic period.

Methods

This article reports on insights gained from final qualitative interviews at the end of a larger study, based on a multi-stage sequential mixed methods approach of qualitative-quantitative-qualitative data collection (Quickfall et al., 2021; see also Table 1).

Table 1. Outline of the full study timeline and participants (Source: Authors, 2022)

Month	Action	Number of participants
August 2020	Baseline interviews to explore experiences of ITE	9
November 2020	First-term survey of NQT experiences	57
March 2021	Second-term survey of NQT experiences	28
June 2021	Third-term survey of NQT experiences	44
August 2021	NQT year exit interviews	7

All participants who had been part of the questionnaires were invited to join in online interviews in August 2021. Seven semi-structured interviews (Adams, 2015) were completed in the final phase of the study, following a question schedule which was shared with participants before their interview (see Box 1).

Box 1. Interview question schedule (Source: Authors, 2022)

1. How would you describe your experience of the NQT year?
2. What support have you been given to progress in your role over the year, and who has supported you?
3. What have been the greatest challenges you have faced?
4. How well prepared did you feel at the start of the year?
5. What are your main concerns moving into the next academic year?
6. What have been the highlights across the year?
7. What are your career aspirations at this point in time?

All interviews took place online and were audio recorded. Semi-structured interviews were chosen to enable the researchers to ask additional questions, and to clarify or explore responses, ensuring that issues of interest could be pursued, while also allowing for cross-comparison of responses. The majority of the interview questions were trialled at the beginning of the study, in the initial data collection of the project, and responses informed the structure and content of the questionnaire and final semi-structured interview. Data were analysed at the end of the data-collection period, using thematic content analysis (Morse, 2012).

Participants

On each occasion that we ran the questionnaire, we asked respondents to share their email addresses with us if they were happy for us to contact them in July 2021. Seven of the 20 NQTs who shared email addresses with us agreed to be interviewed. Where participants decided not to take part in an interview, many reported workload at the end of the school year as preventing their involvement.

All seven participants were current NQTs when interviews were carried out, although Rachel had resigned and had left teaching to return to her previous career. All seven had qualified with a postgraduate certificate in education (PGCE), either through a university-based or a school-based route, and they ranged in age from 22 to 50 (see Table 2 for summary characteristics). All participant names have been anonymised.

Table 2. Participants with age phase, training route and age bracket (Source: Authors, 2022)

Alias	Current phase	Training route	Age
Rachel	Secondary	PGCE university	31–40
Linda	Primary	PGCE SCITT[1]	41–50
Amira	Primary	PGCE university	21–30
Shabana	Secondary	PGCE university	21–30
Samuel	Primary	PGCE SCITT[1]	21–30
James	Secondary	PGCE university	31–40
Katie	Early Years Foundation Stage	PGCE university	31–40

[1] SCITT: school-centred initial teacher training.

Research ethics

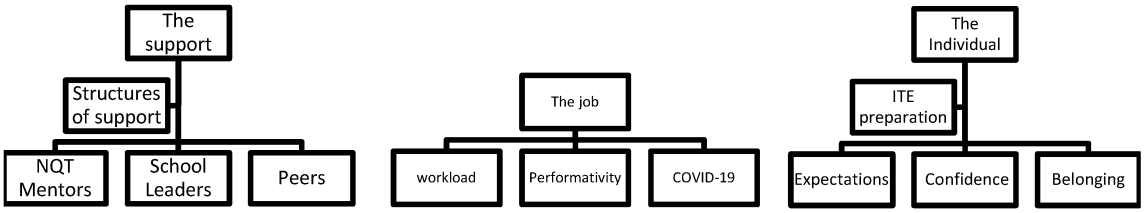
Ethical approval was secured prior to data collection, following institution and British Educational Research Association guidelines (BERA, 2018). The research team were cognisant of the issues around confidentiality and anonymity of the participants, given that responses to the questions often include school information and descriptions that would make the participant recognisable to colleagues. The conflict between presenting detailed responses from participants and protecting their anonymity, even where participants were vocal about not requiring anonymity (Gordon, 2019), was reflected on by the research team, and careful consideration was taken in using direct quotations from participants in the findings.

