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The “problem” of teacher quality: exploring challenges and opportunities in developing teacher quality during the Covid-19 global pandemic in England

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ABSTRACT

Teachers and teacher education are often presented as “problems” to be solved, with policy solutions that focus on ways to make teachers “better” and improve teacher “quality” by introducing prescriptive strategies. We investigate the ways Covid-19-related changes to university and school-based facets of Initial Teacher Education (ITE) in England influence teacher quality in relation to both student teachers and early career teachers, working in secondary schools. Drawing on 34 interviews with school leaders, school mentors and ITE tutors, we critically explore the ways in which teacher quality was developed through key aspects of teachers’ pedagogy and practice during the pandemic crisis when schools were closed and teaching moved online. Our findings show that the pandemic crisis has highlighted the different facets of teacher quality which arguably disrupt narrow and prescriptive understandings of what constitutes “quality” in policy terms. Although there were many instances of challenge in the development of new and student teachers, our data also shows how ITE tutors, school mentors and leaders responded creatively to the crisis. Participants highlighted the opportunities afforded by the pandemic to develop diverse and innovative pedagogies and practice, enhance students’ subject knowledge, as well as overcome some of the challenges in other areas of pedagogy and practice. Furthermore, the study shows that teacher quality was not substantially reduced despite the challenges arising from the pandemic and concerns that pre-service teachers would not be ready and prepared for a career in the classroom.

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Introduction

Across the globe, governments frequently seek to raise the quality of their education and school systems. One of the key approaches in this policy work centres on the training and

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quality of the classroom teacher (Akiba & LeTendre, 2017). Indeed, there has been a growing interest in the concept of “teacher quality” globally over recent decades, with governments focusing on teacher quality as critical for pupils’ educational success (Cochran-Smith, 2021; Sutton Trust, 2011) and improvement in teachers’ pedagogy and practice (Akiba & LeTendre, 2017). However, the Covid-19 pandemic has caused significant and sustained disruption to the training and development of student teachers across the world and those in their early years of teaching – in the case of England, early career teachers (ECTs).¹ This disruption had significant impacts on developing teacher quality of “beginning” teachers which comprise, student teachers and early career teachers. Indeed, there is a growing body of research that illustrates the considerable stress and pressures that teachers have experienced round the world due to the Covid “crisis” (La Velle et al., 2020; Ellis et al., 2020). The pandemic crisis comprised series of national lockdowns in countries all over the world, which meant that many educational institutions were closed and teaching and learning moved online (La Velle et al., 2020).

This article is drawn from data from an 18-month research project, which investigated the ways in which Covid-19-related changes to both the university and school-based facets of Initial Teacher Education (ITE) in England are impacting teacher quality and retention for student teachers and early career secondary school teachers. The aim of this paper is to explore the impacts of the Covid-19 crisis on teacher education in England with a specific focus on the ways in which one ITE institution supported teachers’ professional learning and put in place strategies to ensure the teacher quality of its student teachers. While there are many accounts and research studies have explored the challenges classroom teachers faced during the pandemic, much less is known about those training to become teachers. This paper centres on a key research question: *How and in what ways has the COVID-19 pandemic created challenges and opportunities for secondary student teachers and ECTs to develop teacher quality?*

We start by providing a brief context to the study, before exploring what we understand by teacher quality and how teacher quality is problematised in policy terms. We present data that reveals the ways in which teacher educators, schools and mentors overcame challenges and discovered opportunities that helped develop the teacher quality of their beginning teachers.

The context of initial teacher education (ITE) in England

In the United Kingdom, education is a devolved matter with each of the four nations, Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland and England, responsible for their own educational provision. The Department of Education (DfE) has oversight of Initial Teacher Education (ITE) in England. Those training to teach can choose from a range of routes to qualify as a teacher including a number of school-based routes as well as through Higher Education Institutions (HEIs). One significant avenue to qualify as a teacher is to complete a one-year postgraduate course to gain a PGCE (postgraduate certificate of education) (La Velle et al., 2020). It is this route into teaching and the university context in which this paper is set. In terms of the policy landscape in which ITE in England operates, it has been subject to significant and ongoing reform in recent decades. More recently, two novel statutory ITE policies, the Early Career Framework (ECF) (DfE, 2019a) and the

