

## Covering for Absent Colleagues

### The Role of the Supply Teacher

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*The day-to-day use of supply teachers to cover for staff absences is now a regular feature of many schools. But how are supply teachers selected, managed, supported and developed when they provide short-term cover for absent colleagues and what problems do teachers and schools encounter in the process? These are the questions which this research explored, the conclusions from which should help schools and authorities review their current practices in order to provide a better service for all concerned.*

Schools are heavily dependent on their supply teachers. Staff absence is a common occurrence and it is difficult to see how the smooth running of schools could be maintained without the services of a considerable body of people who are prepared to act as substitutes. Yet in spite of the system's heavy dependence on supply teachers this is an area in which little research has been conducted.

The day-to-day use of supply teachers is problematic, both from the point of view of the school management and the supply teachers themselves. The managers have to cope with ever-changing situations, matching short-term vacancies to available staff, often at very short notice. The supply teachers can be required to deliver lessons to pupils they don't know, in an unfamiliar environment, often with little time to prepare. Supply teachers and their managers (usually headteachers or deputies) are located in different worlds, the manager being highly visible and the supply teachers much less visible. The aim of this project was to examine the interactions between the different levels within schools by exploring the following questions:

- What are schools' expectations of supply teachers?
- How are supply teachers selected and evaluated?
- How are supply teachers supported?
- How are these issues perceived by those at different organisational levels?

The project was confined to the experience of short-term supply teaching, ie teachers taking jobs of short duration, and acting as substitute for the usual teacher.

#### **METHODS**

The research took the form of case studies of two rural comprehensive schools in the same education authority in the north-east of Scotland. The schools were given the pseudonyms Bellview School and Greenacres School. Within each school unstructured interviews were

conducted with the depute rector (in both schools the depute was responsible for managing relief staffing), with some principal teachers (two at Bellview, three at Greenacres), and with six supply teachers. Two of the supply teachers worked at both schools, so a total of ten interviews were undertaken. Additionally, two supply teachers in each school were observed at work for a day each. The observation served to support and verify data gathered from interview. All supply teachers in the sample were women.

#### **RESEARCH FINDINGS**

To set the scene, enquiries made to the education authority revealed that no policies or guidelines were issued to schools regarding the management of supply teachers. The authority took an administrative role, and had entirely devolved the day-to-day organisation of supply staffing to schools. Schools were free to develop the management systems that suited them best.

#### **Schools' expectations of supply teachers?**

Neither school had written policies regarding their deployment of supply teachers, but in both cases there was an expectation that principal teachers would provide work for the classes which could be effectively delivered by the supply teacher. There was an expectation that the supply teacher would act professionally upon those instructions, would ensure the progress of the pupils, and maintain discipline and order within the class.

This was not always straightforward as supply teachers were often required to work at short notice, with little time to digest their instructions or to prepare for the lesson that lay ahead. Commonly they were working with pupils to whom they were strangers. Additionally supply teachers could be expected to take lessons which were outside their own subject specialism, so were required to

maintain authority and oversee learning whilst being ignorant of the subject matter involved. This was not an ideal situation for pupils or teachers, and was one which both schools strived to avoid, but at times it was inevitable.

The role of the short-term supply teacher was in many ways quite a different role from that of a permanent teacher. Perceptions of what made a good supply teacher were exacting:

*I think they have to be flexible, adaptable ... They have to be able to fit in as quickly as possible, stand on their own two feet as quickly as possible, become a member of the department.*  
(Principal teacher, Greenacres)

The supply teachers also felt the job to be difficult and demanding, often referring to it as highly stressful:

*I find it very hard work for lots of reasons. I try to be professional about it, I try and put in as much as I possible can into it. There are times when I have to do things totally off the cuff, and I spend an enormous amount of nervous energy actually doing it.*  
(Supply teacher)

Most of the supply teachers in this sample enjoyed their work and were confident about their ability to fulfil the expectations of their employers. They were mainly experienced teachers and it was felt that this enabled them to cope effectively, and that it would be difficult to manage without that experience.

Only two of the teachers in the sample identified themselves as struggling with the job. One of these was an experienced teacher who was returning to the profession following a career break and who felt herself to be de-skilled by the experience of substitute teaching. She described herself as feeling totally incompetent, having previously viewed herself as a good teacher. The other teacher who was having difficulties was a newly-qualified probationer who had been used on a number of single-day appointments, always outside her own subject. The self-esteem of both of these women was very low.

### **Selection and evaluation of supply teachers**

In the authority, individual schools selected their supply teachers from a list compiled centrally. There was little information about the staff on the list other than their names, telephone numbers, and subject specialisms. Schools were not routinely issued with information about previous experience, qualifications or referees' reports. This lack of information created problems for the depute rectors who, understandably, were cautious about recruiting unknown teachers randomly from the list:

*The problem I have in seeing a name on a list is knowing what kind of quality you're going to get. And the experience that we've all had both as teachers and as managers of supply is that the quality is fairly variable.*  
(Depute Rector, Bellview)

Instead they attempted as far as possible to build up relationships with competent staff whom they used regularly. An informal system of quality control was in operation, whereby supply teachers' performance would be monitored, and only those with whom the schools were happy would be invited back.

