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Title: Stressed, depressed and exhausted: Six years as a teacher in UK state education

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Abstract

This article foregrounds the experiences of a Newly Qualified Teacher – ‘Daniel’ – in the state education sector in the United Kingdom. It provides an insight into the under-explored realities of teaching work and an empirical connection with a segment of the UK public sector that successive governments have positioned as central to economic and social prosperity. It centres on why nine out of ten teachers who participated in the 2017 National Skills and Employment Survey reported that they ‘often’ or ‘always’ come home from work exhausted. In doing so it also helps to explain why 33% of NQTs leave within 5 years of qualifying. Through Daniel’s story 40 years of neoliberal reform to the UK education system is contextualised and shown to have intensified latent contradictions by stripping teachers of time and the freedom to operate and innovate.

Keys words: Education; Public sector; Neoliberalism, Work intensification; Contradiction

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Introduction

In the 2017 National Skills and Employment Survey it is reported that 92% of teachers in the United Kingdom ‘strongly agreed’ that their job requires them to work ‘very hard’ (Green et

al., 2018). What this means is that nine out of ten teachers surveyed reported that they ‘often’ or ‘always’ come home from work exhausted. In the survey teachers were found to experience twice the average level of workplace stress, resulting in high numbers leaving the profession (Green et al., 2018). These findings are consistent with those published by the UK government’s Department for Education in 2016, which identifies high levels of attrition amongst Newly Qualified Teachers (NQTs) linked to stress and excessive workload. It was reported that 15% of NQTs in England left the profession within one year of qualifying. After three years, 33% had left the profession. The problem was most acute in Inner London, where it was found that 43% of NQTs had left the profession within 5 years of qualifying (Department for Education, 2017)

To foreground the experience behind these statistics we have worked with ‘Daniel’, a pseudo-name for a secondary school history teacher and member of the teacher training class of 2013. Now six years into his career, Daniel uses this article to document his experiences as a teacher in the UK. Mirroring the statistics reported above, the story Daniel tells is a predominantly sad one. He describes working in poorly managed, unsupportive schools, suffering homophobic abuse, extreme work intensity and impossible demands created by a highly-regulated, chronically under-resourced education system. He tells how teachers’ altruism is leveraged to plug ‘fatal flaws’ in the system (Harvey et al., 2018), leading to disenchantment and unforeseen personal challenges (for Daniel) in the form of work-related mental illness. Through his story Daniel helps us to understand why so many NQTs leave the profession so soon after qualifying, adding weight as he does to a growing body of research showing that the contemporary UK public sector is increasingly experienced as oppressive, excessive and unsustainable (e.g. Turnbull and Wass, 2015).

Another important aspect of Daniel’s story is the sharp insight it gives into the contradictions that sit at the heart of the education system. The basic concept of contradiction

refers to the ‘strains, tensions and conflicts’ that arise from systemic antagonisms (McGovern, 2014). Principally discussed in the context of capitalism and the tension between capital and labour, what we see in Daniel’s story is the central contradiction of all state bureaucracies – the challenge of delivering low cost, high quality public services (Heydebrand, 1977). Daniel shows us how these ‘play out’ on the front line (Harvey et al., 2018) in the form of a stark choices between “bleed[ing] yourself dry” and delivering educational opportunities. In doing so we see how contradiction is experienced in state education UK, but also how basic antagonisms have been exacerbated by decades of neoliberal reform (Ball, 2017; Harris and Ranson, 2005) and austerity as a dominant policy paradigm (Jones, 2016).

Therefore, what we gain from Daniel’s story is an understanding of how systemic antagonisms translate into a multiplicity of subtly different contradictions and concomitant experiences. As a consequence we suggest that one way of understanding Daniel’s experiences is in terms of *nested contradictions*. An extension of Heydebrand’s (1977) ‘secondary contradictions’, we invoke this concept to reflect Daniel’s experiences of closely related, interconnected and overlapping contradictions orbiting a central cost-quality axis. For example, the cost-quality contradiction surfaces when Daniel identifies himself as a “casualty” of a colleague being too overworked to facilitate his integration into a new school. On this occasion under-resourcing meant that Daniel was left to suffer in the classroom, and later from the professional embarrassment of knowing there were “obvious issues” with his teaching. The same basic contradiction was also visible when Daniel bemoaned his frustrations when, as Head of Year, chronic under resourcing prevented him from doing anything innovative in his role. Consistent with the effects of neoliberal reforms he feels his civic and social responsibility for the students he teaches – the nation’s ‘human capital’ (Becker, 2009; Blunkett, 2001: 8) – but has no time to actually execute his role.

