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The components and implications of teacher workload: a review

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ABSTRACT

Background: Teacher workload is a persistent challenge globally, often linked to long hours, stress and teacher attrition. Evidence shows that teachers in England work longer hours per week, on average, than their counterparts in other countries. Research indicates that it is not only the total hours worked but also the nature and complexity of tasks that contribute to workload pressures. Excessive workload has consequences for teacher wellbeing, professional satisfaction and recruitment and retention.

Purpose: This systematic literature review examined teacher workload in England in the period 2010–2024, identifying key components of workload and their perceived contribution to excessive working hours. It evaluated policies and initiatives aimed at managing workload and explored their impact on teacher recruitment and retention, providing insights relevant to education systems facing similar workforce challenges.

Method: The review assessed a large number (1,839) of peer-reviewed articles and grey literature on teacher workload in England, 64 of which were considered eligible for analysis. Data from these were extracted and inductively synthesised through thematic analysis.

Findings: Key drivers of excessive workload included: marking and feedback; lesson planning; data management; administrative responsibilities; external accountability; and limited professional autonomy. These factors were found to increase working hours and negatively affect wellbeing, job satisfaction, and career intentions. Workload-reduction initiatives exist, but adoption is inconsistent and effects are limited. Workload emerges both as a key factor in teacher attrition and a potential barrier to attracting new entrants.

Conclusion: Addressing teacher workload requires coordinated action at policy, institutional, and preparation levels. Professional development and early career support can enable teachers to manage their workload effectively. Reducing excessive workload is essential for teacher retention, as autonomy and a sustainable worklife balance underpin wellbeing and the profession's future sustainability. Although the review focuses on England, the findings offer valuable insights for international policymakers and education leaders.

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Introduction

The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO 2016) has identified teacher recruitment as a global challenge. More recently, the 'Global Report on Teachers' (2024) described teacher recruitment as a global crisis and highlighted poor teacher retention as a key driver of a worldwide teacher shortage. Reasons for this have been explored through the Teaching and Learning International Survey (TALIS) 2024 (OECD 2025) – a large-scale survey of teachers across 54 countries and territories. The survey identified workload as one of the most reported demands on teachers, with teachers in Japan reportedly working 55 hours per week – one of the highest reported country rates. The report revealed that teaching accounts for an average of 43% of full-time teachers' working time. The next most time-consuming activities identified were lesson planning (14%) and marking or correcting pupil work (9%). Studies from the Philippines (EDCOM II and IDinsight 2025), Central Europe (Kasáčová, Babiaková, and Hanesová 2019) and Australia (Gavin et al. 2021) also report teachers working long hours, with large amounts of time spent on administrative tasks, planning and preparation and, in England, also managing student behaviour (Barmby 2006). Together, these studies show that teacher workload has become a systemic and intensifying global problem, making the profession less attractive to new entrants while accelerating burnout and attrition among experienced staff. As a result, recruitment and retention challenges are growing worldwide.

There is little debate that teaching is a tremendously demanding job with a high workload. While workload is often reported in terms of the number of hours a teacher works, Creagh et al. (2023) stress the importance of distinguishing between 'workload complexity', referring to how difficult, varied or mentally demanding tasks are, and 'workload intensification', referring to how much work there is and the time pressure for its completion. As a subjective experience, 'complexity' and 'intensification' are somewhat more difficult to measure than working hours (Thompson et al. 2023). Although heavy teacher workload is a feature of many education systems globally, Sellen (2016), analysing data from TALIS 2013, identified that teachers in England, United Kingdom (UK), worked longer hours on average than teachers in other countries. More recent research confirms that excessive working hours remain a significant issue for teachers in England (Allen et al. 2021; Creagh et al. 2023; DfE 2025). Reasons are attributed to extensive time devoted to lesson planning, assessment design, and marking.

The literature review reported in this paper analyses studies published between 2010 and 2024, relating to teacher workload in England. It specifically focuses on primary schools (pupils aged 5–11) and secondary schools (pupils aged 11–18) – thereby covering the whole of the mainstream school phase in England, as covered by the National Curriculum for England and the Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted) inspection framework. Working hours, the measurable time teachers spend on professional tasks, are referred to throughout the paper, but it is workload – the volume, complexity, and cognitive and emotional demands of those tasks – that is the study focus. There are many papers examining how teachers manage their workload; however, the authors of this paper aimed specifically to explore the composition of teacher workload and to identify the components that contribute to excessive workload. The study also aimed to identify how workload affects teacher recruitment and retention.

Background

The English context

England's state education system comprises: maintained schools, such as community, foundation, and voluntary aided schools (which follow a National Curriculum and are overseen by local authorities); academies and free schools (which are independent of local authorities with autonomy over their curriculum); and selective and specialist schools (which have provision based on academic performance or specific pupil needs). Teachers working across these schools have their working hours directed by the Department for Education (DfE), the government department responsible for education policy in England, through the School Teachers' Pay and Conditions Document (DfE 2024b). This framework caps directed time at 1265 hours per year, distributed over 195 days. This equates to an average of 6.5 directed hours per working day, or approximately 32.5 hours per week across a 39-week academic year. The DfE extensively investigated teacher workload through a series of surveys first introduced in 1994, followed up in 1996 and 2000, then undertaken annually between 2003 and 2010. During this period, responding teachers consistently reported average working hours of 50 to 55 per week (far higher than the anticipated 32.5 hours of directed time). From 2014 onwards, the DfE broadened its efforts to monitor and address teacher workload by commissioning a Teacher Workload Diary Survey (Bmrb 2014) and Teacher Workload Surveys in 2016 (Higton 2017) and 2019 (Walker et al. 2019). These have been succeeded, since 2022, by the annual Working Lives of Teachers and Leaders Survey (WLTL).