Analysis

Interview transcripts were analysed using thematic analysis. We used a qualitative approach to thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006), entailing an inductive approach to theme development. We followed four phases of theme development (initialisation, construction, rectification and finalisation) as proposed by Vaismoradi et al. (2016). Transcripts were read several times by all three researchers, as a process of familiarisation and initialisation. Then, each individual researcher engaged with the transcripts again, constructing a list of emerging themes. In rectification, the researchers compared their themes and coding to produce a synthesised thematic analysis. Finally, main themes were agreed and evidence in the data which contributed to these themes was collated into one document for ease of communicating the findings. Theme development involved working bottom-up from the transcripts to discover meaning in the data. The assumption in following this process is that the thematic analysis is improved (or deepened) through 'repeated engagement with the data' (Terry et al., 2017: 20).

We found three major themes emerging from the data, which we then broke down again, using the concept of well-being (Dodge et al., 2012) to consider how themes were presented as both resources and challenges in some cases (see Figure 3).

Figure 3. Themes and sub-themes identified (Source: Authors, 2022)



Limitations of the study

It is important to point out that this study, while reporting on a project which involved more than 100 participants, focuses on the interview responses of seven NQTs. Our intention in collecting this qualitative data was not to generalise to a whole cohort of teachers, and hence any recommendations we make are based on a limited sample and are therefore tentative. It is also important to highlight the qualitative data in terms of participant perceptions. It is possible that our participants would have reported similar experiences and situations in a 'normal' year, as we did not compare cohort data.

Results

The individual

Where participants commented on their preparation for their NQT year, there was an apparent disconnect between a curtailed training year and their first teacher role. Some felt reassured by their qualified teacher status and the preparation provided by their PGCE: 'I've done the PGCE, albeit that obviously got disrupted because of Covid. But I still done the PGCE, I'd done the work required. So I walked in feeling prepared' (Amira). Katie described the situation of having finished placement on her PGCE in March because of lockdown, and then going into full-time teaching in September:

> And then you go straight into it. So that was a big step. And you can't, there's no way to prepare yourself for that. Other than doing it. There was never really a point where I was doing all the teaching of the class. [During ITE placement] I was doing half the class for phonics, half for maths, might be leading topic in the afternoon, but it was never that kind of 'it's me for the whole day'.

Some participants commented on how their confidence had developed over the NQT year, but that this was a challenge to begin with: 'The greatest challenges, just kind of feeling comfortable that I can be myself the way I kind of want to be in my classroom, without the repercussions, so, you know, establishing myself as a teacher within the school community' (Amira).

Covid-19 may have had an impact on how quickly NQTs settled into their schools, despite the lockdown restrictions lifting in September 2020. Katie described how a lack of physical contact with other staff and children (because of social distancing measures that grouped class and teacher) meant that it was April 2021, late in the academic year, before she felt she belonged:

> When I came back after Easter, I felt a bit more like I belonged. It was just time, because it does take time to build relationships with people, and it takes longer because of lack of contact. And that was the first point of which I kind of came back in and felt 'Yeah, this is my school and I feel like this is the point when I am starting to know a bit more about the school, beyond the doors of foundation stage'.

Isolation and belonging came through in participant reports and, in many responses, initial feelings of isolation changed over time to a sense of belonging in their schools. However, some NQTs, such as James, did not experience a sense of belonging over time. James described his experience when the staffroom and mixing with colleagues was prohibited:

> [An] entire month went by when I saw no other members of staff, and I was only communicating with the outside world via email. So it was a very isolating and lonely time ... I almost threw in the towel at Christmas. If I get the same treatment again, the next academic year, I will definitely leave that school. And maybe possibly teaching.

James, like many NQTs, had moved to a new area where he did not have friends or family for support, and the lack of staff social spaces due to Covid-19 measures meant that he did not form friendships in his department or wider school.

