

Using spatial justice to understand the impact of policy on teacher education in England

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Resumo

Teacher education is a spatial practice whose spatiality is often unrecognised in education policy. Through examining the ITT Market Review (a teacher education policy in England), this paper shows the impact of such a policy: not just on where teacher education occurs but also through other spatial effects, such as the locus of teacher education (narrowly conceived around individual classrooms and practices), the shifting of provision to urban centres, and the centralisation of power and control. Such spatial effects have the capacity to exacerbate the supply and retention of teachers in hard-to-staff places, and as such will have a dramatic impact on communities and schools in already disadvantaged areas. Such analysis is important to understand the crisis in teacher supply and attrition, particularly as most countries around the world report some form of teacher recruitment crisis, exemplified by failed recruitment targets and high levels of demand for new teachers.

Keywords: Teacher education; Geography; Spatial justice.

Abstract

Adotando a justiça espacial para compreender o impacto das políticas na formação de professores na Inglaterra

A formação de professores é uma prática cuja espacialidade é frequentemente não reconhecida na política educacional. Partindo da análise do ITT *Market Review* (uma política inglesa de formação de professores), este artigo mostra o impacto de tal política: não apenas onde a formação de professores ocorre, mas também outros efeitos espaciais, tais como o *locus* da formação docente (estritamente entendido como as salas de aula e práticas individuais), a mudança na provisão para os centros urbanos e a centralização do poder e do controle. Tais efeitos espaciais podem exacerbar a oferta e a retenção de professores em locais de difícil recrutamento e, sendo assim, impactar fortemente as comunidades e as escolas de áreas já em desvantagem. Tal análise é importante para entender a crise na oferta e no desgaste dos professores, visto que a maioria dos países aponta alguma forma de crise no recrutamento de professores, materializado na dificuldade em se atingir as metas de recrutamento e na alta demanda por novos professores.

Palavras-chave: Formação de professores; Geografia; Justiça espacial.

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Resumen

Adopción de la justicia espacial para comprender el impacto de las políticas de formación del profesorado en Inglaterra

La formación del profesorado es una práctica cuya espacialidad no suele reconocerse en la política educativa. Basándose en un análisis de la ITT *Market Review* (una política inglesa de formación del profesorado), este artículo muestra el impacto de dicha política: no sólo dónde tiene lugar la formación del profesorado, sino también otros efectos espaciales como el locus de la formación del profesorado (entendido estrictamente como aulas y prácticas individuales), el desplazamiento de la oferta a centros urbanos y la centralización del poder y el control. Estos efectos espaciales pueden agravar la oferta y la retención de profesores en lugares difíciles de contratar y, por tanto, repercutir fuertemente en las comunidades y escuelas de zonas ya desfavorecidas. Un análisis de este tipo es importante para comprender la crisis de la oferta y el desgaste del profesorado, sobre todo teniendo en cuenta que la mayoría de los países informan de algún tipo de crisis en la contratación de profesores, materializada en el incumplimiento de los objetivos de contratación y la elevada demanda de nuevos docentes.

Palabras clave: Formación del profesorado; Geografía; Justicia espacial.

Supply of new teachers

Increasing the supply of new teachers is an international concern, particularly in areas with a chronic shortage of teachers. Teachers who receive high-quality initial teacher education (ITE) are more likely to stay in the profession longer than those who do not, and investing in effective initial training and ongoing support for new teachers can help ensure that they feel prepared, supported, and motivated to continue in the profession. This is particularly true in areas that find it difficult to attract and retain teachers who will then wish to stay and teach in these areas. This is certainly the case in England, which faces a chronic shortage of teachers, particularly in rural and isolated communities. Using the analytical lenses of spatial justice (Soja, 2010) and spatial theory (Lefebvre, 1991), this paper examines how policy on teacher recruitment and retention can address these issues, particularly in areas that find it difficult to recruit new teachers.

In England, the UK government is responsible for the supply of new teachers through the setting of target numbers, running advertising campaigns, and oversight of who is able to “train” new teachers. For example, the most recent policy document, the Department for Education Teacher Recruitment and Retention Strategy, published in May 2019, identified a key priority as “Make it easier for great people to become teachers”, which included the promise that “We will simplify and protect the

vibrant ITT market and ensure that it supports more schools in **challenging areas**” (my emphasis).

