



Models of Support in the Teacher Induction Scheme in Scotland: experiences of Head Teachers and Supporters

Analysis of Focus Group outcomes

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The Teacher Induction Scheme in Scotland

The Teacher Induction Scheme (TIS), brought in as part of the response to the McCrone Report, *A Teaching Profession for the 21st Century* (SEED 2001), was implemented in academic session 2002-2003. This brought about radical change to the experience of eligible probationers, who are offered a one year training post carrying a number of special features.

A teacher on a TIS placement has a class commitment of 0.7 FTE to provide time for continuing professional development (CPD) and to enable the probationer to receive guidance from a nominated Supporter, sometimes referred to informally as a mentor. This Supporter should also receive 0.1 Full-Time Equivalent (FTE) remission from timetable to carry out the various functions of the role.

The support provided for probationers should include a regular timetabled meeting each week, focused on the probationer's progress against specific aspects of the Standard for Full Registration (SFR) (GTCS 2002a, GTCS 2002b). In addition, each teacher should have nine classroom observations during the year, each of which should again be focused on elements of the SFR, agreed in advance. Together, these forms of support enable the probationer and Supporter to identify and arrange to address the probationer's CPD needs. All of these are recorded on the Interim and Final profiles, which serve as evidence of the probation experience and of the probationer's progress towards meeting the SFR. They are very important, therefore, as evidence for decisions on recommendations to grant full registration at the end of the Induction year.

Previous research

The General Teaching Council for Scotland is responsible for monitoring the operation of the TIS with a view to its enhancement so from its inception the Council has conducted research into aspects of the experiences of probationers and those responsible for them in schools.

Papers at the BERA conferences of 2004 and 2005 (Robson and Pearson 2004, Robson and Pearson 2005) demonstrated how analyses of the profiles both to compare variations in experience across local authorities and to indicate how the Council was using the outputs of such research to guide local authority probation managers on ways to improve practice at local level. This evidence also contributed, along with a survey conducted in May 2005 of teachers who had gained full registration in June 2003 and June 2004 to an analysis of the experience of probationers (Pearson and Robson 2005).

Once the Council had gained some understanding of how probationers were finding the induction process, it moved to an evaluation of the school experience. In 2005 began a programme of research designed to gather detailed evidence of the models of support being provided to Head Teachers and Supporters. Phase 1 of this research, comprising national surveys of Head Teachers and Supporters, resulted in four reports, two quantitative and two qualitative (Robson, Clarke and Morris 2006a, Robson, Clarke and Morris 2006b, Clarke and Morris 2006a, Clarke and Morris 2006b) and to a paper synthesising the key features of these reports, which was presented to the conference of the Association of Teacher Educators in Europe in 2007 (Clarke, Matheson, Morris and Robson 2007). These reports had practical value for the Council in their influence on the production of a guidance document for Supporters in December 2006.

Aims and methodology

This paper summarises the results of phase 2 of the Models of Support project, which sought to gain a deeper understanding of some of the issues identified in phase 1. This phase took the form of a series of focus groups conducted in seven local authorities in the spring of 2008. In each authority separate meetings were held with Head Teachers¹ and with Supporters, the structure for each meeting being the same. The researchers selected the local authorities to provide a range of contexts for the experience of the TIS, there being one city authority, one island authority, two predominantly rural authorities, one urban authority and two large authorities with a mix of urban and rural schools. They were also in geographically disparate areas of Scotland.

The issues for each focus group were organised in four sections:

- Supporter / Head Teacher preparation, covering issues such as recruitment criteria for supporters, training received prior to school involvement with probationers, and the sources and nature of continuing support during the probationary period;
- The Supporter role, covering the availability and adequacy of the 0.1 FTE allocation, issues in supporting more than one probationer, impact in both directions of the Supporter having additional responsibilities and the importance of sharing a subject or stage specialism with the probationer;
- Organisational structures and their impact, covering access to support from local authorities, the benefits and issues of an external supporter (where relevant) and the organisation of support within a secondary school, including the benefits and issues of using a regent model; and
- Meeting individual needs, covering partnership links between Initial Teacher Education and the TIS, the use of the career entry profile in informing CPD for probationers, the extent to which CPD programmes for probationers are personalised and issues in supporting struggling probationers.