Further studies on teacher workload in England indicate that workload continues to be an issue (L. Adams et al. 2023; Churches and Fitzpatrick 2023; CooperGibson 2023; Martin et al. 2023). A National Association of Schoolmasters Union of Women Teachers (NASUWT 2023) survey revealed that those responding teachers reported working 52 hours in a typical working week, with 52% reporting a significant increase in workload, and 82% noting declining mental health in the past year. The WLTL wave 2 survey (IFF Research et al. 2024), similarly identified that full-time teachers in England were working an average of 52.4 hours in a referenced week, an increase from 51.9 in 2022 (L. Adams et al. 2023), with school leaders averaging 58.2 hours per week. A National Education Union Survey (NEU 2024) also revealed that nearly half of teachers found their workload 'unmanageable', citing the impact of Ofsted inspections, understaffing and resource shortages. Over three quarters (78%) reported workload to be a significant issue. In response, the introduction of a Workforce Reduction Taskforce (DfE 2024) marked the English government's ambition to reduce working hours for teachers and leaders by five hours per week within three years. Martin et al. (2023) reported that most schools had revised their workload policies/approaches in the academic year 2021–2022 as a result.

Several studies have linked teacher workload to wellbeing (Brady and Wilson 2021; Johnson and Coleman 2023). Teacher wellbeing is an intricate concept that has been explored from various perspectives in educational research. Day and Gu (2013) define it as the ability of teachers to balance work demands with their personal lives, while Klassen and Chiu (2010) emphasise the importance for teachers of student engagement and stakeholder relationships. The Teacher Wellbeing Index 2023 (Education Support 2023) found that 89% of senior leaders and 78% of

teachers in England experienced stress, with rising levels of exhaustion and burn-out. There are concerns that such high levels of stress and declining wellbeing among teachers may lead to recruitment problems, and to increased attrition rates in the workforce over coming years (Hulme et al. 2025; McLean, Worth, and Smith 2024).

In response to concerns about teacher *recruitment*, in 2022, the government expanded bursaries for key shortage subjects (including mathematics, physics, chemistry, computing and languages). Despite this, a House of Commons Report (2024) noted that teacher vacancies doubled between 2020 and 2022, and that workload ‘remains a top concern for teachers’ (House of Commons 2024, 83). Recruitment to both primary and secondary Initial Teacher Training (ITT) courses is also falling – for example, the academic year 2023–2024 began with 13,788 recruits – substantially short of the DfE’s target of 26,360 (DfE 2023a). This was particularly pronounced in the secondary school sector, where less than half of the target population was recruited (McLean, Worth, and Smith 2024).

Other studies have identified heavy workload as a concern for teacher *retention*, and as a key reason for leaving the profession (L. Adams et al. 2023; Barmby 2006; Bromley 2019; Lynch et al. 2016; M. Walker, Worth, and Van Den Brande 2019; Worth and Van Den Brande 2020). According to some scholars, the cumulative pressure of high workload is creating a teaching recruitment and retention crisis (Jerrim and Sims 2021; Worth and Van den Brande 2019), a problem that is especially acute in schools with large numbers of socio-economically disadvantaged pupils (Martin et al. 2023). This is attributed to the high demands of pupils with complex requirements, including Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) and English as an Additional Language (EAL), a lack of parental support and often additional external accountability. Beyond workload, challenging pupil behaviour and heightened accountability pressures also play critical roles in teacher retention (Arthur and Bradley 2023; Barmby 2006; Foster 2019; Gu et al. 2018; M. Walker, Worth, and Van Den Brande 2019).

School Workforce in England data (DfE 2024c) reports that over 40,000 teachers left the state sector in 2023 (9.7% of the profession), with vacancies and temporary posts at a 15-year high. The WLTL Wave 2 study (IFF Research et al. 2024), also identified a 25% increase in teachers considering leaving the profession since 2022 (excluding retirement), with 94% of these teachers considering leaving for reasons other than retirement, citing high workload as the main reason. Attrition among early career teachers (ECTs), a term used in England to describe teachers in their first two years of practice, exceeds that of more experienced staff (Allen et al. 2021; McLean, Worth, and Smith 2024). This group is particularly vulnerable, with almost one quarter (23%) reported to leave within three years (House of Commons 2024) and one third (32%) after their first five years of teaching (DfE 2024c).

In summary, workload is relevant in the context of both recruitment and retention, but the drivers are slightly different. Recruitment is affected by the availability of training places, incentives, public perception and policy, while excessive workload may more directly influence teachers’ decision to leave the workforce, alongside considerations related to, for example, pupil behaviour, and accountability. Recognising these distinct but linked influences is important in the context of policies designed to attract new teachers and maintain current staff.

Purpose

The study reported in this paper followed a systematic literature review methodology – a rigorous and transparent process, allowing study findings to be reproduced and updated (Gough, Thomas, and Oliver 2017; Zawacki-Richter et al. 2019). Initially, a scoping review was conducted to explore existing research on teacher workload, with the aim of identifying key themes and to highlight research gaps. This process uncovered extensive international research on ‘workload’ and ‘wellbeing’ with numerous studies from countries such as the United States, Australia, Canada and Nordic nations. However, when mapping the evidence geographically, relatively fewer studies were identified that specifically examined teachers in England. By synthesising this evidence, and through a series of iterative discussions, the authors decided to focus the main review on teachers in England. A review protocol was developed, including four research questions, clear search strings, and the identification of inclusion and exclusion criteria. The research questions were as follows: 1) What are the primary components contributing to teacher workload?; 2) How are these components contributing to excessive workload?; 3) What policies/case studies have been implemented and how effective have they been?; and 4) What is the impact of teacher workload on recruitment and retention in England?