This promise became an ITT “Market Review” activity, whereby an “Expert” Group convened by the Department of Education (DfE) during 2020/21 developed a series of recommendations that included a nationwide redesign of both teacher education provision and content, the focus of this paper.

English policy context: ITT Market Review

First, it is important to recognise that the English system of teacher education is highly complex (Whiting et al., 2018), with a number of organisations involved, including schools, Teaching School Hubs, and the third sector organisation Teach First, (the English version of Teach for All movement), as well as universities. In addition, teacher education is regularly inspected by the inspectorate Ofsted, whose judgements are high stakes for providers. It is also important to recognise the increasing influence of the Department for Education in the teacher education landscape: introducing new government mandated and funded qualifications and professional development such as the Early Career Framework (ECF) (UK Department for Education, 2019b) and National Professional Qualifications (NPQs), and introducing new government-funded and supported providers (such as the National Institute of Teaching). Universities have less autonomy in the English system than in other systems.

Adding to this complexity, the ITT Market Review group, who published their report in June 2021 (UK Department for Education 2021a), made 14 recommendations, including a new accreditation process for all teacher education providers who would need to demonstrate fidelity to a new list of Quality Requirements. The recommendations were accepted with some modifications by the DfE in December 2021 (UK Department for Education, 2021b).

While the stated focus in the DfE’s Teacher Recruitment and Retention Strategy was “to simplify and protect the vibrant ITT market and ensure it supports more schools in challenging areas”, the ITT Market review process of accreditation required fidelity to the set of Quality Requirements, which were heavily focused on the government’s recently published ITT Core Content Framework (CCF) (UK

Department for Education, 2019a), a list of “Learn that” and “Learn How to” statements making up a minimum requirement for the content of all teacher training provision. Judgements based on fidelity to the quality requirements and the CCF were not predicated on any local information or indication of local supply and demand. There was no space for localised provision to take into account the need of “challenging areas” or indeed a definition of what that term meant. To understand the impact of this policy on communities that have previously suffered from a lack of teacher supply, this paper uses the lens of spatial theory and spatial justice to determine whether the policy has been successful in addressing the need for teachers in these communities.

Relevance of spatial theory and spatial (in)justice

Access to high quality education is a fundamental factor in seeking equity for all and is essential for social justice but not all places have the same starting point. Soja (2010) argues that location and distribution, particularly of an important service such as education, can have the effect of producing and reproducing justices and injustices. With teacher education, some places have better access to a teacher education provider than others. This is echoed in other research. For example, Farquharson, McNally, and Tahir (2022) illustrate the cumulative effect where areas of advantage have higher indicators of educational attainment and subsequently attract better “quality” teachers. The provision of better qualified teachers can enable more affluent areas to provide better-quality education, enabling cycles of advantage to persist and become mutually constructive.

Such cycles of advantage and opportunities are profoundly spatial and, as such, can be understood through the lens of Soja’s concept of spatial justice (2010). The lack of access to teacher education in some communities can have a detrimental impact on those communities and their educational provision, which can then lead to a further decline of opportunities. An education policy, such as the ITT Market Review, has spatial effects as it redistributes the provision of teacher education across space.

The idea of spatial justice does more than describe the location and distribution of provision, but by building on spatial theory, it understands places as being part of the social and historical make-up of communities. Thereby recognising that

some places suffer from what Ovenden-Hope and Passy (2019) have called educational isolation and that this can be affected by the proximity of educational services. Location is obviously key here, but it is only part of the picture, as spaces are affected by other influences. Soja recognises that places are made up of a range of social, spatial and historical factors that work in tandem to produce the uniqueness of that place. In addition, space is not just a container for that phenomenon but is influenced by the people who live there and can, in turn, shape those people, described by Soja as a socio-spatial dialectic. Thus, a spatial perspective goes beyond an under-theorised conception of location as being about “context” but looks at how the social, spatial and historical are mutually constructive and can be useful in understanding why policies can affect different places in various ways. Adopting such a perspective not only offers a rich descriptive account of phenomena but also an analytical account that goes beyond seeing places as containers for social or policy-related effects by understanding their impact on individuals and communities. The explicit focus on the spatial as a variance in justice and access is based on an understanding of spatial theory. In this study, Lefebvre’s (1991) spatial triad, upon which Soja’s theory of spatial justice was built, is used to help understand these phenomena:

Lived space: this recognises that to fully understand the impact one needs to understand how it affects the lived experience of people who are affected by it.