The focus groups were audio-taped and transcribed, except in one case where the recording equipment failed and the facilitator took hand written notes of the discussion. The transcripts were then analysed by using NVivo software.

The volume of evidence arising from the exercise makes it impossible to cover all of these themes in a paper of this length. This paper, which represents work in progress to date in analysing the data, concentrates, therefore, on four themes:

- Recruitment policy and criteria for selection of Supporters;
- The importance of subject or stage specialism of the Supporter;
- Balancing the Supporter role with other responsibilities; and
- Supporting the struggling probationer.

Outcomes

Recruitment policy and criteria for selection of Supporters

The three most important criteria, based on frequency of responses from Head Teachers and Supporters, are demonstrable effectiveness in their own classroom practice, an appropriate level of teaching experience (over four years) and strong personal communication skills to support a mentoring role. There was emphasis on the ability to set a good example as well as on the characteristic of being approachable, non-threatening, yet able to be “diplomatically honest in a gentle way”.

Some Head Teachers expressed an awareness of the dangers of appointing teachers who may seek to impose their personal teaching style on beginning teachers. Four Head Teachers in two authorities acknowledged that the Supporter role was not exclusively modelling or mirroring but was more akin to a ‘coaching’ role.

I think someone who's also able to recognise that it's not about telling them, you know, accepting their practice as long as the outcome is a positive one. There's a risk of a Supporter finding it hard not to tell them to do this, so you have to be careful in terms of the selection.

(Head Teacher LA4)

Perceptions of the recruitment process differed in some areas between Head Teachers and Supporters. Even in Head Teachers' accounts, despite references to an invitational approach, there was strong evidence that the Supporter role was often allocated to senior colleagues as part of their existing set of duties. Depute Head Teachers (DHTs) and Principal Teachers were identified as naturally associated with the Supporter role, partly because it was valuable for the school to use the 0.1 FTE time allowance for someone who did not have a class commitment. In secondary schools, it appeared to be common practice (the "default position" as one Head Teacher in LA2 put it) for the subject Principal Teacher to be the Supporter. One reason for this is the requirement for the Supporter to assess probationer performance. As one Head Teacher (LA4) noted, "somebody has to pass or fail them and I think it has to be somebody that has that level of management expertise". A related issue was that there is a potential conflict between the Supporter's main function in mentoring the probationer and this necessarily judgemental aspect of the role.

To my mind that is a slightly different role to that of the Supporter, at least there's a conflict there in how you would deal with that. If you're the same person that is doing that, you lose that sense of supporting.

(Head Teacher LA1)

The following extract is typical of practices reported across the Head Teacher transcripts.

Though we give them some element of choice, by and large it's the Principal Teacher who does the support for the role, but there are occasions when we've got another member of staff who's volunteered to deal with the role as part of their own professional development.

(Head Teacher LA4)

There was only one case where a Head Teacher (LA2) identified a Chartered Teacher with the Supporter role.

Two Head Teachers in one authority (LA7) explicitly spoke of the need to share opportunities and build capacity by periodically rotating the Supporter role. Three reported that the annual performance development review process was used to identify teachers who might be "looking for further challenges" (LA4) and who fulfilled the criteria. In one secondary school (LA3), an open call for volunteers produced seventeen candidates of whom eleven became Supporters based on the recommendation of Principal Teachers. One Head Teacher summed up the potential value of the experience as professional development.

We're very much looking at it as a standard development exercise to benefit not only the probationer but the person who is undertaking the role.

(Head Teacher LA7)

Transcripts from focus groups with Supporters did not contain references to such aspirations for capacity building and personal professional development. To them, their selection appeared to be based on their availability through non-class contact roles (Primary Depute Head), the subject or stage qualification of the probationer, or their current role, perhaps as a Principal Teacher in a secondary school. In some accounts offered by Supporters, their identification appeared to be based on expedience rather than as an outcome of professional dialogue and deliberation.