In revealing the contradictory nature of contemporary teachers' work, Daniel also reveals the 'fatal flaw[s]' (Harvey et al., 2018) in the system. These slide into view in the single hour per week he is given to fulfil his role as Head of Department and in the three and a half hours per week he is given to assess, plan and prepare lessons for 340 pupils. We see how Daniel tries to overcome these flaws, such as by working 'extremely' (Bloomfield and Dale, 2015), and by creatively 'gaming the system' (Bevan and Hood, 2006). However we also see how these actions trigger new, internal tensions. For example, to survive audits of his work Daniel contravenes his own ethics, creating an illusion of high quality and standards by manipulating key points of assurance and indexes of quality (Hoyle and Wallace, 2005). These are not grand acts of resistance, rather, he simply drops those parts of his job that will not be noticed and marks pupils' workbooks he knows will be checked. Other aspects of his job, such as workbooks that will not be checked, get left. In these ways systemic issues become personal ones, in the form of challenging choices and internal conflicts where there are no right answers and nobody wins.

Paradoxically, in gaming the system and working extremely, Daniel plugs the gaps in the system but disguises its 'fundamental weakness' (Harvey et al., 2018): It 'hits the target but misses the point' that education is under-resourced and that the quality assurance mechanisms in place give little more than the suggestion that all is well (Green, 2011). Thus while system-wide measures of students' performance (and thus teachers' performance) show improvements (Stevenson and Wood, 2014), consistent with Heydebrand's theorising, we can see through Daniel's experiences how these improvements come 'without regard to the social and human costs of production and its consequences for the quality of life' (Heydebrand, 1977: 90). Thus we can see the cost of quality education to be high and that a large proportion of this cost is borne by the teachers personally.

For these reasons in particular we foreground Daniel's experiences, which to summarise, help us to understand why so many NQTs leave the profession as a consequence of a myriad of interrelated ['nested'] contradictory pressures. Daniel's story exemplifies the experience of teaching in the UK, but it also has relevance to other education systems around the world. For example, in America where studies highlight the corrosive effects of high-stakes accountability on teaching and learning (Santoro, 2011) and point towards disillusionment amongst teachers whose access to the intrinsic rewards of the job is increasingly limited (Rooney, 2015). Also in Australia where policies centred on devolved responsibility and an increased emphasis on audit and accountability have also been implemented. Studies in this context show that, as in the UK, these reforms have rapidly intensified teachers' work and created a 'tsunami' of paperwork under which teachers are now drowning (Fitzgerald et al., 2018). In these places, as in the UK, we are likely to find many Daniels.

Introducing Daniel

Daniel read history at university and then took a one year teacher training course. He started work as a 'Newly Qualified Teacher' (NQT) in 2013. For the first six months of his career he taught History at Breadwell School, from there he moved to Tonbridge High and then to St John's. All were state Comprehensive Schools, which are typical community schools. He is now Head of Department.

Daniel's story

My NQT year

I began my career as a History teacher at Breadwell School. The school was everything that I expected and hoped it would be. I worked in an incredibly supportive environment, there were training programmes, fortnightly meetings, teaching observations and constant support. However, my three month fixed-term contract (a contract typical amongst NQTs) came to an end and I had to move on.

I joined Tonbridge High School in January 2014. Within three days of starting work my Head of Department went off on long-term sick. This wasn't a great start because there was nobody there to fill in the gap. It left me as the only history teacher in the school. As an NQT you are very inexperienced. However instead of having a Head of Department supporting me I had to take on much of their teaching, and even some of their leadership responsibilities. I found myself teaching every year group in the school, from new entrants (year 7, age 11) right the way through to A-level students. I also had to support the supply teachers brought in to provide cover. It was a lot. I found it difficult and stressful.