Support

NQTs reflected on the level and sources of support they gained as they developed their practice. The unique context created by the impact of the pandemic showed through in the way in which some of the participants reflected on their transition into their first year of teaching:

> I was just thrown straight in at the deep end, even when I arrived in on, like, the training days, the computers weren't set up or anything. So no access to my class lists. I just had no information, I was just thrown straight in there. (Rachel)

> I think that would be a concern because I hit it hard last year, that really kind of pushed my confidence back a bit, you know, being measured against a new change, but you've just tried to get used to the old one. And then you've changed it, and you're measuring me against it. (Amira)

Here, Rachel reflects on what seemed to be a chaotic situation, having little set up to help her orient and a feeling of unpreparedness. Amira also suggests a difficult transition, with new ways of being measured and assessed, both as a teacher and for her students, being difficult to get used to. Amira described a school with seemingly weekly changes of not only plan for assessing progress with students, but also strategies to assess staff competence. Here, there are apparent challenges due to the transition from student teacher to NQT status, which appear to have been made more acute by the impact of the pandemic and the teacher perception of school organisation and change management.

As might be expected, NQT relationships with their mentors were particularly important. Not only was this their first year of teaching, but the inherent instability involved in teaching during the pandemic added to the importance of this relationship. Participant perceptions of their relationships with mentors were polarised, with some reporting positive pictures, and others describing a bleak situation. At the positive end, Linda talked about her NQT mentor (she had left the school for a new post at the point of interview):

> I had an amazing mentor at the school where I was, nothing was too much trouble. When I had moments of doubt, or when I had worries that I wasn't doing everything I needed to, or worries that I was missing out on something or that I wasn't doing the best by the children at the time, she was the one that gave me a virtual kick up the rear end and said, 'just stop and take a look at exactly what you are doing'.

Many of the comments from participants were similar to that of Linda. Mentors were helping their NQT orient, understand school systems and develop their expertise. But there were a number of comments about the emotional support given, such as the quotation from Linda above, getting NQTs to stop and reflect, or listening to them when they were having a crisis of confidence. However, responses about the support of mentors were polarised, and some of the seven participants did have less successful relationships with their mentors, such as Amira. Here, it appears that there was a lack of communication, in part because of lockdowns, but, as a result, Amira characterises this relationship as a challenge:

> Probably for me, my NQT mentor–mentee relationship was a huge challenge ... Mine was tricky. Prior to Covid – Covid doesn't help any of those concerns whatsoever. But yeah, I mean, unfortunately it just couldn't build from the word go. And probably Covid adds strain. And when people are busy and tired, and then you throw in the lockdown as well, it just keeps, it just continues that strain.

Some participants identified wider relationships as a support. Samuel highlights his interaction with senior leadership, and how this helped him develop his work. He also highlights that through doing this, he did not feel judged, and that he is being supported positively to develop his expertise as a teacher with support from the wider community of the school:

> I've been working with members of SLT [senior leadership team], getting that sorted, so I've had a bit of support, been able to use my NQT time to find resources ... There's no point have I ever felt like I've been judged.

Unfortunately, in some cases, this level of positive support from the wider school community appears not to have been in place. James highlights an expectation for him to be able to work independently, leading to a feeling of failure:

> This is not what I signed up for, not what I expected, and not being supported with it, or being harassed from every quarter, by people who are expecting me to do these things that I don't think it's reasonable to expect me to do, as a first-year teacher.

NQTs also talked about the support they gained from friends from their training programmes. As Shabana highlights, some of her friends from training were the centre of an informal network, listening and offering advice to help each other through. Such informal networks were important in creating wider support to help NQTs meet the challenges of their first year: 'There were a few of us that kind of got on really well, in the PGCE, and we've stayed in touch, even moving forward. They're always there ready to give a listening ear and give lots of advice' (Shabana).