Relative space: recognises that (education) policies have varied spatial effects and that different places will be disproportionately affected.

Representational space: explores how the problem is represented and is likely to be addressed through policy outcomes, including if spatial variations are acknowledged and represented and how power and influence are distributed.

This spatial triad provides a nuanced way to understand how education policy can have different spatial effects. By reviewing the ITT Market Review policy and outcomes through a spatial lens, it is possible to explore the spatial impact of the policy outcomes. The aim of this analysis is to explore to what extent the policy has sought a more just distribution of access to teacher education, and which areas have

benefited or lost out through the policy. In doing so, a key theme is the issue of recruiting teachers in “challenging areas”.

Lived space: where can you become a teacher?

The Department for Education sets annual targets for the number of new teachers required. It is, however, the accredited providers of teacher education, which may consist of universities and school-centred partnerships, who are then encouraged to recruit sufficient trainee teachers to reach these targets. Therefore, the success of meeting the targets relies on having sufficient teacher education providers who can offer the required number of places (as well as having a throughflow of suitable applicants).

The accreditation process that followed the ITT Market Review required all providers to submit a four-part application with illustrative content showing how their proposed teacher training programme reflected fidelity to the ITT CCF and the published new set of Quality Requirements (laid out by the Market Review Expert Group in their report). 179 providers were accredited as teacher training providers to start from 2024 (subject to fulfilment of the stage 2 requirements). Although the estimated number of placements offered by each provider has not been published, estimates from the DfE suggest that the accreditation process has left a number of significant “cold spots” lacking ITE provision.

The TES reported that according to DfE data collected in the ITT census of 2021–22 the providers that were not accredited were equivalent to 4,000 trainee teachers or 17% of the trainees (Martin, 2022a). However, this loss was not evenly spread across the country, as rural and remote areas of England were more significantly affected. Twelve universities were not accredited, one of which was the University of the West of England, which made up 11% of trainee placements in the Southwest in 2021. Similarly, the University of Cumbria’s (who also were not accredited) suite of teacher training programmes consisted of more than 700 trainees and 200 partner schools; they are the only university-based provider in the region.

The areas that were most affected by the loss of providers were rural, coastal, and more remote areas of England, such as the Southwest, Cumbria (located in the Northwest), the Northeast and East Anglia (the East and Southeast). These areas can all be described as having low population density, largely rural communities,

and, in terms of teacher education provision, a limited number of providers. They are all located in the geographical periphery of England, at some distance from major urban conurbations. Data reported in the TES (Martin, 2022a) suggests that these areas have been particularly hit by the failure to meet national targets, with the Northeast 37% below target, the Southwest 30% below target, and only London hitting above target (by 1%) (Martin, 2022b). Each of these areas has lost a significant provider: one of the 12 university-based providers that were unsuccessful in the accreditation process. The loss of a university-based provider illustrates that the spatial impact of the outcomes of accreditation is not just in the number of places that are available in that region but also in the type of providers that are accessible to potential new teachers in there.

This represents two issues of spatial justice: one in terms of the reduction of choice in some local areas in terms of what providers are available, and the second is the lack of access to university-based provision in some regions. This is not to suggest that university-based provision is superior to non-university-based provision, but to highlight that in some rural communities, which can be characterised as communities of low numbers of graduates, the lack of access to university-based provision is a cause for concern. These are issues of spatial justice because the impact of this policy has been to reduce choice in some areas that already suffer from relative disadvantage.

Relative space: where do policy influences come from?

The ITT Market Review, the ITT CCF, and the criteria for accreditation do not make specific reference to location or locational factors. Lefebvre's (1991) concept of relative space recognises that places are part of a range of scales: local provision of a service such as teacher education is nested with national policies and global trends and is also influenced by variations in local provisions such as the availability of schools (for teaching placements) and the availability of individuals who wish to become teachers. Recognising these influences, particularly the significance of national policies on the availability of local provision, offers another way of understanding the spatial impact of the policy.