Method

A systematic literature review methodology was selected for this study because it offered a clear, structured, validated means of bringing together existing research on teacher workload from a wide range of studies and educational contexts. Teacher workload is a complex issue with important policy implications; this approach made it possible to examine findings systematically across different types of study. The review followed the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analysis (PRISMA) guidelines (Page et al. 2021). [Figure 1](#) illustrates this process graphically, identifying the different review stages, the numbers of papers identified at each stage through the application of inclusion and exclusion criteria, and the final papers selected. The 2010–2024 timeframe was selected because 2010 was a pivotal year for the English state education system, with the introduction of academies and free schools. From this year in England, maintained schools (those controlled by Local Authorities) could voluntarily convert to become academies – thereby gaining direct funding from the DfE (central government) and greater freedom over curriculum, staffing and finances. Free schools (also funded directly by central government) could be set up by parents, charities or other sponsors with a similar level of autonomy. The year 2010 therefore saw the beginning of a movement of control away from local authorities, towards academy school trusts, greater central government control and, arguably, towards greater levels of school autonomy.

Search strategy

The following six databases were searched for appropriate sources: ERIC ($n = 5$); EBSCO ($n = 4$); ProQuest ($n = 61$); Web of Science ($n = 32$); Taylor & Francis ($n = 1,064$); and Google Scholar ($n = 621$). To ensure a comprehensive analysis, we also searched the following grey literature, which included policy reports, trades union publications and research

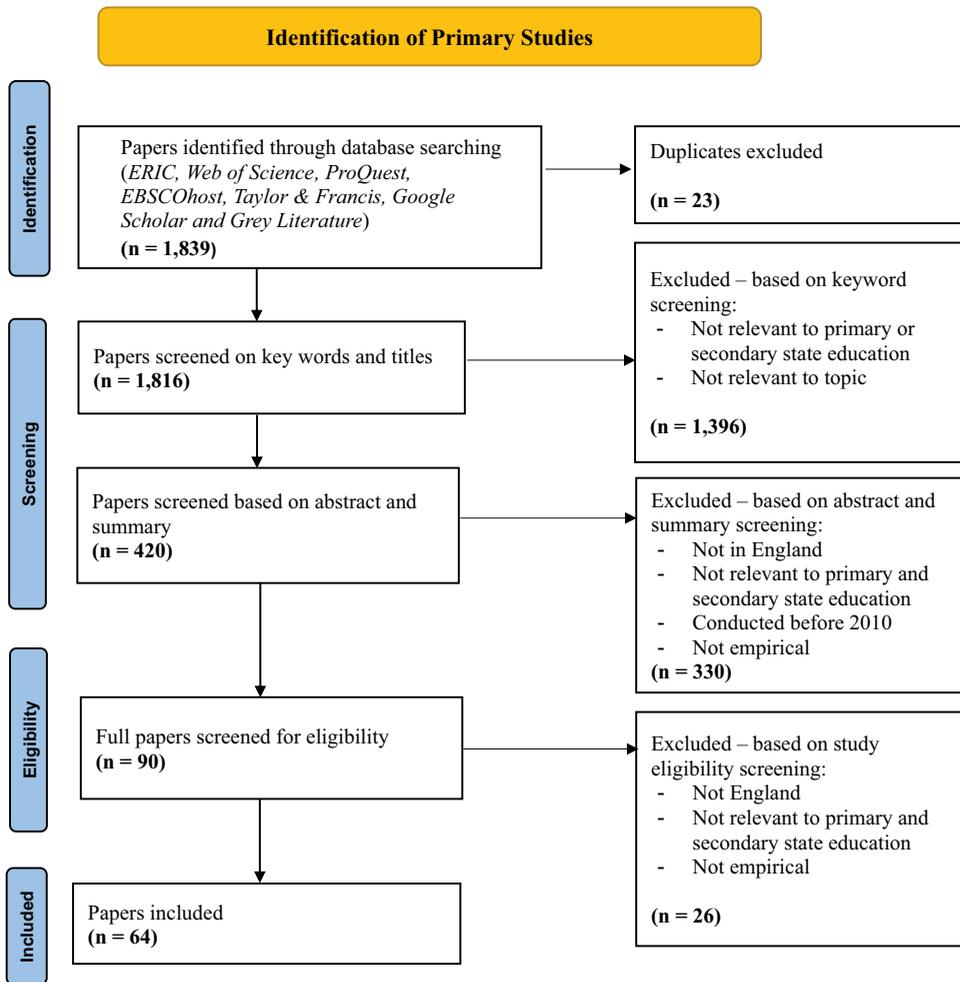


Figure 1. PRISMA flow diagram.

briefs: DfE ($n = 30$); Education Policy Institute (EPI) ($n = 5$); National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER) ($n = 8$); Education Endowment Foundation (EEF) ($n = 2$); NEU ($n = 2$) and NASUWT ($n = 5$). These sources provided the total number of identified studies ($N = 1,839$) that were screened in this study, as seen in [Figure 1](#). The potential for bias and validity in study quality associated with Google Scholar was carefully considered. For this reason, Google Scholar was used only as a supplementary search tool to identify additional relevant studies not indexed in other databases. The inclusion of grey literature allowed the review to capture important policy reports, government data, and professional insights that are not always available in peer-reviewed journals, thus reducing publication bias and supporting a more complete synthesis of the evidence.

With adherence to PRISMA guidelines, the research team undertook searches for articles to be included for full text screening. Specific keywords (search strings) were identified that were required in the title or body of each paper. Using the advanced search feature in the databases, we specified peer-reviewed papers only, published in English,

Table 1. Search strings.

Context	Strings
Teacher workload	('teacher workload' OR 'teaching workload' OR 'teachers workload' OR 'teacher's workload' OR 'teacher work-load' OR 'teacher stress' OR 'teaching stress' OR 'teacher workload factors' OR 'work-life balance' OR 'teacher working hours' OR 'teachers working hours' OR 'teacher's working hours' OR 'teaching working hours' OR 'work intensification' OR 'teacher hours' OR 'teaching hours' OR 'teachers hours' OR 'teacher attrition' OR 'teaching attrition' OR 'teacher retention' OR 'teaching retention')
Specific content relating to explanatory factors	('factors' OR 'determinants' OR 'causes' OR 'influences' OR 'contributing factors')
Empirical research design	('quantitative study' OR 'qualitative study' OR 'mixed methods study' OR 'systematic review' OR 'meta-analysis' OR 'meta analysis')

and papers from 2010 to 2024. The search strings were grouped into three categories: *teacher workload*; *specific content relating to explanatory factors*; and *empirical research design* (see Table 1).