There was no consultation at all.

(Supporter LA1)

You're not in a position to choose.

(Supporter LA6)

I'm a Principal Teacher. It was expected that I would do it.

(Supporter LA1)

I was appointed with a remit for the early years and the probationer was going into the primary 2 class to I think that was part of the selection really.

(Supporter LA2)

Only six Supporters across four local authorities reported that they had volunteered to take up the Supporter role.

The importance of subject or stage specialism of the Supporter

The focus groups reveal very strong support for the need for Supporters to have familiarity with the subject or stage of the probationer. This is necessary to provide the necessary contemporary knowledge of curriculum, assessment, resources and pedagogies. It is important in enabling the Supporter to judge the appropriate level of pitch, challenge and pace of learning in observed sessions. One Head Teacher emphasised that, while non-specialists might be able to coach probationers, newly qualified teachers (NQTs) themselves would prefer to work with Supporters who have the credibility of recent stage or subject experience, especially in the early stages of the induction year (LA2). In secondary schools where probationers are in faculties that encompass a wide range of subjects there was often a Supporter at faculty level with an additional subject mentor, who would be better placed to identify gaps in curriculum knowledge, as might occur with, say, a probationer teacher whose degree is in media studies teaching English classes. In one school with a Social Subjects faculty where the Principal Teacher was a History specialist, where the school was allocated a Geography probationer

It's someone within the old Geography department who takes responsibility for them and works jointly with the Principal Teacher.

(Head Teacher LA4)

Ensuring an adequate level of curriculum age or stage experience could be a challenge, especially in smaller schools, as one Supporter explained.

Someone outside the department could give an overview on the general learning and teaching about whether outcomes were shared, about what was going on all over the classroom, were you asking questions, was everybody contributing. Yeah, we're all able to do that, but where I would find it difficult was if I looked at a English lesson and I thought, now have they covered enough in that fifty minutes? I probably wouldn't know that, but an English teacher looking at it would say, no, that was more than enough, or it was far too much.

(Supporter LA2)

Similarly, one Head Teacher acknowledged the benefits of a probationer working with a stage partner in a primary school.

Stage partners can be valuable in supporting someone else at that stage, regardless of whether you are a probationer teacher. I think those of us who have been in that position know how good it is to be able to be involved in joint planning or collaborative work and really have the support of someone else who is working at the same or similar level.

(Head Teacher LA3)

In smaller schools where a stage partner was not available, an emphasis was placed on collective professional responsibility to support recently qualified teachers and to arrange opportunities to gain experience by visiting other schools.

We would want everyone to engage in professional dialogue and support each other on a pastoral level. To that extent, we are lucky in a smaller school. It is unfortunate that they don't have a stage experience but we do orchestrate the opportunity for our probationers to go elsewhere.

(Head Teacher LA3)

In summary, although high levels of support were expressed for the involvement of subject/stage specialists, practicalities of timetabling, school size and available staffing influenced opportunities available for probationers. It was stressed that the professional community within the whole school has a collective responsibility to the novice teacher and that a range of mentors could offer valuable generic support.

I think there are two sides to this. One of the biggest concerns of all the NQTs is assessment within the subject. From that point of view, they absolutely do need to have a subject specialist. However, there is also learning and teaching in general across the curriculum where Supporters in any subject have a role to play. You can go into a subject that you know very little about and immediately focus on how this lesson is structured, how this lesson is being delivered, what are the good learning and teaching points here - rather than getting caught up in the nitty gritty of the piece of writing of the poem or whatever. I think you need both.

(Supporter LA1)

Balancing the Supporter role with other responsibilities

Head Teachers were aware that providing high levels of support to probationers could detract from other responsibilities held by Supporters. In one authority, they had a sense of juggling commitments to ensure a defensible balance between the competing demands on their time. As well as meeting the needs of the probationer, Supporters also had to address the needs of their own classes, administrative responsibilities and the broader requirements of service to the school. Excessive demands in one area could detract from other areas of performance and could lead to individuals withdrawing from the (additional) demands of the Supporter role.