The supply teachers themselves were well aware of the informal assessments that would be made of them, particularly when new to a school:

*You like to prove yourself in the first few days, in the sense that I presume that if you weren't great in the first few days they wouldn't have you back.*  
(Supply teacher)

However, feedback to supply teachers was mostly indirect. The supply teachers accepted that an invitation to return to the school signified approval:

*I've always been in demand, so I must be doing something right.*  
(Supply teacher)

On the other hand, if the depute rector decided not to re-employ a supply teacher, he would not usually inform the supply teacher of that decision. So a supply teacher who was not offered any further work would not know whether she was not wanted back, or simply not needed:

*If you don't get used very much by schools you begin to wonder, is it me that they didn't like me ... is it because teacher X is better than me?*  
(Supply teacher)

This system, which was designed to protect the interests of pupils, worked well in the situation where a supply teacher was deemed to be competent. Repeated offers of work enabled the supply teacher to become more familiar with her working situation and develop closer links with colleagues, thus giving rise to enhanced professional confidence and competence in that setting. This could produce fruitful working relationships to the benefit of all parties involved.

The system was more problematic if the supply teacher was disliked, for whatever reason. The school was not obliged to inform the supply teacher if they were dissatisfied, so the teacher could remain unaware of the nature of the charges made against her. Consequently that supply teacher might accept work in other schools, where the same mistakes might be repeated to the probable detriment of pupils involved.

There was also a question of the fairness of the procedure. The rejected teacher had no opportunity to defend herself. It was clear that teachers depended heavily on those around them to be able to perform effectively, and things could go wrong for a supply teacher for reasons that were beyond her own control. So whilst rejection may often be a just response to a situation, it was also possible that a supply teacher could be held responsible for some mishap when, in fact, she had been left with insufficient work, or inadequate resources, or lacked some other support that she could reasonably expect.

Another mechanism of quality control in operation was to contact colleagues in other schools, to ask their opinions of supply teachers on the list. At principal-teacher level and depute-rector level opinions were freely passed on by word of mouth. So the poor reputation that a supply teacher had unknowingly acquired in one school could spread throughout the authority. Paradoxically, the reason the authority gave for putting so little detail on the supply lists was that of confidentiality.

### How supply teachers are supported

Clearly, supply teachers are most in need of support when new to a school, and they need to familiarise themselves with pupils, colleagues, resources and procedures as rapidly as possible. Often, supply teachers would be in front of their first class just minutes after their arrival on the premises, so support at this time was crucial.

The two schools were very different in this respect. Greenacres School issued temporary staff with a specially-designed welcome package containing five booklets of information. In addition, the rector of this school would meet the new supply teacher personally to offer a welcome to the school. The difficult situation that supply teachers faced was recognised by the depute rector, who believed that information enhanced the competence of the new supply teacher:

*I always say this to my supply teachers ... they're in the worst possible situation, where they're coming in to a new situation, if they haven't known the school before and they're not given information about what the school stands for and what the purpose of the school is, and what the pupils position is. Pupils, no matter how good they are, however excellent the youngsters are, will seize on weakness, it's human nature ... Knowledge is strength, lack of knowledge is weakness.*

(Depute Rector, Greenacres)

As well as speeding up the settling-in period, this effective induction also made the supply teachers more accountable for their actions. Supply teachers could not plead ignorance if they failed to follow school procedures, and the senior staff would be justified in displeasure if this was the case.

By contrast, Bellview school issued no documentation as a matter of course to new supply teachers. Only those who had asked specifically were in possession of school handbooks, staff lists and so on. Supply teachers in this school showed considerable ignorance of normal procedures, for example one teacher who had worked there regularly for over a year was not aware of the discipline policy.

The support that supply teachers felt the most important for them was that of their colleagues in the department. In particular clear instructions as to the format and content of the lessons to be taught was crucial, as was the provision of appropriate resources. The supply teachers reported (and observation confirmed) that support at this level was variable in both schools even within the same department. Whilst some absent teachers would leave very detailed instructions, other would leave just a few words. For some supply teachers this was a source of considerable irritation.

Yet, for the principal teacher, or the absent colleague, the leaving of appropriate work was not a straightforward matter. Schools employ supply teachers precisely because they are very busy. The purpose of bringing in a supply teacher is either because the department is short-staffed, or to create some free time for development work. So devoting large amounts of time to producing detailed notes

for the supply teacher can seem to be onerous or even counter-productive. At this point of transfer of responsibility there was a conflict of interests between the supply teacher and the absent colleague.