The NQTs relied on support to make a success of their first year. Their main resources appear to have been their NQT mentors and friends from their training programmes. While professional support was important in helping participants develop their practice, it appears that the emotional support offered by both mentors and friends was most important. Conversely, challenges appeared to come from a lack of communication and relationship building, and resultant feelings of inadequacy.

The job

The nature of the job was a central theme in the reflections of the NQTs. A lot of participant responses talked about the role of a classroom teacher generally, with Covid-19 as an additional challenge, rather than as the main cause of their issues. Linda verbalises a common experience:

> Not enough hours in the day. I literally wanted a Time Turner from Harry Potter on numerous occasions. Yeah. Yeah. Just because it's, you want to do so much. And you want to make sure that they [the children] get the best of everything.

There is a challenge here; she finds that the work takes a large amount of time, but she is determined to ensure that her students get the best education she can provide. This pressure on workload became clear once the teachers were operating in lockdown (January–March 2021; see Figure 1), as Covid-19 changed the nature of the job – as previously discussed, most teaching moved to online methods overnight, with re-planning required to deliver and assess the curriculum. Shabana describes delivery of teaching, and the additional assessment measures that were put in place in secondary schools, which were all new – her ITE school experience did not include any online teaching of students, or how to manage teacher assessments of previously exam-based content:

> Sometimes it was really overwhelming. Especially when we moved to teaching online. Because of the lockdown. We still offered, you know, a full timetable. We were teaching live every day, all day. So at times, it felt quite daunting because the kids didn't put on their cameras. It was like talking into a dark abyss with almost no interaction on the other side ... and then the teacher assessment grade periods over the summer. I really found that quite difficult, just because of, kind of, the number of things that went into it, it was almost like a piece of assessment every two weeks.

Balancing work and personal life emerged as a theme in this area, particularly for NQTs with their own families, such as Katie: 'For a long time, I kind of felt like there was an assumption that I would be like

[Mentor], but because I've got three children and would like to have a life outside teaching, it's been really hard.'

Before the pandemic, accountability structures were central to much of the work of schools. The pressures present during the pandemic appear to have led to different responses from schools, some retaining a performative regime, while others minimised the continuation of data collection. This difference in performativity came through where participants reported that some aspects of teacher workload had been reduced during the pandemic:

> I mean, obviously I've got nothing to compare it against, I suppose. But the school are being less bothered about sort of loads and loads of data and observations and tracking and all of that kind of thing, then perhaps it might have been if it had been a normal year. (Shabana)

But others describe a continuation or increase in performative activity: 'I think Covid just like threw a spanner in lots of works. And there was no, no slowing down on the data expectation' (Rachel).

What these reflections suggest is that the job was particularly challenging over the course of the 2020/1 year, with high workloads, sometimes exacerbated by the impact of lockdowns. In some cases, this pressure was mitigated by a reduction in the performative structures centred on data and observation, making the job more sustainable. However, the extremes of resource and support can be found in two contrasting reflections. James identified a hierarchical and performative culture in which he was struggling to find a positive way of working: 'I can't even speak to my senior leadership directly, I have to go through the chain of command to speak to them.' However, Samuel described a positive job experience, where creativity appeared to be seen as a resource, and where room was given to experiment, directly supported by senior leaders:

> And I've just, I've been able to try different things as well, so I've tried out various different ways of teaching ... And that's just been encouraged, I've not been told 'Oh, don't do that. That's pointless. You're wasting your time.' I've no point have I had that, which has been really nice. The school is very much if a teacher has got a good idea, they're more likely to say yes than they are to say no, which is a really nice environment to be in.

All the NQTs identified a pressured and intense first year of teaching, with large workloads. These challenges were made more intense in those cases where schools continued to use their normal, pre-pandemic accountability structures. However, in some schools, this pressure was replaced by supportive environments where NQTs were encouraged to be creative and to try new approaches to their teaching.