The DHT spent more time supporting the probationer and her class, the emphasis being on the impact on the children. Therefore, the DHT was taken away from other children.

(Head Teacher LA3)

If the Supporter is doing this, (s)he is not doing something else. There is not a limitless resource of motivated, committed members of staff. If there is a problem, it can distort the use of a key individual's time.

(Head Teacher LA3)

Head Teachers acknowledged that taking on the Supporter role did increase teachers' workload. Supporters must complete the formal recording of support offered, targets set and progress towards targets, as well as continued management of departmental responsibilities, their own teaching and provision of cover for absent colleagues.

No one who has taken on the role has left any part of the job to the side to be able to do the probationary part. It definitely has been an addition. If it goes beyond the point one [0.1FTE] support time, it does not mean that anything else is left. It's just an additional workload you have taken on.

(Head Teacher LA4)

Another from the same local authority observed that the existing job continued to be done, but teachers were working longer hours to do it. These observations were borne out in the Supporter focus groups, where they routinely described role conflict in performing the Supporter role to their expected standard and maintaining high levels of performance across a range of other responsibilities in schools.

Being the DHT this year, it's actually quite difficult being a Supporter as well. I've got a very good probationer, which makes it very easy, but if we've got a child protection issue or something like that, I have to go to that.

(Supporter LA1)

It was difficult to manage the NQT and do the [project] job because I sometimes felt I was not there enough for the probationer. On the other hand, I was getting some quite good ideas from being a [project] support teacher – on formative assessment and that kind of thing – that I could pass on to the NQT. So, it had an advantage and a disadvantage, but it was quite hard going.

(Supporter LA1)

Supporters also stressed that their mentoring responsibilities often extended to existing members of staff as well as to students on placement. The capacity to meet needs across these groups was often influenced by their assessment of the 'quality' of the NQT. Beginning teachers who needed an intensive level of support could pose problems. At pressure points in the school year, some Supporters admitted to making difficult decisions on where to commit their time and emphasised the need to involve colleagues in maintaining satisfactory levels of support to the probationers.

Many of the things I do in my new job are after school. The first two terms with a probationer, they need more support. I found it quite difficult running from one thing to the other. I don't want to make my probationer feel that I don't have the time to discuss things, so I put things that I should be doing for my job to the side so that I can go to the probationer more. I have to rely a lot more on my colleagues.

(Supporter LA4)

As a consequence of these considerations, Supporters often reported that mentor meetings, associated preparation and administration were carried out before the start of the school day, at breaks and lunchtimes, at the end of the school day and at weekends (LA2, LA4). Mentoring as an activity could not be allocated to a discrete time period but was conducted informally throughout the week.

Aware of the potential for role conflict and of competing demands on Supporters' time, one Head Teacher emphasised the responsibility of the Head Teacher in ensuring that support mechanisms continued to operate in school. In some schools, these issues have encouraged team teaching with attendant implications for additional resourcing.

If you have one of these people in your school, you cannot just leave them to flounder. That does have an impact on staff. It's then down to me or another teacher to release whomever and outsource support. Professionally and morally, I do not think you can just leave these people to get on with it.

(Head Teacher LA7)

Although opinion was divided, there was a general feeling among Head Teachers that the adequacy of the 0.1 FTE time allocation depended on the time of year, the particular support needs of each probationer and the disposition of the Supporter. Supporters were more likely to report that the allocation was inadequate. They emphasised that support meetings are only one aspect of the role, which incorporates preparation, recording, observations and elements of research to support probationer development. A minority of Supporters reported that either they or colleagues at local authority Supporter meetings were not aware of their entitlement to this allocation and that remission was available only to attend observed sessions (LA1, LA4). More commonly, they noted that their schools attempted to guarantee time for a one hour meeting each week, though at times this was difficult, especially in small schools. It was expected that they would accommodate further involvement with the probationer within their normal non-contact time.