A significant part of the difficulty and the stress I experienced was because when my Head of Department went off sick I discovered there were no schemes of work (documents that outline what will be taught each term) or teaching resources. Term was starting and literally nothing was in place. It was incredibly unprofessional and it became my problem to fix. Nobody seemed to care that I'd been qualified for less than 6 months. The Head thought it was fine for someone in my position to pick up this kind of teaching load with no notice. She just didn't care. Nor did anyone else. I got no help.

Of course, I just got on and did it. What else could I do? I used old syllabuses, planned my teaching and found resources on-line, but I had no idea what the expectations of the exam boards were. I've a degree in history, but it is hard to know exactly what to teach, and how. Particularly for A-levels, which can be very in-depth. If I was a parent I'd have been very, very

concerned. Think about it: I was 6 months post-qualification, working alone, not being managed, with no resources and no experience taking students through their GCSE and A-Level exams. Reflecting on the situation now, as a Head of Department, I would be mortified if that happened in my department.

Disinterest was endemic throughout the school, particularly in relation to NQTs. As an NQT you are not supposed to take on Head of Department responsibilities. You are supposed to be eased in, supported, trained and observed by a school mentor. However the only time I saw my school mentor was in my end of year meeting when she signed off my documentation. That was it. Perhaps she was stretched, but it made me the casualty because eventually it became apparent that I wasn't doing my job particularly well. I discovered this when I was observed by an Assistant Head towards the end of term. She quickly realised that something was wrong. There were obvious issues with my teaching. I needed help. I was embarrassed. But I'd had no observations, no feedback and no training. How was I supposed to know?

The Assistant Head contacted my external NQT mentor (who had been appointed as part of a national programme of support for NQTs) and he took over. I was just one of many NQTs he visited in different schools, but he spoke with the Headteacher and tried to make sure the school did what it was supposed to. He didn't fix all the problems, but he was my saviour. I was struggling, even 'failing', but he had absolute belief that I could be a good teacher. That was very, very important to me because without him saying: 'you can do this' and 'you've got it', I don't know where I would have been. Eventually the Headteacher arranged for one of the Deputy Heads to support me, but by that point I'd been teaching for months, almost entirely unobserved and completely unsupported.

The challenges of teaching

When you are a teacher, but particularly when you are an NQT, a significant amount of the stress you experience is caused by difficulties with managing student behaviour. School behaviour management plans are often highly ineffective. At Tonbridge there was a plan in place but the mentality was that behaviour management was the responsibility of the teacher. If a child misbehaved in your lessons, it was it was always your fault, you were doing something wrong.

When you are a teacher, pupils can see your weaknesses and they get really good at exploiting them. Any parent will tell you that. This was another area where, despite being an NQT, I got no help or advice. When pupil behaviour got out of hand, nobody was there to intervene and help me out. The Heads of Year would normally be expected to do this, but at Tonbridge they were too busy to help. This meant that I regularly had situations where a pupil would arrive for my lesson having skipped a detention I'd given them. It was brazen. They would just sit there smiling, knowing full well they had ignored your detention and you couldn't do anything about it.

I was particularly prone to abuse from pupils because I'm gay. Schools in general seem completely unable to deal with this effectively. When I was a student teacher on a training placement I had a very nasty situation: a child screaming homophobic abuse in my face in front of the whole class. On that occasion my teaching mentor was outside and heard the whole thing, but didn't act or come in. I was supposed to observe her, and have her observe me, but often she did not come into the classroom at all. She'd just sit outside and listen. She told me, 'you need to feel the flames'. So I felt the flames. She gave me a baptism of fire.

At Tonbridge I regularly experienced homophobic incidents, that I reported to school management. However they refused to act unless the incident was observed by another member of staff. My voice alone was not enough. One pupil made some awful comments but because there was not another teacher present when it happened no action was taken. This meant that

the pupil was allowed to continue being abusive and I had to teach him as though nothing was happening. So, the pupil would be back in my lesson day after day, sitting at the front of the class, continuing his homophobic abuse. There was nothing I could do. Eventually a colleague overheard the comments and went with me to report it. Only then was he disciplined. But that was just one pupil, the others weren't dealt with.

My perception is that the school leadership just didn't know how to deal with the behaviour. Or else they didn't class homophobic behaviour as something worth dealing with. Perhaps they didn't want the hassle.

