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Exploring the well-being of early career teachers: staying afloat whilst fixing the boat during COVID-19

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ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 pandemic had a major impact on schools, leading to far-reaching and rapid responses by those in the sector. This included the cohort of student-teachers who were training to teach during the 2019–2020 academic year. Due to a national UK lockdown in the spring and summer of 2020, this cohort of individuals were unable to undertake school placements where they would gain the majority of their classroom experience before starting as qualified teachers. This paper reports on data we collected in a British Academy funded study from members of the cohort as they started their first year of teaching, to try to understand the impact of the loss of practical classroom teaching whilst training and to understand the extent of the impact this had on their well-being as they entered an unfamiliar and stressed sector. The results from the analysis suggest that this cohort of newly qualified teachers were meeting multiple challenges, which in some cases had a reported impact on their well-being. However, where they were well supported, and where strong professional relationships were developed, and performative measures were reconsidered, these challenges were more than compensated for by the resources individuals could draw on to ensure their continued development and positive well-being. However, there are still questions to answer as to how this cohort will react as schools return to performative, accountability-driven contexts, approaches to education that this cohort have had little experience of.

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Introduction and context

The COVID-19 pandemic had a major impact on the socio-economic fabric of the UK (El-Erian 2020; Blundell et al., 2022). The temporary shutting down of large parts of the economy, the introduction of restrictions on movement and the use of social distancing, all brought fundamental changes to day-to-day life. Whilst there is already a focus on the economic impact, and hence how the private sector will be changed by the pandemic over both a short and longer term (Gurumurthy and Leadbetter 2020), as yet there is less open consideration of the potential impact on the sustainability of public services and the

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longer-term impact they will face. In creating a sustainable longer-term response to the pandemic, whilst also building systemic resilience against future crises, it is essential that we begin to understand the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic across a wide spectrum of human and societal activity.

In attempting to understand the impact of the pandemic and how we might use the insights we can gain from it to consider change, we focus here on a specific group of individuals in the education sector; those who qualified to teach in the summer of 2020. Teacher education programmes in England, responsible for providing qualified teachers to the school sector, require the completion of school placements where student teachers undertake teaching practice in schools for prolonged periods of time. The longest teaching placement for student teachers is normally undertaken in the spring and early summer of the final year of training. As a consequence, the 2019–2020 cohort of qualifying teachers were forced to take up their first positions in schools with severely curtailed practical experience in the classroom due to the national lockdown which lasted from March to July, 2020 (see Figure 1), with a phased return of schools from early June, 2020. This happened at a time of great anxiety and uncertainty for schools, parents and pupils, and therefore the lack of extended workplace learning may have hampered student teachers' transition into full-time roles as qualified teachers, roles they generally took up in September 2020, at the beginning of the 2020–21 academic year.

Those qualifying in 2020 were also the last cohort to receive only one year of induction support, including mentoring and formal professional development, on becoming newly qualified teachers (NQTs[1]). In England, teachers do not fully qualify until they have completed a period of time in a full-time teaching post (originally a year, until 2021 when it increased to 2 years), and only then if they are assessed as having attained a given level of expertise against a government set of Teachers' Standards (Department for Education 2012). To aid this transition, each NQT is assigned a mentor and should be offered meaningful additional support. Yet, it is clear that 'schools that recruit NQTs may need to consider how these early career teachers are supported to maintain a sense of personal agency in relation to their teacher identity' (Glazzard and Coverdale 2018, p. 99), and that the relationship between a professional mentor and newly qualified teacher is key to their success (Totterdell 2005, O'Sullivan and Conway 2016). It is crucial that we understand the experiences, challenges and successes faced by the 2019–20 cohort of teachers as they entered their chosen profession in the public sector. This is particularly so in the context

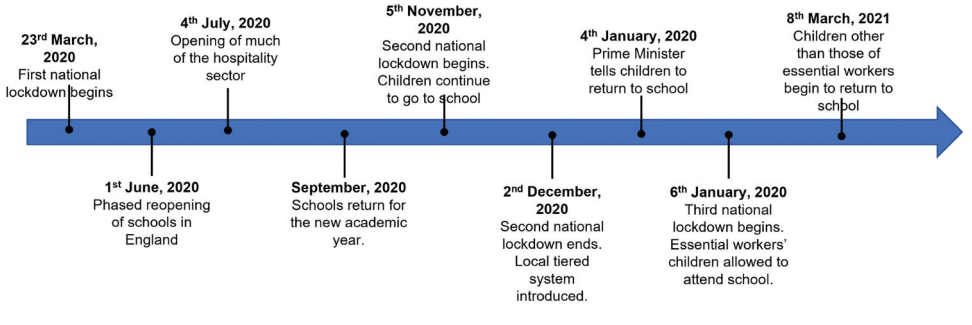

Figure 1. National and educational timeline for covid in England. (Based on Institute for Government timeline, https://www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/sites/default/files/timeline-lockdown-web.pdf.)

of ongoing problems with teacher retention and well-being (Birchinall *et al.* 2019, Quickfall *et al.* 2022, Worth and Faulkner-Ellis 2022). Whilst this study was based in England, many countries around the world have challenges around the recruitment and retention of student teachers into initial teacher education (Quickfall and Wood 2024), and the findings from this project may be helpful to those who seek to address similar challenges in their own systems.