As Table 1 shows, a broad range of workload-related terms was included to capture the varied terminology used across education research and policy literature. Variations in spelling, phrasing, and hyphenation (e.g. 'workload', 'work-load') were incorporated to maximise retrieval across databases. Terms related to teacher stress, working hours, work intensification, work-life balance, attrition, and retention were included because they are frequently associated with teacher workload in the literature. The inclusion of terms such as: factors, determinants, causes, influences and contributing factors, helped focus the search on studies exploring influences on teacher workload, rather than purely descriptive or opinion-based work. Empirical research terms were included to focus on studies using clear and systematic methods, including quantitative, qualitative, mixed-methods studies, and reviews. This helped ensure the included studies were robust and evidence based. Combining the three term groups with Boolean operators enabled a search strategy that maximised relevant study retrieval while limiting irrelevant or non-empirical literature, in line with systematic review best practices.

Screening strategy

During the screening process a set of inclusion and exclusion criteria were applied (as outlined in Table 2). Studies were included in the review if they met the following criteria: 1) published between 2010 and 2024 (reflecting a policy change in English state schools); 2)

Table 2. Inclusion and exclusion criteria.

Serial number	Inclusion criteria	Exclusion criteria
1	Papers published between 2010 and 2024	Papers published before 2010
2	Contains empirical data, peer-reviewed papers, or grey literature from reputable organisations	Does not report on empirical data
3	Papers written in English	Papers not written in English
4	Papers that are based on English state education	Papers outside English state education
5	Papers relating to primary and secondary education	Papers relating to higher and further education
6	Papers relating to teacher workload	Papers that discuss issues outside teacher workload

containing empirical data and peer-reviewed or, for grey literature, produced by reputable organisations such as government bodies or professional research associations; 3) written in English to allow accurate interpretation; 4) focused on teachers within the English state education system (see section The English context for definition) to maintain relevance to the national policy context; 5) related to primary or secondary education, as these phases of education are compulsory in England and are the main focus of teacher workload research; and 6) addressed teacher workload, including related forms such as stress, working hours, work intensification, work-life balance, attrition and retention.

To ensure a comprehensive investigation of teacher workload, studies employing a variety of methodological approaches were considered, including quantitative, qualitative, and mixed methods designs, as well as systematic reviews and meta-analyses. This enabled the inclusion of a range of studies, from those reporting large-scale surveys to those based on smaller-scale case studies, for example.

Once duplicates were removed, 1816 papers of the original 1839 remained. Duplicates occurred due to variations in metadata in different repositories, and because some conference papers originally located as grey literature, were later published as journal articles. Following this stage, the 1816 relevant studies were screened based on key words and title and, if not relevant, were excluded according to the criteria set out in the inclusion/exclusion criteria shown in [Table 2](#). This step resulted in the exclusion of 1396 papers. The remaining 420 papers were taken through a further screening process, based upon abstract or summary. This resulted in a further 330 exclusions, leaving 90 papers that were taken forward to eligibility assessment stage (see [Figure 1](#)).

Data analysis

Eligibility assessment was based on a full-text review of the 90 papers. This process resulted in the exclusion of a further 26 papers because they were: outside the English state system ($n = 5$); not an empirical study ($n = 18$); or not related teacher workload ($n = 3$). This resulted in 64 papers being taken forward for analysis: 30 peer-reviewed papers and 34 grey literature sources. Analysis was conducted thematically using a narrative synthesis and an inductive approach. After familiarisation with the included studies, open coding was carried out to identify key concepts and recurring patterns within the data. Two reviewers independently coded a subset of studies to develop initial codes and discussed any discrepancies to reach consensus. From this process, a preliminary coding framework was developed. This framework was then applied to the remaining studies and iteratively refined through ongoing team discussions. The resulting codes were grouped into categories and synthesised into higher-order themes, which were reviewed and validated by the full research team. Studies were then grouped according to each of the four relevant research questions, and the resulting themes were interpreted descriptively, considering differences in study methodology, scale, and source type. [Table 3](#) shows how the selected studies are distributed across the four research questions.

Findings

To provide a structured synthesis of the evidence, findings from the 64 selected papers are reported below in relation to each of the four study research questions (RQs). Sub-

Table 3. Analysis of selected papers relating to Research questions (RQs).

RQ1	25 papers relevant to this research question	39% of selected papers
RQ2	27 papers relevant to this research question	42% of selected papers
RQ3	18 papers relevant to this research question	28% of selected papers
RQ4	39 papers relevant to this research question	61% of selected papers

Papers could be relevant to more than one research question, so percentages do not sum to 100.

themes within each RQ area were derived inductively from the included studies. For example, seven interrelated components emerged as the main drivers of teachers' workload, with teachers' perceptions revealing that it was not simply the number of hours worked, but also of the degree of control, relevance and support they experienced in carrying out tasks that contributed to their assessment of whether or not their workload was reasonable. Policy initiatives and case study interventions introduced since 2010 demonstrate that collaborative, autonomy-enhancing approaches tend to be the most effective in reducing workload pressures. Finally, the evidence links excessive workload directly to challenges in recruitment and retention, highlighting the urgent need for systemic reforms that address both the quantity and quality of teachers' work.

RQ1: what are the primary components contributing to teacher workload?

While numerous pressures are discussed across studies, analysis reveals seven primary components that consistently contribute to teacher workload pressures: non-teaching tasks; administrative and data-related responsibilities; marking and lesson preparation; technology-related demands; continuing professional development (CPD); systemic and structural pressures; and a lack of autonomy and resources. These components are not mutually exclusive; rather, they interact to create a working environment in which teachers frequently report feeling overwhelmed and burdened.

