

**The evolving codification of teachers' work:  
Policy, politics and the consequences of  
pursuing quality control in Initial Teacher  
Education**

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**Abstract**

This paper documents the evolution of attempts to codify and standardise teachers' work in England with particular attention to how this phenomenon has impacted the Initial Teacher Education (ITE) sector. In recent decades the teaching profession in England has undergone various iterations of competency criteria, culminating with the current policy, the Teachers' Standards (TS) (DfE, 2011). Discussion focuses largely on the most rapid period in the evolution of competency-based approaches from 1997 to the present, analysing aspects of the political landscape which have precipitated this rise. Two key themes evident in, and precipitated by, the Teachers' Standards policy initiative are discussed: *i)* the political necessity for a reductionist view of teaching and learning and *ii)*, the centrality of the teacher. It concludes by imagining how, taking these themes into account, the policy could evolve to become more useful to both teachers and pupils.

**Keywords**

Teachers' Standards; competency descriptors; professionalism; policy; codification; New Labour; Neoliberalism.

**Introduction**

Like much of the world, in recent years England has begun to move away from judgements about quality of teaching based on centrally agreed procedures and practices, towards outcomes based appraisal. According to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD, 2009<sup>1</sup>) pupil test scores have become the dominant criteria for evaluating teacher performance in the world today. In England however, competency statements for trainees and teachers remain important benchmarks for quality. The central pillars of the standards agenda, pupil testing, publication of school league tables and the Ofsted inspection regime dovetail perfectly with the Teachers' Standards, which consist of eight competency based descriptors outlining 'a minimum level of practice' (2011:3) for teachers. Teachers' performance in England is judged against both descriptions of practice, descriptions of desirable outcomes for pupils and pupil test scores. As such, the TS is one of the key policy tools by which the government hope to 'make teaching practice less variable, more reliable and increasingly effective.' (Mulcahy, 2013:95), countering what Furlong *et al.* (2000) refer to as the variable 'topography' of provision nationally.

**Conception and evolution, 1960s – 1990s**

During the 1960s, according to Wilkin (1996), thanks largely to the publication of the Robbins Report (Robbins, 1963), teaching became viewed as a scholarly pursuit and teachers as requiring 'strong personal education' (Furlong *et al.* (2000:19) and as a consequence teacher education, in the form of the Bachelors in Education (BEd), focused on preparing trainees in sociology, psychology, history and philosophy. Although practical school experience played a part in ITE, the balance weighed heavily in favour of enhancing the education of the future teacher. Practical descriptors of teachers' work

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.oecd.org/newsroom/43125523.pdf>

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were still some way off. Debates over whether teaching is predominantly an academic or practical pursuit have never been far from the surface however, and by the 1970s a movement in the opposite direction had begun with calls from policy makers (see the James Committee Report, (James,1972)) for a stronger classroom-based element in ITE. Although teacher education remained the preserve of universities and colleges, the shifting emphasis towards school-based placements brought with it an increasing need to describe and codify what acceptable practice looked like. Since, according to Furlong *et al.* (2000), provision during the decade fragmented considerably as Polytechnics also began to offer teacher education courses, by the 1980s the first research into school-based teacher education was commissioned by the incoming Conservative government of 1979.

The vision of teachers' work presented in the subsequent 1983 White Paper Teaching Quality, was one of strong practical skills personally understood and justified through an intellectually rigorous process in which trainees would be required to 'provide satisfactory evidence of classroom competence.' (DES, 1983:1). The resulting government intervention in 1984, the first of its kind (DES Circular 3/84 (DES, 1984) gave the first glimpse of how neo-liberal market ideology would increasingly come to influence education policy. The report included regulations on the length of time students had to spend in school, ensured that all ITE courses be regularly inspected and graded by inspectors, made stipulations that ITE lecturers should return periodically to the classroom and, crucially, established the right of the Education Secretary to intervene in the structure and content of teacher education. In a series of subsequent circulars culminating with 24/89 (DES, 1989) the government positioned itself as the central overseer of what Menter (2010:15) calls the 'Secret Garden' of ITE curriculum and for the first time the emerging curriculum became expressed in terms of 'outputs' or 'exit criteria'. Described by Gilroy (1992) as the 'political rape of teacher education', by 1992 these criteria had been developed into 'competences' (DfE, 1993). This firmly established the still dominant discourse in which technical accomplishment, performativity and measurement are seen as the key mechanisms by which high quality teachers prepare pupils to contribute to a successful economy.