Moving on from Tonbridge School

I did my best but my career at Tonbridge School was short-lived. It's fairly standard in teaching for NQTs to only get short, fixed-term contracts. The reason for this is that if you don't make the grade they don't renew your contract. They think: 'that's the weak link, just get rid of him'. As it turned out, I was a weak link. In June 2014 the Head told me that I wouldn't be kept on, they needed someone to come in and just do the job. She didn't want the hassle of me and all my needs. I was a cog that didn't quite fit the machine. So I got replaced. I suppose you need to have a certain steeliness about you to be a Headteacher, but it doesn't make it right. I felt betrayed, angry and upset. I was trying really hard to meet their expectations in what was an incredibly difficult situation.

After my horrendous experiences at Tonbridge High School I felt lucky to get another job, at St John's School, where I still am now. I learnt a lot from my NQT year, so when I joined St John's it was less daunting. I felt more adept and more used to the school environment. For the first three years I just got my head down and tried to consolidate what I'd learnt. It was hard because the workload was incredibly high, but I worked hard and managed

to get through it. So after three years I decided I was comfortable teaching and agreed to become a Head of Year, which is a largely pastoral role. I was really excited about the opportunity as there were many exciting things I wanted to do, but in practice I didn't have time to make any changes at all. As the Head of Year, I was still teaching 80% of a full timetable but I was now also responsible for attendance, behaviour and personal issues experienced by the 130 pupils. I was shocked to discover there was no formal training programme for this role. Not even a booklet or a handbook. There was literally nothing.

I found learning on the job extremely difficult because at St John's there were a lot of children who came from very unsavoury, abusive home life situations. I'd be in meetings with social services with no idea what I was meant to do. I desperately wanted to do my job well, but I could feel the worry and the stress building. Managers could see that I was struggling. The stress and the workload were taking their toll but I was just expected to get the work done. The advice and support I got was laughable. I needed a workload reduction so that I could do the job properly but, rather than finding ways of doing that, I was just told to go home earlier and to stop taking the work with me. But I'm there saying: 'the job description says I have to do all these things and I'm also a classroom teacher. Tell me what I don't do?'. They couldn't tell me, because nothing could be allowed to slip. Around this time the Government produced a pamphlet telling teachers how they can reduce their stress and workload. The strategies were totally unfeasible. I ripped mine up. The school brought someone in to talk to staff about how to cope with stress. The lady suggested: 'If you're sitting in traffic look out the window at a tree for 10 minutes'. What use is that?!

Eventually the pressure of the role became too much and I had to take time off work. The doctor diagnosed me with stress. The school was supportive, but only to a degree. I needed a workload reduction, but that didn't happen. In the end they offered counselling. I went to one session. The man told me that he couldn't give any advice other than to reduce my workload

and relax. I didn't go back. I knew my workload needed to reduce, significantly. I didn't need a counsellor to tell me that.

I began to handle the stress in my own way but gave up the pastoral role. It was impossible to manage. However, not long after I gave up being Head of Year, my Head of Department left. This role was the next step in my career so I felt I needed to apply. So, I did, and was appointed Head of Department, responsible for exam result analysis, development plans, department evaluation and line managing two teachers. I also dealt with pupil behaviour issues, staff issues, meeting with parents and monitoring classrooms. To do all that work the school allocated me a single hour a week. One hour. Just one. Only, it's not even that because every fortnight I have to spend an hour in a meeting with other line managers. So in practice I actually got 30 minutes each week to do all that work. I thought as Head of Department I'd be able to spend my time improving the department. Instead I had to spend hours evaluating last year, with no time left to think about this year and the changes we needed to make.

I like the recognition of being Head of Department. I do like having the title and I've worked hard for it, but it is not worth the money. I earn an extra £150 a month after tax and deductions. Is it worth it? No. I traded work-life balance for an opportunity to take a step up on the ladder. I don't know if I necessarily want to go any further up that ladder, not that things would be any better if I took a step back down again. The workload on frontline teachers is just massive. For example, St John's School allocates teachers 3.5 hours per week for preparation, planning and assessment – it is called 'PPA'. I have 250 pupils at key stage 3 plus another 60 at GCSE and then 30 in my A-level classes. If I spent three minutes marking each book that would be 70 books marked a week, which is less than 20% of my students. That is assuming I mark one book right after another and don't stop for any breaks. When do I mark the rest of the books and plan brand new exciting lessons? How can every single lesson be rated as 'good' or 'excellent' in lesson observations if you're given 3.5 hours PPA?

