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The Management of Supply Cover in the Teaching Profession

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The Management of Supply Cover in the Teaching Profession

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Introduction

There have for some years been concerns in Scotland about the availability of supply cover, the quality of supply teachers, and the adequacy of support and development provided for them. This *Insight* highlights key findings from a study of the management of supply cover in Scotland. The research was commissioned by the Scottish Executive Education Department in October 2002 to inform the development of guidelines. The objectives of the study were to:

- (i) develop an understanding of the supply market and why teachers are attracted to the work
- (ii) document the methods used by education authorities and by schools to recruit supply staff
- (iii) document methods used by education authorities and schools to manage the deployment of supply staff including systems to support supply teachers when working in school
- (iv) identify the effect of these different recruitment and deployment methods on education authorities, schools and teachers by examining, for example, the impact on the ability to provide cover when needed and supply teachers' job satisfaction
- (v) make recommendations for good practice in the management of supply cover at the education authority and school level.

Context

The growing concerns about supply cover in Scottish schools have come from two main directions: a focus on the teachers themselves and a focus on the staffing of schools.

The Teachers on Probation study, conducted by Draper, Fraser, Raab and Taylor (1997), found that a high proportion of those in their probationary period worked as supply teachers for all or part of the time. More recently concerns have centred on the apparent shortage of supply teachers and doubts about their quality. In 2000 the Scottish Executive funded an investigation of the management of supply teachers by Scottish education authorities (Spratt, 2000). The report described the variation in the extent to which education authorities were directly involved in managing supply cover, and the advantages and disadvantages of the various systems in place. It identified a widespread problem with the availability of supply staff. Quality assurance mechanisms and professional development opportunities for daily-paid staff were found to be limited.

The Committee of Inquiry into Professional Conditions of Service for Teachers (the McCrone Inquiry) report (May 2000) identified the difficulties that schools had in securing appropriate supply cover to deal with planned or unplanned absences among the permanent teaching staff. The Committee commented that its recommendations on the organisation of Continuing Professional Development (CPD) should tend to reduce the demand for cover, and its suggestions for 'winding down' among teachers

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approaching retirement should increase the pool of experienced staff available. In addition it recommended that the Scottish Executive and local authorities review the way supply cover was provided and managed, and how this might be improved, for example, by employing permanent peripatetic teachers. In August 2001 a Supply Teacher Working Group was established by the Scottish Executive Education Department to take forward the commitment on the issue of supply teachers in the subsequent agreement *A Teaching Profession for the 21st Century* (Scottish Executive, 2001).

Whereas in the past a significant number of new teachers emerging from training went into supply posts as a first stage in a career ladder, as part of the agreement *A Teaching Profession for the 21st Century* all are now guaranteed an induction post with 0.3 non-contact time for professional development, and support from a mentor. The year during which this study was undertaken was the first of this new arrangement. This scheme in itself has created additional demand for supply cover, but simultaneously removed from the pool of available supply teachers one key source – those very same newly qualified teachers. There is considerable interest in what the longer term effects of this will be.

Another element of the settlement that will create an increased demand for teachers, and therefore may impact on the supply market, is the commitment to reduce all teachers' class contact time to 22.5 hours per week. By 2006 primary teachers' maximum contact time will have been reduced to this level from 25 hours and secondary teachers from 23.5.

Also, as agreed in the settlement, the Scottish Negotiating Committee for Teachers (SNCT) has been discussing the use of temporary teachers. It is aiming to develop a National Code of Practice to replace Clause 8.5 of the Scheme of Salaries and Conditions of Service ('The Yellow Book'). This is likely to provide a better definition of different forms of temporary work and to clarify the pay and conditions under which supply teachers are working. Following a Court of Session judgement that affirmed a temporary teacher's right to transfer to a permanent contract after a period of satisfactory full-time service, many education authorities have been reviewing their employment practices relating to temporary teaching staff, and teacher unions have been urging their members on temporary contracts to seek permanent status from their employers.