Core Content Framework for Initial Teacher Training (CCF) (DfE, 2019b) were introduced. The ECF is, in part, an attempt to counteract the “problem” of so many teachers leaving the profession so soon after their qualification. It doubles the length of induction, from one to two years, and provides schools with additional funding for mentor support and training programmes. The new Ofsted² framework for the inspection of teacher education (Ofsted, 2020) makes clear that the successful implementation of the CCF will be a marker of an ITE provider’s quality. The CCF was introduced to be used by training providers to support the development of pre-service teachers in pedagogy, assessment, behaviour management, the curriculum and professional behaviours (DfE, 2019b). Both the CCF and the ECF are designed to enhance what policymakers understand as “quality” teachers and teaching through a perspective of quality drawn from a “restricted” and “partial” evidence-base (University of Cambridge, 2021). Although our paper is not focused on these two headline policies in ITE, we want to make the point that current ITE policy making in England is designed to address teacher quality, which, it is alleged, needs improving. One way to tackle this particular “problem” is to reform the professional preparation of beginning teachers. It is argued that through raising quality, it may also be that more teachers will remain in the profession sustained by their commitment and quality.

What is teacher quality?

Teacher quality remains a “concept in search of a definition” (Goodwin & Low, 2021, p. 2), contested in the literature and deployed in different ways dependent on the positioning and interests of writers and practitioners (Strong, 2011). Distinctions are often drawn between teacher quality and teaching quality (Churchward & Willis, 2019). Teacher quality sees an emphasis on the personal attributes of the individual teacher while teaching quality implies a focus on practice and an emphasis on teacher effectiveness in the classroom (Hanushek, 2011). Arguably, teaching quality is more reductive in its scope, emphasising the role of teachers as merely “deliverers of education” (Snoek, 2021, p. 10). In their evidence review of teacher quality, Naylor and Sayed (2014) position teacher quality as encompassing both “quality teaching” and “quality teachers”, with consideration of teachers’ personal qualities alongside their classroom practice and the impact on student outcomes. Specifically, they define teacher quality as referring to competence; teacher professionalism; exercise of personal attributes and values; teacher relationships with parents and community and teacher practices (Naylor & Sayed, 2014). Elsewhere, other factors cited as contributing to teacher quality include the relevance of teachers’ prior qualifications and professional training (Darling-Hammond, 1999) and teachers’ professional development (Hattie, 2009). Others turn to personal attributes as central to the construction of teacher quality, such as having a “passion” for teaching (Day, 2004) and possessing “moral values” (Osguthorpe, 2008). Teacher “quality” is synonymous with what it means to be a “good” teacher (Towers & Maguire, 2022). For example, Alex Moore’s (2004) seminal study, *The Good Teacher*, which is set in the English context, refers to three key competing discourses: the “charismatic” model of the teacher, often represented in Hollywood movies and the media; the “reflective practitioner” model, widespread in universities and teacher education courses; and the “competent craftsman” model, which he argues is preferred by government. Indeed, in England, the emphasis on school-led practice and centralised curricular has

been such that theory and reflective practice can be viewed as marginalised (Alexander & Bourke, 2021). Although high performing jurisdictions share similar understandings of teacher quality, context matters when considering what constitutes teacher quality (Goodwin & Low, 2021). Indeed, Cochran-Smith's (2021, p. 425) exploration of teacher quality from an international perspective concluded that due to the highly complex and dynamic understanding of teacher quality, "it is not reasonable or even desirable to expect that teacher quality could or should achieve a consistent, stable definition across nations". In other words, there are many facets to teacher quality that are context specific and cannot be captured or defined in a straightforward way.

Teacher quality as a policy "problem"

In many national contexts, including in England, teachers and teaching are often characterised as "problems" to solve (Scott & Freeman-Moir, 2000) with educational issues presented as "problems that require policy solutions" (Skourdoumbis, 2017, p. 206). As Bacchi (1999, p. 1) argues, much depends on how the "problem" is constructed, also called "problem representation". Taking a "problems" approach, as formulated by Bacchi (1999, 2009) can help explain why an educational phenomenon is formally taken to be a policy "problem" in a particular moment in time. For example, the "problem" of the schoolteacher has been the target of policymaking for many decades, including how they are recruited, trained, and developed to become effective "quality" teachers (Ball, 2017). As Gale and Molla (2015, p. 811) suggest, policy making can be seen as 'a form of "politiking" ... it is an act of "problem constructing" and is central to the practice of government'.