A major contributor to workload pressure is the volume of non-teaching tasks teachers are expected to undertake. Research shows that teachers in England spend an average of 24 hours per week on classroom instruction, compared to 32 hours on additional duties such as covering for absent colleagues, supervising pupils, engaging in parental communication, attending meetings, completing training, and performing general administration tasks (L. Adams et al. 2023; Jerrim and Sims 2019). These tasks are often perceived as detracting from core teaching responsibilities and are cited frequently as contributing to excessive workload. Many teachers report spending too much time on bureaucratic tasks, including writing pupil reports, analysing performance data, inputting information into data management systems, and recording pupil progress (Bmrb 2014). In 2014, the DfE launched the 'Workload Challenge' (Gibson, Oliver, and Dennison 2015), a consultation exercise aimed at identifying the main causes of teacher workload pressures. This was followed by a series of independent reviews (DfE 2016a, 2016b, 2016c) which highlighted that lesson planning policies, assessment frameworks, and administrative systems were among the main causes of unnecessary workload. Recent evidence confirms these findings, with L. Adams et al. (2023) reporting that three quarters (75%) of teachers identified general administrative work as a contributor to workload pressure, while over half (49%) cited data-related duties such as recording and analysis.

Marking and lesson preparation are also consistently reported as major contributors to the teacher workload challenge. In 2013, teachers in England spent an average of 6.2 hours per week on marking and 8.0 hours on planning, figures which exceed the OECD averages of 5.0 and 7.3 hours respectively (Sellen 2016). These tasks, particularly when accompanied by rigid school marking policies or requirements for detailed lesson plans, were perceived as especially burdensome. Despite government efforts to streamline these processes through policy and guidance, teachers continue to identify marking and planning as core contributors to excessive workload (Gibson, Oliver, and Dennison 2015; M. Walker, Worth, and Van Den Brande 2019).

The increasing use of digital technology has introduced a further layer of responsibility. While technology has the potential to enhance efficiency, and collaborative digital tools to reduce administrative burdens (Passey 2021), evidence suggests that it often generates additional work for teachers, who are required to maintain digital records, prepare online resources, and respond to communication via email and school platforms (Sellen 2016; M. Walker, Worth, and Van Den Brande 2019). In practice, these technologies often require time-consuming setup and training, which adds to, rather than alleviates, overall workload. When not accompanied by adequate support and realistic implementation expectations, technological innovations may only add to workload pressure.

Continuing professional development (CPD) represents another aspect of workload that affects teachers' perceptions of work-life balance. Although CPD is essential for professional growth and school improvement, many teachers report that they must complete training outside standard working hours (McLaughlin and Wood 2020; M. Walker, Worth, and Van Den Brande 2019). This encroachment on personal time intensifies perceptions of workload as unmanageable and highlights a tension between CPD requirements and sustainable working practices.

Systemic and structural pressures also play a central role in shaping teacher workload. Evidence consistently links high workload to a culture of performativity, where teachers are expected to meet numerous accountability measures, many of which are externally imposed through, for example, Ofsted inspections (Bromley 2019; Martin et al. 2023). These pressures are compounded by the rapid pace of educational reform and frequent policy changes in England (L. Adams et al. 2023; Lynch et al. 2016). The cumulative effect is a professional environment in which workload intensity is driven not only by discrete tasks, but by structural expectations that shape how, when, and why teachers work.

Finally, perceptions of a problematic workload are intensified by a perceived lack of professional autonomy and by insufficient resourcing. Teachers in England report lower autonomy than peers in comparable professional occupations (including scientists, doctors, nurses and lawyers), with minimal increases in perception over time or with experience (Worth and Van Den Brande 2020). This lack of influence over how tasks are approached or scheduled often results in inefficiencies and a perceived loss of control. Concurrently, under-resourcing issues including, for example, insufficient teaching materials, reductions in support staff availability, large class sizes, and limited access to functioning technology, force teachers to absorb additional responsibilities (Burge, Lu, and Phillips 2021; M. Walker, Worth, and Van Den Brande 2019). These factors increase not only the amount of work teachers must complete, but also the cognitive and emotional demands associated with their role.

Research suggests that excessive workload in England's teaching profession cannot be understood solely in terms of hours worked. Rather, it reflects an interaction of multiple, interrelated pressures including non-teaching duties; administrative and data tasks; marking and planning; digital demands; CPD expectations; systemic accountability; and limited autonomy and resources. This combination of pressures influences the daily realities of teaching, highlighting the importance of interventions that address both structural and school-level factors while supporting teacher wellbeing, autonomy, and resources.

RQ2: how do these components contribute to excessive workload?

Teachers' perceptions reflect not only the quantity of work they are expected to perform but also the qualitative experience of that work, whether it is manageable, meaningful, or unnecessarily burdensome. Evidence from literature suggests that workload is not simply a function of total hours worked, but also of how much control and professional autonomy teachers feel they have over their time and tasks (DfE 2019). Data from the 'Working Lives of Teachers and Leaders' (L. Adams et al. 2023) indicate that certain workload components are more likely than others to be experienced as excessive. These include general administrative work, data recording and analysis, behaviour management tasks, lesson planning, and marking. While these elements were identified in RQ1 as central components of teacher workload, their perceived *excessiveness* relates to factors such as policy pressure, accountability culture, and lack of support. The following sections examine teacher perceptions of these key workload components in greater detail.

Marking

Marking is one of the most frequently cited drivers of excessive workload. In England, government policy has explicitly recognised this issue. For example, in 2016 the DfE published 'Eliminating Unnecessary Workload Around Marking' (DfE 2016c), which concluded that 53% of teachers considered marking requirements to be excessive (Bmrb 2014). Despite such policy interventions, marking continues to be reported as a major source of workload pressure. Teachers frequently perceive the time devoted to marking as disproportionate to its impact on pupil learning and driven largely by external accountability expectations, particularly external school inspection requirements and internal performance monitoring, rather than by pedagogical necessity (DfE 2016c; Greer and Daly 2020).