A recruitment and retention gap in the English education system has been apparent for a number of years (Department for Education 2018, Geiger and Pivovarova 2018, Noble-Rogers 2020). A report published by the Department for Education (DfE, 2018) highlighted that over half of those teachers who responded had considered leaving the profession in the previous 2 years. In addition, 45% felt that they were unable to find a positive work–life balance, suggesting a serious set of issues which are hampering both the recruitment and retention of teachers. It is in this context that a cohort of new teachers entering the profession at a time of national crisis might lead to a further exacerbation of an already poor employment environment if not well supported, given that even before the advent of the COVID-19 pandemic, 4,000 NQTs left their posts in 2018, which equates to one-seventh of the total cohort (DfE, 2018, Speck 2019).

The research reported here covered three overarching research questions concerning the 2020 cohort of NQTs and their experiences in light of the COVID-19 crisis and its impact on their training and induction year, with particular reference to well-being:

(1) What do NQTs see as their challenges and resources in meeting the demands of their first year of teaching?
(2) How do the experiences of NQTs develop over the course of their first year of teaching?
(3) What lessons can be learnt concerning the longer-term transition, training and support needs of the NQTs from this cohort?

Teacher well-being: reflecting on the challenges and resources NQTs use to meet the demands of their roles

Teacher well-being

Teacher retention and well-being are recurrent and pertinent issues that have been exacerbated by the pandemic, with continued recruitment issues resurfacing in the 2021/22 academic year in England. There is a paucity of research on well-being and stress levels in teacher trainees and NQTs; the normalisation of a high-stress atmosphere of early career teachers is possibly an explanation for this (Birchinall *et al.* 2019), however, there is a growing body of literature on the well-being of fully qualified teachers and teacher well-being and workload issues have been linked to mental health problems (Skinner *et al.* 2021). Burnout and poor mental health are relatively common in the profession (Skaalvik and Skaalvik 2010, Rumschlag 2017), and specific cases of burnout in qualified teachers have been linked to the development of symptoms in their early careers (Väisänen *et al.* 2018).

Since the Education Reform Act of 1988, education in England has seen a shift in emphasis towards managerialism and quasi-marketisation. This has led to a change in

the educational landscape (Burgess 2008, Faulkner and Coates 2013) which has altered the teacher role, encompassing ever more responsibilities, whilst also increasing the individual responsibilities of teachers with regard to student outcomes and accountability more generally. Perryman and Calvert (2020) highlight the need for new teachers to engage with the performative nature of the profession. But the result of these changes includes the need for teachers to work very long hours (Hardy 2016, Richardson *et al.* 2018; National Association of Schoolmasters Union of Women Teachers 2019; National Education Union 2019) leading to an increased risk of burnout (Sellen 2016).

Research published in the early part of the COVID-19 pandemic highlights a shifting educational culture and context with schools forced to react to changes without a systematic or pre-planned response (Campbell 2020). Netolicky (2020, p. 392) suggesting this led to a transformation of the traditional performative environment in schools with the 'tightrope of accountability and autonomy' temporarily disrupted. Netolicky (2020) explores this shift away from overbearing performativity, which enabled schools to change their focus from one of 'measurable outcomes' to 'the humanity of education' by moving away from an emphasis on 'performance, surveillance and compliance' of teachers (Netolicky 2020, p. 392). The opportunity for increased autonomy, collegiality, community and professional capital that research suggests (Azorín 2020, Sahlberg 2020, Stone-Johnson and Weiner 2020, Trombly 2020) typifies many school environments during that period may impact on NQTs' experiences and subsequent views of their professional role.

It has been suggested that the transition between student teacher and qualified teacher is often 'dramatic and traumatic' due to the 'reality-shock' they experience when faced with the reality and complexity of teaching (Haggarty *et al.* 2011, p. 937). This is echoed by Perryman and Calvert (2020, p. 7) who describe the mismatch between student teacher expectations of teaching and the reality, which they suggest lead to a 'discourse of disappointment'. They suggest that this discourse specifically relates to the performative aspects of teaching (Perryman and Calvert 2020).

Research on NQTs experiences during the pandemic is scarce, but where it exists the focus is on practical advice for future teachers. One study carried out in 2020 suggests that the 'upheaval COVID-19 has caused to education means that PSTs (pre-service teachers, i.e. student teachers) may need to be more proactive in their own preparation, and consider the additional complexities COVID-19 brings' (Moorhouse 2021, p. 3). Another study makes recommendations for PGCE student teachers (PGCE programmes are 1 year, post-graduate programmes which convert graduates into newly qualified teachers (NQTs)), including focus on research and tailored support, acknowledging that 'different trainees have had very different experiences of training during the COVID-19 pandemic, with associated variation in the challenges they are likely to face (or have faced) in their first years in the classroom' (Rushton *et al.* 2021, p. 3).

Defining well-being for our study

The concept of well-being is difficult to define (Pollard and Lee 2003, Ortega-Alcázar and Dyck 2012) and is often considered as complex and multi-dimensional (Masters 2004, Dodge *et al.* 2012). Following Holmes (2005, p. 5), we felt as a research team that well-

being 'implies a sense of balance and ease with the myriad dimensions of life'. In attempting to reflect some of the complexity of the concept, the working definition of well-being we are using is as follows:

> Maintaining the balance between resources and challenges . . . these factors may be internal or external and operate in a dynamic flux over time(adapted from Dodge *et al.* 2012, p. 223).