Teacher quality has been a central focus of national education reforms and policy initiatives in education systems worldwide (Barnes, 2021). With narrow definitions on what constitutes teacher "quality", policy responses have tended to centre on ways to "improve" teachers by introducing prescriptive measures that include rigorous target setting, regulation and surveillance – prescribing *how* as well as *what* to teach (Ball, 2017). In England, there has been an increasing emphasis on the application of teaching skills and policies focused on the practice of teaching since the election of the Conservative-led Coalition government in 2010 (Ellis et al., 2019). The reworking of the 2007 Professional Standards Framework into the more "robust" Teachers' Standards (DfE, 2011) established a new centralised baseline of expectations for the professional practice and conduct of teachers. Key areas of focus, that (implicitly) denote high "teacher quality", have been on teachers' ability to "manage classroom behaviour" (Bennett, 2019) and "deliver" adaptive teaching that simultaneously meets the needs of each pupil in the classroom (DfE, 2019). An increased focus on the mastery of a set of skills and competences produced a view of teacher professionalism "heavily weighted towards the behavioural components" of practice (Evans, 2011, p. 868).

The responsibility of teachers to improve outcomes for all pupils has led to the promotion of an audit culture, with a focus on quality assurance and the apportioning of blame to teachers and teacher educators when expectations around teacher quality are not met (Cochran-Smith et al., 2020; Naylor & Sayed, 2014). According to Ball (2003, p. 220), navigating this "labyrinth of performativity" leads to teachers wrestling with how to meet increasingly ambitious targets and improve their own productivity. In this

performative environment, quality becomes a “regime of assurance, standards and regulations” (Churchward & Willis, 2019, p. 260), based on demonstrating effectiveness and standardised practice. Such policies intended to improve teacher quality and retain highly effective teachers, can have the opposite effect where the strategies can, and have, driven teachers, including already high “quality” teachers, from the profession (Allen & Sims, 2018).

In the context of the pandemic, the “problem” of teacher quality has been reinforced, as seen in a report issued by Ofsted (2021) that stated that too many ITE providers were “overly reliant on [the placement] experiences” for their student teachers, and despite delivering an innovative teacher training programme, this was “unlikely to be enough to provide trainees with full and rounded ITE” (Ofsted, 2021, n.p). Findings from our study suggest that teacher quality was, in fact, not substantially reduced despite the challenges arising from the pandemic and concerns that pre-service teachers would not be ready and prepared for a career in the classroom. In what follows, we set out the research design for the study before presenting the findings from our study.

The study

The 18-month long research project, which followed a pilot study comprising interviews with student teachers working in secondary schools (Rushton et al., *forthcoming*), adopted a mixed methods approach. A mixed methods approach allows researchers to combine a diversity of methods which can offset the limitations of using solely a quantitative or qualitative research method (Cohen et al., 2017). Crucially, mixed methods can produce a robust description and interpretation of the data. Quantitative data was gathered through two questionnaires distributed to student teachers who completed their PGCE in King’s College London during the Covid period (2019-2020 and 2020-2021) and to senior school leaders from the university’s network of partner schools. Qualitative data was gathered through semi-structured interviews with student teachers, ITE school mentors and senior leaders, and university-based ITE staff. The research team followed research guidance and ethics as set out by the British Educational Research Association (BERA, 2018). The study was approved by the researchers’ university Ethics Committee on 6 August 2020 (LRS-19/20-20527).

Table 1. Interviews with three groups of participants.

Participant group	Interview participants [total number of interviews]
School-based ITE mentors	Alexandru; Dina; Ed; Ellen; Judy; June; Karen; Leo; Luna; Lydia; Mary; Natalia; Salvo; Samira; Serena; Victor [5 female, 11 male] [16]
School Senior Leader	Clara; Daniel; Emma; Jake; James; Janet; Jim; Keisha [4 female, 4 male] [8]
University ITE staff	Amanda; Bella; Carlos; Caroline; Mary; Miah; Nick; Romana; Samuel; Sian [7 female, 3 male] [10]
Total number of interviews	34

This paper draws specifically on the qualitative data gathered from 34 semi-structured interviews (each lasting between 30 and 60 min) that took place between April – July 2021 with (a) secondary school-based ITE mentors (b) secondary school senior leaders; (c) university-based ITE staff (see [Table 1](#)). All participants gave informed consent to participate and pseudonyms are used to protect anonymity and confidentiality of the participants quoted.