The strong sentiment from Gilroy was echoed by universities and education academics, powerless against the 'onslaught' (Menter, 2010:17) which they claimed led to the 'de-professionalisation' (Landman and Ozga, 1995:23) and 'technicisation' (Stronach et al. 2002:112) of teaching. As Stronach et al. point out, the drive towards codification of teachers' work, 'universalism', is led by policy makers, not professionals. Established in 1994, the Teacher Training Agency (TTA) was tasked with (amongst other things) setting the standards for the award of QTS and place control of the criteria for becoming a qualified teacher firmly in the hands of the government, where it has resided ever since.

### **Enter New Labour**

When New Labour came to power in 1997 they pledged to 'move beyond the "ruthless free-for-all" of the neo-liberals' (Power & Whitty, 1999:535). While both the Blair and Brown governments did allocate more money to education and claim to regulate from a distance rather than intervene directly in education, New Labour ostensibly sustained the policy trajectory already established by the previous eighteen years of Conservative governance. The prevailing policy direction, in which teachers' value became ever more directly linked to pupil outcomes, and surveillance increasingly the primary tool for accountability, achieved its ultimate expression in the years since 1997. The economically-led view in which education is the 'key force in human capital development' (Giddens, 2000:73) was at the heart of Third Way politics, as illustrated in this extract from the 1996 Labour paper: Lifelong Learning:

Education is the key to economic success, social cohesion and active citizenship. Our future

national prosperity depends on the skills and abilities of our people  
(Labour Party, 1996:2).

Though the efficacy of human capital theory, as expressed here, was by no means new (Callaghan's 1976 Ruskin speech<sup>2</sup> signaled a shift in that direction long before the Blair/Brown years) teachers' work, pupils' outcomes and national economic prosperity were becoming more and more directly and causally aligned. It is no wonder therefore that the change of government in 1997 ushered in the most concentrated period of centralised control that teachers and teacher educators had yet seen. Direct causal connections between inputs and outputs are necessary for exercising control, managerialism demands simple cause and effect structures around which to build its narratives. In the case of education, a straightforward narrative in which teachers' work was for the national good was emerging. An effective causal relationship also needs a causal mechanism, a variable or determining factor, for the newly emerging economic view of education; this was teachers.

For ITE this resulted in what Furlong et al. (2008:307) describe as politics and policy reaching 'down into the finest of detail of provision.' The Teachers' Standards went through various iterations in line with broader educational reforms between 1997 and 2010 becoming harnessed to, and subsequently uncoupled from, policies such as Every Child Matters (DfES, 2003). In fact, the defining feature of descriptors of teacher competency during this period was their subservience to changing policy. In 2008, ten years into New Labour governance, Furlong et al. described the Teachers' Standards as a 'key vehicle for the achievement of policy initiatives.' Whilst it is acknowledged (Furlong et al., 2008; Furlong, 2005; Gewirtz, 2002; Newman, 2001) that New Labour made some progressive changes to education policy after 1997 (creation of Education Action Zones, Sure Start Children's Centres, increasing emphasis on partnership and some gestures towards evidence-based policy making), these developments sat somewhat awkwardly alongside the familiar Conservative neo-liberal approaches of quasi-markets, inspections and national strategies. It was the latter, according to Hodgson and Spours (1999) which characterised the government's approach to ITE policy, the ever growing refinement and emphasis on standards and competencies being the clearest example.

The first significant New Labour initiatives to impact on ITE were the issuing of Circular 10/97 (DfEE, 1997) which further developed the 1992 'competencies' into more detailed 'standards' and publication of the National Curriculum for ITE which set out in hitherto unprecedented detail the content to be covered by trainee teachers. Abandoned in 2002, it was replaced by a list of 'standards' set out in three key areas: professional values and practice, knowledge and understanding and teaching. As Furlong (2005) points out however, far from signaling a decline in neoliberal ideology, the twin policies of defining 'standards' for the profession and creating multiple providers of ITE (Universities, School-based Initial Teacher Training (SCITT), Teach First) ensured that the maintenance of the market remained at the heart of public management of education, recreating education in the image of technical rationalism, assuming that getting education right is largely a procedural matter.