International comparisons further highlight the scale of the issue. Teachers in England spend considerably more time on marking than many of their international counterparts. Findings from the 2018 TALIS survey (Jerrim and Sims 2020) indicate that England ranks among the countries where teachers devote the greatest number of hours to marking, with nearly one quarter of full-time secondary teachers spending over 10 hours per week on it – the OECD average for full-time secondary teachers is 4.3 hours per week (Jerrim and Sims 2019). There is also growing recognition that certain forms of marking, particularly excessive written feedback, may not substantially improve student outcomes (Elliott et al. 2016). Consequently, marking is not only perceived as time-consuming but also as professionally frustrating and inefficient. These perceptions contribute greatly to teacher stress and burnout, as confirmed by cross-national studies on workload and wellbeing (Jerrim and Sims 2021).

Lesson planning and preparation

Lesson planning is widely recognised as a fundamental component of effective teaching; however, it is also frequently experienced as an excessively demanding aspect of teachers' work. In England, lesson planning is formally embedded within the Teachers' Standards (DfE 2011), which set national expectations for teacher performance. Evidence suggests that, in practice, planning often shifts from a focus on pedagogical design towards a compliance-driven activity aimed at meeting accountability requirements (DfE 2016b). Teachers report that the time required for daily and short-term planning can be overwhelming, particularly when planning documents are used as evidence for performance management or for inspection purposes rather than as tools to support instructional improvement (Martin et al. 2023).

International comparisons indicate that teachers in England spend more time on lesson planning than their counterparts in many other OECD countries (Sellen 2016). This increased time commitment is partly attributed to policy guidelines around differentiation and meeting the needs of increasingly diverse pupil populations (Gibson, Oliver, and Dennison 2015). In addition, frequent curriculum reforms and policy changes require teachers to regularly revise lesson materials and teaching approaches, contributing to perceptions of inefficiency and intensifying workload-related stress (Chitty and Maunder 2024; Jerrim and Sims 2020). Although some authors argue that improving the quality and organisation of planning time may be more effective than simply reducing it (Gibson, Oliver, and Dennison 2015), teachers consistently report that lesson planning remains a poorly supported and time-intensive demand within the current accountability framework.

Data management

The burden of data management is another area where perceptions of excessive workload are evident. In England, national evidence from the 'Workload Challenge Survey' (BmrB 2014) indicates that over half (56%) of teachers identify data-related tasks as a major contributor to workload pressure. These responsibilities include recording assessment outcomes, tracking pupil progress, maintaining digital records across multiple platforms, and producing reports for a range of stakeholders, including school leaders and external authorities (DfE 2016a). While such activities are often justified as mechanisms for monitoring performance and improving outcomes, teachers frequently perceive them as poorly connected to day-to-day teaching and learning and more closely aligned with accountability and compliance requirements (CooperGibson 2018a; Higton et al. 2017).

Teachers also report frustration with the duplication of work created by multiple, poorly integrated data systems and with the increasing demands to track specific pupil groups in detail. These findings suggest that, although data use has the potential to support reflective practice and targeted intervention, current approaches to data management often prioritise accountability over instructional value. As a result, data-related workload is experienced as inefficient and professionally demotivating, reinforcing broader perceptions of excessive workload within the teaching profession.

Administration

Administrative work continues to be widely perceived as a constraint on effective teaching and a major contributor to excessive workload. Evidence from the ‘Working Lives of Teachers and Leaders’ survey shows that three quarters (75%) of teachers in England report spending too much time on administrative tasks, including managing emails, completing behaviour and safeguarding records, and maintaining documentation related to pupil welfare (L. Adams et al. 2023). This finding is consistent with earlier research, which identified administrative demands as a key source of workload pressure (Higton et al. 2017).

Administrative responsibilities are repetitive and time-sensitive in nature and often include safeguarding reporting, pastoral care documentation, performance management processes, and communication with parents. Teachers report spending more than two hours per day on such tasks, with notable increases in email volume and pastoral casework following the COVID-19 pandemic (CooperGibson 2023). Furthermore, the rising number of pupils identified with special educational needs or disabilities (SEND), a term used in England to describe pupils requiring additional educational support, has increased teachers’ administrative responsibilities. These include the preparation of individual learning plans and documentation required by external agencies (Martin et al. 2023). While many of these administrative tasks are necessary to support pupil wellbeing and inclusion, they are often undertaken without sufficient administrative support, specialist staffing, or efficient systems. As a result, responsibilities that could be shared or delegated are absorbed into teachers’ workload, reducing time available for teaching and planning and reinforcing perceptions of administrative work as both burdensome and inefficient.

Continuing professional development (CPD)

Although CPD is widely recognised as essential for maintaining teaching quality, improving pupil outcomes, and supporting careers (McLaughlin and Wood 2020; M. Walker, Worth, and Van Den Brande 2019), it can also be perceived as a source of additional workload. In some schools, CPD is scheduled outside regular teaching hours or requires extensive preparation, which teachers view as cutting into their personal time (DfE 2016b; M. Walker, Worth, and Van Den Brande 2019). Mandatory sessions that are not directly relevant to teachers’ subject areas or immediate classroom needs can also reduce perceived value and increase frustration (CooperGibson 2018a).

However, when CPD is well-targeted, embedded within the working day, and linked to collaborative approaches such as peer observation or joint planning, it is more likely to be seen as beneficial than burdensome (Robinson and Pedder 2018). Teachers’ perceptions of CPD, therefore, hinge on its alignment with professional needs and the extent to which it is supported by adequate time and resources (Worth and Van Den Brande 2020). Poorly integrated CPD can exacerbate workload pressures, whereas effective, well-structured CPD can enhance teacher agency, reduce inefficiencies in other workload areas, and improve retention (Harland, Bradley, and Worth 2023; Martin et al. 2023).

RQ3: what policies/case studies have been implemented and how effective have they been?