Interview questions were drawn from both the literature (e.g. Churchward & Willis, 2019; Ellis et al., 2020; Kidd & Murray, 2020) and findings from the pilot study, which focused on the perspectives of teachers who completed a PGCE during 2019–2020 and 2020–2021 (Rushton et al., [forthcoming](#)). The interviews were transcribed and coded manually using Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA) (Braun & Clarke, 2019) to analyse the views and experiences of ITE during the pandemic and perceptions of the teaching quality of student teachers and ECTs. Coding was carried out using a two-stage process (Saldana, 2011). First, labels were attached to repeated characteristics noted in the interview transcripts. To increase the reliability of our coding, the research team first coded a set of transcripts independently, then shared and revised code definitions before recoding and analysing the transcripts (Saldana, 2011). The data were analysed using a line-by-line (Chenail, 2012) and the constant comparative method (Strauss & Corbin, 1998), with themes initially constructed from an inductive reading of the data and subsequently refined using an analytic grid focused on two key themes coalescing around professional development of student teachers and ECTs. These are: (1) Challenges in developing teacher quality (2) Opportunities in developing teacher quality. Four key areas of pedagogy and practice are covered within these two themes relating to: *Differentiation and inclusion*, *Behaviour management*, *Subject knowledge development*, and *Engaging in diverse pedagogies and practice*. Although we do not claim these themes to be exhaustive, they serve to highlight some of the key problems and challenges facing ITE institutions as well as some of the opportunities that the pandemic crisis afforded them in relation to developing teacher quality.

Findings

A note on context of different cohorts

At the outset, it is important to highlight the substantial differences in the experiences of the two cohorts of teachers who have trained during the Covid-19 pandemic. The first cohort, who completed a PGCE during 2019–2020, experienced a relatively “normal” period between September 2019 and the end of February 2020. However, from March 2020, with the onset of the global pandemic and the implementation of national social distancing measures in England, there was a rapid and abrupt shift where student teachers worked completely online and were unable to return to their school placement. In contrast, those who completed their PGCE during 2020–2021 embarked upon their programme of study during the pandemic and as such have moved between periods of in-school placement and online teaching which has been dependent on the implementation of school-wide, regional and/or national decision making. Although these student teachers have been able to complete substantive

school placements, these have had a disrupted rhythm and have been restricted in a number of ways, for example, in terms of movement around the classroom and school site.

Challenges in developing teacher quality

In the early days of the pandemic, with the disruption of teaching and learning in educational institutions across the country, teacher educators and school leaders were responsible for making the right decisions for their students and staff. As a senior leader working in a special school explained:

There was a lot of reinventing, recreating, redoing [...] I definitely didn't feel supported by the government in their decisions, but I was like I'm going to look after the people I can look after, the decisions I'm making. (Keisha, SLT)

Student teachers and ECTs experienced the pandemic in diverse and different ways, in part, depending on their school placements, subject and personal circumstances. However, crucially, the data revealed that their experiences also depended on the different ways in which schools responded to COVID-19, including in their use of "bubbles", the restriction of movement around the school site and their use of online teaching (for example pre-recorded content, "live" online teaching, blended approaches among other measures). Indeed, the choice of approach by schools has naturally had implications for student teachers' school placements, and their ability to develop their professional practice. This included important aspects of professional learning such as observing others, developing classroom management strategies, engaging with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) provision and implementing assessment for learning strategies.

In this section, we detail some of the key challenges facing ITE tutors, school leaders and mentors in the professional education and learning of student teachers and ECTs. The data revealed two main areas of practice that posed significant challenges for participants in terms of developing teacher quality: differentiation and inclusion, and behaviour management. As Sian (ITT leader) said:

[The Lockdown] affected things like behaviour management, classroom management, differentiation [...] with schools staying shut until mid-March [students] genuinely have had less time physically in schools than in a normal year – that doesn't mean they haven't been teaching or they haven't been developing their practice – but they won't have had as many hours behind the wheel ... as you would probably want ideally, and so that nuance to practice that I imagine you get in the last four or five weeks of a placement perhaps isn't there yet and some of them I think have found themselves going backwards and forwards in terms of their development.

Differentiation and inclusion

A key aspect of teaching quality is the capacity to teach in an inclusive way so that planning and then class practice adapts to pupils' specific needs and abilities (DfE, 2019). Participants highlighted a key problem encountered by those training to teach in developing skills of differentiation and inclusion in the classroom. They shared how student teachers had fewer opportunities to work with school-based professionals

with expertise in Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND), including working with teaching assistants (TAs) who provide pupils with individual support during lessons and small group interventions. For example, one mentor said, “I feel they’ve had a lot of training, but it hasn’t quite been the same as being able to use teaching assistants” (Ellen, mentor). School mentors, senior leaders and university tutors were aware of the impact that the pandemic had on their student teachers’ and ECTs’ practice in this area as the student teachers had experienced supporting SEND students differently.