Hordern and Brooks's (2023) study of the evidence cited in the CCF and ECF notes the dominance of research drawing on methodologies favoured by the

New Science (as defined by Furlong & Whitty, 2017, as improvement-orientated, “what works” studies that focus on large-scale empirical studies of policy or practice relevance) and an overwhelming focus on identifying causal mechanisms in education. This is also the case with the ITT Market Review, which Brooks (2023) argues “shows a preference for research generated outside of English universities” and which reflects what Tatto (2021) has described as econometric research. The use of such research has been widely critiqued, not least because of its narrow evidence base, inability to draw upon personal, social, and cultural impacts, and simplistic input-to-output logic to reflect effectiveness and efficiency. As Biesta (2007) argues, this type of evidence lacks contextual detail, ethical reflections, transferability, and methodological robustness.

Such evidence has a spatial expression: as it was created in different locations from the policy context where it is used. There is almost a complete absence of references from any of the key British journals or those that focus on teacher education. Helgetun and Menter (2021, p. 98) describe this as a lack of regard for sociological and philosophical accounts as the removal of “moral or philosophical thought” from teacher education policy.

Although many of these influences stem from locations external to the policy context (most of them are based in the US), the focus of the research is firmly located in classrooms. The ITT CCF is structured around the eight areas of the teacher standards, which are orientated to the classroom practice site. Of the eight standards, seven are specifically located within the classroom (high expectations, how pupils learn, subject and curriculum, classroom practice, adaptive teaching, assessment, managing behaviour). The eighth standard, professional behaviours, has the potential to address wider issues of professional practice outside the classroom, such as building effective relationships with parents and families and liaising with specialists who can provide appropriate specific support. As the ITT Market Review emphasises fidelity to the ITT CCF, it introduces two specific requirements that also focus on the site of classroom practice: the inclusion of intensive training and practice elements and mentoring at the site of teaching practice specifically focussing on feedback on classroom behaviours.

On the one hand, it makes sense for teacher education to focus on classroom practice, as that is the main site of teachers’ work. However, there is a danger in placing too much emphasis on the practice of teaching, at the expense of wider professional

understanding of the complexity of influences and causes that make up classroom behaviours (from both students and teachers). This is reflected in the distinction that Orchard and Winch (2015) make between professionals (who are able to make situated judgements based on their broad knowledge and understanding) and the more instrumentally focussed technicians or craft workers.

Looking at the ITT CCF through the lens of relative space, we can see that much of the limited range of research has been generated in contexts external to England, and the policy itself focuses on classroom contexts and classroom practice. This has two impacts: a lack of connection between the evidence base, the context of its application, and the limited definition of what it means to be a teacher.

As there is no attempt in the policy to define “challenging areas”, the implication is that some communities experience education differently from others. A focus on research from other contexts is unlikely to address such issues or the specific needs of those areas. To what extent have cultural differences been accounted for? And if initial training is focussed on classroom practice, how do new teachers develop the understanding, knowledge, and skills they need in an adaptive dynamic social context?

Representational space: how power flows to other places

Any policy that affects practice raises questions of power and influence. Exploring the representational space focusses attention on where that power and influence is manifested and represented. The policy has left areas of cold spots in provision through the redistribution of providers, and in particular the failure to accredit twelve universities. However, the policy relocates some of that training potential to a small collection of relatively new providers, each with a national brief and non-university orientation. This represents a redistribution of power that has a spatial location within London and the Southeast of England.

The accreditation process was not limited to current providers but to any organisation that could satisfy the accreditation criteria. Three new providers were accredited: Ambition Institute, Teach First, and the newly established National Institute of Teaching. While Teach First has been working with new teachers for over 20 years, they had previously been required to work with a university and could only operate in certain regions. Ambition Institute has provided professional development

for teachers in a number of ways but accreditation enables them to partner in ITT for the first time. The National Institute of Teaching was procured by the Department for Education alongside the policy for the ITT Market Review as a flagship ITT provider, and the contract was won by a consortium of school providers who marketed themselves as “school-led” provision. Each of these three providers is directly contracted to the Department for Education for other key initiatives for teacher professional development, specifically the national roll out for the government’s own ECF and NPQ. There are few providers who are responsible for all three government initiatives, and so this development indicates that their scope and reach is almost to the level of being a “super-provider”.