School leaders know the workload is not sustainable, but they pay lip-service to the issue. For example, we are told to reduce the amount of feedback we give to pupils, and only provide detailed feedback on one piece of work per pupil. Of course, the school then does an audit of our books and pulls us up for not correcting enough of their other work. What do you do? Last weekend I spent six hours marking 28 pupils' books. Ideally, I would get through 60 books in a week. Half across 6 hours at a weekend, and the rest after school or during lessons. I should mark everybody's work once a fortnight, so that would be 300 books, so 150 a week. That's before all the other things I have to do. I can't do it. It is not possible, right now I have 300 books to mark, 40 lessons to plan, 300 sets of data to input.

It's impossible to do my job during waking hours, let alone during my contracted hours. I wake up at 5.45, I'm in work for 7.30 and I leave work 5.30/6 o'clock and that's still not enough. To be honest it's pointless even trying. You just have to find creative ways to game the system. For example, you will know when they are doing book audits, so when it's your turn you'll make sure that the books for that class are perfectly marked. Your marking for other classes won't stop (because you'd feel too guilty) but they're just not a priority. One year I marked books in June, that had been given to me in January. It had no impact whatsoever on the students, but I marked them in case they were checked.

Where you focus your energy has to constantly shift just to survive. If you're not able to do this you get into trouble because the Headteacher marks (yes, marks!) your work. She sends it back to me with red pen if it's not good enough. It's like I'm a pupil, as well! So we learn to cope by being selfish at times and not doing things we're supposed to unless it's being audited. It's awful that's what we have to do to survive, but you have to learn how to beat them at their own game. The work will never be finished, you'll never be on top of everything. You have just got to accept it and move on. It is well known that this is what is going on, but we all

turn a blind eye. One Assistant Head said to me 'I don't plan lessons I just walk into the classroom and teach', I'm thinking, Christ, at your teaching level!

Concluding reflections

For most teachers their work is never 'just' a job. You'll bleed yourself dry because you really do care. If you don't do something you think will help your pupils, you'll feel incredibly guilty, just horrible. Guilt motivates, no, compels us. The problem is that the people who manage us know this, and they leverage this commitment to make us do more and more. When pupils do well I feel proud, it is a great badge of honour when you see them moving on to what they want to do. Last year three of my pupils studied history at university. You can see they've been inspired and they want to make your subject their career. That feels fantastic. Many pupils do appreciate what we do, I get cards and little presents at the end of the year, I feel valued and this is lovely.

When schools are run well they're a great place to work. When I worked at Breadwell School, I felt valued and supported. But in Tonbridge I left feeling betrayed, foolish, inadequate, let down and just relieved to still be alive. In St John's I'm only just coping. The thing is, I don't want to be 'coping'. I want to feel free and comfortable. I don't know how you can have a husband or a wife and children and a life outside of this place. You just can't. I know the Deputy Head will come into school for 7.30, work through until the end of the day, go home, spend an hour with his children then work through until 1 o'clock in the morning. On a Friday when he leaves work, he'll just work straight through until 2am, with Saturday off with the children and his wife and then work all day Sunday. He does that constantly. The work expectations are totally unrealistic. They're increasing steadily and good people are leaving because they just can't cope.

Unfortunately, I don't see things changing. In the time I have been at St John's, government cuts have really started to bite and are making things even worse. Everything has been cut. Staff have gone and we are scraping the bottom of the barrel. I'd say we're almost completely down to the wood. St John's certainly can't take any more. When it rains, I get water pouring through the ceiling. I had a puddle on the floor in my classroom just the other day. That is what cuts look like. I also know colleagues who are on anti-depressants, just to help them overcome the effects of their workload. They're normal capable people, but they have to be medicated to do their work! I don't want to be medicated to do my job, but that's what cuts look like. There are gestures, nods to support, gratitude for working hard but it's just lip service. So will I leave teaching? I cannot really afford to, but I do seriously consider it fortnightly if not weekly. The outlook in teaching is not promising.

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