However, our data revealed how mentors, senior leaders and ITT tutors found specific ways to address the student teachers’ gap in experience. For example, Samira (mentor) described how, during the pandemic, online teaching and learning was linked to increased anxiety for some pupils and shared how, as a mentor, she encouraged her PGCE students to support pupils:

I think what we tried to do as mentors is encourage the trainees [student teachers] to think of a way that might calm the students’ anxiety, and actually this is where relationship and rapport really comes into it. So, my trainee teacher contacted the student, cc’d in the parent and said “I fully understand this is a difficult situation. I would love for you not to miss out on the lessons. How about [...] If you want to put your hand up you can but otherwise, I won’t call on you. Would that help ease things?” And I think that was a really good approach because what we were getting was boys dropping off, just not wanting to be part of the call because they were so anxious about speaking up in front of their peers. (Samira, mentor)

Given the reported additional burden of the pandemic on students with SEND (Jayanetti, 2021) the lack of opportunities for student teachers and ECTs to develop their classroom practice in supporting this group of learners is particularly troubling. However, when reflecting upon the support that student teachers might need in the future in this area of practice, mentors and school leaders highlighted the need to prioritise the involvement of the school Special Educational Needs and Disabilities Co-ordinators (SENDCos) in professional development sessions for ECTs, so that they could gain practical support and insight as to how to extend inclusive teaching and learning. For example, Ellen (mentor) described how she had included the SENDCo as one of the earliest twilight professional development sessions at the beginning of the academic year 2021/2022. Another mentor interviewed, Karen, agreed that, “involvement of staff with expertise in SEND such as the SENDCo and our brilliant team of TAs is vital for all teachers but especially ECTs who have not had the usual kinds of opportunities to learn from this part of the school staff this year”. As one senior leader told us, “it is up to schools to ensure they nurture and develop their new teachers”. He added that his school had good systems for “moving people on [...] in terms of their practice” (Jake, SLT).

Other participants, such as school leader Keisha, described how the teachers were able to utilise online learning for the benefit of their pupils with SEND:

When we’ve done mentoring sessions with kids – we were doing it on the phone and they were better because ... they were out of the space, not looking [at you] face to face ... so actually for some of them being out of the school environment for the kids is great. (Keisha, SLT)

Much of our data clearly shows how educators worked creatively during the pandemic to try and overcome some of the issues in developing teachers’ practice in differentiation

and inclusion. As such, ITE educators were required to assume “an innovative stance” (Ellis et al., 2020, p. 569) to develop their beginning teachers’ practice in this case.

Behaviour management

Another area that concerned some of our participants is new teachers’ behaviour management practice as highlighted by this school leader:

I think one thing is that a lot of behaviour management can only really be taught by practising it and it just wasn’t the same for people who joined in September [2020], they just hadn’t had that same sort of level of practice. (Clara, school senior leader)

Covid-19 had also presented new behaviour management challenges, for example through limiting the ability to circulate around the classroom and both teachers and pupils needing to wear masks. This has required both student teachers and more experienced teachers to adapt their approaches to behaviour management. Teacher educators in our study argued that it is important that student teachers are properly supported in developing these skills in their first year of teaching:

Behaviour management [...] is probably the only area where I don’t think they would have had sufficient practice in and I would say they [first year teachers] would need to have very clear established and strong behaviour systems [...] I think it’s important that they are near a strong member of staff in the department where if there are problems with the behaviour management, that you can just pop your head round and say are things OK? They need to know that they’re not just left dangling and ready to you know sink or swim. (Janet, school senior leader)

The issue of behaviour management is critical in the working life of a teacher, as research shows that a key factor in teachers’ decisions to quit the profession is having to deal with poor student behaviour (Burge et al., 2021). Therefore, developing teachers’ skills in managing classroom behaviour is of paramount importance, yet successive lockdowns and school closures have negatively impacted this aspect of teachers’ development. In normal times, as Perryman and Calvert (2020) have argued, skills in dealing with poor student behaviour can fade over time as teachers become more experienced and adept at dealing with behaviour issues. However, student behaviour has frequently been a key policy focus for successive governments in the UK (Maguire et al., 2010). Just before the pandemic struck, a publication titled “Behaviour Toolkit” was produced by the government aimed at supporting student teachers and included as an appendix to the CCF (Bennett, 2019). The “problem” of behaviour management was addressed by Ofsted (2021) during the height of the pandemic with media reports of worsening pupil behaviour (BBC, April, 2021). Ofsted (2021) asserted that *all* those who trained to become teachers during 2020–2021 require further support to develop effective behaviour management. Those who shared their perspectives as part of this study highlighted how reduced and/or disrupted school placements had posed challenges for *some* student teachers to develop effective behaviour management strategies over a sustained period and explained ways in which this was tackled at a local level.