Reflecting the Head Teachers' acknowledgement of the extra work load, Supporters felt a personal, as well as a professional, obligation to invest as much time as was necessary to ensure that 'their' probationer met the required standards.

Because it kind of reflects on you if your probationer's not doing well, you want to do your best.

(Supporter LA4)

Supporting the struggling probationer

While most newly qualified teachers complete their probationary year with relatively few traumas, the minority who struggle to reach the Standard for Full Registration cause serious difficulties for schools. In these focus groups, there were fifteen references to the negative impact on colleagues and on the wider school community of supporting a struggling probationer in school. In the following three extracts, Head Teachers describe the impact in their schools of coping with this issue. Participants in focus group discussions used powerful language to describe the consequences of working with 'failing' probationers. They described the experience variously as "horrific", "horrendous", and "devastating", one noting that "nothing prepares you for it until it happens" (LA4).

I can think of a scenario where a Principal Teacher was the Supporter with a probationer who was failing significantly. This had an enormous impact, not just upon that teacher but also upon the department and across the whole school in some ways, but particularly in the department it was very, very damaging.

(Head Teacher LA 1)

For a time I was very concerned last year because my Supporters could not have worked any harder to support my probationers and they then needed support. No matter how hard they were working, the probationers were not engaging with the support that they were trying to put in place. They became demoralised, which meant an additional workload for me because I was not only supporting probationers, but I was supporting my Supporters, who were feeling incredibly de-skilled and just couldn't understand why they couldn't get these girls to pick up, to take commitment, to do what they needed to do. So it's an incredibly complex thing to have to handle and to manage.

(Head Teacher LA4)

It was incredibly stressful and it wasn't just the Supporters it hit. It just permeated the whole of the department. It was really, really difficult to do and at the same time they were trying to meet the learning needs of the children.

(Head Teacher LA4)

Such issues carry resourcing implications to enable provision of support for the struggling probationer. One Head Teacher suggested that additional support coming from other areas of the school caused other needs to go unmet.

She got a really disproportionate amount of the Supporter's time – way beyond what she should have got and I only had that luxury because my Depute was non-teaching. That was to the sacrifice of other children who would have got support elsewhere in the department. That was the crisis point and that was what had to be done.

(Head Teacher LA3)

Schools made every effort to reduce the impact of these problems on pupils and their learning, as they remained the school's primary focus.

If a serious problem arises, our first concern has to be the pupils. How do you provide adequate and effective support without the children being harmed because we don't have the luxury of being able to take that person off timetable to take the remedial action? You can alter timetables at the margins by swapping teachers round but that has got problems as well.

(Head Teacher LA3)

However, one Head Teacher explained the longer term implications for staff and pupils who were left to recover the damage and rebuild parental confidence.

We had parental complaints and parental meetings. There was not a week that I didn't have a parental meeting with regard to the situation in classes. We still have to try to repair the damage this year, the work we've had to do with that group of children. The class teachers have had to pull out all the stops again, additional workload for them, trying to close the gaps what were created ... That girl was damaging my children every time she walked through the door and that's why after five weeks she was never alone with the class. It was nothing short of horrendous and professionally it devastated me.

(Head Teacher LA4)

In five focus groups, participants raised questions about the assessment of competence by universities of teachers during their initial teacher education. In a minority of cases, Head Teachers and Supporters had difficulty in determining how a candidate had achieved the Standard for Initial Teacher Education. This was the case for teachers who had completed the BEd as well as those who had taken the shorter PGDE programmes. One Head Teacher was forthright on the subject.

We need to bite the bullet and actually start to question the people who are getting through a BEd4 and coming out not able to do the job they're there to do. Somewhere along the line, someone is not putting their head above the parapet and saying, "This isn't for you and you really need to think seriously about it".

(Head Teacher LA3)

Schools use internal and external resources to cope with struggling probationers. Participants in five local authorities expressed high levels of appreciation for the support provided by their local authority probation managers when problems arose in relation to probationer performance. They provided "invaluable" (LA2) support by conducting additional observations, which gave an independent external perspective to cross check school level judgements on competence (LA4), especially in circumstances where it was necessary to "lay it on the line" (LA2).