Thus the context at the time of this study was one of rapid change, and some factors affecting the supply market were specific to that year. This needs to be taken into account in reading the findings.

Research design

The term supply teacher is used to cover a wide range of different roles and types of employment (short-term cover, long-term cover, daily-paid and permanent contracts). In this study we included anyone working in a school on a temporary basis, either as a daily-paid teacher (with or without a temporary contract), or a teacher on a permanent contract whose role involved working across different schools filling temporary needs.

The research was designed to collect quantitative and qualitative data from education authorities, schools and supply teachers. In addition, interviews were conducted with representatives from the GTCS, teacher unions and HMI(E). Relevant documents were also collected from both education authorities and schools.

Education authorities: Questionnaires were returned by all 32 Scottish education authorities. Six case study authorities were selected to illustrate different approaches to

the deployment of supply cover in geographically diverse areas. In each of these, in-depth interviews were carried out with key personnel.

Schools: A questionnaire was sent to 1055 schools, and responses were received from 431, a response rate of 41%. Of these, 5.1% were nurseries, 41.5% primary schools, 41% secondary schools and 12.3% special schools. Face to face interviews were conducted in 20 schools (normally with headteachers in primary schools and nurseries, and depute heads in secondary schools). The majority of the schools selected were in the case study authorities.

Supply teachers: Questionnaires were despatched to supply teachers via schools. While over 2500 questionnaires were sent out, we assume that a much smaller number actually reached teachers, in that senior staff in schools where their own questionnaire was not returned were unlikely to have distributed questionnaires to supply teachers. Around 700 were completed and returned. Telephone interviews were conducted with 20 supply teachers who had responded to the questionnaire. This sample was selected entirely from those engaged mainly in short-term cover, largely from the case study authorities, and included a balance of those who were aiming to get a permanent job and those who were happy as supply teachers. In addition, three supply teacher panels were established, comprising 20 supply teachers in all; the panel members were engaged in a wide variety of work and represented all age groups and career stages. Each panel met on three occasions over the course of the project, to explore in considerable depth a range of issues including recruitment, contractual and pay matters, deployment, professional development and support.

Findings

The supply market

Supply teachers in Scotland currently come from three main pools of teachers: those at the start of their careers (who would generally prefer a permanent position); those returning after a career break, generally for child-care; and those teachers who wish to reduce their work and responsibility, as a move towards retirement. It may be possible to increase the supply by making cover teaching attractive enough to encourage more teachers who are currently inactive to return. Similarly, it may be possible to retain as supply teachers some who would otherwise have retired fully. A few education authorities are making active efforts to tap into both these sources. Another possible source of supply, not generally tapped into in Scotland, is the young overseas-trained teacher who wishes to travel.

Demand for supply teachers is created by teachers being absent from their normal duties; this may be for a range of reasons. We asked authorities, schools and supply teachers themselves about the most common reasons for their employment. The authority responses indicated that just under half the demand is for short-term cover for sickness, a quarter for long-term sickness or maternity leave, and the remainder is split between long-term cover for vacancies and short-term cover for professional development activities. On average, authorities reported that 40% of the employment of supply teachers was 'pre-booked' and 60% was arranged at short notice. Demand could be reduced by increasing the use of internal cover, or by reducing the volume of professional development activities and meetings in school time.

School respondents reported that there is currently a shortage of supply teachers. This had been increasing over several years, and had been exacerbated by the introduction of

What do you know about supply teachers in Scotland?

the induction year; 43% of schools reported that suitably qualified teachers were 'rarely' available when requested, while only 21% of schools reported that such teachers were 'often' available. Secondary and special schools reported greater difficulty than primary schools in obtaining supply teachers. Schools in urban and inner-city areas reported the greatest difficulty, though the education authorities considered that the shortages were more severe in rural and remote areas. The difficulties in obtaining supply cover were increased by the tendency of supply teachers to be very selective about which schools they worked in, and by problems in creating effective deployment systems (considered below).