Supply teachers were very cautious about seeking too much help from their colleagues, feeling that it was their duty to stand on their own two feet, and not to be too demanding:

*You do need a certain amount of information and support to be able to operate effectively, and yet you don't want to get in the way.*

(Supply teacher)

*You think, well, I'm only in here for a limited period. Will I survive or will I make a major fuss about it? And I think, in retrospect, there are times when I should have sought help, but I didn't want to make a fuss.*

(Supply teacher)

As successful supply teachers became more established in a school they were in a stronger position to access support from colleagues. They could be drawn into a positive feedback cycle whereby increased familiarity led to greater confidence and competence leading to more offers of work and closer relationships with colleagues. But mechanisms of support were less accessible to, and more needed by, the struggling supply teacher. The individual schools could not reasonably be expected to tackle such problems:

*What we don't do, where a weakness is identified, we don't take it on. The cop out is just nae to use them again. Rather than to say we have a responsibility to bring you on as a teacher, to remedy the situation and so on.*

(Depute Rector, Bellview)

The local authority had no way to assist either. So the unfortunate supply teacher was left to struggle in isolation.

Opportunities for professional development did not exist for the short-term supply teacher. Whilst longer-term supply teachers would be included in school-based in-service training, the short-term worker generally fell outside this provision. Nor did the authority offer an alternative programme of training for supply teachers. Consequently supply teachers' knowledge of curriculum updates could be alarmingly sketchy. One supply teacher who had worked a day or two per week for many years remarked:

*When I left permanent teaching, it was just as Standard Grade was coming in, anything I've picked up over the years has been from that time. And the 5-14, its been pick it up as you go along.*

(Supply teacher)

### CONCLUSIONS

There appeared to be a basic contradiction between the difficult role that short-term supply teachers were expected to fulfil, and the lack of support available to them in this authority. It is hardly surprising that some supply teachers found the job to be excessively difficult, giving rise to management concerns over the quality of pupils experience. To blame the unsatisfactory situation entirely on the supply teacher's inadequacies is hardly fair, and ignores the employer's responsibility to offer constructive

professional development. Here, there is considerable scope to raise standards. Some possible improvements are suggested below:

► At school level, it should be standard procedure to offer an effective induction, as described at Greenacres school. The importance of the interchange between permanent staff and supply teachers should be emphasised to all staff.

► At authority level, a system which provided more detailed information to headteachers, would allow schools to select supply teachers with more confidence. It would be possible to set up a central networked database, accessible only to headteachers and authorised senior managers, which gave much more detail of previous experience and references. A record of supply work within the authority could be kept on the database, and, by negotiation with the supply teacher, schools could add comments about performance. Thus, supply teachers would have a more formal evaluation of their work, and be aware of their professional standing. Schools would also benefit by having a much clearer idea of who they were appointing.

► At a national level, conditions of service for teachers have been reviewed, following the McCrone report, and there is an opportunity to address conditions of employment for supply teachers. The restructuring of teachers' professional development should include supply teachers.

► The most awkward problem to address is how best to offer support to a supply teacher whose piecemeal-type work pattern does not allow easy access to school-based support systems. Perhaps the best support for a new supply teacher would be an experienced supply teacher. A system of mentoring could exist, whereby supply teachers were offered help and support from a named colleague who had a successful record of service. In one survey of supply teachers, 49% expressed a desire to shadow an experienced supply teacher at work (Mullett, 1990). Shadowing their mentor could form part of a planned induction. Mentors, for their part, could be offered an incentive, perhaps working towards chartered teacher

status, thus introducing a career structure into the supply service.

It is of considerable importance to Scottish education that the issues raised here are addressed. Schools perpetually rely on supply teachers, and their classroom performance is significant to the education of our pupils. Many supply teachers will, at a later date, look to return to full-time permanent work, so to invest in their training and support is to invest in the quality of the future teaching stock. Short-term, piecemeal supply teaching is currently the starting experience of 10% of probationers (Draper, 1998), and their early experiences will impact significantly on future teaching quality. Teachers' experiences of supply work can either draw them into, or turn them away from, the profession. The system cannot afford to turn away fully-trained teachers. To address the issues of support, training and quality assurance of supply teachers has potential benefits for pupils, for schools and for the teaching profession.

### References

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### Notes

1. This research was carried out as an MEd thesis. A more detailed account of the project, entitled *Untrained, unsupported and underperforming? The complexities of employing supply teachers* is published in a series of research papers published by the Centre for Educational Research, University of Aberdeen, Aberdeen AB24 3QY. Price £5.00.
2. The author would like to thank Mrs Janet Shucksmith for her consistent support and encouragement throughout this project. Thanks also to the headteachers, depute rectors and principal teachers of 'Greenacres School' and 'Bellview School' and to all supply teachers who took part in the study.

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