Accreditation to provide all three parts of the government strategy places these providers in influential positions. Not only do they provide all aspects of what the Department for Education has described as its “golden thread” of teacher development, but with the exception of the National Institute of Teaching they are located near or around London. This location is representative of power and influence in two ways: the centralized location offers easier accessibility to almost all areas of the country (through London’s role as a transport hub making it accessible for most of England) and because London is widely regarded as being distinctively different culturally and economically from many other parts of the country, particularly to those areas identified as “cold spots”. In addition, the key government agencies that influence teacher education: the Department for Education, the inspectorate Ofsted, and the government funded research outfit the Education Endowment Foundation are all also located in London, indeed all within a short distance of each other.

The seven national providers of the ECF and the eleven national providers of the NPQ are all located in urban areas. Three of the four “super-providers” (who deliver all aspects of the “golden thread”) are located in London, which suggests a particular influence from the capital city. However, the centralised influence is further emphasised in the DfE’s own document “Delivering World Class Teacher Development” (UK Department for Education, 2022), which places the DfE as the top layer of the infrastructure, with responsibility for determining the content frameworks that guide all other actors in the system. This position places the DfE as the curator of “appropriate” research or evidence for teacher education programmes.

The restructuring of teacher education provision that emerged through the Market Review has a further spatial effect in how it has centred provision to urban centres. The focus on a number of “super-providers” is doing more than shifting the locus of power and control of teacher education to urban areas but is also focussing on it in and around London and the Southeast. This raises questions as to the extent to which these super-providers are aware of the issues faced in areas located outside London, in particular the combination of factors that Ovenden-Hope and Passy (2019) describe as educational isolation, as experienced by schools in rural, coastal, and remote areas of England.

Discussion

The spatial effects of the ITT Market Review in England include the redistribution of provision away from rural and remote areas of England, leaving cold spots; the relocation of power and influence to key organisations based in and around London, and a policy focus on the classroom site, influenced by evidence from different locations to where policy will be enacted. Taken together, there appears to be a widening gap between policy and the very areas that have a high demand for teachers. The policy appears to have been constructed without much attention to its spatial effects. The Teacher Recruitment and Retention Strategy does not define what it means by challenging areas; however, the outcomes of the policy appear to be blind to the needs of those areas.

Where teacher education occurs matters. It has an impact on schools and communities. Areas that experience social, cultural, or economic variances require a localised response. Teachers need to know their communities. They need to understand what education means to those communities and how schools can best serve them. Policies that ignore local issues are unlikely to be able to cater for them.

The ITT Market Review seeks to address the problem of lack of consistency by stipulating a uniform content and pedagogical approach across all providers. However, reviews of teacher recruitment and retention do not suggest that this is the main reason for the teacher supply crisis. Prospective teachers are put off by concerns about status, pay, workload, and autonomy (Allen & Sims, 2018; UK Department for Education, 2019; Gibson, Oliver, & Dennison, 2015). Different geographical patterns of recruitment and retention might suggest that opportunities

for better pay, for example, are more available in some areas than others. (See, Morris, Gorard, & El Soufi, 2020). Therefore, the failure to address these regional variances can be seen as an issue of spatial (in)justice. The analysis suggests that the spatial impact of the policy is likely to adversely affect rural and remote areas, particularly if access to local teacher education is restricted through the outcomes of the accreditation process. In other countries, the spatial pattern of need may vary but the principle of access to high-quality teacher education remains a substantial issue. I would also suggest that focusing on research from places with different teacher education programmes and funding mechanisms may not be the best place to find the answers to addressing local problems experienced by these communities. Indeed, shaping teacher education away from the wider professional aspects of teacher understanding and focusing it too narrowly on classroom practices is unlikely to equip teachers to address the needs of students who come from “challenging areas”. I would also argue that future policy initiatives will need to understand the specific local concerns of rural and remote regions to be able to address them.

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