The definition of well-being that we have chosen, drawing on the work of Dodge *et al.* (2012), reflects our own experiences; as NQTs we all experienced the difficulty of finding a balance between resources and challenges, as well as the personal and professional (Pillen *et al.* 2013). Individuals face challenges which can negatively impact on their well-being, such as teaching a difficult class or finding it difficult to fit into a school culture when first on placement. Such challenges can be mitigated to a greater or lesser degree by the resources an individual might draw on such as friendships, or excellent school-based mentoring. Well-being is then impacted by the balance of these opposing forces, shifting over time as the balance shifts. Well-being can change rapidly over time; the experience of feeling elated at 9.05am, followed by crushing anxiety by 9.15 am is common. Student teachers and NQTs often apportion the outcomes of fast-moving situations on themselves, taking responsibility for what they perceive to be positive and negative situations and linking these to their own actions and practice (Larsen and Allen 2016). It is important that any well-being related theoretical lens can take into account the impact of this 'flux' in well-being over time when it is linked so closely to personal decisions and actions by NQTs.

The resources and challenges aspect of the theory provides a personal approach to considering both internal and external factors which may impact upon participants' well-being (Thompson *et al.* 2020). Resources and challenges can be psychological, social or physical (Dodge *et al.* 2012), for example; a person may draw upon their experiences of previous situations (psychological), the support of their friends and family (social) and their physical fitness (physical) when facing a challenge. Likewise, challenges might be related to issues with confidence (psychological), difficult relationships with colleagues in a practicum setting (social), or the result of a lack of sleep (physical) when working hard to plan, mark and complete academic work, all to very short deadlines. Well-being is the state of having enough resources to tackle the challenges in any given moment, in a context where the balance of resources to challenges is constantly changing. However, it is important to note that we are not theorising 'challenges' as negative and 'resources' as positive – challenges can be rewarding and fulfilling if we have the resources to tackle them successfully.

A benefit of using Dodge et al.'s model as a basis for our research during the pandemic is that it allows well-being to be defined and qualitatively 'measured' in circumstances that are not 'normality' (Dodge *et al.* 2012, p. 224). Using resources and challenges with participants and asking them to comment on their perceptions of what they can draw upon, alongside what they need to deal with, presents a picture of their well-being that is not reliant on a comparison with when life is 'normal' – which would not be appropriate as they have not been an NQT in non-pandemic times. It also gives the opportunity to consider the additional challenges reported by NQTs which are caused by the pandemic, and resources that may have been depleted, or bolstered during this period.

Table 1. Research design and data collection outline.

Stage	Timeframe for data collection	Data collection approach
1	August 2020 - September 2020	Interviewing of 9 NQTs
2	October 2020 - June 2021	3 questionnaires tracking aspects of NQT work, one questionnaire during each term (November, March and June).
3	July 2021 – August 2021	Interviewing of 5 NQTs

Research design

To explore the research questions posed, our research design was based on a multi-stage sequential mixed methods approach of QUALI-QUANTS-QUALI design (Table 1). This brings together an initial phase of exploratory sequential mixed methods (QUALI-QUANTS) followed by an explanatory phase (QUANTS-QUALI) (see also Quickfall *et al.* 2022).

Table 2, below, shows how the research design related to the ongoing change in government policies such as school openings/closures and national lockdowns.

The initial interviews were completed (Quickfall *et al.* 2022) to gain an insight focusing on the challenges student teachers had faced during their training year and

Table 2. Timeline of NQT project/COVID-19 in UK schools, 2020/21.

23rd March 2020: UK lockdown begins – teacher trainee cohorts withdrawn from school placements in most cases. Department for Education directs training providers to use trajectory assessments to recommend qualified teacher status. Keyworker children are allowed to attend school during this period. Schools have phased return from June for some year groups but most teacher trainees do not return to schools.

September: Schools open with safety measures such as 'bubbles' in place – groups of children and staff who do not mix with other bubble, so that in the event of an outbreak leaders can avoid closing the whole school.

► ***Project: Social media recruitment begins for interviews with NQT participants to inform survey***

October: As covid numbers increase, a three tier system is introduced in England with local lockdowns which do not affect school attendance. As numbers grow further, a second lockdown is planned.

► ***Project: Autumn Survey launched via social media***

5th November: Second lockdown begins and lasts four weeks. Schools remain open.

December: Schools in high COVID-19 infection areas petition to close before the Christmas holidays and are warned that they must remain open. Mixing of households is allowed over Christmas.

► ***Project: Autumn Survey closes.***

4th January: Prime Minister announces that schools should open physically for the Spring Term.

5th January: After one day at school for most children, third lockdown is announced and all schools close to the majority of pupils for face to face learning. Keyworker children are allowed to attend school and learners who are deemed vulnerable. Schools are tasked with creating online content that will meet the National Curriculum requirements for children who are at home.

8th March: Schools reopen to all children.

► ***Project: Spring survey launched via social media on 12th March.***

April

► ***Project: Spring Survey closes.***

May

June: Education 'catch-up' plans announced by Department for Education.

► ***Project: Summer Survey launched via social media.***

July 2021: 839,100 children, or 11.2 per cent of the total pupil population, were off for Covid-related reasons on 8th July according to the DfE.

Schools close as scheduled for Summer holidays.

► ***Project: Summer Survey closes and all participants from Autumn, Spring and Summer surveys whohave expressed an interest in a final interview are contacted. Interviews take place July/August.***

the resources they were able to draw upon in supporting them. Questions were also asked to understand their more general experiences of teacher training and any initial experiences they might have of the schools in which they had gained their jobs (see Appendix 1 for question roster).

An initial analysis of the interview transcripts which followed allowed us to identify important themes in their experiences which we used as the foundation allowing us to develop a questionnaire (see Appendix 2) which focused on the identified factors to understand NQT perceptions over the course of the year (stage 2). The questionnaire allowed us to consider general trends in NQT experiences. We altered some of the questions for each of the three questionnaires over the course of the academic year to ensure that the questions remained relevant, whilst retaining a core of questions to see how responses might be similar or different between each data capture point. One limitation of the research is that it was not possible to keep consistent respondents between each point across the year. This means that we can make some general comparisons between data points, but nothing more specific as the data is not longitudinal at an individual level.