To respond to the demand for supply cover, authorities employ supply teachers in two main ways. Most are registered on an education authority list and are paid a daily rate of 1/195 of the annual salary for the days they work (which may be full-time or very infrequently). This arrangement is used even when teachers are undertaking long-term placements covering vacancies or secondments. In some cases temporary or fixed-term contracts are issued. The duration of employment that would trigger the issuing of a contract varies across education authorities. For example, one authority issued contracts for every single placement – even of half a day. Others issued them only for placements exceeding a particular duration (varying from three weeks to a term). However, teachers on such contracts were still paid on a daily rate. From education authority figures for numbers of daily-paid supply teachers on their lists, and from supply teacher data about the number of authorities they are registered with, we estimate that there are around 11,000 daily-paid supply teachers in Scotland.

In addition, at the time of our survey 20 authorities employed a total of around 500 supply teachers on permanent contracts. Almost half of these were employed in one authority, South Lanarkshire. However, since that time other authorities have expanded their permanent supply pools, partly in response to the contractual concerns identified above.

Why supply teachers are undertaking the work

Daily-paid supply teachers can be categorised into groups with different motivations:

Can supply teachers be seen as one professional group?

- Those in the early stages of their career enter the supply market if they are unable to get permanent jobs. Around 17% of respondents came directly from Initial Teacher Education to supply teaching; others had taken career breaks. Some 14% had not yet achieved GTCs full registration. Altogether 45% of the sample claimed they had never had a permanent contract in one school (though some of these had many years of supply experience). The majority of this group were in long-term supply posts.
- Some teachers (43% of the sample) choose supply teaching because it offers a high degree of flexibility and allows them to combine teaching with another occupation, most commonly caring for dependants (including children), or part-time work or self-employment (often artistic activities or tutoring and private tuition). Some of these teachers would have preferred a part-time job in one school to supply teaching, but others saw the flexibility as ideal.
- Teachers approaching retirement move to supply teaching to reduce their workload, while those who have already retired use supply teaching to supplement their pensions. Half the teachers in our sample were in their fifties and sixties. These teachers tended to be the most contented with supply work. They were most often found in short-term supply work, and on average worked two or three days a week, often in only one or two local schools.

Education authority staff and school managers expressed concern about both the first and last of these groups. Supply teaching was seen as a job which required a high level of skill in teaching, classroom management and communication, and that was better done by experienced teachers. Thus the first group were seen as less able to do the job well. It was also considered inappropriate for the career development of teachers to start out in supply. While many schools welcomed older and retired teachers because they were experienced and were willing to cover odd days at short notice, there were also concerns that they may be out of touch, and that they could be taking work from younger teachers.

Many permanent supply teachers had previously worked as daily-paid teachers, and permanent supply was seen as a step towards a permanent post in one school. However, some supply teachers expressed concern that taking a permanent contract could involve being sent to schools they did not wish to work in.

Recruiting supply staff

The majority of daily-paid supply staff are added to local authority lists when they approach the authority directly or local schools urge them to join the list. Only 7% of the sample had responded to advertisements. The vast majority of those who apply are added to the list, in some authorities with no further selection process. Just over half the authorities interview applicants, and four carry out teaching observations of at least some applicants. There was a clear tension between the shortage of supply teachers (which encouraged authorities to add all applicants to their lists) and concerns about supply teacher quality (indicating the need for more stringent selection).

Permanent supply teachers are generally recruited from those on the daily-paid list. During the time period of the research, many authorities were planning to offer permanent contracts to large numbers of daily-paid teachers engaged in long-term supply work.

Managing the deployment of supply staff

Two main systems are used in the deployment of short-term teachers:

- central management by the authority (10 authorities); and
- local management by schools using a list provided by the authority (14 authorities).

Remaining authorities used a combination of these two systems, varying across sectors, between short- and long-term placements, or depending on school preference.