It has been really important to bring together our new teachers from the first day and support them to observe different teachers across the school and how they approach behaviour – we

always do this with new teachers but it has been even more important to give new teachers the chance to observe and discuss the ways different teachers approach managing their classrooms with the same groups of students ... the new teachers need to be able to ask and explore how our school policies work in a range of classrooms ... they need to know that behaviour for learning is something that can be achieved in different ways for different teachers and that it develops over time – that is at the core of being a “good” teacher. (Salvo, mentor)

Here, Salvo underlines effective behaviour learning and classroom management as a facet of teacher quality and demonstrates the role of a mentor in making this explicit for new teachers through observation and discussion with a range of teachers with varied approaches to behaviour management.

Opportunities for developing teacher quality

Our data reveal that experience of training to teach during Covid-19 has not been wholly negative for student teachers and the flexibility and resilience that the situation has necessitated may even impact positively on professional development, enhancing teacher quality and a desire to remain in the profession. We discuss two specific areas – subject knowledge development and engaging in diverse pedagogies and practice – where participants reported to have noted positive outcomes from teachers’ experiences.

Subject knowledge development

The pandemic and associated responses affected different subjects in different ways. Those subjects that make greater use of practical work (for example science, art, drama and PE) and fieldwork (for example geography) have had to adapt their teaching strategies more extensively. Mentors and university ITE staff described how many PGCE students had used the time that they had gained due to reduced time commuting to school placements during periods of online teaching and learning and university-based sessions, to develop their subject knowledge through self-directed reading and online webinars provided by networks including learned societies, subject associations and teaching unions. For example, Miah (ITE tutor) highlighted how the PGCE students, “had more time to develop their subject knowledge while they weren’t in the classroom”. Some student teachers could also focus more fully on the academic component of their PGCE course, as an ITE tutor explained:

... sometimes things have worked out sort of OK for students where they’ve not been in school ... and that has definitely ... shown through in terms of the quality of what’s been produced within the assignments. And that to me, the PGCE is partly a year for doing that kind of in-depth work, thinking about stuff, really kind of digging into who you want to be as a teacher and what you want your practice to look like. (Caroline, ITE tutor)

In terms of teacher quality, the importance of subject knowledge cannot be understated as research studies have shown a significant effect of the teacher’s subject knowledge on pupils’ achievement (Hill et al., 2005; Metzler & Woessmann, 2010).

The pandemic meant that the education sector became much more familiar and engaged with online technology, ITE institutions were able to provide more flexible and responsive subject-specific support:

... they've [PGCE students] been able to access more online CPD, so they've been going to stuff at the Royal Geographical Society that's been online and free [...] I had some of my students who were showing their mentors and their departments how to use Teams, you know, really bringing in some online pedagogy. (Sian, ITE tutor)

Indeed, many mentors, ITE tutors and school senior leaders noted how much they had valued the teaching and learning resources that student teachers had produced and shared how they had incorporated sequences of lessons into their curricula. They noted that, although curriculum development has been a regular feature of their work with student teachers in the past, this contribution had been especially valued when teachers' time and resources have been so stretched during the pandemic period. Our data has indicated that, rather than student teachers' and ECTs' subject knowledge development being negatively impacted by the pandemic, it has, in many cases in our sample, been strengthened. The construction of a threat to teacher quality in the pandemic as a policy "problem", at least in terms of subject knowledge, is not reflected in our findings.