Discussion

As suggested in the introduction, we believe that times of stress can emphasise problems already inherent in a system, while also showing glimpses of future solutions. What findings on well-being are available for the UK education workforce during the pandemic suggest is that while there are significant overlaps in the experiences of NQTs and experienced teachers and school leaders, such as uncertainty (Kim and Asbury, 2020a) and workload (Kim et al., 2022), there are also differences, and the NQT perspective is unique.

From the themes outlined in the results, it is obvious that the mentoring relationship is paramount to the quality of development experienced by the NQTs, as well as playing a major role in their well-being. At the heart of this process is the emerging relationship between the mentor and the NQT. Due to the restrictions on mixing within the workplace during the pandemic period, this relationship played a larger role than would normally be the case. Hence, if the individuals involved failed to foster a positive relationship, that had a major impact on well-being and development. Likewise, the amount of time available for support was important, as the intense nature of working in the pandemic did not always allow for regular meetings. It is crucial that positive communication flows between mentor and mentees on a consistent basis to ensure that both development and well-being are fostered. Reflecting on the model of Dodge et al. (2012), where mentoring is of high quality, and harnesses positive relationships, it becomes a crucial support, but where it stalls, as in the case of Rachel, it becomes a major challenge, which might lead to individuals leaving the profession.

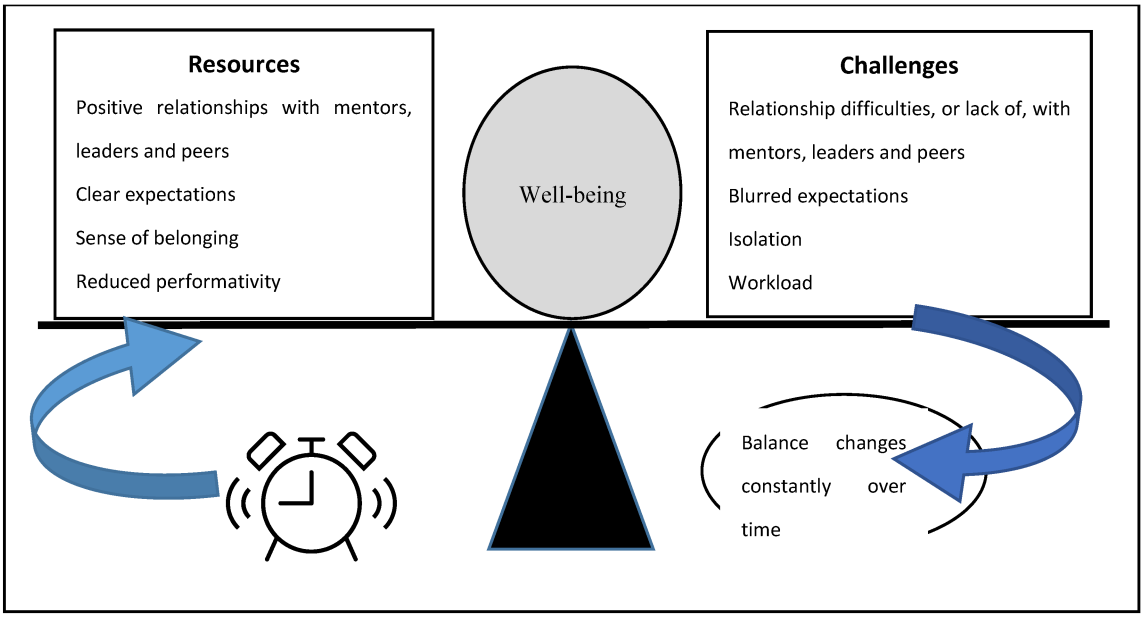
The reflections of participants make it clear that the workload and expectations during the pandemic were unsustainable. Individuals made the situation work, and, in some cases, participants even flourished. But the work for most was unsustainable in the longer term. This was a major challenge for most participants, and in some cases it contributed to thoughts of leaving the profession, or, in one case, contributed to them actually leaving. Again, this issue is not new, or restricted to NQTs (Kim et al., 2022), but the pandemic emphasised the issues and the impact for teachers. Moving forward, there needs to be careful consideration as to how workload issues can be identified, and overall workload cut, if new teachers are to consider remaining in the profession.