However, in practice most schools develop their 'own' lists of local supply teachers, and contact them in the first instance. This practice has advantages and limitations. The advantages are that teachers are able to work in familiar schools, and schools have familiar teachers. Four out of five schools in the survey considered that the supply teacher having previously worked in the schools was a key factor in maximising the effectiveness of supply teachers. However, there are two serious limitations:

- Those schools in more challenging circumstances are less likely to establish their 'own' lists; as a result they have greater difficulty in getting any supply teachers and are less likely to use teachers who are familiar with the school. Only a central deployment system can ensure that the needs of such schools can be prioritised.
- When schools are unable to draw on the services of their regular supply teachers, they turn to the official system, but because so many schools are making their own arrangements, the official system is less able to work effectively.

Did you know that arrangements for the deployment of supply teachers vary around the country?

Deployment of permanent supply teachers is seen as a potential solution to one problem identified above: permanent supply teachers could not refuse placements. However, most authorities with permanent supply teachers use them mainly in long-term placements. Others use them to provide cover in a cluster of schools.

Seven authorities still have their list in paper form only. Others make it available electronically. A variety of on-line booking systems are being developed, some of which are sophisticated and should simplify the task of finding an available teacher. However, in practice they have not fulfilled their promise. There are three reasons for this:

- schools do not always record their bookings (particularly when they phone their regular supply teachers);
- many teachers are registered on the list of more than one authority and appear as 'available' on the system when they are in fact working in another authority; and
- authorities do not generally update the whole list often enough.

There are very different expectations of short-term supply teachers in primary and secondary schools. Those in the secondary sector often supervise pupils doing set work, generally in a subject other than their own specialism. In primary schools, short-term supply staff are expected to teach and to mark pupil work, often following the class teacher's weekly plan.

Systems to support supply teachers

Support systems for supply teachers are limited, and often entirely lacking. While over 80% of schools claimed to have a named person responsible for the induction and support of supply teachers, fewer than a quarter of supply teachers who worked across different schools reported encountering this provision. Similarly, 68% of schools reported having a handbook designed to meet the needs of temporary staff, while only 37% of supply teachers reported receiving such documentation. Even basic information such as the timetable and fire procedures was often lacking. While poor pupil behaviour with supply teachers was perceived by schools as a concern, only 27% of schools issued supply teachers with behaviour policies.

Many short-term supply teachers lacked opportunities for professional development. Schools are unwilling to fund development for those not on their staff, and some authorities expressed reluctance to provide development for teachers who were not committed to that authority. Most supply teachers were left to fund development themselves (either by attending school CPD days without payment, or paying to attend twilight sessions). This is a particular concern because

- schools identified weaknesses in supply teachers' knowledge, and in particular their ICT skills;
- some supply teachers have not yet achieved full GTCS registration; and
- lack of professional development limits the future options open to supply teachers.

A small minority of authorities are already addressing these issues.

The effects of different recruitment, deployment and support systems

Effects on pupils: This study did not set out to measure the effects of supply cover on pupils' experience in any direct way. However, we did seek the views of school managers on the impact that supply cover had on pupils' learning experiences. Overall, they presented a picture in which the use of supply teachers often resulted in poor behaviour

Who gains and who loses from the use of supply teachers in Scottish schools?

and had a negative impact on learning. This was most clearly the case in secondary schools, but repeated use of short-term supply teachers in any sector was believed to have negative consequences for pupils. Where a wide range of supply teachers was used (most often in secondary schools and schools in disadvantaged areas), respondents indicated that some of these are very weak. This can be linked to lack of selection in recruitment in many authorities and the lack of opportunities for professional development.

Effects on schools: Many school managers devote a great deal of time to finding supply cover, particularly in secondary schools. It is relatively simple to contact familiar regular supply teachers, but when supply teachers had to be contacted from the education authority list, most school managers claimed that they had to make very large numbers of phone calls. However, where supply cover was centrally managed, authority staff did this work. In the secondary sector, extra work is created when supply teachers are not specialists in the relevant subject; work has to be set and marked by internal staff.