On each occasion that we ran the questionnaire, we asked respondents if they would share their emails with us if they would be happy for us to contact them at the end of the academic year (July 2021) July 2021, to offer them an opportunity to complete an interview about their experiences over the course of the year.

Participants for the first two phases of the research were gained through advertising on social media, particularly through the use of X (at the time, known as Twitter). We believed that this maximised our opportunity of gaining a sample with a wide range of experience and from a wide geographical spread (Quickfall 2022). The X advertisement was in the form of a poster inviting reply to a university email address. We then answered initial interest with a standard email containing a consent form and information sheet, and a short demographics questionnaire which we intended to use as a sampling tool in stage 1 of the fieldwork. In the event, we received only a small amount of interest and interviewed nine NQTs before creating the first questionnaire.

The results we focus on in this paper are from the three questionnaires, and the tables below give an outline of the characteristics of the opportunity samples we gained during the project. Table 3 shows that in the Autumn and Spring, roughly similar samples of primary and secondary respondents completed the questionnaire. However, in the summer term, fewer primary respondents completed the questionnaire as a proportion of the whole. In addition, there were a significant smaller number of respondents in the spring term. However, as shown in Table 2, the questionnaire was sent out just after the reopening of schools in March 2021, and may therefore have not been a priority during an undoubtedly hectic period of the academic year. Findings from the interviews can be found in Quickfall *et al.* (2022).

Table 3. Respondents to questionnaire by educational phase.

	Autumn	Spring	Summer
Primary (3–11 year olds)	29	16	16
Secondary (11–18 year olds)	27	12	28
Post-16 (16–19 year olds)	1	0	0
Total	**57**	**28**	**44**

Table 4. Respondents by gender.

	Autumn	Spring	Summer
Primary (3–11 year olds)	29	16	16
Secondary (11–18 year olds)	27	12	28
Post-16 (16–19 year olds)	1	0	0
Total	**57**	**28**	**44**

Respondents were also predominantly female (Table 4). This may be in part due to the much larger proportion of female primary-level teachers compared to males but is still high overall.

Research ethics

The BERA ethical guidelines (2018) were used to guide our research design and ethical approval was sought and gained from the university ethics committee before data collection commenced. Ethical issues around recruitment via social media have not been properly explored (Gelinas *et al.* 2017) and recruitment in this context can present issues with informing participants about the study; potential participants may misrepresent or misunderstand the criteria for participation (Samuel 2017). We sent an information sheet to all potential participants to reiterate the aims, duration and nature of the project, plus ethical considerations such as anonymity, consent and withdrawal in the preamble to the questionnaire and interview. Participants and potential participants may identify themselves as part of the project on social media, in response to advertisements to participate or in their own posts. The researchers asked potential participants to respond by email only to minimise this. Consent was considered a renegotiated situation, throughout the research process, rather than a fixed, summative point (Miller and Bell 2012). Participants were asked to confirm their consent at each questionnaire point/interview. Interviews were anonymised during transcription and any identifying wording, such as school names, were removed. Interviews took place at a distance due to COVID-19 restrictions, so we recorded ourselves asking participants to confirm they were happy to proceed and to record the interviews.

Results

The termly samples across the study reflect the importance of different training routes in the English initial teacher education system. As Table 5 shows, across all three terms, respondents came predominantly from two routes into teaching. First, a SCITT (School-

Table 5. Initial teacher education programmes followed by respondents.

	Autumn	Spring	Summer
SCITT	19	10	15
University Undergraduate	7	4	3
University Postgraduate	26	13	20
School Direct	2	0	1
School Direct PGCE	2	0	0
Apprenticeship	1	0	0
Assessment only	0	1	0
Teach First	0	0	4
Independent	0	0	1

Centred Initial Teacher Education) route, where typically, student teachers complete a 1-year post-graduate programme having completed a university degree. They are based in a local school alliance where the majority of their training takes place, as well as their classroom placements. The school alliance will normally have a university partner with whom student teachers complete a Post Graduate Certificate in Education. This form of teacher education programme is managed and delivered mainly by the school alliance and hence by teachers who during the pandemic will have had huge additional pressure to keep both teacher education and school-work moving forward.

Postgraduate university programmes are 1-year programmes similar to SCITTs, but here, the main organisation involved is a university, which conducts teaching during periods of the course, and organises for student teachers to complete two or three school-based placements where they develop their practical skills as teachers. This latter element of the course takes up the majority of the programme time and is based on an experiential learning model, with support from a school-based mentor.

Table 6 shows the summary of questions which were asked about respondents' experiences in both their initial teacher education and NQT years. Dark shading shows that some questions were only relevant in some of the questionnaires and hence, whilst there were a core of questions asked throughout the three questionnaires, some were dropped or replaced by a more relevant question as the experiences of NQTs developed.

There is some variability in the responses, but overall, perhaps the most surprising outcome is the general positivity of student teachers in the autumn term as they entered into their NQT year, especially given that they had not completed the main school placement due to the first national lockdown in England. Forty-four of 57 respondents said that they agreed or strongly agreed that their training had prepared them well for their NQT year. Fewer felt confident moving into their NQT year 28 agreeing/strongly agreeing that they were confident, but this is against only 17 who disagreed or strongly disagreed.

There are also a significant minority who felt that their skills, understanding of how to improve and work during the first lockdown were all compromised by the pandemic. However, any deficiency some NQTs felt from their experience in their training year appears to have been mitigated for many in the first part of their NQT year. Only 14 of 57 identify their initial NQT development programme as being inadequate, and the more general support from colleagues and the chance they have to continue to develop as teachers appear to be seen as positive by the majority.