In 2006 the Standards underwent further revision in which they evolved to encompass the whole professional career of teachers, not just their initial training (TDA, 2007), with each career stage (NQT, Main Scale teachers, Upper Pay Scale, Advanced Skills Teachers etc) having its own set of descriptors. This iteration, the final under New Labour, had some advantages over its predecessors. Firstly, it was more condensed and manageable than the 2002 version. Secondly, the descriptors included reference to reflective and reflexive practice, developments welcomed by ITE providers and teachers. The most significant change initiated by the 2007 Professional Standards for Teachers:

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<sup>2</sup> <http://www.educationengland.org.uk/documents/speeches/1976ruskin.html>

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Core, however, was ideological since it represented a move away from using ITE as a vehicle for instigating policy changes in the profession at large.

Throughout the New Labour era, despite political claims that the TS enhance teacher professionalism, the prevailing ideological underpinning remained unchanged from its earliest conceptions under the Conservatives two decades before, as essentially a mechanism for market managerialism; as Giddens (2000:164) put it, 'there is no known alternative to the market economy any longer.'

### **Coalition 2010 – 2015**

Whilst the Conservative/Liberal Democrat Coalition government of 2010 wasted little time in making sweeping changes to education in England and Wales - Rebranding the Department for Children Schools and Families (DCSF) as the Department for Education (DfE) and narrowing its remit, disbanding of the Sure Start Children's Centres, abandonment of Every Child Matters (DfES, 2003), sidelining of the Rose Review of Primary Education (Rose, 2009) and the Cambridge Primary Review (Alexander, 2009) findings to name a few - the policy of codifying teachers' work into competency 'standards' continued and in 2011 the current version of The Teachers' Standards was published (DfE, 2011). This iteration is in two parts. Part one: 'Teaching' deals with what teachers do and how they do it, part two: 'Personal and Professional Conduct' deals with how teachers should behave. In a development on from the 2007 version both sections of the policy apply equally to trainees, NQTs and qualified teachers at all career stages. The government now had a framework for total control and a single instrument for intervention stretching from pre-service to end of service professionals. Comparative analysis of the language employed in the preamble to the 2007 and 2011 versions reveals an interesting ideological shift from the New Labour to Coalition administrations. The 2007 New Labour document describes itself in the following way:

Professional standards are statements of a teacher's professional attributes, professional knowledge and understanding, and professional skills. They provide clarity of the expectations at each career stage:

The Standards clarify the professional characteristics that a teacher should be expected to maintain and to build on at their current career stage

(TDA, 2007:2).

The 2011 Coalition document uses more performative language, describing its purpose as:

To provide a framework for assessing teacher performance by describing a 'minimal level of practice.

...to assess the performance of all teachers with QTS who are subject to the Education Regulations (2012).

And that teachers are:

expected to extend the depth and breadth of knowledge, skill and understanding that they demonstrate in meeting the standards

(DfE, 2011:3).

The employment of terms like 'performance', 'minimal level', 'subject to' and 'expected to' in the 2011 Standards allude more directly than in any of the previous versions to concepts of judgement and performativity. The language is more authoritative than in prior competency policies, and

represents widening of the hierarchical gap between those who are 'subject to' the policy and those who authored it. The 2011 version also has some interesting contradictions at its heart. There are positives for trainees, teachers and those who must enact the policy, not least the streamlining of descriptors, the focus on reflection and self-evaluation and the scrapping of the 150 page guidance which accompanied the 2007 document. This gave tutors running ITE courses considerably more freedom to decide the content of their programmes than in recent decades. The rhetoric which accompanied the 2010 White Paper (DfE, 2010) emphasised the Coalition's intention to give back freedom and control to teachers, to free them from bureaucracy and re-professionalise them. Hints of these intentions are visible in the 2011 policy, however what was given with one hand was more than taken away with the other. The new, more flexible Teachers' Standards were followed by revision to the Ofsted framework for ITE providers which allowed institutions to be accountable for their graduates' performance even into their second or third year in the profession (Ofsted, 2015), and a variety of new school based routes into teaching which placed schools very much in the driving seat. Under the School Direct<sup>3</sup> model, schools would train their own teachers and buy in the services they required from only 'Outstanding' ITE providing universities, deciding how much training they wish to purchase. As the then Education Secretary Michael Gove put it in 2012:

The cumulative impact of these changes ... will be [that] well over half of all training places will be delivered in schools. Most of the rest will be doing PGCE course in existing providers rated outstanding. The weakest providers will no longer be in business

(Gove, 2012).

The incentive for university ITE providers in this new even more highly marketised landscape is to stick to formulas, teach to Ofsted descriptions of 'Outstanding' teaching and to avoid innovative or transformative course design. Thus, flexibility or freedom delivered by the 2011 Teachers' Standards was more than sufficiently counteracted by a new age of ultra-marketisation and control. The government ceased describing what teachers and ITE course leaders should do in minute detail, but simultaneously made it not worth their while to plough far from previously recommended furrows. One of the important lessons, seen across the sphere of public management and illustrated well here is that individual policies should not be evaluated as single entities, but in respect of concurrent policies. Seemingly benign, or even teacher-professionalising policies can dovetail with coexisting initiatives to form ideological patchworks of conflicting messages and forces within the profession.

### **Codification: principle and practice**

There is a good deal of support among educationalists, teachers, head teachers and education academics for the principle of policies which make the requirements of teaching more open and clearly defined (Mahony & Hextall, 2000; Mulcahy, 2013). However, it is in the enactment (Ball *et al.* 2015) of such policies that a dichotomy emerges between academics and teachers on the one hand, who see their potential as a formative tool for teacher development, and policy makers on the other for whom their primary use is as a summative tool for judging competence and filtering out those who 'require improvement.' The latter is clearly articulated in the preamble to the current Teachers' Standards (DfE, 2011:3): 'The standards define the minimum level of practice expected of trainees and teachers from the point of being awarded qualified teacher status.'

Critical analysis of the language here points to the policy authors' summative intentions for this tool. '*Minimum level*' indicates the test-like nature of the Standards when applied to teachers' work. '*Expected*' positions teachers as subordinate to both the policy authors and its implementers. Far from encouraging its use as a reflective tool for supporting professional development, the language

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<sup>3</sup> <https://getintoteaching.education.gov.uk/explore-my-options/teacher-training-routes/school-led-training/school-direct>

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employed denotes a policy designed for the purpose of filtering out trainees, probationers or teachers who do not meet the required level.

This dichotomy, between formative and summative enactment of teacher competency policy is indicative of a philosophical schism which began in the 1960s and persists, to some extent, today between two partially conflicting conceptions of teacher development: the *reflective practitioner model* and the *competency model*. In the decades preceding New Labour, the reflective practitioner model had dominated ITE, but gradually began to give way during the 1980s and early 1990s as policy shifted more towards competencies and government control of education policy became tighter. By 1997 the two approaches were no longer viewed as incompatible but complementary, as one PGCE course leader stated:

I don't see how an effective course can be run without analysis of competencies. It permeates the work, but its greatest use is in self-analysis of students' practical experience  
(Furlong et al., 2000:42).

In this conception which combines reflection and competency based models, the trainee benefits from what Mahony & Hextall (2000:31) describe as opportunities for structured 'further professional learning', the structure of the descriptors providing points of reference for development. This two-sided coin approach in which the policy at once articulates the level of practice required and forms the basis of a formative coaching process towards that level is the most common application of the policy across the ITE sector. The question is whether the government's seemingly insatiable desire for a concise articulation of what makes effective teaching has resulted in descriptors which usefully describe what young professionals should be aiming for.

