

**Some thoughts on the challenges faced by newly qualified teachers (NQTs)
and those who support them: a discussion paper**

James Underwood

University of Northampton

Association of Global Teachers: international conference on supporting new
teachers – Dedham, UK, 24 October 2015

Keynote Introduction and Opening Workshop.

ABSTRACT

This short paper was written in order to introduce the main theme for discussion at the conference: *Association of Global Teachers: international conference on supporting new teachers – Dedham, UK, 24 October 2015*. This theme was ‘ways in which we can support newly qualified teachers (NQTs) so that they remain in the profession’. It is influenced and inspired by colleagues who I have worked with over a career in education which is now over twenty years long. It is influenced by teachers I worked with in schools. It is also and most significantly influenced by current colleagues at the University of Northampton, where we run a course for Newly Qualified Teachers, that is now a deeply embedded part of our practice in working with the teachers who work in schools in our local community. As these sentences above illustrate this is a paper shaped by the experiential knowledge and reflections on the working practice of colleagues as revealed through conversations we have had over the past two years. It is written in an informal and, at points, anecdotal tone with the aim of provoking discussion. However, it is not a paper about the mechanics of our NQT programme, but rather about the ideas, personal reflections and experiences that shaped its design. Three themes are presented for discussion as follows: the pressures of the workplace; seeing oneself as a teacher; and reflections on a recent past. In the conclusion I link these to another theme for discussion: degrees of freedom - degrees of support.

I was asked to prepare this short paper in order to introduce the main theme for discussion at this conference day, which is 'ways in which we can support newly qualified teachers (NQTs) so that they remain in the profession'. It is worth making clear in this introduction both what this paper is and what this paper is not. It is some thoughts written down by me but influenced by colleagues I have worked with over a career in education which is now over twenty years long. It is influenced by teachers I worked with in schools, because the retention of new staff is not a new issue. It is also and most significantly influenced by current colleagues at the University of Northampton, where we run a course for Newly Qualified Teachers, that is now a deeply embedded part of our practice in working with the teachers who work in schools in our local community.

This NQT course at the University of Northampton was not solely or even primarily designed by me, there are a large number of dedicated and talented colleagues whose ideas have shaped this short paper. The course has been successful in achieving its goals, last year for example 56 NQTs took part in this programme, all remained in teaching throughout their NQT year and when surveyed planned to remain in teaching into the next. When this is compared against a national average of between 30% and 40% of NQTs leaving teaching nationally in any given year of the last five, it is clear to see why this is an outcome that we are rightly proud of. It should also be noted that our excellent programmes of initial teacher training will also have helped to lead to this positive outcome as many of these NQTs had been trained by us at this first stage too. For us at the University of Northampton the process whereby trainee teachers move to become NQTs and then onwards into their careers is an integrated process in which we work with schools to support their teachers throughout.

As these sentences above illustrate this is a paper shaped by experiential knowledge and reflections on the working practice of colleagues as revealed through conversations we have had over the past two years. It is written in an informal and, at points, anecdotal tone with the aim of provoking discussion with my friends and colleagues here. Lastly it is not a paper about the mechanics of our NQT programme, but rather about the ideas, personal reflections and experiences that shaped its design. In the next few paragraphs I present three themes that I hope will form the basis of the next hour's discussion. These three themes are titled as follows: the pressures of the workplace; seeing oneself as a teacher; and reflections on a recent past. In the conclusion I link these to another theme for discussion: degrees of freedom - degrees of support.

The pressures of the workplace

There is a saying I have heard many times and it is not one that I can attribute to its original source. I am sure it is one that some of you will have heard before. It goes something like this '*it takes a new teacher three hours to prepare a good lesson, it takes an experienced teacher twenty years and three minutes*'. It isn't entirely true of course and most problematic of all it risks implying that experienced teachers don't work as hard as they do. However, it does

touch upon a reflection that those designing our NQT course regularly returned to in various conversations. Experienced professionals possess in their repertoire a wide range of techniques which can be used creatively and flexibly to build lessons. I can think back to my own experience as a history teacher and they included: the card sort against the ‘zones of relevance’, interrogation of an image, various types of structured debate and many others. This meant that the planning of each lesson would more often than not involve the selection of which techniques to use for any given circumstance, the combination could be innovative but the process itself was structured. An analogy could be with a carpenter, who may build for you a new design but in which each individual join is based on experience of doing something very similar before. NQTs are still building this repertoire. They will have made headway in this process during their initial teacher training year. However, even when this has been excellent it is at this early stage still an incomplete process. In relation to this many NQTs have communicated to us the sheer exhaustion they experience when planning lessons. I am therefore presenting this issue and ways we can respond to it as the first topic for discussion.

Seeing oneself as a teacher

I would like to start with a simple personal reflection and statement about myself that may be true for many people in this room: *I work in education, I have worked in education for close to 25 years and I will work in education until I retire.* All of those statements inter-relate and are significant in terms of discussing how we support NQTs, because to make a similar statement about them: *typically they work in education, they have only done so for a short while and they may well not continue to do so, indeed in many cases their career teaching may be a brief moment in a life time of work.*

To put it another way: the longer we have been doing a job or been part of a professional field, the less likely we are to leave. There is a considerable amount of research supporting this anecdotal assertion that I would be happy to discuss at another time, but it is largely confirmatory research, confirming a fact that a room full of people like us, with the average age we have, already know well. We have made this journey ourselves personally and if you are anything like me as part of this you will have experienced that there was a point when you started teaching, a later point where you perceived yourself as a teacher and felt comfortable in this role, and a further point after which you had such confidence and expertise in this professional field that to leave it would seem wasteful and to start again in another terrifying. It is therefore the twin challenges of retaining teachers, bearing in mind that they will not yet have made this journey and of supporting them to move to a stage where they identify themselves as teachers, that I am presenting as the second theme for discussion.

Reflection on the recent past

A personal learning process I went through recently was plastering the internal walls of a house. I read quite a lot about plastering and then plastered a wall, I then read the same things again and because this time I was able to reflect on my earlier mistakes did a far better job second time around. Again to quote a truism that I am sure you have all heard in some form: *it is far easier to learn how to do something after you have tried it a few times, than learn about something before you do it.*

In terms of NQTs of course reflection and discussion have been part of their training year but as we all know this year is intense whilst teaching is a nuanced and complicated profession that takes time to become skilled at. Therefore even at the end of their training year and throughout their NQT year teachers are still developing their professional skills. The University of Northampton NQT sessions were designed with this reflection in mind. We realised that we needed to provide space and time for NQTs to reflect and discuss teaching strategies, both ones they already use and newly presented ones. Finding ways to do this is therefore the third theme that I am presenting here for discussion.

Concluding remarks

In relation to all the paragraphs above, an over-arching issue that emerges for those who work with NQTs is the extent to which we feel confident in giving both freedom and support. Unless NQTs are given the creative freedom to embed a self-identity as ‘crafts-person teachers’ then it is likely that their commitment to the profession will remain partial. However, if the freedom given leads to a sense of failure then the chances of leaving a profession that they have only just started and so can leave with relatively minor personal, emotional or even financial implications is also high. We need to provide ways for them to adjust to a new workplace, support in building an identity as a teacher, and space for reflection and discussion on their developing repertoire in their craft. It is in the next part of this session and over coming weeks online that I hope we can explore and discuss these issues further.