To address this question, the authors examined national- and school-level interventions aimed at reducing teacher workload across planning, marking, data management, and

professional development. In terms of national interventions, since 2010, the DfE has introduced a range of initiatives aimed at reducing teacher workload in England. A major development was the 'Workload Reduction Toolkit' (DfE 2018), later updated as the 'Improve workload and wellbeing for school staff' resources (DfE 2024d). These resources provide practical guidance for schools in areas commonly associated with workload pressure, including data management, marking, curriculum planning, behaviour management, and communications. While they signal formal recognition of workload as a policy issue, their effectiveness largely depends on how they are implemented at school level.

Evidence from the Workload Challenge research projects (Robinson and Pedder 2018) identified a series of school-based interventions with varying degrees of effectiveness. Several case studies addressed workload through collaborative and shared planning models, particularly in relation to curriculum development. Such collaborative planning was associated with reduced individual planning time, improved subject knowledge, and increased confidence, particularly for ECTs (Ellis et al. 2018; Gu et al. 2018; Handscomb et al. 2018). The findings suggest that planning workload is strongly influenced by how work is structured and shared within schools.

Other schools trialled workload reductions through alternative marking approaches, such as an increased use of verbal feedback, peer and self-assessment, and coded marking strategies. Such interventions were found to reduce marking time without negatively affecting pupil outcomes (Featherstone and Seleznyov 2017; Kime 2018; Morris et al. 2023; Protsiv, Pipola, and Welch 2018; Richardson et al. 2017). Additionally, data management initiatives that streamlined assessment and tracking systems were able to reduce duplication and administrative burden, indicating that workload related to data management was closely tied to system design rather than data use itself (Ashman and Stobart 2018). Targeted professional development initiatives, especially those supporting ECTs, were also associated with improved retention and more manageable workload, although evidence suggests that CPD is most effective when combined with wider organisational support (CooperGibson 2018b; Ovenden-Hope et al. 2018).

This combined evidence indicates that workload reduction initiatives are most effective when they are grounded in collaborative practices, enhanced teacher autonomy, coherent organisational systems and supportive leadership. Interventions that focus solely on procedural change, or on individual teacher practices, without addressing underlying cultural and accountability pressures, appear less likely to produce sustained improvements.

RQ4: what is the impact of teacher workload on recruitment and retention in England?

Research consistently identifies teacher workload as a central factor shaping both recruitment to, and retention within, the teaching profession in England – but particularly retention. For example, empirical studies indicate that workload is a dominant driver of teachers' intentions to leave the profession; McLean, Worth, and Smith (2024) report that the large majority (94%) of teachers identify workload as a reason for potentially exiting the profession. This finding is reinforced by national and governmental reports, which characterise current workload levels as unsustainable and warn of their implications for workforce stability (Burge, Lu, and Phillips 2021; DfE 2019; House of Commons 2024).

High attrition rates, particularly among ECTs, have contributed to what has been described as a ‘revolving door’ profession (Levi, Schlam Salman, and Orland Barak 2024). Retention studies consistently show that excessive workload compromises job satisfaction and long-term commitment, especially when combined with accountability pressures, unrealistic expectations, and limited support (Burge, Lu, and Phillips 2021; Martin et al. 2023). Notably, Perryman and Calvert (2019) found that the actual experience of workload in schools often exceeded what teachers had anticipated prior to entering the profession, with major consequences for both mental and physical wellbeing. While volume of work is a concern, research also points to the nature and perceived value of tasks, which play a critical role in shaping retention decisions. Tasks widely viewed as low-impact or overly bureaucratic, such as extensive marking, detailed planning documentation, and data collection, are strongly associated with dissatisfaction and disengagement (Martin et al. 2023; M. Walker, Worth, and Van Den Brande 2019). Additionally, an intensified culture of performativity and accountability, including inspection regimes and frequent policy reforms, adds further pressure, compounding feelings of stress and disempowerment (Lynch et al. 2016; Perryman and Calvert 2019).

Conversely, research indicates that supportive school cultures, which promote professional autonomy and collaboration, can buffer against the adverse effects of workload and enhance retention (Chitty and Maunder 2024; Kangas-Dick and O’Shaughnessy 2020; Ovenden-Hope et al. 2018). In practice, such cultures are reflected in distributed leadership structures, protected time for collaborative planning, peer mentoring and coaching systems, and teacher-led curriculum development. These practices foster intrinsic motivation and a sense of professional mastery, key protective factors for retention (Arthur and Bradley 2023; Chiong, Menzies, and Parameshwaran 2017).

Workload pressures also influence teacher recruitment. The DfE Initial Teacher Training Census for 2023–24 reported a 38% shortfall in recruitment targets, with most secondary subjects under-recruited. High workload expectations are widely recognised as a deterrent for prospective teachers (Harland, Bradley, and Worth 2023; McLean, Worth, and Smith 2024), with international and national research indicating that addressing workload concerns is vital to improving the attractiveness of the profession (Klassen et al. 2021). Examining flexible working conditions, including greater options for varied hours and part-time teaching roles and, for ECTs and trainees, enhanced support systems, Klassen et al. (2021) suggest that flexible working arrangements can help mitigate workload-related barriers, provided they are implemented with care and without adding new complexities.

Discussion

Synthesis of the 64 selected studies demonstrates a decade-long persistence of excessive workload demands on teachers in England, with reported levels consistently exceeding those reported in comparable education systems (Sellen 2016). While international comparisons show that teachers in England work longer hours than their peers in other OECD countries, the evidence suggests that workload pressures are shaped not only by the number of hours worked, but also by the intensity, complexity, and emotional demands of tasks (M. Walker, Worth, and Van Den Brande 2019). International research similarly highlights that limited professional autonomy and high scrutiny are key predictors of

workload stress and burnout across education systems (OECD 2019; Skaalvik and Skaalvik 2017). In England, these pressures appear particularly acute for ECTs, emphasising the importance of teacher agency in managing workload and mitigating stress (Worth and Van Den Brande 2020).

