REFORMING TEACHER TRAINING TO FIND THE BEST TEACHERS

Everyone remembers a brilliant teacher; and most people remember an ineffective one too. Teachers are more important to pupil achievement than small class sizes, resources, or any large-scale policy intervention. **Rebecca Allen** and **Simon Burgess** argue that current teacher selection and training policies do not make sense given what is known about teacher effectiveness.

So, what do we know about teacher effectiveness?

• **Teacher effectiveness matters enormously.** A pupil being taught for eight GCSEs by all effective teachers (those at the 75th percentile of the teacher effectiveness distribution) will achieve an overall GCSE score four grades higher than the same pupil being taught for eight GCSEs by all ineffective teachers (at the 25th percentile). A range of studies have consistently shown a very high impact of teacher effectiveness on pupil progress.

• **Measures of teacher effectiveness are 'noisy'.** Numerous factors affect exam scores, from good or bad luck on exam day, the pupil's ability, motivation and background through to a school's resources. Research shows that it is possible to measure a teacher's contribution to this, but it is an estimate with less-than-perfect precision. For example, a teacher's score in any one year may be affected by being assigned a particularly difficult class, or a particularly well-motivated class in a way not accounted for in the analysis.

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• **Experience doesn't help beyond three years.** Research shows that on average teachers do become more effective in their first two or three years. Thereafter, there is no evidence of systematic gains as their experience increases: a teacher is as effective after three years as s/he will be after 13 years and 30 years.

• **Good teachers are hard to spot ex ante.** One of the more surprising findings has been that the characteristics that one might have thought would be associated with better teachers simply aren't. Experience, a masters degree, and a good academic record in general are not correlated with greater effectiveness in the classroom. These results have been found in both the US and England.

We need to be careful what we are claiming here. The research shows that easily observable, objective characteristics variables typically available to researchers are no use in predicting teacher effectiveness. This is not to say that no-one can identify an effective teacher. No doubt many headteachers are adept at spotting teaching talent. But there are enough who aren't to mean that there are ineffective teachers working in classrooms.

• **Finally, very few teachers are dismissed from the profession in England.**

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What does this imply for the best way to structure the entry into the profession?

Initial teaching training (ITT) encompasses both the initial training and the probationary year. We assume that the point of ITT is to produce effective teachers who will have the greatest possible impact on pupil progress. ITT therefore plays two roles for the profession – training and selection. The emphasis has typically been on the former, but both are important and neither should be neglected.

We need to consider the process of training teachers as a whole, thinking of the PGCE (Postgraduate Certificate of Education) and the probationary period as both being critical parts of ITT. Based on the facts set out above, we suggest that the following changes to the current ITT could raise the average effectiveness of teachers in England.

• **Broader selection:** The difficulty in identifying people likely to be good teachers suggests a high degree of agnosticism would be appropriate when faced with applicants: it is very hard to tell who will be a good teacher. This is certainly true for selection based on objective criteria from the applicants' academic records. We know that these are unrelated to teaching ability, and so should be irrelevant in selection into ITT.

We argue that selection into ITT should be very broad, with a relatively low academic entry requirement. This of course is not the situation now, nor the direction of travel of current policy. We argue that the tightening of academic entry requirements into teaching is not helpful: it will restrict the quantity of recruits and have no impact at all on average teaching effectiveness.

• **Graduation from ITT should be tough.** Given that much of an ITT course is now school-based, time spent in the classroom will form an important part of the assessment. Arguably the classroom experience is the key part of the course. However, in such a short space of time it will not generate sufficient data for a robust and objective view of the trainee's effectiveness. It will nevertheless allow the trainee to discover whether teaching is for them.

• **Longer probation:** Once in a job in a school, the key decision on final certification should be made after a longer probation period, for example three years, rather than the current one. The appropriate length of the probation would need to be analysed properly and, depending on the statistical reliability of any pre-hire indicators, school-

based performance data, and the cost of being wrong (Staiger and Rockoff (2010) discuss this issue in depth). However, there should be an expectation that not all probationers will make it through to final certification, and indeed only the most effective should be retained.

The key judgement for passing probation should be a minimum threshold of progress made by the pupils. Obviously, the measurement of that progress and the parameters of the threshold require a great deal of careful work. Like any statistical data, estimates of teacher effectiveness will never be perfect, and a good deal of evidence over a number of years will be necessary to reach a decision, but this is clearly necessary to raise the average effectiveness of the teaching profession in England.

The best way to reduce the problem of low-performing teachers is to make it very difficult for ineffective teachers to get into the profession in the first place.

Our view is that the evidence shows that the selection aspect of ITT is completely the wrong way round. Selection is tight to get into ITT, but once in, progression to full certification is normal and expected. We argue it should be the other way around: we need to be more open to likely teaching ability in the first place and allow a much broader group of people to try teaching and we need a much tougher probation regime before trainees are given final certification. It seems to be very hard to fire ineffective teachers. While the regulations on this have recently changed it may be that the best way to reduce the problem of low-performing teachers is to make it very difficult for ineffective teachers to get into the profession in the first place.

Further reading

Staiger, D. and Rockoff, J. (2010) *'Searching for Effective Teachers with Imperfect Information.'* Journal of Economic Perspectives vol. 24 no. 3, pp. 97-118.

Chetty, R., Friedman, J., and Rockoff, J. (2011) *'The long-term impacts of teachers: teacher value-added and student outcomes in adulthood.'* NBER WP 17699. www.nber.org/papers/w17699

Slater, H., Davies, N. and Burgess, S. (2011) *'Do teachers matter? Measuring the variation in teacher effectiveness in England Forthcoming'*, Oxford Bulletin of Economics and Statistics