Isolation became an important issue for some of the participants. In some cases, they were living by themselves, and were cut off from face-to-face contact, while still being required to teach. This isolation was overcome in some cases by contact with family, and also through networks from teacher education programmes. In these cases, communication which was focused either on non-teaching, or which allowed for de-stressing through mutual support, acted as a resource to maintain or increase well-being. We cannot assume that early career teachers will not suffer from isolation as we move out of the pandemic, as with heavy workloads and relocation to find work, some may still have little opportunity to spend time with others.

Finally, leadership and organisation are critical to creating resource-rich contexts for increased teacher well-being and development. While a level of performativity may be necessary to ensure that the organisation has an accurate view of itself, if allowed to become too prevalent, it can begin to have an undue negative effect, and can become a challenge for teachers. In the experience of our participants, those who were in contexts where schools continued through the pandemic tended to show challenges related to stress from accountability structures and the continued reliance on numeric data. These processes were not well understood by some of the participants, due to their lack of preparedness from their teacher education programmes, and they often found them alien and overbearing. In cases where participants were given much greater room to try out different approaches, and to be creative, within a supportive and reflective environment, they flourished, even with the constraints of the pandemic. It is worth noting that a prevalent theme in the literature on the education workforce during Covid-19 is the pressure on school leaders and the great impact on their well-being (Kim et al., 2022; Allen et al., 2020b).

What this discussion indicates is that in any context, issues can either present as challenges or as resources, and can be summarised as in Figure 4.

Figure 4. Findings applied to Dodge et al. (2012)'s model of well-being (Source: Authors, 2022)



Conclusions

Our findings are drawn from a rich yet small-scale data collection with seven participants, and hence our recommendations are tentative. However, using the patterns which emerge during times of crisis can act as a barometer of considerations for making a system more resilient and effective.

Future-proofing, based on the results from this study, would need to emphasise communication within the profession. First, quality mentoring is important, which is already emphasised within the ECF (DfE, 2019b). Mentoring needs to be based on the development of strong relationships and sustainable approaches, which give new teachers opportunities to grow and to try out ideas with professional support, rather than forcing them into predetermined moulds of best practice. As such, the quality of mentoring rather than the content of supporting materials needs to be emphasised, as it is the human contact and reflective process which is at the heart of such relationships.

Schools and those who support early career teachers, including ITE providers, mentors and ECF providers, need to adopt practices which communicate the importance of well-being. Hence, both mentors and leaders need excellent communication skills, but to what degree are such soft skills developed in current training programmes? The insights from participants in this study suggest that strong accountability systems are less useful in developing teachers, and ensuring their well-being, than effective communication.

In the literature on UK education during the pandemic, three positive resources identified by teachers were social support, autonomy and coping strategies (Kim et al., 2022). Dodge et al.'s (2012) model of well-being shows that issues such as relationships and flexibility (akin to social support and autonomy) can be either a challenge or a resource. How schools and training providers interact with those factors determines their impact on teachers, especially those early in their careers. Hence, sustainability of professional work will to some degree rely on the balance between challenges and resources, at the individual level. And herein lies an important aspect of future-proofing teaching. Uniform approaches to well-being may work for some over a short period of time. But well-being is complex, intersectional and ongoing, each individual requiring different types of support, as demonstrated in the experiences of our participants. Providers and schools need to become more sustainable organisations which develop effective, personalised support for teachers, and give them room to develop. This requires time and space, and consideration of the perceptions of the teachers and mentors who live this experience every day.

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Declarations and conflicts of interest

Research ethics statement

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Consent for publication statement

The authors declare that research participants' informed consent to publication of findings – including photos, videos and any personal or identifiable information – was secured prior to publication.

Conflicts of interest statement

The authors declare no conflicts of interest with this work. All efforts to sufficiently anonymise the authors during peer review of this article have been made. The authors declare no further conflicts with this article.

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