Across the reviewed literature, four recurrent elements emerged as primary contributors to excessive workload: *marking and feedback*; *lesson planning*; *data management*; and *administrative duties*. These are embedded within a culture of high-stakes accountability, shaped by performance measures and inspection regimes (L. Adams et al. 2023; Brady and Wilson 2021; Lynch et al. 2016). Similar accountability-driven workload pressures have been identified internationally, particularly in systems characterised by strong inspection frameworks and test-based accountability such as Ireland (Ball 2016), the United States (Von der Embse et al. 2016) and Portugal (Jerrim and Sims 2022). In England, this environment sustains workload pressures over time and has important implications for how teachers are prepared, inducted, and supported during the early stages of their careers.

In England, extensive *written feedback* for pupils is often required to meet inspection and audit demands, despite growing evidence that such practices do not consistently improve pupil outcomes (Jerrim and Sims 2020). Alternative approaches such as verbal feedback and peer and self-assessment have been shown to reduce teacher workload without compromising pedagogy (Robinson and Pedder 2018). These findings suggest that initial teacher education has a crucial role to play in equipping trainees with the skills to implement these approaches effectively.

Lesson planning demands are intensified by frequent curriculum and policy changes, increasing learner diversity, and expanded responsibilities related to SEND provision (Chitty and Maunder 2024; Jerrim and Sims 2020; Sellen 2016). International evidence indicates that collaborative planning models can mitigate these pressures by reducing duplication and strengthening professional learning communities (Vangrieken et al. 2015). Similarly, studies in England show that collaborative planning supports workload reduction and professional dialogue (Robinson and Pedder 2018), suggesting that embedding such practices within teacher education could help counter early-career isolation and inefficiency.

Administrative and *data management* demands have increased markedly, particularly in relation to safeguarding, SEND documentation, and communication with parents (Martin et al. 2023). The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated these demands, with responsibilities often shifting from specialist or support staff to classroom teachers, which exacerbated these pressures (Levi, Schlam Salman, and Orland Barak 2024; McLean, Worth, and Smith 2024). Comparable international research highlights similar patterns (UNESCO 2021).

These combined workload pressures have direct implications for retention, especially during the early stages of a teacher's career. Research links intensive marking, planning, and accountability demands to high attrition rates, which contribute to ongoing teacher shortages (Martin et al. 2023; Perryman and Calvert 2019; Skinner, Leavey, and Rothi 2019). International studies support these findings, showing that workload, and a perceived lack of professional support, are key indicators of teachers' decisions to leave the profession (OECD 2020). While financial incentives such as recruitment bursaries can attract new teachers, these do not resolve these systemic workload challenges that drive attrition (Chitty and Maunder 2024). Integrating realistic workload expectations,

time management strategies, and evidence-based working practices into initial teacher education may help new teachers better navigate these pressures.

Overall, evidence indicates that effectively reducing teacher workload requires coordinated action across teacher preparation, induction, and ongoing professional support. While initial teacher education can contribute by introducing workload management strategies, the issue itself reflects broader systemic and policy challenges. Sustainable solutions require collaboration among teacher education providers, schools, and policy-makers to: integrate workload management and efficiency practices into initial teacher education; encourage collaborative and streamlined approaches to marking and planning; reform policies to reduce administrative burdens and ensure appropriate deployment of support staff; and support professional autonomy within accountability frameworks (Lynch et al. 2016; Robinson and Pedder 2018; Worth and Van Den Brande 2020). Without such systemic reform, excessive workload will remain a barrier to maintaining a high-quality teaching workforce, with adverse effects for teacher wellbeing, retention and, ultimately, student outcomes.

Limitations

While this review offers a comprehensive analysis of research on teacher workload in England, several limitations should be acknowledged. Despite a rigorous search across six academic databases and six grey literature repositories, some relevant studies may have been unintentionally excluded. Restricting inclusion to publications in English may also have resulted in the omission of valuable non-English language research. The review covers publications from 2010 to 2024, a period of significant policy change in England's education system. Although this timeframe was chosen for its relevance, earlier studies may still have provided important perspectives on the evolution of teacher workload.

Teacher workload, wellbeing, and stress are closely interrelated concepts. To address the research aims, this review focused specifically on workload and teaching hours; however, incorporating broader measures of teacher wellbeing and stress in future studies could reveal additional insights. Finally, the scope was limited to teachers in the English state sector, with the aim of identifying key components of excessive workload and potential mitigation strategies in this specific context. While this targeted focus enhanced the relevance of findings for England, it may limit wider applicability. Comparative studies including other countries could offer valuable cross-national insights into addressing excessive workload.

Conclusion

This systematic review, based on studies from 2010 to 2024, aimed to pinpoint the main factors contributing to teacher workload in English primary and secondary schools and to explore how these factors combined to shape the overall demands faced by educators. The analysis identified four primary workload drivers: marking; lesson planning; data management; and administrative tasks. These operated within a broader context characterised by constrained teacher autonomy and intensifying external accountability pressures. Crucially, these elements are deeply interconnected, with challenges in one domain often exacerbating difficulties in others. As such, effective workload reduction strategies demand

integrated, systemic approaches that address multiple dimensions concurrently. Among the 64 studies reviewed, several case studies demonstrated that targeted, context-specific interventions can lead to measurable reductions in workload. Although many schools have begun implementing such initiatives, the current evidence suggests that these efforts have not yet achieved a sustainable or widely acceptable alleviation of workload pressures. Future research points towards the potential of new approaches, including the integration of artificial intelligence (AI) applications, to support teachers by streamlining routine tasks and offering new efficiencies (Goldman et al. 2024; Hashem et al. 2024; Martin et al. 2023).

The findings further reinforce the well-established link between excessive, unnecessary workload and teacher attrition. Autonomy and perceptions of manageable workload emerge as pivotal factors influencing retention, while the attractiveness of the teaching profession hinges on its perceived sustainability and intrinsic rewards. Promoting a healthy work-life balance is therefore essential to safeguarding teacher wellbeing and securing the future viability of the profession.

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