These patterns are repeated in the second and third set of responses showing that NQTs at different points in their initial year of teaching appear to have felt generally positive about the initial phase of their careers. Support from colleagues and the presence of a well-developed programme for teacher development appear to have been critical in helping individuals to enhance and deepen their practice, given their initial lack of classroom experience at the ends of their training year. In the summer, 38 or 44 respondents identify that they agree/strongly agree that they feel confident going into their second year of practice, perhaps partly due to the developmental opportunities they were given and also due to the general support of colleagues.

A number of strong Spearman's rank correlations are apparent in the data (to see correlation tables for each term, see Appendix 3). In the Autumn term there is a strong correlation, as might be expected, between the NQTs' confidence in their initial skills as

Table 6. Summary of questionnaire responses.

	Autumn					Spring					Summer				
	Strongly disagree (1)	Disagree (2)	Neither agree nor disagree (3)	Agree (4)	Strongly agree (5)	Strongly disagree (1)	Disagree (2)	Neither agree nor disagree (3)	Agree (4)	Strongly agree (5)	Strongly disagree (1)	Disagree (2)	Neither agree nor disagree (3)	Agree (4)	Strongly agree (5)
My training programme prepared me well for the NQT year.	1	6	6	34	10	0	4	4	15	5	0	7	4	26	7
I felt confident in my skills as a teacher at the point at which I finished my training programme	0	17	9	23	8	0	3	5	16	4	2	10	3	23	6
During lockdown I was provided with useful content to expand my understanding and confidence to practice in the classroom	8	11	13	16	9										
I had a good idea of areas I needed to develop at the point of leaving my training programme, through the use of the Career Entry Profile?	4	13	10	24	6										
I felt confident when I entered into my NQT year	3	14	12	24	4	1	5	5	14	3	3	6	10	21	4
I have had a well developed NQT programme to support my work in the first term	6	8	13	22	8										
I have had a well developed NQT programme to support me						1	5	6	10	6	1	12	6	13	12

(*Continued*)

Table 6. (Continued).

	Autumn					Spring					Summer				
	Strongly disagree (1)	Disagree (2)	Neither agree nor disagree (3)	Agree (4)	Strongly agree (5)	Strongly disagree (1)	Disagree (2)	Neither agree nor disagree (3)	Agree (4)	Strongly agree (5)	Strongly disagree (1)	Disagree (2)	Neither agree nor disagree (3)	Agree (4)	Strongly agree (5)
I have been supported well by those around me to develop my teaching practice.	2	6	5	22	22	1	3	2	10	12	1	6	4	16	17
I have been supported well by those around me to develop my skills in those areas other than teaching (e.g. contacting parents, data reporting, behaviour policies etc).	3	10	9	15	10	2	4	6	8	8	2	5	8	17	12
Given the continued presence of COVID processes, I have been able to continue to develop my skills as a teacher.	2	6	3	27	19	0	6	4	10	8	2	4	3	18	16
I feel confident in my classroom practice now						0	1	5	16	6					
I feel confident going into my second year of practice											0	3	3	19	19

teachers, and the confidence they experienced entering into their NQT year, with a Spearman's rank coefficient (r_s) = 0.798 (p-value <0.001). The support given to NQTs was obviously important at this point in the year, for example, the support given to develop teaching and the wider aspects of the role found an $r_s = 0.800$ (p-value <0.001), and NQT development programmes are positively correlated with the wider support given by colleagues, $r_s = 0.602$ (p-value < 0.001). These correlations suggest that respondents experienced a strong support culture, both formal and informal, within their first roles.

Perhaps as a result of a second national lockdown in early 2021, a strong correlation exists between NQTs feeling generally well supported by colleagues and gaining support in the wider aspects of the job, such as parental contact and data management, $r_s = 0.784$ (p-value <0.001), and being supported and continuing to develop even given the pandemic related restrictions and problems $r_s = 0.714$ (p-value <0.001), and $r_s = 0.851$ (p-value <0.001).

During the summer term, this same narrative continues with NQT development programmes correlating strongly with the ability to continue developing during the pandemic, $r_s = 0.810$ (p-value <0.001), and generally support of various types leading to a perception of continued growth. The correlations across the year therefore appear to emphasise the importance of positive, well-planned support and good relationships as a key resource for the continued growth and development of NQTs.

In trying to understand what had made the first year of teaching a positive experience or otherwise, we wanted to identify the resources NQTs had drawn on in this initial phase of their careers, and the nature of the challenges they had faced, both important in balancing their well-being during a time of national crisis.

Table 7 shows the resources/sources of support the groups of NQTs felt they had drawn on during the year. It must be stressed that the high number of responses identifying the use of social media would be expected as we conscripted respondents through the use of X. Hence, we cannot be sure that social media is a widespread resource for NQTs as our results will be skewed by our selection process.

More widely, those who responded in the Autumn term showed a diverse range of resources, but these were generally focused on structured support in school, particularly the day-to-day support from those in their own subject departments (secondary) or year

Table 7. Resources and sources of support.