The most significant development in competency-based teacher education since the New Labour era has been the shift away from descriptors which exclusively articulate teacher actions towards those which increasingly describe pupil outcomes. The practice of judging the quality of teaching by judging resulting pupil attainment is a natural consequence of the hegemony of human capital theory (Becker, 1994) and rooted in the assumption of a linear causal relationship between teaching and learning; that if pupils' attainment is at or above expected levels then teaching is good or better, and if pupil attainment is below expected levels then teaching is poor. There is no room in this conception for teachers to have taught well, but pupils not to have met expected levels. The reverse is also a necessary logic of this conception, that if pupils learn, the teacher cannot have taught badly. Both of these assumptions are subject to question. Woods (1990), Eisner (1985), Atkinson & Claxton (2000) amongst others present teaching as a dynamic, complex affair, the outcomes of which are often unpredictable, a view with which the prevailing policy direction of the last 30 years is necessarily at odds. Human capital theory, as realised through the neoliberal political project, demands that teaching and learning become linear and deterministic ( $A+B=C$ ) so that stakeholders from policy authors to parents come to expect a simple causal relationship between teaching and learning: Teach well and children learn well, teach poorly and children learn poorly. In this easy-to-digest conception of how education functions teachers are positioned as the 'lynchpins' (Clarke, 2012:303) of pupil progress and educational reform, whilst other in-school and out-of-school factors are sidelined. Larson describes teacher centrality as 'one of the most revered and abiding cultural myths associated with education' (2009:208) and in her comparative analysis of discourse on 'teacher centrality' posits that by keeping our gaze firmly fixed on teachers, we become increasingly inattentive to wider socio-economic and political factors which influence pupil learning.

This in turn clears the way for one of the most powerful forces in the discourse on teachers' work and how teachers are trained; the 'moral crusade' (Leather & Langley-Hamel, 1998:68). It has proved politically expedient since the 1980s to present pupil outcomes as moral as well as

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national/economic imperatives, and this has led to a particularly potent version of Lee and Van Patten's (1995) 'Atlas Complex' in which teachers carry the weight of the nation's future on their shoulders. The toxic combination of moral/economic imperative and government manifesto pledges makes this oversimplified narrative of teaching and learning necessary, since political pledges must appear attainable via straightforward policy changes. If the true complexities of teaching and learning were acknowledged, 'fixing' the education system itself would be exposed for what it is, a complex undertaking. Thus a simple linear, casual narrative prevails; high quality teaching produces high quality learning, the teacher is the only significant causal mechanism in the production of learning, high and low quality teaching can be easily identified, therefore define high quality teaching and hold those responsible for producing/enacting it to account. As one of the authors of the 2011 Teachers' Standards put it:

The new Teachers' Standards give an unequivocal message that highly effective teaching is what matters in this profession. The Review Group has seized the opportunity to raise the bar for current and future teachers. Our nation's children and young people deserve no less  
(Blatchford, 2014:1).

The prevailing view here is of a mechanistic system in which in order to improve output (pupil attainment) it is simply necessary to adjust or 'improve' the input (teaching), and the codification of teachers' work via competency descriptors has been a central tool of this world view since the 1980s. As Cain and Caine (1997) put it, in machines, causes and their effects can be 'clearly identified, separated, measured and related to each other.' Of particular potency here is the idea of separating variables. In a typical classroom and in pupils' lived experience there are a multitude of factors, some more predictable and controllable than others, which may influence the pace, extent and quality of learning and attainment; as Eisner (1985:104) described it, teaching is 'an inordinately complex affair' in which a web of variables from both within and outside of the classroom collide to create learning. The idea of isolating one or more aspects of what teachers do and tweaking them to produce a guaranteed improved output from pupils is not particularly representative of teaching and learning as experienced by those on the frontline. To illustrate this, take the example of a descriptor from Standard Four of the current Teachers' Standards: 'Impart knowledge and develop understanding through effective use of lesson time' (DfE, 2011:11). Of course no one would disagree that lesson time should be used productively, however there are certain assumptions implicit in this instruction for trainees and qualified teachers which promote the mechanistic narrative and mask the complexity which Eisner speaks of. Firstly, the assumption that 'effective' in this context is the same for all learners, as if effective practice is a thing, different from ineffective practice. In fact, what is effective for one pupil might not be for another. What is effective at the beginning of a lesson for one pupil might be more effective coming towards the end of a lesson for another. A well thought out explanation of a concept might be effective for one pupil but unnecessary for another, who may develop understanding more 'effectively' by engaging in hands-on practical activity.