Engaging in diverse pedagogies and practice

The interviews revealed that student teachers and new teachers were embracing the challenges of online teaching that required them to be more creative and imaginative in their pedagogy. As such, the data illustrated that the student teachers and new teachers in our study were adept at diversifying their practice and pedagogy to respond to their students' needs and the changing circumstances. As one participant said:

In a strange way, although I know people have very much focused on all the negatives of lockdown and believe me, there are many, I think for new teachers and for student teachers, I think it's probably going to make them better teachers. They've really had to think a lot more about why and how they do what they do. (Jake, school senior leader)

Mentors and university-based ITE staff noted that opportunities for student teachers to develop and implement in-person, online and hybrid approaches to teaching and learning allowed them to develop expertise using a greater range of strategies when planning and teaching lessons and assessments by comparison with typical years. For example, this senior leader said of the ECTs in his school, "[They] even sometimes lead the way because they're more IT savvy perhaps or they can think a bit more quickly about how am I going to solve this? How am I going to sort of see how these students are learning?" (Jake, school senior leader). One Computing ITE tutor noted how, surprisingly, while technology does not feature highly in the teaching standards anymore, the pandemic has raised its status:

the use of technology has come to the forefront and students, even computer students, I think are much better placed now to prepare resources, to potentially look at flipped classroom approaches to teaching and just you know better able to incorporate technology into their lessons. (Nick, ITE tutor)

Other participants noted how new teachers adapted swiftly to challenges of having reduced face to face teaching experiences, by, for example, developing their skills in assessment for learning, an aspect of teacher quality (DfE, 2019). One particular challenge was in giving "live" feedback to pupils and identifying and addressing misconceptions. One ITE tutor spoke about the ways in which certain aspects of teaching that are often

“invisible”, such as Assessment for Learning, become “really, really visible” through online pedagogy:

... the ability to get whole class feedback in something like a chat, or some of the various apps that are available to do that is much stronger [online], so that you don't even need to remember to give out mini whiteboards ... this has spurred some students to use really good assessment practices and then use that to respond to teaching. (Caroline, ITE tutor)

Furthermore, many of the mentors and school leaders noted that through developing online teaching strategies, student teachers and ECTs were able to explore and trial a greater range of teaching approaches at the outset of their careers and argued that this would have significant ongoing benefits to their practice in the future. Many ITE tutors in the study also noted that student teachers and ECTs had been able to adapt to changing situations and find new and innovative approaches to pedagogy and practice which trainers felt prepared them better for their first year of teaching. This was highlighted by a school-based ITE mentor:

[The student teachers] have gone through a variety of methods of teaching online, present, partial as well, like some students at home, some students in the classroom, so they know at least what to expect, it's not going to be a shock to the system. (Alexandru, mentor)

These themes reveal the varied and different facets of a teacher's professional learning in developing teacher quality during the time of the Covid-19 pandemic. Indeed, the ITE landscape during the pandemic period should not be considered to be entirely “problematic” as practice in several aspects (notably subject knowledge and innovative and online pedagogy) was boosted in comparison with “normal” years, as has been reported and repeated in a number of official government and other related documents (e.g. Ofsed, 2021; DfE, 2021). Those areas of specific challenge, such as reduced opportunities for developing practice in behaviour management and inclusion and differentiation, were still, in the main, overcome by those learning to teach with the help of ITE tutors, mentors and school leaders. As Samira, a school-based mentor commented:

I have really focused my practice as mentor to ensure that the teachers I work with are supported to learn that teaching is rooted in ideas of equality, diversity and inclusion, this means that not every teacher should teach in the same way in the same school, it is about supporting teachers to be professionals with individuality ... they need to be able to develop their practice in different areas based in their context, with support from mentors who understand how inclusion and classroom management work in these communities.

Discussion

In this paper, we have discussed the ways in which teacher quality is understood, mostly within narrow definitions of what comprises a “quality” teacher. However, the data revealed that teacher quality comprises many different facets and aspects of teachers' skills, attributes and practice that are often overlooked in formal policy documents and discourse around teacher quality, but are crucial to the development of the school pupils they teach. The paper also explored the extent to which teacher quality is seen in policy terms as a “problem” to solve. Yet our research has revealed that during a period of intense crisis where opportunities for normal activities were severely curtailed, rather than perceive teacher quality as a “problem”, teachers and educators were able to

adapt to circumstances and continue their important work in developing teachers' practice and learning, ensuring high quality new cohorts of teachers entering the profession. For example, the data revealed the extent to which the pandemic cohorts of student teachers have made the most of opportunities to strengthen their subject knowledge and develop a range of pedagogical skills needed in the time of crisis. One school leader went so far as to say that, "for new teachers and for student teachers, I think it's [the pandemic] probably going to make them better teachers". Our findings have also shown how ITE tutors, school mentors and leaders have responded creatively to the crisis and have highlighted the opportunities afforded by the pandemic to develop diverse and innovative pedagogies and practice, to find ways to enhance students' subject knowledge and support them through their training year.