	Autumn ($n = 57$)	Spring ($n = 28$)	Summer ($n = 44$)
Department/year group colleagues	40	16	33
Social media	39	19	28
NQT mentor	37	24	30
Friends from ITE	37	14	25
Family	30	11	16
Friends	26	14	28
SLT	24	12	7
Colleagues	6		
Teacher support network	1		
Partner	1		
Books		1	
University PGCE staff		1	
SENCO			1

groups (primary), as well as the networks they had established in their training year. Interestingly, whilst the NQT mentor appeared to be important for many, senior leaders appear to have been of less importance. The pattern here is interesting as those responding in the autumn and spring were a mix of primary and secondary NQTs, whilst in the summer response, the dominant group were secondary teachers. We suggest here that the fall-off in those seeing the SLT as a resource is due to the greater return of secondary responses where SLT may be more remote within a larger organisation. However, in the first two terms, primary NQTs were seeing their own senior leaders as important resources in organisations which tend to be smaller and possibly more community led.

Outside of school, as might be expected, both family and friends offered a resource and source of support on which NQTs could draw.

Whilst the results above suggest that, with some exceptions, most schools created supportive, positive environments for development, nonetheless there is some evidence that the curtailed classroom experience of the training year did have an impact and presented initial challenges for the NQTs. Table 8 shows NQT responses to the question 'Please list three areas where you wish you had been able to gain more experience before entering into your NQT year'. The three which remain high across the three questionnaires are behaviour management, assessment and planning. Each of these is an aspect of practice which would have been focused on and developed during the lost placement and suggest that the curtailed placement experiences did leave an impact on NQT perceptions of their own development. Interestingly, for the latter two questionnaires, communicating with parents declines, possibly because by the time the questionnaires were being completed this aspect of practice was less in the forefront of NQTs minds having had experience in this area.

Given this initial context of classroom issues, we also asked about the challenges NQTs had faced. Table 9 shows the pattern of responses. Behaviour management is again a challenge for some, and respondents in Spring and Summer reflect this in their responses. Two further, related challenges, workload and time management are also apparent. The NQT year is generally seen as being a busy year as early career teachers step up from teaching loads in their last school-based placement which are lighter than in their NQT year. They now have a near full timetable and are expected to work more independently as well as often taking on greater pastoral duties. As a result, their workload increases, and they have to manage that work to a greater extent by themselves. These issues remain prevalent for respondents across the year and may have been

Table 8. Areas where NQTs wished they had had more support before their first year of teaching.

	Autumn ($n = 57$)	Spring ($n = 28$)	Summer ($n = 44$)
Behaviour management	20	7	12
Assessment	13	10	17
Communicating with parents	12	4	5
Planning	9	12	11
Classroom experience	5	2	4
Working with SEND students	5	6	5
Pastoral training/experience	5	1	8
Phonics teaching	4	1	
Long term planning	4		1
Admin	4	1	2
Differentiation	4	2	

Table 9. Challenges faced by newly qualified teachers.

	Autumn ($n = 57$)	Spring ($n = 28$)	Summer ($n = 44$)
Workload	42	21	32
Behaviour Management	34	14	28
Planning	33	17	20
Time Management	31	11	20
Morale amongst staff	24	14	24
Confidence with teaching	19	11	18
Levels of support	19	10	22

accentuated by the pandemic, meaning that some teachers were required to plan for both face-to-face and online teaching. At points during the year, particularly the autumn term, students were in school, but there was a constant concern that schools might need to close and that infections might collapse class/year group bubbles, leading to cohorts of students being sent home.

There are also continued concerns relating to levels of support. Whilst the questionnaires had demonstrated the importance of support and development, not all NQTs had been positive about their experiences, and this comes through in this question as a significant minority highlight the lack of support as a challenge. Interestingly, those who identified lack of support were also more likely to highlight a challenge with both confidence in teaching and with behaviour management. This again stresses the importance of support in helping NQTs make a success of their classroom practice.

Finally, staff morale appears to have been a challenge for a significant number of NQTs. This is not surprising given the disjointed nature of the 2020–21 school year together with the huge workloads and constantly shifting policies coming from the Department of Education. Again, this shows that for some the wider atmosphere within their school might have been a challenge whilst for those in schools with a positive, collaborative environment, this might have been less of an issue.

Conclusions

We named this paper 'staying afloat whilst fixing the boat' because we were struck by the resilience and flexibility the NQT cohort were showing, in repairing the damage done to their training whilst literally 'at sea' in classroom conditions that would have been unrecognisable when they started their training. This section explores our recommendations for those who support early career teachers, which following this study are;

- The 2020/21 cohort of early career teachers receive continued developmental support, beyond the statutory requirement
- To consider the importance of strong support by NQT mentors, NQT development programmes and informal support by colleagues
- Reduce overbearing accountability systems being used to 'measure' ECTs.

The initial thesis in developing the current project was the increased possibility that the major disruption to the initial teacher education phase of teacher development together with the increased workloads and pressure on teachers within the school system might

lead to negative experiences and a lowering of teacher well-being. In turn, there was an initial concern that negative impacts on well-being together with a lack of initial experience in the classroom might lead to an increased problem with teacher retention as NQTs felt unprepared for the role they had been employed to carry out.

The data from the questionnaires are not longitudinal as the respondents differed from questionnaire return to questionnaire return. However, accepting that the samples were different each time there nevertheless appears to be a consistency in the experiences, support and challenges of those responding. This leads us to believe that there are underlying similarities which can act as a basis for understanding how this cohort of NQTs should be supported as they move forward into their teaching career. Firstly, it should be noted that the vast majority of respondents in the summer term demonstrate a confidence concerning their second year of teaching, a confidence which may be born from the levels of both formal and informal support offered during their NQT year. Therefore, it appears to be evident within respondents' views that continued developmental support will be vital in continuing to build their confidence and expertise. This is particularly the case when many of the common performative practices used in schools, such as observation, learning walks and work scrutinies, have not been a common feature. This suggests that for some respondents the shift towards a less performative and more human approach in many schools, identified by Netolicky (2020) might be reversed. A return to 'normal' aspects of teacher work, aspects that the 2020–21 NQT cohort have little experience in and may feel alienated from, means they will face further challenges in their subsequent years of teaching, challenges which may have a negative impact on their well-being.