The point here is that 'effective use of lesson time' is complex, challenging and subject to change. Effectiveness in this context is not a *thing* teachers do. It is a consequence of detailed knowledge of learners, trial and error, complex classroom and pupil management, deployment of additional staff, pitching of learning objectives, pace of activity, flexibility and on the spot response from the teacher. Learning is a complex task for pupils, teachers and those who have responsibility for training them. However, in this short sentence from the Teachers' Standards lies everything necessary to recreate learning and teaching as a simple, mechanistic, causal sequence of events with the teacher as the sole determinant of success.

### Conclusions

One of the casualties of evolving competency policies in the last thirty years has been an honest and

realistic depiction of teachers' work. Put another way, repeated attempts to describe quality teaching have culminated with a document that is more politically, than educationally, useful. The reduction of teaching and learning to convenient inputs and outputs and the accompanying moral crusade narratives are now so deeply woven into the discourse on education, its purposes and future, that they have become necessary, and mutually dependent, bedfellows. The moral narrative placing teaching at the heart of the national good demands an accompanying narrative of teaching as a simple, mechanistic activity, showing that it can be easily fixed if broken, and can be constantly improved by tweaking the input (teaching). At the same time, the mechanistic narrative feeds on moral victories in which 'inadequate' teachers are identified and either removed or improved.

These two narratives find their ultimate expression in the evolving quality control policies of the last 30 years and have propelled teachers onto the frontline of the battle for international economic supremacy. There is no doubt that descriptions of competency in the teaching profession are here to stay, however a policy more representative of the realities of teaching and learning, and more useful to all stakeholders is possible.

#### *Reimagining the Teachers' Standards*

Reimagined as a formative tool for teacher development rather than a summative tool for judgement, the TS would take on a less political, perhaps more useful role, with descriptors forming focal points for dialogic analysis of practice. This would be significantly enhanced by the inclusion of teacher knowledge, skills and attributes, conspicuous by their absence in the current policy. Descriptors which directly reference flexibility, responsiveness, creative thinking and action, improvisation, action research and understanding of learning theory to name a few, would acknowledge that teaching and learning are complex, dynamic processes and support emerging professionals, and other stakeholders, in developing a more realistic view of teachers' work, as well as reminding more experienced colleagues of the need to remain flexible and open minded. This would encourage a move away from the status quo in which ITE programmes necessarily 'value certainty, the known and the manageable' (Larson, 2009:225) towards teacher preparation in which teaching is presented more accurately as problematising learning rather than producing it. Such changes would also discourage those observing and evaluating teaching from attempting to make measurable judgements about its quality and usefulness without sufficient contextual understanding and in overly short time frames.

The propagation of a simple, mechanistic view of teaching and learning seems increasingly out of step with reality and unhelpful for anyone entering the non-selective, inclusive classroom environment. With teachers leaving the profession in greater numbers than at any other point in recent times (50,000, equalling 10.6% - DfE, 2016), many within their first few years of teaching; with vacant posts reaching record numbers (DfE, 2016) and with a rising proportion of the workforce without Qualified Teacher Status, the need for a more realistic, comprehensive and less politically motivated description of teachers' work is clear. This more realistic description should challenge the prevailing centrality of teachers as the sole determinants of pupil learning. It should acknowledge that teaching and learning is not an exact science and frame teacher competence not only in objective terms, as 'minimum levels of practice', but also subjectively, as responsive to varying classroom and pupil contexts.

Of course, changes such as these would render the Teachers' Standards a less potent tool for advancing the neoliberal vision of education as a consumer commodity, and it is difficult to imagine a climate in the near political future in which a case for them could be successfully argued. With this in mind it will fall to ITE providers and school mentors to enact the Teachers' Standards policy with sensitivity to the complexities of teaching and learning and for the formative professional development of the emerging professionals they train. As we increasingly move towards an era of



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political, economic, social, national and international uncertainty, policy discourse will attempt to reassure with progressively simpler and more ideologically driven discourse. To successfully navigate this uncertain future, pupils will need to develop comfort with uncertainty, supported by teachers who are not shouldering an 'Atlas Complex', able and willing to reflect critically and honestly about the complex work they do.

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