First, our data showed that there may have been some challenges in realising teacher quality, particularly in areas of pedagogy and practice like behaviour management and the practice of differentiation and inclusion which heavily rely on student teachers and teachers "practising" these skills on-the-job and in-person. However, our findings show that problems arising from these areas these were largely supported through localised measures including finding creative ways for teachers to gain experience and skills in these areas. For example, in some cases remote learning was also reported to aid inclusion, allowing student teachers and ECTs to support individual pupils in a secure environment devoid of peer pressures. Furthermore, participants reported the importance of building productive and effective relationships between student teachers, mentors and teachers to work collaboratively to address any problems encountered.

Second, the data revealed positive aspects of the experience of training to teach during Covid-19. Participants reported that there were opportunities to showcase and further develop IT and online working skills. ECTs commented that their technological expertise and willingness to adapt to new ways of working has been embraced by schools. For example, during the pandemic, student teachers were often able to provide their placement schools with support to implement online teaching and learning strategies, with this having a positive impact on student teachers' self-efficacy and confidence. Indeed, the findings show that the pandemic cohort of student teachers have demonstrated extraordinary resilience and resolve during their training period and have developed specific teaching and learning skills in response to the Covid-19 crisis. We might argue that such resilience and resolve is a key element of teacher quality. Therefore, we contend that while this cohort of student teachers have not had the optimum conditions to develop their professional practice, neither should they be viewed as deficient or unready as they begin their teaching careers. When implementing the ECF we suggest that schools are provided with support, capacity and autonomy to build on the many strengths that those 2020–2021 student teachers have developed, as well as considering areas for development, so that they are able to build on and extend their confidence and self-efficacy throughout their period as ECTs (see for example, Rushton et al., 2021).

In this time of crisis, the teaching profession has nimbly and flexibly responded to what is needed to ensure that teachers of a high quality entered the profession. Schools and teachers have had to work rapidly to move their teaching content and resources online during successive lockdowns. As well as discovering new and creative ways to engage students online, many teachers including student teachers have engaged in what Allen et al. (2020, p. 233) have referred to as "professional development in a time of urgency", where

teachers and student teachers have become more adept at sharing and developing their own IT expertise with other educators and professionals.

Conclusion

Our research so far has indicated the importance of harnessing what has been learnt and achieved by ITE providers, schools and student teachers through the pandemic. Although this study centres on one ITE institution and its partner schools and stakeholders, the findings of the research can be applied to other contexts both in the UK and beyond. We provide two key takeaways from our research followed by a set of recommendations for ITE institutions post-pandemic.

First, we argue that in a post-pandemic educational context, there is now an urgent need to move away from viewing ITE as a “policy problem”. Policymakers are more likely to develop meaningful and long-lasting policies if they develop collaborative partnerships with student teachers, schools and higher education providers to develop context-responsive approaches that are sensitive to the needs and experiences of student teachers, ECTs and trainers. Second, we argue that we also need to move away from how the “problem” of teacher quality is constructed in policy discourse. We agree with Hardy et al.’s (2021, p. 303) contention that teacher education should depart from narrow conceptualisations of “quality” and literature and numeracy results and focus more on supporting beginning teachers’ capacities to enrich students’ broader learning experiences which, in turn, is more likely to result in rewarding and rich teaching experiences for our nation’s teachers as we begin to enter a post-pandemic world.

In line with the findings from this study, we provide the following recommendations. First, Schools and ITE providers should continue to embrace the unique skills and experiences of student teachers and new teachers (in England known as ECTs) in the planning and delivery of the curriculum. In our view, this would help develop and sustain teacher resilience, teacher agency and a sense of self-efficacy which we argue are all important aspects of teacher quality. Second, to provide a more coherent structure for student teachers and new teachers in terms of offering personalised support which responds to the varied training they have experienced and the prescribed content of their induction programmes. We suggest that institutions need to invest in offering bespoke professional development for new teachers to address the highly variable impact of COVID-19 on teacher training and induction. Finally, as many of those who trained and qualified during the pandemic crisis had reduced opportunities for pastoral practice, limited parental engagement and a reduced involvement with extracurricular activities, we suggest that new teachers should be given the opportunity and time to engage in a range of pastoral activities both in and beyond the school to further develop pastoral skills. This would also help strengthen behaviour management skills by fostering positive relationships with pupils.

Notes

1. In England, ECTs refers to those in the first two years of their career post-qualification.
2. The Office for Standards in Education, Children’s Services and Skills (Ofsted) is a non-ministerial department of the UK government that is responsible for inspecting a range of educational institutions.

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