What the questionnaire results from across the academic year 2020–21 appear to have demonstrated is that in actual fact respondents generally felt positive about their initial teacher training and that they had been well prepared, given the circumstances, to begin their NQT year. Whilst this appears to have been the general case, it also has to be stressed that a significant minority of student teachers were less confident and were concerned about their move into full-time teacher work.

It is apparent that across the questionnaires, the year was both extremely busy with heavy workloads and in some cases, issues with staff morale and that respondents were being required to develop their work quite rapidly to make up for any lost experience in the training year. This is apparent in the reflections on those areas they felt they had least experience in during their training year, which then appear to have continued as major challenges in their first year of teaching, namely planning, assessment and behaviour management. As such, there were major challenges for NQTs. As Dodge *et al.* (2012) stress, challenges need not automatically lead to lowered well-being, as long as they can be met with confidence and understanding. The NQT year was difficult for a minority of students, who perhaps felt unable to overcome the challenges before them for a number of reasons. In these cases, the challenges appear not to have been lessened through support from school systems or mentors. However, in many cases, the challenges appear to have been mitigated through strong support by NQT mentors, NQT development programmes and informal support by colleagues, especially those in departments and year groups (Moorhouse 2021). In some ways, this latter support structure is not surprising as in most schools COVID-19 bubbles had been developed as a way of mitigating the risk of rapidly spreading infections. Consequently, for many teachers,

the majority of their time will have been spent working alongside only those colleagues within their own departments or year group, contact with other professionals being limited at best. For the NQTs located in positive departmental/year group cultures this appears to have been a major source of support in helping them develop that practice.

If well-being is seen as a balance of resources and challenges, periods such as the COVID pandemic might be expected to amplify the boosting or decline of mental states. Where resources are plentiful, even in the context of missed teaching placements and a resultant lack of experience, well-being might be boosted due to supportive contexts where NQTs are able to learn, make mistakes, but always have individuals in both school, and beyond to support them, to listen to them when they are feeling low. As such, challenges can be met in a positive way, and if not necessarily overcome, put in perspective. There are individual stories of such dynamics from this project, reported elsewhere in an analysis of the interview data collected at the end of the data collection period (Quickfall *et al.* 2022). Meanwhile, where resources are lacking, due to little mentor support, overbearing accountability systems still being used to 'measure' NQTs rather than supporting their growth during a national crisis period, and/or few friends and family beyond the immediate school context, challenges can be perceived as insurmountable. Once again, one respondent left the profession before the end of their NQT year due to a lack of support, at the same time as meeting a number of large challenges (Quickfall *et al.* 2022); this was the only way they could see of protecting their well-being.

What the quantitative results from this project suggest is that seeing teacher well-being as a balance of resource and challenge is a useful lens for understanding the experience of our NQT respondents. It would have been easy to assume that the lack of teaching experience allied with arriving in schools just as they were opening up from the first lockdown, with unfamiliar restrictions, constant threat of infection, and the eventual calling of a second lockdown in the spring term, might all have offered huge challenges which would have had an identifiable impact on well-being. In some instances, this appears to have been the case, but for the majority of respondents, flexibility in schools, together with well-thought-through NQT development programmes and colleague support meant that the challenges which did present themselves were more than balanced by a range of resources which supported the NQTs in making a success of their first year as teachers.

In conclusion, the respondents to our quiestionnaires appear to suggest that the NQT cohort of 2020–21 may well have made up on initial deficits which were the result of missing a considerable amount of classroom experience. Through extensive and positive support they may well have begun to mitigate the challenges they faced during this first year. However, as practices begin to return to normal as the post-crisis period develops it may still be necessary for schools to offer heightened support to ensure that those from this cohort continue to prosper.

Note

1. The acronym NQT has now been superseded by ECT (Early Career Teacher) under the new system of two years of early career support. However, throughout this paper we use the term NQT as the student teachers involved were supported under the older system.

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Appendices

Appendix 1. First interview question roster (August–September 2020)

(1) Please tell me about your current NQT school?
(2) How has your initial experience of your NQT school been?
(3) How do you feel your training has prepared you for your experiences since September?
(4) Who is supporting you?
(5) Are there any other resources you are drawing on?
(6) What have the challenges been so far for you? For people you are in contact with?
(7) Is there anything you would wish to add about the experience of transition into your NQT year?

Appendix 2. Items included in Autumn Questionnaire

(1) I am happy for the information I share here to be used in aggregated form to help understand patterns and perceptions in NQT experiences
(2) How would you identify your gender?
(3) I teach (tick as many as relevant) [to identify key stages]
(4) My teacher training route is best described as [from list of key stages]
(5) I gained my NQT teaching job in a school I had been on placement within.
(6) My training programme prepared me well for the NQT year.
(7) I felt confident in my skills as a teacher at the point at which I finished my training programme
(8) During lockdown I was provided with useful content to expand my understanding and confidence to practice in the classroom
(9) I had a good idea of areas I needed to develop at the point of leaving my training programme, through the use of the Career Entry Profile?
(10) Please list three areas where you wish you had been able to gain more experience before entering into your NQT year
(11) I felt confident when I entered into my NQT year
(12) I have had a well-developed NQT programme to support my work in the first term
(13) I have been supported well by those around me to develop my teaching practice.
(14) I have been supported well by those around me to develop my skills in those areas other than teaching (e.g. contacting parents, data reporting, behaviour policies etc.).
(15) Given the continued presence of COVID processes, I have been able to continue to develop my skills as a teacher.
(16) Please check those resources and sources of support which you have found important in this first term
(17) Please list your three most important resources/sources of support (these can include items other than listed above)
(18) Please check those challenges which you have found important in this first term
(19) Please list your three greatest challenges in this first term (these can include items other than listed above)