The quality of supply staff is an important factor: where quality is poor, internal staff have to provide support and often deal with poor behaviour, and the returning teacher has to spend time 'picking up the pieces'. However, the vast majority of school respondents rated the supply teachers they had used as excellent or good across a range of professional qualities and skills. Professional behaviour was rated positively by over 90% of respondents, as was ability to form relationships with other teachers. Even behaviour management, which has frequently been identified as a concern by both schools and supply teachers, was rated positively by 69% of school managers. However, the majority of schools considered supply teachers' ICT skills to be poor. In general, secondary schools were less positive about their supply teachers than other sectors.

Effects on supply teachers: The supply teachers themselves indicated that overall levels of work satisfaction were generally high. Most (but not all) supply teachers got as much work as they wanted. Schools were generally found to be welcoming (though teachers reported some very negative experiences). The areas where satisfaction was lower were pupil behaviour and attitude, and the opportunity to contribute to pupils' education. This is particularly a concern for short-term supply teachers, who are not able to see the long-term outcomes of what they do. In particular, those in secondary schools supervising pupils doing work in a subject they are not familiar with can feel very frustrated.

Many supply teachers (and particularly those in the early stages of their careers) were dissatisfied with their contractual and payment arrangements and conditions of work. Uncertainty about the long-term future and inability to make long-term financial arrangements such as mortgages were a serious problem. Payment arrangements vary: some secondary supply teachers are employed to cover only a part of the day, and sometimes only one or two lessons. This generally makes it impossible to get other work to fill the day, and reduces overall pay. The effect on the teachers concerned ranged from considerable irritation to real disenchantment and even bitterness. In addition, many supply teachers lack career and professional development opportunities, and often feel marginalised as teachers. Those who have not yet achieved full GTCS registration are a particular concern.

Effects on education authorities: This depends very much on the systems that the authority has adopted. Where deployment is managed by schools, the authorities lack data on the teachers working in their schools, and can therefore have very little strategic role in their management. Where little selection is used in adding supply teachers to the list, the risk of poor quality teaching may be greater. The creation of a pool of permanent supply teachers may reduce possibilities for flexibility in staffing to meet changing demands.

What can be done to improve the management of supply cover in Scotland?

Recommendations

The underlying purpose of these recommendations is to seek improvements that will help to ensure the maintenance of quality educational provision for pupils. Because the essence of supply cover systems must be the ability to be responsive to changing needs, the extent to which a single simple system can be developed is limited. However, there is scope for considerably more common and consistent practice across the country, which could help to reduce some of the uncertainty and confusion that currently exists, at least in the experience of the supply teachers themselves. Such developments could also lead to improvements in the match between the needs of schools and the particular skills and experience of supply teachers.

- A national framework for the recruitment, deployment and employment of temporary staff should be established.
- This should include: a formal interview for selection; a move away from employing teachers in the early stages of their careers as supply teachers; making supply teaching more attractive for experienced teachers; education authorities developing systems to ensure that the schools with greatest need are able to obtain supply teachers; and clarification of pay and contractual issues and of duties.
- A national code of practice concerning the employment of supply teachers should be developed. This should set out minimum standards required of schools and authorities, and should be subject to local development and implementation.
- This should include clear information, evaluation procedures, access to and funding for professional development, and training for supply teachers who may wish to work in special education or nurseries.
- Consideration should be given to the establishment of a national database of supply teachers.
- Education authorities should consider their provision of permanent supply teachers.
- Additional research may be helpful to assess the impact of the various systems of deployment of permanent supply teachers, both on schools and on the teachers themselves.
- Education authorities and schools should consider whether their systems for internal cover in schools could be further developed and whether staffing budgets could be expanded to increase schools' own flexibility in responding to need.
- Consideration should be given to the ongoing monitoring and evaluation of the impact of supply cover on provision in schools and on the attainment of pupils.

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