There was consensus that in these circumstances it is necessary to maintain accurate record keeping and follow agreed protocols carefully. Supporters were attentive to the need document processes of support and negotiated targets accurately across the year as they would be held accountable if formal requirements were not met. Head Teachers, too, were aware of this pressure and emphasised that Supporters were not solely responsible for probationer performance, but drew on the full range of school and local authority resources.

The probationer I've got who's struggling, I've got a lot of documented evidence and the probationer's signed it so if it does come to the case where she's not recommended [for Full Registration] I've got a lot of evidence to back it up.

(Supporter LA2)

I would not want the Supporter to hang on to that problem. I would want them, and I emphasise that at the beginning, to come and see me because it is bigger than just two people. It may take the whole school, indeed the whole authority, to do anything meaningful.

(Head Teacher LA3)

If you are involved in a meeting when you are saying to someone they are not really doing very well, you have a witness. This is important because things will be distorted if you don't. I have someone taking minutes that are agreed on and action points that are agreed on and it becomes perhaps a little more formal. I found I had to go down that route because otherwise it is "oh, that's not my record of the meeting" so you must keep it crystal clear.

(Head Teacher LA3)

Conclusions

The Teacher Induction Scheme in Scotland has rightly gained the reputation of being a world leader and has attracted interest from across the globe (Clarke *et al*, 2007). Its success is dependent absolutely on the quality of support provided in the schools to which probationers are allocated, therefore on the work of Supporters and Head Teachers.

This makes it essential that the right structures, and the right people, are in place. From the observations of Head Teachers and Supporters it is clear that, while Head Teachers may often have criteria relating to personal qualities and experience in their minds when inviting members of staff to become Supporters, the decision is often a pragmatic one of who has time available or has relevant stage or subject expertise. This is especially true in secondary schools, where the most common basis for allocation is being head of the appropriate department.

The very presence of a probationer in a school, even when that person is coping well, has an impact on the Supporter and on the broader school community. This is far from being exclusively negative. In common with the findings of other research studies (Hulme, Elliot, McPhee & Patrick, 2008) evidence from these experienced colleagues suggested that new entrants to the profession have a positive impact on school culture: refreshing and energising departments, bringing “zest” and “dynamic” approaches as well as bringing a command of formative assessment and new learning technologies.

One particular department was struggling for staff over a couple of years. That had a very bad effect on morale and the performance of their pupils. They were able to get two NQTs and it just so happened that the two NQTs were outstanding. They had a very positive effect ... They don't need a lot of shepherding and that's had an impact across the department.

(Head Teacher LA1)

We've been very fortunate. They have not just done their subject; they've got into the whole life of the school, and therefore the reputation of NQTs is actually an extremely positive one.

(Supporter LA4)

Even in such cases, the demands on Supporters are often considerable, adding to their workload, often to their working hours, and sometimes making it difficult to give sufficient attention to their other responsibilities. To an extent this could be mitigated by the involvement of other colleagues, for example through team teaching, in schools where there was a sense of collective responsibility. The division of opinion between Head Teachers and Supporters about the adequacy of the 0.1 FTE remission of timetable is perhaps predictable but is nonetheless instructive. However, when a school has to deal with a struggling probationer there is no diversity of views. A case of this type causes enormous stress to the Supporter, to the Head Teacher and often to other colleagues, perhaps even to the whole school. The Supporter requires support from colleagues internally and often from local authority probation managers, both to offer the probationer the best possible support and to manage the process should it be necessary to recommend cancellation of registration. In these circumstances the work involved extends far beyond what can be accomplished in the allocated time.

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ⁱ In practice, some Head Teachers were represented by Depute Head Teachers where they were the probation managers for the schools, therefore had more practical involvement with the TIS and with probationers. Nineteen primary Head Teachers and one primary Depute Head Teacher attended, with eight secondary Head Teachers and nine secondary Depute Head Teachers. Twenty one primary Supporters and nineteen secondary Supporters participated in their groups.