Appendix 3 Spearman's Rank Correlation Tables for the Autumn, Spring and Summer Questionnaires

Note: *** shows p-value <0.001, ** shows p-value <0.01, * shows p-value <0.05

Autumn

	My training programme prepared me well for the NQT year.	I felt confident in my skills as a teacher at the point at which I finished my training programme	During lockdown I was provided with useful content to expand my understanding and confidence to practice in the classroom	I had a good idea of areas I needed to develop at the point of leaving my training programme, through the use of the Career Entry Profile?	I felt confident when I entered into my NQT year	I have had a well developed NQT programme to support my work in the first term	I have been supported well by those around me to develop my teaching practice.	I have been supported well by those around me to develop my skills in those areas other than teaching (e.g. contacting parents, data reporting, behaviour policies etc).	Given the continued presence of COVID processes, I have been able to continue to develop my skills as a teacher.
My training programme prepared me well for the NQT year.		0.504***	0.298*	−0.014	0.393**	0.255*	0.279*	0.334**	0.491***
I felt confident in my skills as a teacher at the point at which I finished my training programme			0.364**	0.143	0.798***	0.374**	0.323**	0.421***	0.514***
During lockdown I was provided with useful content to expand my understanding and confidence to practice in the classroom				0.174	0.426***	0.206	0.244*	0.172	0.127
I had a good idea of areas I needed to develop at the point of leaving my training programme, through the use of the Career Entry Profile?					0.078	0.091	0.256*	0.355**	0.234*

(*Continued*)

(Continued).

	My training programme prepared me well for the NQT year.	I felt confident in my skills as a teacher at the point at which I finished my training programme	During lockdown I was provided with useful content to expand my understanding and confidence to practice in the classroom	I had a good idea of areas I needed to develop at the point of leaving my training programme, through the use of the Career Entry Profile?	I felt confident when I entered into my NQT year	I have had a well developed NQT programme to support my work in the first term	I have been supported well by those around me to develop my teaching practice.	I have been supported well by those around me to develop my skills in those areas other than teaching (e.g. contacting parents, data reporting, behaviour policies etc).	Given the continued presence of COVID processes, I have been able to continue to develop my skills as a teacher.
I felt confident when I entered into my NQT year						0.397**	0.246*	0.337**	0.363**
I have had a well developed NQT programme to support my work in the first term							0.602***	0.520***	0.465***
I have been supported well by those around me to develop my teaching practice.								0.800***	0.541***
I have been supported well by those around me to develop my skills in those areas other than teaching (e.g. contacting parents, data reporting, behaviour policies etc).									0.656***
Given the continued presence of COVID processes, I have been able to continue to develop my skills as a teacher.									

Spring

	My training programme prepared me well for the NQT year.	I felt confident in my skills as a teacher at the point at which I finished my training programme	I felt confident when I entered into my NQT year	I feel confident in my classroom practice now	I have had a well developed NQT programme to support me	I have been supported well by those around me to develop my teaching practice.	I have been supported well by those around me to develop my skills in those areas other than teaching (e.g. contacting parents, data reporting, behaviour policies etc).	Given the continued presence of COVID processes, I have been able to continue to develop my skills as a teacher.
My training programme prepared me well for the NQT year.		0.354*	0.109	0.066	0.238	0.343*	0.385*	0.261
I felt confident in my skills as a teacher at the point at which I finished my training programme			0.625***	0.498**	0.213	0.161	0.139	0.238
I felt confident when I entered into my NQT year				0.657***	0.206	0.129	0.251	0.187
I feel confident in my classroom practice now					0.214	0.058	0.198	0.184
I have had a well developed NQT programme to support me						0.673***	0.728***	0.691***
I have been supported well by those around me to develop my teaching practice.							0.784***	0.714***
I have been supported well by those around me to develop my skills in those areas other than teaching (e.g. contacting parents, data reporting, behaviour policies etc).								0.851***
Given the continued presence of COVID processes, I have been able to continue to develop my skills as a teacher.								

Summer

	I felt confident when I entered into my NQT year	I feel confident going into my second year of teaching	I have had a well developed NQT programme to support me	I have been supported well by those around me to develop my teaching practice.	I have been supported well by those around me to develop my skills in those areas other than teaching (e.g. contacting parents, data reporting, behaviour policies etc).	Given the continued presence of COVID processes, I have been able to continue to develop my skills as a teacher.	How important has the relationship with your NQT mentor been so far?	How important has the relationship with the senior leadership of your school been so far?
I felt confident when I entered into my NQT year		0.425**	0.316*	0.241	0.348*	0.326*	0.004	0.185
I feel confident going into my second year of teaching			0.437**	0.500***	0.405**	0.565***	−0.014	0.173
I have had a well developed NQT programme to support me				0.756***	0.730***	0.810***	0.344*	0.114
I have been supported well by those around me to develop my teaching practice.					0.724***	0.784***	0.311*	0.180
I have been supported well by those around me to develop my skills in those areas other than teaching (e.g. contacting parents, data reporting, behaviour policies etc).						0.737***	0.357**	0.068
Given the continued presence of COVID processes, I have been able to continue to develop my skills as a teacher.							0.305*	0.107
How important has the relationship with your NQT mentor been so far?								0.126
How important has the relationship with the senior leadership of your school been so far?								